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An Exploratory Study of Religiosity and Same-Sex Couple Relationships

Sharon Scales Rostosky, PhD

Melanie D. Otis, PhD

Ellen D. B. Riggle, PhD

Sondra Kelly Brumett, Ed.S.

Carolyn Brodnicki, Ed.S.

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Author's Note: Sharon Rostosky is Associate Professor in the Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology at the University of Kentucky. Melanie Otis is Assistant Professor in the College of Social Work at the University of Kentucky. Ellen Riggle is Associate Professor of Political Science and Women's Studies at the University of Kentucky. Sondra Kelly Brumett works in the private sector. Carolyn Brodnicki is a doctoral student in the Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology at the University of Kentucky.

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concerning this article to Sharon S. Rostosky, Ph.D., Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology, 245 Dickey Hall, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40506-0017. Email: [rostosk@uky.edu](mailto:rostosk@uky.edu).

#### Abstract

An apparent lack of empirical research on religiosity and same-sex couple relationships led to an exploratory examination of the role of religiosity in the relationships of 90 same-sex couples. For most couple members, religious expression took an internal or private form rather than a public form. Couples tended to be homogamous in their religiosity. Couple homogamy of intrinsic religiosity (but not of affiliation or public/private religious activities) was associated with higher relationship satisfaction. Couples used various strategies to address conflicts between sexual identity and religiosity including abandoning public religiosity in favor of private religious expression or retaining a public expression by integrating or compartmentalizing sexual minority identities. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

### Religiosity and Same-Sex Couple Relationships

A majority of Americans report that religion is important in their lives (Gallup, 2001; Hoge, 1996). The role of religion in family relationships and human development, therefore, has rightly received renewed attention (Holden, 2001). Family researchers are urging systematic and rigorous inquiry into understanding the ways in which religion is integrated into couple and family life and the effects of that integration on relational functioning (Baucom, 2001). However, empirical literature examining the impact of religion on couple relationships has focused almost exclusively on heterosexual (married) relationships, with little attention to the salience of this question for same-sex couple relationships.

Same-sex couples face unique challenges in forming and maintaining relationships in social contexts that deny them most, if not all, of the institutional supports that are automatically conferred on heterosexual couples (Green & Mitchell, 2002; Kuehlwein & Gottschalk, 2000; Riggle, Thomas, & Rostosky, 2005). Many members of same-sex couples, for instance, have been raised within religious traditions that do not affirm or support their relationships (and may even characterize them as “sinful”). Yet, a majority of self-identified gay men and lesbians still claim a religious affiliation (GLCensus, 2003). Given the association between religious involvement and outcomes such as psychological well-being, marital stability, and healthy lifestyles (e.g., avoidance of substance abuse) in longitudinal, prospective studies of the general population (e.g., Koenig, Hays, & Larson, 1999; Strawbridge, Shema, Cohen, & Kaplan, 2001), it is important to understand the negotiation of religion and spirituality within same-sex couple relationships.

A professional commitment to the health and well-being of *all* families necessitates that researchers and service providers address the needs of same-sex couples and the GLB

(lesbian, gay, bisexual) population. A relative paucity of empirical research on religiosity and same-sex couple relationships led to an exploratory examination of the role of religiosity in the relationships of same-sex couples. This study utilized a purposive sample of same-sex couples to examine the self-reported public and private manifestations of religiosity in same-sex relationships. We draw on these findings to suggest ways that mental health professionals can help couples cope with negative religious experiences while finding affirming ways to express their religious and spiritual values.

### *Conceptual Background*

From a human ecological framework (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993), individual religious attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are powerfully shaped through interdependent interactions with aspects of the environment that include the family, the community, and the culture. Publicly, religious beliefs and values may be expressed through church attendance or through participation in the other organized religious activities of a particular religious tradition. Privately, religious beliefs and values may be expressed through activities such as personal prayer or meditation. Public religious expression may have important ritualistic and social value to individuals that may promote a sense of identity and belonging. Private or internal forms of religious expression may have important psychological and health benefits including a sense of personal well-being and/or increased ability to cope with stresses and challenges in life (Myers, 2000).

Many organized religious traditions have condemned GLB-identified individuals and same-sex couples with messages that they are sinful and inferior (Sherkat, 2002; The Pew Research Center, 2003). Traditional Judeo-Christian religious institutions in America explicitly facilitate, celebrate, and sustain heterosexual couple relationships while implicitly

and/or explicitly marginalizing and maligning same-sex couple relationships. For example, all of the major Protestant churches define marriage as “one man and one woman” and none has endorsed marriage for same-sex couples (Marriage Law Project, 2002). Another example is the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which released a document in 2003 stating that “[h]omosexuality is a troubling moral and social phenomenon...” and further arguing explicitly against the recognition of marriage for same-sex couples:

“Legal recognition of homosexual unions or placing them on the same level as marriage would mean not only the approval of deviant behaviour, with the consequence of making it a model in present-day society, but would also obscure basic values which belong to the common inheritance of humanity.” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2003).

In many religious traditions, attitudes toward same-sex relationships lead to exclusionary or rejecting actions toward those who seek to integrate a minority sexual identity with a strong religious identity in the context of a committed same-sex relationship. As a result, many same-sex couples must construct their committed relationships without the sanction and support of the rituals and role models from their faith traditions. This task requires actively subverting negative messages about their relationships that originate from prejudicial social attitudes and are subsequently credited with divine authority by religious institutions (Morrow, 2003).

A handful of research articles describe common strategies used by gay and lesbian individuals to resolve discrepancies between religious and sexual identities. These strategies most often include resolving conflict by rejecting negative religious doctrines in favor of a spirituality based on positive personal experiences of love and acceptance (Mahaffy, 1996;

Rodriguez & Oellette, 2000; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Yip, 1997a; 1997b). The majority of these studies recruited participants from gay religious organizations and may therefore only represent those who have achieved significant integration of their religious and sexual identities. The present study extends previous findings by using a community rather than religious-based sample and by examining the religious and spiritual involvement and coping strategies practiced among same-sex couples.

In heterosexual couples, religiosity has been found to be associated with relational commitment and satisfaction (see review by Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar & Swank, 2001). Specifically, married couples that are religiously homogamous (i.e., have the same religious beliefs and practices) have been found to report higher levels of relationship satisfaction than couples that are religiously heterogamous (i.e., have different religious beliefs and practices; Mahoney et al., 1999). These associations seemingly have yet to be documented in same-sex couples.

While heterosexual couples frequently report religious participation as a source of support for their relationships, survey findings have suggested that same-sex couples do not consider mainstream churches to be an important source of social support (Bryant & Demian, 1994). Yip (1996), a British sociologist, interviewed 30 gay male couples recruited through personal contacts and national (British) gay religious support groups about their interactions with organized religious and secular gay organizations as a support for their gay identities. The majority (70%) of couples reported that they were not active in gay religious groups (beyond being on a mailing list) largely because they found the moral support and identity reinforcement provided by their partners and close friends to be sufficient for their needs. While Yip's studies point to the importance of involvement with a supportive social network,

these studies did not directly explore religious involvement as a possible support/deterrent to satisfying same-sex couple relationships.

### *Research Hypotheses*

This study examined the private and public expressions of religiosity and spirituality by same-sex couple members and explored strategies used by couples in coping with non-affirming and negative religious experiences. Drawing on previous research on marital relationships and the few descriptive studies of GLB individuals and couples reviewed above, it is hypothesized that:

- (1) A higher percentage of same-sex couple members will endorse private forms of religious or spiritual involvement than public forms of religious expression.
- (2) More (same-sex) couples will be homogamous than heterogamous in their public and private religiosity.
- (3) Same-sex couples who are religiously homogamous will report higher levels of relationship satisfaction than same-sex couples who are religiously heterogamous.

## Method

### *Participants*

As part of a study of relational commitment, both partners in 90 same-sex couples (45 male, 45 female) completed a multi-topic questionnaire. In addition to completing a series of measures of relationship quality and mental health, participants answered questions about their religiosity. The first 40 of the 90 couples also completed a couples' conversational task

and individual interviews that were taped and transcribed. Other details of the study procedure can be found in [citation deleted for blind review].

### *Measures*

*Private Religiosity.* Couple members completed the Intrinsic Religious Motivation Scale (Hoge, 1972). This scale is a 10-item self-report measure with likert responses ranging from “Strongly disagree” (1) to “Strongly agree” (4). Sample items included “My faith involves all of my life” and “Although I believe in my religion, I feel there are many more important things in life” (reverse scored). Items were scored such that higher scores would indicate higher internal or private religiosity, with index scores ranging from 10 to 40. Coefficient alpha for this sample was 0.88.

Couple members were also asked an additional item assessing private religiosity. Specifically, they were asked how often they spent time in private religious activities such as prayer, meditation, or Bible Study. Item responses for this question were: rarely or never (0); a few times a month (1); once a week (2); two or more times a week (3); daily (4); more than once a day (5).

*Public religiosity.* Two separate items were used to assess public religiosity. First, couple members who indicated that they were religious or spiritual were asked to designate their religious affiliation. Categorical choices were Christianity, Judaism, Muslim, and Other. Couple members were also asked how often they attended church or other weekly meetings. Response choices were: never (0); once a year or less (1); a few times a year (2), a few times a month (3); once a week (4); more than once a week (5).

*Relationship Satisfaction.* The Relationship Adjustment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988) is a 7-item measure of relationship satisfaction. Sample items include: “How well does your

partner meet your needs?” and “How often do you wish you hadn’t gotten into this relationship?” (reverse scored). Participants rated satisfaction on a scale ranging from “low satisfaction” (1) to “high satisfaction.” (5). Hendrick (1988) obtained an alpha reliability of 0.86 for this measure, and found that the RAS correlated 0.80 with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), providing evidence for the concurrent validity of the measure. Alpha reliability for this sample was 0.82.

*Demographics.* Couple members completed items that asked about their age, race, education, and income. Each participant reported whether or not he or she considered him/herself to be religious/spiritual. They were also asked to indicate how long they had considered themselves a couple, whether or not they lived with their partner, and whether or not they had children.

#### *Procedures*

Couples were recruited through announcements that were posted in various venues (bookstores, concerts, coffee shops) that serve a gay, lesbian, and bisexual clientele in a mid-sized Southern city. Announcements were also published in two regional newsletters that serve as a community link to GLB individuals in surrounding counties and rural areas. Finally, we used the “snowball” technique of interpersonal recruiting by asking participating couples to share flyers with interested and eligible couples in their social networks.

Eligible couples had to be at least 18 years of age and had to have considered themselves a couple for a minimum of 6 months. Interested couples that contacted the researchers were given a brief description of the study and then each couple was scheduled for a private appointment at the University. Couples completed the conversation task together and then were individually interviewed (first 40 couples only). The survey portion of the

study was completed individually in separate rooms. Couples who completed both the conversational/interview and survey portions of the study received an \$80 stipend. Couples who participated in the survey portion only were given a \$50 stipend as compensation for their time.

## Results

### *Participant Characteristics*

The mean age of couple members in the sample was 34.5 (sd =9.05). The majority of couple members were European-American (84.9%). The remaining couple members reported their race/ethnicity as African American (5.6%), Native American (3.9%), Latino/a American (1.1%), and Other (2.8%). In terms of highest education level attained, 27.4% of the couple members had some college education (including those currently attending college), 32% were college graduates, and another 31.3% had post-baccalaureate, graduate or professional training. The median reported household income was \$30,000-39,999.

The majority of couples lived together (89.5%). The mean length of relationship in the sample was 5.33 years (with a standard deviation of 5.61 years). Thirty-one percent of the sample had been together for between 2 and 5 years, and thirty-four percent of the couples had been together more than 5 years. Twenty-one couples (23.3%) indicated that they had children. Of those, 18 couples had children from previous relationships and 3 couples had children as a couple during their present relationship.

T-test analyses were used to test differences between the sub-sample that completed both the survey and the conversation task and the sub-sample that only completed the survey measures. No significant differences were found for the two groups.

### *Public and Private Religiosity*

At the individual level, 75.6% of the couple members indicated that they considered themselves to be religious/spiritual. Fifty-two percent of couple members reported an affiliation with a Christian religion. Twenty-four percent reported an affiliation with Judaism or other spiritual or religious tradition, and 24% percent did not report an affiliation.

To address the first hypothesis, the percentages of individuals who reported public and private religious involvement were examined. Only 18% of the sample reported that they attend church *at least* a few times a month. Fifty-seven percent of the sample reported that they attended religious services only a few times a year, or once a year or less. Twenty-four percent of the sample indicated that they *never* attend religious services. Forty-nine percent indicated that they engage in private religious activities, such as prayer and Bible-reading, at least once a week, including those who do so daily or more than once daily. Mean scores on the intrinsic religiosity scale were 24.6 (sd = 7.4) indicating moderate levels of private religiosity across the sample. These findings support the first hypothesis that more couple members would endorse private forms of religious/spiritual activity rather than public forms (i.e. church attendance).

### *Couple Homogamy*

To test the second hypothesis, public and private measures of religiosity were examined for patterns of homogamy and heterogamy within the couples. Worship service attendance was used to create groups based on self-reports of low, moderate and high attendance. Low attendees reported that they attended organized worship activities never or once a year or less. Moderate attendees reported that they attended a few times a year. High attendees indicated that they attended religious services a few times a month, once a week or

more than once a week. Likewise, couple members were grouped according to their reports of private religious activities into frequent, occasional, and infrequent. Those who reported that they participated in private religious activities rarely or never are categorized as “infrequent”. Those who participated once a week or a few times a month were placed in the “occasional” group. Those who engaged in private religious activities two or more times a week, daily, or more than once daily were considered “frequent.” Scores on the intrinsic religiosity index were evenly distributed across the range (10-40), thus they were divided into terciles and designated as low, moderate and high intrinsic religiosity categories.

To examine homogamy among couples, crosstabulations were generated for each measure of religiosity. Fully homogamous couples were couples in which both members reported the same religious affiliation or who were in the same category for church attendance and private religiosity measures. Fully heterogamous couples reported different religious affiliations and/or, for church attendance and private religiosity measures, were in opposing categories (e.g., one member in the lowest and one member in the highest category). “Similar” couples were those who were in adjacent categories (e.g., one member was in the low and the other member was in the moderate category) on the church attendance and/or private religiosity measures.

The pattern of results indicated that couples tend to be homogamous in religiosity across all measures. Fifty-three percent of the couples reported the same religious or spiritual affiliation (or non-affiliation), and 47% reported affiliations with different religious traditions. The crosstabulation analyses (see Tables 1-3) revealed that 65% percent of the couples were fully homogamous in their frequency of church attendance ( $\tau\text{-}b = .524, p < .000$ ).

In terms of private religiosity, 54.4% were fully homogamous in their frequency of private religious activities ( $\tau\text{-}b = .376, p < .000$ ) and 47.1% of the couples were fully homogamous in their intrinsic religiosity index score ( $\tau\text{-}b = .329, p < .000$ ). Fully heterogamous couples, where one couple member was in the “high” group and the other member was in the “low” group comprised only 4.6% of the couples in relation to their church attendance, 16.7% of the couples in terms of private religious activities, and 11.5% of the couples in relation to the intrinsic religiosity index. Thus, support is found for the second hypothesis that more couples will be homogamous than heterogamous in their religious and spiritual expressions.

#### *Relationship satisfaction*

To test the third hypothesis, a t-test was used to examine mean differences in relationship satisfaction for couples who were homogamous and heterogamous in religious affiliation. Couples who were homogamous in religious affiliation did not significantly differ in relationship satisfaction from couples that reported different affiliations ( $t = -0.61, p = 0.54$ ). However, initial examination of the bivariate relationship between relationship satisfaction (RAS) and the groups of couples who were either fully homogamous, similar, and heterogamous on the intrinsic religiosity measure revealed a significant positive correlation ( $r = 0.364, p = .001$ ).

Results of a one-way ANOVA with intrinsic religiosity and relationship satisfaction found a significant relationship ( $F_{(2, 83)} = 6.60, p \leq .001$ ). That is, couples sharing the same (RAS mean = 4.518, sd = .45) or similar (RAS mean = 4.37, sd = .37) levels of intrinsic religiosity reported significantly higher levels of relationship satisfaction when compared to couples with the most disparate scores on the intrinsic religiosity scale (RAS mean = 3.921,

sd = .60). One-way analysis of variance was also used to examine mean difference scores for relationship satisfaction among homogamous versus heterogamous couples for both involvement in private religious activities and frequency of church attendance. No significant differences were found for these measures. Thus support for the third hypothesis in this sample is limited to the higher relationship satisfaction of couples that are closely matched in their level of intrinsic religiosity.

### *Couple Strategies*

To further explicate the role of religiosity in the committed relationship of same-sex couples and how they negotiate religious challenges, we searched the transcripts of the couples' conversations and their individual interviews. Although the conversational prompts did not specifically ask about religiosity, 45% of the couples that were interviewed (n=18 couples) discussed religiosity as it pertained to their committed relationship. At times couples defined their commitment in terms of religious values; at other times they discussed religion in conjunction with their relationships with their families of origin or with their personal struggles to reconcile religious beliefs with sexual minority identities.

An examination of the relevant conversational and interview text revealed that same-sex couples actively negotiate whether or not to retain their public religious involvements. For some couples the decision was to abandon public religiosity in favor of private religious expression. Other couples struggled with how to reject certain public forms of religiosity and simultaneously craft a meaningful personal/private religiosity. For some couples, distinguishing between public and private forms of religiosity was difficult, which had implications for their ability to disengage from the parts of religion that they experienced as negative. The following example illustrates this strategy.

“We (couple) were talking about how much better we feel since we really made the decision to just...to not have to go [to church] anymore...I think religion has gotten so abusive...There’s a lot of things I question now. I do believe that there’s a God...but a lot of the stuff in the Bible I don’t believe...and I got to feeling kinda hypocritical sitting there on Sunday morning...I may later on down the road explore other things, but right now I just don’t want to do anything...I don’t know where it’s going to lead me, but I’m definitely not closing the door on anything.” (couple member A).

Some couples decided to retain a public expression of religiosity and used different strategies to accomplish this integration of religiosity into their lives. Some couple members either rejected or compartmentalized their sexuality. Other couples reframed religious doctrine or dogma to be more positive for them, while still others integrated public and private religiosity within their relationship based on shared values and beliefs. These different strategies are illustrated below.

*Rejecting or compartmentalizing sexuality.* Some couple members reflected on a past that included an abandonment of their sexuality in efforts to comply with the doctrines of their faith tradition.

“I spent several years in the seminary...going into the seminary you’re gonna be celibate for the rest of your life, so it (sexuality) was a non-issue...It didn’t matter anyhow [that I was gay], which I think looking back that was probably a little part of why I went in there...that’s what good gay Catholic boys do; they go become priests. What other choice do you have?” (couple member B).

Other couples discussed strategies for coping with being rejected by their families of origin based on organized religion and religious doctrine. Some couples chose not to disclose their relationship to religious family members in efforts to avoid family conflict. Others chose to distance themselves from religious family members who rejected them and their partners.

“My mother is the kind of person who would do absolutely anything in this world to break us up because she disapproves of our relationship and thinks that I could never be a Christian. In her view, this is wrong and as long as I live this kind of lifestyle, I will die and go to hell. Therefore, she is in her mind, justified in doing anything that she could to break us

up... We are both sons of ministers. My dad was a Southern Baptist... a lot of the personal problems that I have had have been because of things that have happened with my family. I've had to distance myself from my family... it still hurts that I'm not very well connected to them; I admit that." (couple member C)

*Reframing rejecting doctrines and dogmas.* Other couples reframed negative religious doctrine as positive, affirmative messages. These couple members expressed values of tolerance and acceptance as fundamental to their beliefs in God or a Higher Power. For instance, one couple member stated, "I don't believe that I should be ashamed of who I am. I'm a gay man who is in a partnership with another and this is the way God made me; I don't feel ashamed of myself..." (couple member D).

*Rapprochement between public and private.* Several couples described an integration of public and private religiosity that was important to their couple relationship and served as a positive reinforcement of their commitment to one another. For instance, one male couple, that met at a pagan religious gathering, commented on the importance of their spiritual connection to each other and to their local religious community.

Partner A: "Both of us have pagan beliefs... And it was great to finally find a partner... another gay man... who was interested in the same aspect of spirituality, which is something that is very important to me. It is something... I couldn't have been with somebody else who didn't share my spiritual beliefs, because it's that much a part of my life and it's not something I can just push off to the side."

Partner B: "Oh yeah, I think spirituality is something that a couple needs to be able to share between themselves... I think it gives us some grounding to get through the rough times. It gives us a network of people we trust that we can go to with problems." (couple E)

*Respecting couple differences.* While the majority of couples were united in their approach to religion and spirituality, some couples handled their differences either by forging a compromise or agreeing to disagree.

"I would say UN-orthodox might be the best way to describe me because I'm not quite comfortable with conservative things and I'm not comfortable with some of the Orthodox things either, so obviously being gay does kind of throw a wrench in certain things so I have

to sort of adapt as best I can. (My partner) adapts as well as he can to that but he doesn't understand a lot of it and doesn't agree with a lot of it. We don't really discuss it. We just sort of work around that." (couple member F).

### Discussion

These findings indicate that religion and spirituality are important to sexual minority individuals. However, this religiosity/spirituality is not likely to be expressed publicly as part of an institutionalized tradition. In this sample, public, organized religion is practiced less often than more private forms of expression. Although the majority of participants reported a religious affiliation and indicated that religion was important to them, few reported attending worship services regularly. This finding is consistent with the results of an online survey conducted by the GLCensus (2003) that found that while 64% of their sample claimed a religious affiliation, only 38% attended church. [Comparatively, 81% of respondents in the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey claimed a religious affiliation and 44% attended church regularly.]

Resolving religious issues may represent a developmental "crisis" for some sexual minority members that may have implications for individual and relational health. As Barret & Barzan (1996) note, "A fundamental struggle is for gay men and lesbians to find ways to overcome the clash between homoprejudiced religious institutions that assert their authority and personal spiritual experiences that connect them with a Supreme Being who offers love and acceptance" (p. 7). Our findings highlight some of the strategies that couples use to cope with such clashes. Future research should continue to understand links between the developmental processes of integrating sexual and spiritual identities. Understanding the importance of this task and strategies that lead to its accomplishment remains an empirical

endeavor with important implications for counseling sexual minority individuals and same-sex couples.

Our findings support the utility of examining religiosity as a couple-level variable. Few studies, even the marital literature, have used the couple as the unit of analysis (see review in Mahoney et al., 2001). One exception is the literature on religious homogamy, in which couple members' similarity and difference on religious affiliation has been determined. Some findings from longitudinal data have suggested that couple homogamy predicts lower rates of marital dissolution (Call & Heaton, 1997; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993). This study finds high levels of couple homogamy across measures of religiosity. Unlike findings from the marital literature, however, relationship satisfaction in this sample was not associated with homogamy of religious affiliation. Rather, relationship satisfaction was associated with homogamy of intrinsic religiosity. Notably, it is couple homogamy of the importance of religious beliefs or spirituality to the individual rather than simply higher levels of public or private religious/spiritual expressions that is important to relationship satisfaction. This finding suggests that it is the similarity or difference in intrinsic religiosity and religious/spiritual values that affects same-sex couples' relationship quality, not necessarily a high level of religiosity.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

The current study contributes an understanding of the breadth of religiosity by using a scale measure of intrinsic religiosity as well as the more frequently used single-item measures. Several limitations of this study should be noted, however. First is the lack of precision in measuring religious affiliation and the reliance on broad affiliation categories. Mahoney et al. (2001) has criticized the lack of preciseness in determining homogamy and the

need to distinguish between shared values and activities from shared religiousness. They suggest, and we concur, that future research on religious homogamy among couples should use more in-depth measures.

Second, this study relied on volunteer participants drawn from the community. Thus a selection bias prevents generalization to the general population of same-sex couples. Representative samples of sexual minority individuals and same-sex couples will be difficult as long as these identities are stigmatized and therefore concealed. Progress can be made however to the extent that those conducting large scale studies on religion, couples and families incorporate measures of sexual orientation or identity into their studies. To date, seemingly none have done so.

The exemplars from the texts of the conversations and interviews revealed that some same-sex couples consider their relationship to be sacred. Mahoney et al. (1999) found that heterosexual married couples who considered their marriage as a sacred bond and participated together in religious activities enjoyed greater marital satisfaction, commitment, and collaboration. Similar associations may also exist among same-sex couples. Future research should inquire about these associations directly and extensively.

While this study is exploratory, it suggests the importance of religiosity and spirituality in the lives of same-sex couples. Distinguishing between religiosity and spirituality and the public and private dimensions of spiritual identity expression is particularly important in a population that has traditionally been excluded and even psychologically traumatized by organized religions (Fitzgerald, 2003). Future research should continue to examine the function and content of religiosity and spirituality in same-sex couple relationships using psychometrically sound measures with larger, more diverse samples of

same-sex couples. While this study examined religiosity in a community sample of generally healthy, committed, satisfied couples, future research should also examine the role of religiosity among distressed same-sex couples that perhaps have been less successful in coping with non-affirmative or negative elements of their religious traditions. Meanwhile, however, our findings point to possibilities for same-sex couples to find ways to forge spiritual connections that support them as a couple and as individuals.

### Implications for Counseling Same-Sex Couples

Same-sex couple relationships exist in a socio-political context that must be carefully considered during the assessment and intervention phases of the counseling process. For many couples, organized religion has been a significant part of this social context. For same-sex couples, affiliation with a faith tradition is as likely to be a source of stress as it is a source of strength. Therefore, competent service delivery to this population should include assessment of the religious/spiritual identities or “spiritual wellness” (e.g., Chandler, Holden, & Kolander, 1992) of couple members. While the emphasis in gay-affirmative psychotherapy has been on honoring the psychosocial challenges of the coming-out processes of identity formation, the related process of integrating a healthy spiritual identity should also be incorporated. Above all, however, the personal values of the client should be honored, even if a client ultimately decides to give precedence to his/her religious identity over his/her sexual identity (see Haldeman, 2004).

For many same-sex couples, creating a healthy spirituality will involve what has been called “spiritual transformation” (Chandler, Holden, & Kolander, 1992) or “transformational coping” (Pargament, 1996). That is, some couple members will need to actively “move through the loss” of their earlier religious identities, (Ritter & O’Neil, 1989) and then replace

negative religious beliefs and experiences with new beliefs and experiences that are affirmative of their relationships. Same-sex couples that accomplish this transformation may experience greater psychological well-being as individuals and as a couple. Mental health professionals can encourage this transformation by helping couples to create supportive and encouraging spiritual ‘safe spaces’ in their relationship and in their community. For some couples, the use of rituals may help to create a spiritual refuge within the relationship that is healing and comforting in times of stress. For other couples, negotiating divergent religious values may be important to facilitating relationship commitment and increasing relationship satisfaction.

To aid in these goals, counselors should become aware of available resources that can help couples forge affirming public and private expressions of spirituality. Counselors must also be vigilant about counter-transference issues that may lead them to either avoid addressing spiritual identity issues or attempt to “convert” their GLBT clients to their own perspective. Exploring this important dimension may be particularly complex for clients from ethnic or racial minority communities. Couples who are composed of individuals with different ethnic or racial identities may particularly benefit from exploring together the impact of the religious/spiritual values of their families of origin and their cultures. Counselors can model respect for religious diversity and help couples to articulate the strengths (and challenges) of each tradition.

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Tables 1-3. Crosstabulations of Worship Service Attendance, Private Religious Activity, and Intrinsic Religiosity in Same-Sex Couples

Table 1. Church Attendance (n = 87)

Couple member A	Couple member B		
	Low	Moderate	High
Low	32.2% (28)	11.5% (10)	2.3% (2)
Moderate	10.3% (9)	20.7% (18)	4.6% (4)
High	2.3% (2)	3.4% (3)	12.6% (11)

$\chi^2 = 42.89, p < .000; \rho = .558, p < .000; \tau\text{-}b = .524, p < .000$

Table 2. Private Religious Activities (n = 90)

Couple member A	Couple member B		
	Infrequent	Occasional	Frequent
Infrequent	33.3% (30)	8.9% (8)	6.7% (6)
Occasional	8.9% (8)	8.9% (8)	6.7% (6)
Frequent	10% (9)	4.4% (4)	12.2% (11)

$\chi^2 = 16.11, p = .003; \rho = .412, p < .000; \tau\text{-}b = .376, p < .000$

Table 3. Intrinsic Religiosity (n = 87 couples)

Couple member A	Couple member B		
	Low	Mid	High
Low	20.7% (18)	5.7% (5)	4.6% (4)
Mid	10.3% (9)	11.5% (10)	10.3% (9)
High	6.9% (6)	14.9% (13)	14.9% (13)

$\chi^2 = 14.95, p = .005; \rho = .369, p < .000; \tau\text{-}b = .329, p < .000$