The weaving of the garment that I'm wearing: The spiritual lives of gay men in Aotearoa New Zealand

David Sander and Jan Wilson

Abstract

This small qualitative study took an in-depth look at the spiritual lives of gay men in Aotearoa New Zealand seeking to understand how they have constructed both their spiritual and sexual identities. A qualitative approach, in which eight participants were interviewed, was adopted. Thematic analysis was carried out to identify and understand the major themes related to what being spiritual and being a gay man meant to them, and the experiences each had gone through in the process. It sought to understand in particular these identities within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. Each talked about what it meant to be a gay man who is spiritual in Aotearoa New Zealand, and how ideas around masculinity may also impact on this position. It was found that gay affirmative organisations and help from significant others meant they could develop a more secure spiritual and sexual identity.

Keywords: gay, queer, spirituality, queer spirituality, Aotearoa New Zealand

Background

Being gay and spiritual

Homonegative environments can be a source of psychological distress (Lease, Horne, & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005) for gay men, and being involved with religion can mean a conflict between sexual and religious identities. Literature offers many perspectives on this. Among the contributing sources of this conflict can be implicit or explicit homonegative messages from religious organisations (Began & Hattie, 2015). Messages from wider society can also be homonegative (Macaulay, 2010; Mathibe, 2015; Subhi & Geelan, 2012) and the Rainbow community can also marginalise its own members who are religious (Hattie & Began, 2013). However, not all religious institutions are homonegative, and some are known to have leaders who are openly non-heterosexual (Began & Hattie, 2015).

When there is identity conflict between sexual and religious identities, there are different ways in which the individual typically responds. According to Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000), the four most common strategies implemented by those who are trying to manage this identity conflict are:

- embracing the religious self, which means there is a rejection of the homosexual self
- rejection of the religious self and the embracing of homosexual identity
- a compartmental approach in which individuals commute between identities
- an embracing of both religious and sexual selves.

Literature also highlights that a loss of belief system is not the only consequence when an individual decides to leave religion. When disaffiliation from religion occurs, not only can there be a loss of a belief system but there can be a loss of key support systems such as a relationship with the wider community, with other members of the religion, and even with the individual's family (Began & Hattie, 2015). However, those who are marginalised and disconnected from their religious beliefs are able to integrate their sexual and spiritual identities

if they can get affirmative support such as being in a safe environment and being supported emotionally by a spiritual community (Rodriguez & Vaughan,2013). Continuing spiritual practices such as prayer and meditation have also helped gay men cope with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (Foster, Arnold, Rebchook, & Kegeles, 2011; Ridge, Williams, Anderson, & Elford, 2008).

Spirituality and the rainbow community of Aotearoa New Zealand

Spirituality is often used synonymously with religion, however some definitions of spirituality do not involve formal religion at all (Bregman, 2004). For the purposes of this study I wanted to capture those who were religious, but also those who had practices outside of the church. Kiesling, Sorell, Montgomery, and Colwell (2006) in their research looking at the narrative construction of spiritual identity, described spiritual identity as the "persistent sense of self that addresses ultimate questions about the nature, purpose, and meaning of life, resulting in the behaviours that are consonant with the individual's core values" (p. 1269). In a similar vein, Templeton and Eccles (2006) define spiritual identity as a "personal identity that is grounded in one's personal beliefs, behaviours, concerning the transcendent" (p. 254).

Despite the high rates of disaffiliation from traditional religious institutions, spirituality is still important for the Rainbow community of Aotearoa New Zealand. When he interviewed 159 men who described themselves as actively homosexual within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, Rosser (1990) found that of 84 per cent of participants, who had been raised in a religious tradition, only 16 per cent of the participants regularly engaged with traditional religious practices. Rosser (1990) also suggests that the rate of disaffiliation from the Christian church is 2–5 times higher than that of the general population. A study of the Lavender Islands by Henrickson, Neville, Jordan, and Donaghey (2007) undertook research involving 2269 members of the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) community. The findings showed that the rate of disaffiliation was said to be 2.37 times higher than that of the general population Henrickson (2007). However, 59.8 per cent of the same respondents said that they had a belief in a higher being, thus indicating that spirituality was still important to them (Henrickson, Neville, Jordan, & Donaghey, 2007).

Publications documenting homosexual history in Aotearoa New Zealand (Brickell, 2008) capture the impact of significant events such as legislation changes for the Rainbow community (Kirkman & Maloney, 2006). This is important in understanding how historical and contemporary context shapes the position of the individual. With respect to queer Pākehā women the work of Kirkman (2001) is a significant study that offers insight into and how they negotiate being non-heterosexual and religious in Aotearoa New Zealand, particularly how their spirituality has developed. The aforementioned Lavender Islands study (Henrickson et al., 2007) included brief qualitative responses giving glimpses into the stories of gay men who are spiritual in Aotearoa New Zealand. The opportunity remained, therefore, for further research to be undertaken to understand gay men's lived experiences of spirituality in greater depth.

This study provided the participants with an opportunity to share their stories of being a gay man in Aotearoa New Zealand and of being spiritual. It sought to understand what might have grown out of their unique experiences, and how this may have influenced their sexual and spiritual identity development to a greater depth than has been explored before. It also sought to understand what spirituality means to them and how it is experienced by gay men in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Method

The aim of this research was to better understand aspects of the spiritual lives of gay men in Aotearoa New Zealand; hence a qualitative approach was used. This research received Ethics approval from the University of Auckland in 2016. The interviews occurred over 2016 and

2017, and the research report was submitted as part of a research portfolio toward a Master of Counselling in February 2018.

This research was specifically chosen as it is my lived experience, and I wanted to give voice to other gay men for whom spirituality is an important part of their lives. My experiences have included being raised within the Christian faith, "coming out" as gay, having time away from formal religion, and currently integrating these parts of myself. As an insider researcher, doing this research was itself a spiritual act as I hope to create an understanding that is larger than my own. As the intention of the research was to look at a lived experience that was also my own, I made sure that I attended to any biases that might emerge for me in conducting it. This was done by working closely with my research supervisor, taking part in a pre-suppositions interview, and being conscious throughout the process of the need for self-reflection.

To take part in the research the participants had to meet several criteria: They had to have been openly gay or queer for at least five years; they had to identify as spiritual and have ways in which they practised their spirituality; and they had to be currently living in New Zealand and be willing to talk about their spiritual and sexual selves.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling and snowball sampling (Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K., 2015) within the Auckland region as this was what was practical for this study. Two of the participants contacted me after seeing notices while the remaining six had the advertisement passed on to them by contacts, to whom I had forwarded the advertisement.

The research process and data gathering involved the use of semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews in which participants were invited to talk about their experiences in ways that would help others to understand what it means to be a gay man of spiritual beliefs. Of the eight interviews, six of these were conducted in a soundproof office space in Auckland and two at the participants' places of work. At the time of the interviews, six of the participants had monotheistic religious beliefs with two having their own spiritual beliefs and practices away from organised religion. All participants identified as male, had been openly gay for at least five years, lived in Auckland, and self-identified as being spiritual. The participants' ages ranged from 24 to 81 years old.

Following the interviews, the data was transcribed and analysed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) process of thematic analysis, identifying themes and subthemes. Pseudonyms chosen by the participants were used to protect their confidentiality.

Themes

Spiritual and sexual identity development

One theme to emerge among some participants was the way in which identity was a natural part of their development in their formative years.

> *I was born in a religious household, so it's just been second nature to me.* Alastair

> *Oh, just felt attracted to other guys, really and even I suppose that's pretty normal for that age. You start feeling attractions towards other people, and yeah, that was it really. I think when I first felt attracted towards another guy I just knew straight away.* John

For Alastair, development came out of the experiences he had in his family and being involved in religion. John talks of development of his sexual identity as being a part of going through puberty, which is a normal part of adolescence.

When participants were asked about early spiritual experiences, it appeared that being exposed to religion at a young age was common. These experiences ranged from being exposed briefly to Christian values as a part of their education to being born into an exclusive religious

community in New Zealand. Their conversations centred on their activities within churches and the communities of which they were a part and included attending Sunday school, being a part of religious rituals, traditions, and receiving religious education.

This talk of early exposure evolved into how they explained their spirituality from experiences during pre-teen and teenage years. One participant said that they were "*naturally inclined*" toward spirituality, another spoke about having an "*awareness*", and another about feeling "*connected"* while performing the rituals that centred on his religious beliefs at the time. For others being a part of formal religion was marked by a pattern of "*coming and going*" and yet another by being directly prohibited from having religious beliefs, but seeking them out for himself anyway.

Being able to articulate feelings of same sex attraction and to pursue relationships with members of the same sex was difficult. John reflected that puberty meant that it would be *"normal"* that he would want to explore his sexuality, but he, with other participants, struggled to do so in their teenage years. A lack of visible role models and positive scripts around what being gay meant made it difficult to articulate feelings of same sex attraction. Thomas, one of the older participants, knew that he had feelings toward a male teacher, but had no way of understanding this as sexual attraction as he did not know of any other men attracted to men. For Asher it was sublimated in his male friendships. Those who knew what being gay meant internalised beliefs that being gay was bad or something that they could not act on, given the messages around them.

Three of the older participants entered heterosexual marriages prior to coming out. Harold acknowledged that he knew he had feelings toward men, but did not have anyone with whom he could share these feelings. He talked about how he convinced himself to get married to a woman. James knew that he was not going to get married to a woman and that this was a sign to him that he was not straight, but he did not call it being gay.

Coming out as a process

A further key theme to emerge was the way in which participants experienced and viewed "coming out" as a process over time.

> *... I think the acknowledging, the process of acknowledgement, it's a long process coming out, a very long process. And it probably took me five years, you know, to work out, well, I think we're always coming out, aren't we?* James

James speaks to a couple of key ideas about coming out. How coming out is about others, but also a coming out to oneself. That it can be marked by recurring events when coming out to others.

Telling someone that they might be gay was one of the first steps of "*coming out*". This included telling family members, spouses, teachers, and those who participants thought it important to know about their sexuality. John said that he was able to tell his mother about it, and she was encouraging of exploration. He reflected how her response was "beyond the times" in which they lived. James had seen his brother ex-communicated from his spiritual community for being gay, and he himself talked about being ex-communicated for the same reasons. Pita came out to his ex-wife about his sexuality and was then subsequently outed, in terms of other members of his close family finding out about his sexuality.

Coming out also centred on first sexual experiences with a man. Going to a sauna was talked about. For one, this involved a sexual experience at the age of 10 with his older male friend, and he said that this was the first time that he became aware of the possibility that he might be gay.

The conflict and consequences of coming out

The struggles associated with coming out were very significant for participants.

> *I had more difficulty, I think, being gay, and even thought of committing suicide when I was a teenager, because the bible readings I had heard in the churches [said] that Sodom and Gomorrah got destroyed for homosexuality. My mother said, "if you become a homosexual, it would break my heart".* Alistair

Being gay was often internalised as a bad identity to embody and this was confirmed by external messages and real consequences for coming out. For James, coming out as gay led to his suspension from his religious community at the time, while John recalls going back in the closet because he wanted to stay involved with his church. Another of the participants said he had internalised the idea of same sex attraction as being "*bad*" without having been brought up in a religious family, which pointed to the influence of broader negative societal attitudes.

Negative internalisations around homosexuality led to negative mental health outcomes for the participants. Alistair got to the point where he thought of committing suicide because of the messages he was hearing in church about homosexuality. He was not the only participant to talk of his struggles with mental health or use of substances to help cope with the overwhelming feelings. Pita identified drug and alcohol use as part of his self- acceptance around being gay, stating that using alcohol and marijuana made being gay OK. John talked about a mid-life crisis at 30. Asher said that he went through depression. Adam talked about his OCD and anxiety being related to trauma he had experienced after having an early sexual experience at the age of 10. For Adam, this seemed to be compounded by the negative messages that he had internalised about being gay, as although he was unsure where these messages had come from, he knew at the time that to be gay was a bad thing.

Being a gay man in Aotearoa New Zealand

Mainstream narratives of what it means to be a gay man were widely discussed.

> *And you know, it's almost like doing things that are usually stigmatised, like getting, you know, super drunk, or being super slutty, it's almost not considered a really good thing. But you know, coz it's just out there, and wild, and fun, like it's more kind of celebrated, I guess. And also, you know, like being really fabulous, or over the top, is kind of more celebrated in the gay world. And I don't know, I like that, I like the over-the-topness about it. It's like that in the gay world, I don't know if that's like a product of just the marginalisation that's kind of made gay people that way, gay culture that way? Or whether it's just almost how gay people are wired, you know.* Adam

Adam talked about gay men being celebrated for being *"super drunk"* or *"super slutty"*, and that being gay was tied to the clothes he wore and being *"fabulous"* and *"over the top"*. While he rehashed typical narratives about what roles gay men play in society, he also introduced the idea that gay men could be caring, emotional, and supportive. He talked about gay men being a "go-between" for males and females through their understanding of both masculine and feminine identities.

John expressed the thought that the traditional masculinities that exist in New Zealand "*got in the road"* of men, both straight and gay, being vulnerable and talking about core parts of themselves such as spiritual beliefs. Based on the messages he had been brought up with, he thought that it was hard for men to be vulnerable around other men. Adam thought that it was a societal norm that existed. He talked about men feeling *"weird"* when they discussed topics such as spirituality as they were incongruent with day-to-day conversations men traditionally had.

The participants felt that such masculinities interfered with the ability to express, act on, and accept same sex feelings. Thomas recounted an experience growing up in rural New Zealand, in which his brother would try to get him to kill animals. He recounted this with distress and concluded that if this was what it meant to be a man, then there was no way that he could come out. In other words, men who have sex with men are not masculine, and are therefore not "real men".

Adam also talked about this struggle and said that he did not want to subscribe to the traditional masculinities that continue to exist in New Zealand. He wanted to be masculine in a different kind of way and to challenge the idea that masculinity and femininity are not tied to sexuality.

James talked about his distaste for *"indulgent"* and *"selfish"* gay relationships, while John believed that one's sexual or gender identity can too often become the only defining characteristic of the individual. James, perhaps prompted by his own religious beliefs, suggests that what can be missed is a depth of connection that comes when individuals relate in a spiritual way. This possibility offers another way in which gay relationships can be modelled through a spiritual relationship with no act of sex at all—or that one's sexuality is only one factor when relating to one another.

Asher talked about being *"mindful"* with his sexuality, about how being gay played out in his friendships with others and how it resulted in having more care for the males in his community, and that it was not inherently tied to having to have sex with them.

For other participants the gay community, and the different experiences that were to be had in that community, were often meaningless and empty. Some talked about the gay community providing a false sense of community. James described the community that was focused on the gay bar scene as being lonely and sad. Asher referred to "hook-up" apps as providing a meaningless sense of connection.

It also emerged that participants felt that just being gay did not seem to create a meaningful community. James found that having interests, such as sports, alongside one's sexual identity meant the bonds of the community worked well. Asher also talked about using Facebook to meet other gay Christians and how for him it was a supportive community.

Thomas talked about having "feet in two worlds" and not being accepted in either. He also accepted that being marginalised was a developmental part of his spiritual journey. Alistair had accepted that the way people took him was beyond his control, as he talked about being seen as offensive without even having to try. Adam believed that marginalisation made the gay community bond and thrive; had made it more progressive and more open to different ways of being.

The journey towards acceptance and integration of being gay and spiritual

Self-acceptance in relation to one's sexuality emerged as a clear theme.

> *One part of me knew straight away, but then there was another part of me that had to go through a process of actually accepting that for myself*. John

Interestingly, participants talked about coming out as a continual and that internal self-acceptance was, for them, a separate process. Pita took 10 years after he had his first sexual experience with a man before he accepted that he was himself gay. He said that what he needed was to be in an environment in which he was able to share his beliefs with others and feel accepted for those beliefs, thus highlighting the need for external acceptance.

What really helped with the process of acceptance around sexuality was the ability for participants to connect with someone who could and would support or understand their situation. For some it was speaking with a parent, a teacher, or a member of a helping profession. For Adam this connection came from his straight flatmate, with whom he was able

to have his own negative thinking reflected back at him, as well as develop a positive and healthy relationship. Asher talked of a teacher at his high school who gave him the space to explore his sexuality in an appropriate way.

The input of some members of the helping professions was unclear. Pita thought that he offended his counsellor by saying that he did not want to be gay, and for Harold, who visited three different helping professionals, while the answers he was given seemed to be supportive of him being gay, they left him upset as they did not resolve the struggle he was going through. John attributed some of his ability to navigate his *"mid-life"* crisis because his therapist helped him to reconnect with the process of ritual such as meditation, which he had liked when he had been part of the church. He talked about it being reparative and powerful for him that he was able to connect again with the parts of spirituality that were so important for him. He believed that the process of therapy was a final ritual toward the acceptance of his sexual identity.

The environment of Aotearoa New Zealand

The influence of legislative changes was raised by participants.

> *It was quite an insular conservative community and I particularly remember like around [age]11, which was when the legalisation of civil unions happened. There were, it was always like a separation between us and them. And so, like we are Christians and they're called to be separate from the world.* Asher

Asher is here referring to how the Civil Union Act (2004) shone a light on where his church stood on homosexual marriage, namely the way in which Christians were considered as separate from the world and sinful behaviour, alluding to homosexuality being a sin.

Legislation that has been passed in Aotearoa New Zealand in relation to sexual and spiritual identity was also the subject of discussion. The three pieces of legislation on which participants focused their conversations were the Homosexual Law Reform Act (1986), the Civil Union Act (2004), and the Marriage (Definition of Marriage) Amendment Act (2013). For instance, John saw the Homosexual Law Reform Act as a missed opportunity for him personally to come out. For Asher, the Civil Union Act was a kind of marker for what was acceptable and unacceptable behaviour as a Christian, and for Thomas the Marriages Act gave him hope that he might be free to marry in a church one day. These pieces of legislation have all legitimised same sex relationships in New Zealand but have also normalised same sex relationships and enabled gay men to be out without fear of legal recourse. This would appear to have helped in the internal acceptance of the gay identity.

For Harold, moving to Auckland brought a connection to supportive organisations and environments. He went on to talk about how he made the conscious choice to move to Auckland to get involved both with the gay community and a spiritual community, both of which he found were supportive of who he was.

Pita, however, challenged the idea that all of Auckland was a wholly supportive environment. He said that he felt unsafe to be gay in South Auckland; he had to be "s*treet wise*", and he saw it as a place where he was forced into having a girlfriend, as having a romantic relationship with a man did not seem an option.

Organisations that affirm sexual identity are important in the process of acceptance and integration. Participants confirmed, for example, that gay affirmative churches such as the Auckland Community Church were key in helping people who were both gay and spiritual to integrate these two identities. Pita talked about needing a place where he could understand his gay self, his Christian beliefs, and how they could work together. For James, this church helped him reintegrate his theology with who he was a person. Pita also attended a Māori religious organisation so that he could connect with his Māori identity as well. It would seem that

organisations' explicit support for different identities, such as homosexuality, contributes to greater understanding and help with the process of acceptance.

Being gay and spiritual

A further theme to emerge from this study were reflections on the relationship between being gay and spirituality.

> *So, I think for a gay person they have to come to the understanding that they are unique, and that they are loved as being a unique soul. And that they have a contribution to make to the world, and because we're not alone, we're part, this is why, we're part of a community.* Alistair

For Adam, being spiritual was tied to the way he observed, understood, and interacted with the world. He talked about how his world view was influenced by the spiritual leaders he listened to. He then talked about the practices that he performed, such as meditation, which came out of a process of listening and choosing what he wanted to do.

Being spiritual also meant adhering to certain values. Participants talked about their spirituality in terms of the values that they held, and how they enacted these values. Some of these values reflected traditional religious values; e.g., love, justice, mercy, and being humble before God came up in most of the interviews.

Having active roles within religious organisations were some of the explicit ways in which participants practised their spirituality. This involved traditional roles such as delivering the "sermon" message, doing the homily, or taking on leadership roles within the religious setting.

James's spirituality seemed to involve a continual critical engagement with the Bible and his beliefs. He talked about the importance for him of continually questioning what it means to be a Christian, what his beliefs are and what it means to be a gay Christian. He reflected on a message that he had shared in church and how when he gave that same message again, because of the transition of time and a new context, its meaning had changed.

Spirituality was a sense-making process for Asher, who talked about transitioning from a place where he was confused and engaging in destructive behaviours, to a place where he was able to look back at all of it as being meaningful. This involved reflecting on experiences, and the integration of the knowledge he had gained from these experiences, so that he might lead a better life in the future.

The idea that spirituality and sexuality could be intertwined also came up. James likened Jesus' marginalisation with his own in that he believed being gay gave him key insights into Jesus' key values of marginalisation, and loving others—even when being persecuted for being different than the world, which in biblical terms can represent the mainstream.

Pita was explicit that his ethnic identity came before his sexual and spiritual identities; he said that he was Māori first, after which he was a gay Christian and that integrating these beliefs were a part of being himself. This was also evident in Pita's spiritual practices of karakia, which he said were helpful coping skills. During his interview Harold shared a poem, which I saw as a meaning-making practice, and then talked about his journey from being closeted, through to the struggles he experienced coming out, to the point of accepting his own sexuality. Spiritual practices seemed to help him come out to other family members. For these men these spiritual practices not only allowed them to explore and re-present a part of their spiritual selves, but they also helped with the articulation and acceptance of their sexual selves.

John talked about spirituality being the scaffolding holding the building up. He said that the scaffolding helped when the building, which he described as himself and his wellbeing, needed re-energising and he needed to reconnect with himself. He spoke of rituals and spiritual practices being a part of a holistic approach to getting better health. He also saw the morals and

values he had been taught in a religious setting as being the ones that he still embodied, despite no longer taking a part in any formal religion.

Spirituality and spiritual growth meant not only concern for one's own spiritual wellbeing, but caring for others. Several times throughout the interviews, participants expressed that concern for others' spiritual wellbeing was part of what it means to be spiritual. James talked about the act of friendship as being deeply spiritual and Asher thought that being in this community (i.e., gay and spiritual) meant that they were responsible for each other.

Spirituality for gay men seems to be about active service to the community. Adam talked about being the "go-between" with his friends, as being an objective outsider, or counsellor, as he was neither a straight man, nor a straight woman. James talked about his role being the "peace maker" between different churches in the Auckland area. Alistair talked about being asked to help a member of his congregation, who had recently been widowed, with her grief. Pita was being asked to lead a workshop at a conference on being Māori and spiritual.

This also manifests in choosing a vocation. Thomas at the time of the interviews was completing a Masters in Queer Theology, and James and Harold both had counselling roles. Harold talked about volunteering his time and knowledge as a critical part of his purpose in life.

The metaphor of the spiritual journey

The final theme from this study was the reference to the powerful metaphor of a journey.

> *I think it just became another part of the weaving of the garment that I'm wearing, I guess.* Harold

Many of the participants employed the metaphor of "the journey" to describe their experiences. For most this journey was at times a lonely one. Adam talked about his loneliness as not being able to talk with others at the "*depth"* that he liked about being gay and spiritual. John spoke about the journey, going forward, as being one where he would reconnect to ritual when he wanted and needed to, such as an upcoming Spring equinox in which he planned to participate as a way of connecting with others, but also connecting with himself.

Pita described his journey as a series of opportunities to put himself "*out there*". He talked about being visible in a Facebook photo advertising a gay affirmative church and stepping up to run the workshop on being Māori and Christian.

Discussion

Identity development, conflict, and integration

When talking about their sexuality all of the participants spoke of developing an awareness of having an attraction to members of the same sex, which is congruent with developmental models of sexuality (Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994).

Intersectionality of their spiritual and sexual identities, particularly in the religious context, has meant that these participants have all gone on a journey of accepting that they are gay and then trying to reintegrate their spiritual beliefs with their sexuality.

To understand this journey is to understand the challenges the participants experienced. Participants to varying degrees experienced struggles with mental wellbeing. The literature (King et al., 2008; Subhi & Geelan, 2012) talks of the over-representation of members of the Rainbow community with their struggles related to mental health and substance use. While it is difficult to draw direct causation, it could be assumed that the extra marginalisation that did occur for these participants, partly because of their spiritual beliefs, and other experiences of implicit or explicit marginalisation, would make them more vulnerable to developing these issues. Social isolation from support networks such as family and religious organisations would

have meant that participants would have had to find new ways of coping, with drugs and alcohol being one way. However, as the research confirms (Arreola, Neilands, Pollack, Paul, & Catania, 2008), their struggles were also idiosyncratic. What was heartening to hear, however, was that even though some of the participants had been at the point of suicide, they had been resilient and found ways through their spiritual practices as well as taking proactive measures of seeking support.

Having some form of support seems to have been a critical factor of participants being able to negotiate being gay and spiritual. As indicated in the literature (Fenaughty & Harre, 2003; Yakushko, 2005) there was an importance of engagement with helping professionals, important authority figures, family members, friends, and those who were going through, or had been through, similar issues. It was also suggested that gay affirmative churches were a crucial part of this process. Brickell (2008) talks about urbanism in the 1950s and how urban centres became enclaves for gay men, places where they could explore their sexual selves. Not only did this mean connection with other gay men, but it also meant the participants were able to connect with gay affirmative churches, which reflects a shift from isolation to connection, a theme present throughout the study. However, even within Auckland city itself, Pita highlights that there are still places where it is not safe to be openly gay, including his workplace at the time of the study where he not only cannot be openly gay, but also cannot express his religious or spiritual identities.

Literature suggested a mixed view regarding the acceptance of spirituality in Aotearoa New Zealand. Morris (2005) believes New Zealand to be an inherently spiritual place where spirituality can be seen on the rugby field or in more traditional forms such as going to church. Other commentators suggest that there remain more traditional discourses on Kiwi men being rough, strong, and decisive men (Liepens, 2000) who love their beer and rugby (Phillips, 2006). Interestingly, the men in this particular study could be considered change agents in respect to shifting some of these discourses by leading and teaching openness and acceptance. Also, aligned to more recent viewpoints on men embracing masculinity and femininity (McNeill & Douglas, 2011), the men in this study seemed comfortable talking about supporting, caring, and willing to be vulnerable in discussing their spiritual beliefs, which points to a way in which gay men who are spiritual are comfortable with embodying both the masculine and feminine.

In terms of identity management, the participants managed their identities similarly to those described in the literature, e.g., Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) describe the four ways in which sexual and spiritual identities are managed. John is a prime example of this trajectory in that he was brought up in a religious setting and then came out as gay, before going back in the closet to maintain his connection with the church. As he started exploring his sexual identity however, he then lost interest in the church, thus rejecting his spiritual identity. He came back to it in his 30s when going through a "mid-life crisis", and then integrated it back into his life in the form of non-religious ritual. Pita walks between four different worlds: his Māori world, a work of world, his gay world, and his spiritual world while Adam noted that he himself sees the world through a spiritual lens.

Limitations

One of the limitations of the research for this study is that all but one of the participants had been involved with Christian institutions, and thus it is not representative of other faiths. Hoverd (2008) has noted that Christianity is the most ascribed-to faith in Aotearoa New Zealand, with other faiths such as Buddhism and Islam becoming more mainstream. Since finishing my original research, I have come across a branch of the faery movement in New Zealand, which is a unique form of gay spirituality, but it is not represented here.

Another limitation is the lack of the ability to tease out all of the unique environmental factors that contribute to identity development. Future research might address gay spiritual

beliefs such as these, or even seek to understand the intersectionality of being Māori, with its inherent spirituality, and being gay, particularly in settings that explicitly forbid homosexuality. Research into understanding what it means to be gay in rural Aotearoa New Zealand might also assist our understanding of how ecosystems influence identity development.

Recommendations for counsellors

Te whare tapa whā, Mason Durie's (2001) Māori model of health, well known in Aotearoa New Zealand, advocates that drawing upon and strengthening the spiritual beliefs and practices of an individual contributes to their overall wellness. The Lavender Islands study (Henrickson et al., 2007) highlighted how particularly important spirituality is for the Rainbow community, showing that spirituality can be a source of meaning, values, resilience, and possible steps toward wellbeing.

From our research, we conclude that it is important for counsellors to understand the nuanced, lived experience of the individual. In particular, this study has shown the seeming contradictions and complexities that gay men may face and which we suggest are critical for counsellors to grasp. Spirituality for gay men can provide both a source of strength and a source of conflict. That conflict can come from religious organisations such as the various churches, but it can also provide sympathetic reconnection with a supportive community, and Rainbow-affirming religious organisations can be one of these places. It is important to understand that the rejection of the spiritual self, or sexual self, is a normal response, but that integration of these identities is also possible.

Supportive spaces where individuals can unpack and explore their sexuality and spiritual are also critical. Although New Zealand may have pockets of resistance toward homosexuality, participants confirmed that there is also a lot of support, ranging from family members to gay affirmative organisations. Counsellors can also provide support, offering a safe space where clients can unpack who they are safely and explore how they want to move forward with their lives. We contend that one of the important goals of therapy should be seeking out Rainbow-affirmative organisations to get peer support from others, to create a stronger sense of community, and, most importantly, to turn what is talked about in a counselling session in respect to affirmation into lived experience.

Conclusion

> *Acceptance, accepting who I am, and my beliefs, and knowing that there are people out there who are similar, who have walked journeys, but they've ended up in the same place. We've all ended up in the [same church]. We've all ended up there, but we've all walked different journeys, but we've found a place where we're safe.* Pita

Equifinality, as defined by Templeton and Eccles (2006), is the process whereby many paths lead to the same destination when it comes to spiritual development. This research set out with the aim of understanding what the path looked like for gay men in Aotearoa New Zealand and how they managed being both gay and spiritual. These eight journeys proved that there were challenges to be faced, but also victories to be won. It was heartening, for example, to hear that formal religion was still relevant for six of the eight participants. For the two who practised their spirituality outside of formal religion, it was encouraging to hear that they had managed to incorporate their beliefs and practices in a way that was authentic and real for them. What was clear was that being able to be spiritual was important.

A "post gay" era as conceptualised by Weststrate and Mclean (2010) is a time where one is just allowed to express their sexuality without having to come out or go through a process of acceptance. We as a society may not be there yet, and there may always be parts of society that struggle with those who do not subscribe to heteronormativity. It would be my hope that others would look to the lives of these participants, and others in the community who have

carved out a space where they can be gay and spiritual, and be able to see that it is possible to live an authentic and integrated life, however that may look, and despite the struggles that may be encountered.

This project itself has been a significant spiritual experience for me. There have been times in the process of hearing the participants' stories, and in the process of writing, that I have felt connected to something that is bigger than just myself. Their bravery and courage have changed my life and I wanted to honour that through this article.

> *Being gay and spiritual is a hard blessing that takes a lot of wrestling and repositioning, cognitively, emotionally and physically.* James
>
> *Being marginalised comes with challenges, but it also makes me feel like I can ultimately find myself and express my authentic self.* Adam
>
> *Do not throw out being gay or spiritual, as this is the equipment that will get you through.* Harold
>
> *It requires a little self-understanding, and taking small steps, and this will not always be easy.* John
>
> *On the way following one's intuition and having the space to flail are all part of the experience.* Asher
>
> *At times the journey will be a lonely one, but remember to surround yourself with supportive people, listen, and share in their experiences.* Thomas
>
> *If one is able to make it through this journey the rewards are self-understanding, understanding others and their struggles, and maybe a relationship with another man, or even a relationship with a God that is personal to you.* Alastair
>
> *It strengthens, it softens, and may even mean that you can stand tall as a man, with pride, and say that you are Spiritual and Gay.* Pita

Iti noa ana, he pito mata. "From the withered tree, the flower blooms." (Māori Language.net, 2020)

References

Arreola, S., Neilands, T., Pollack, L., Paul, J., & Catania, J. (2008). Childhood sexual experiences and adult health sequelae among gay and bisexual men: Defining childhood sexual abuse. *The Journal of Sex Research, 45*(3), 246–252. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/20620366

Beagan, B. L., & Hattie, B. (2015). Religion, spirituality, and LGBTQ identity integration. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, *9*(2), 92-117. doi:10.1080/15538605.2015.1029204

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Bregman, L. (2004). Defining spirituality: Multiple uses and murky meanings of an incredibly popular term. *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, *58*(3), 157–167. doi:10.1177/154230500405800301

Brickell, C. (2008). *Mates & lovers: A history of gay New Zealand*. Auckland, New Zealand: Godwit.

Cass, V. C. (1979). Homosexual identity formation: A theoretical model. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *4*(3), 219-235. doi:10.1300/J082v04n03_01

Civil Union Act 2004. Retrieved from http://legislation.govt.nz/all/results.aspx?search=ts_act%40bill%40regulation%40deemedreg_Civil+Union+Act_resel_25_a&p=1

D'Augelli, A. R. (1994). *Identity development and sexual orientation: Toward a model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual development.* In E. J. Trickett, R. J. Watts, and D. Birman (eds.), *Human Diversity: Perspectives on People in Context.* (pp. 312–333). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Durie, M. (2001). *Mauri ora: The dynamics of Māori health*. Auckland, New Zealand: Oxford University Press.

Fenaughty, J., & Harré, N. (2003). Life on the seesaw. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *45*(1), 1–22. doi:10.1300/J082v45n01_01

Foster, M. L., Arnold, E., Rebchook, G., & Kegeles, S. M. (2011). "It's my inner strength": Spirituality, religion and HIV in the lives of young African American men who have sex with men. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, *13*(9), 1103–1117. http://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2011.600460

Hattie, B., & Beagan, B. L. (2013). Reconfiguring spirituality and sexual/gender identity: "It's a feeling of connection to something bigger, it's part of a wholeness." *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work*: Social Thought, *32*(3), 244–268. doi:10.1080/15426432.2013.801733

Henrickson, M. (2007). Lavender faith. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, *26*(3), 63–80. doi:10.1300/J377v26n03_04

Henrickson, M., Neville, S., Jordan, C., & Donaghey, S. (2007). Lavender islands. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *53*(4), 223–248. doi:10.1080/00918360802103514

Homosexual Law Reform Act 1986. Retrieved from www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1986/0033/latest/whole.html

Hoverd, W. J. (2008). No longer a Christian country? Religious demographic change in New Zealand 1966–2006. *New Zealand Sociology*, *23*(1), 41–65.

Kiesling, C., Sorell, G. T., Montgomery, M. J., & Colwell, R. K. (2006). Identity and spirituality: A psychosocial exploration of the sense of spiritual self. *Developmental Psychology*, *42*(6), 1269–1277. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.42.6.1269

King, M., Semlyen, J., Tai, S. S., Killaspy, H., Osborn, D., Popelyuk, D., & Nazareth, I. (2008). A systematic review of mental disorder, suicide, and deliberate self-harm in lesbian, gay and bisexual people. *BMC Psychiatry*, *8*(1), 70. doi:10.1186/1471-244X-8-70

Kirkman, A. M. (2001). Ties that bind. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, *5*(1–2), 211–227. doi:10.1300/J155v05n01_14

Kirkman, A., & Moloney, P. (Eds.). (2005). *Sexuality down under: Social and historical perspectives.* Dunedin, New Zealand: Otago University Press.

Lease, S. H., Horne, S. G., & Noffsinger-Frazier, N. (2005). Affirming faith experiences and psychological health for caucasian lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *52*(3), 378.

Liepins, R. (2000). Making men: The construction and representation of agriculture-based masculinities in Australia and New Zealand. *Rural Sociology*, *65*(4), 605–620. doi:10.1111/j.1549-0831.2000.tb00046.x

Marriage (Definition of Marriage) Amendment Act 2013. Retrieved from http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2013/0020/latest/DLM4505003.html

McNeill, L. S., & Douglas, K. (2011). Retailing masculinity: Gender expectations and social image of male grooming products in New Zealand. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *18*(5), 448–454. doi:10.1016/j.jretconser.2011.06.009

Macaulay, R. (2010). "Just as I am, without one plea": A journey to reconcile sexuality and spirituality. *Ethnicity and Inequalities in Health and Social Care*, *3*(3), 6–13. http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.auckland.ac.nz/10.5042/eihsc.2010.0505

Māori Language.net (2020. Retrieved from http://www.maorilanguage.net/maori-made-easy/week-1-wednesday-pt-2/

Mathibe, R. (2015). The conflicts: Christianity and homosexuality. *Agenda*, *29*(1), 81–84. doi:10.1080/10130950.2015.1010298

Morris, P. (2005) "Who are we? New Zealand identity and spirituality" in J. Liu, T. McCreanor, T. McIntosh and T. Teaiwa (eds.) *New Zealand Identities: Departures and Destinations* (pp. 242–254). Wellington, New Zealand: Victoria University Press.

Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health*, *42*(5), 533–544. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y

Phillips, D. A. (2006). Masculinity, male development, gender, and identity: Modern and postmodern meanings. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 27(4), 403–423. doi:10.1080/01612840600569666

Rodriguez, E. M., & Ouellette, S. C. (2000). Gay and lesbian christians: Homosexual and religious identity integration in the members and participants of a gay-positive church. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *39*(3), 333–347. doi:10.1111/0021-8294.00028

Rodriguez, E. M., & Vaughan, M. D. (2013). Stress-related growth in the lives of lesbian and gay people of faith. In J. D. Sinnott (Ed.), *Positive psychology: Advances in understanding adult motivation* (pp. 291–307). New York, NY: Springer. doi:10.1007/978-1-4614-7282-7_18

Rosser, B. R. S. (1990). Christian and catholic background and adherence in New Zealand homosexually active males: *Journal of Psychology & Human Sexuality*, *3*(1), 89–115. doi:10.1300/J056v03n01_06

Subhi, N., & Geelan, D. (2012). When Christianity and homosexuality collide: Understanding the potential intrapersonal conflict. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *59*(10), 1382–1402. doi:10.1080/00918369.2012.724638

Templeton, J. L., & Eccles, J. S. (2006). *The relation between spiritual development and identity processes*. (pp. 252–265). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc. doi:10.4135/9781412976657.n18

Weststrate, N. M., & McLean, K. C. (2010). The rise and fall of gay: A cultural-historical approach to gay identity development. *Memory*, *18*(2), 225–240. doi:10.1080/09658210903153923

Yakushko, O. (2005). Influence of social support, existential well-being, and stress over sexual orientation on self-esteem of gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling, 27*(1), 131–143. doi:10.1007/s10447-005-2259-6