A few years ago Dr. Yarhouse wrote an article for the Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling in which he made a distinction between same-sex attraction, a homosexual orientation, and a gay identity. He referred to this as a “three-tier distinction.” What was suggested was that today most people treat these terms as synonymous - that if a person experiences same-sex attraction, they are gay. But we know that a higher percentage of people experience same-sex attraction than would say they have a homosexual and bisexual orientation, and even fewer people presumably identity as gay. It is unclear how much attraction to the same sex leads a person to say that they have a sufficient amount of attraction to identify themselves as having a homosexual orientation. Also, not everyone who reports a homosexual orientation refers to themselves or thinks of themselves as gay. Put differently, a gay identity is a sociocultural label and self-defining attribution (“I am gay”) that has evolved within a cultural context being rather unique to our time in history. There has not been language for a comparable, socially constructed self-defining attribution.

Why is the distinction important to some people? It should be noted at the outset that it is not a distinction that is important to everyone. Some people are quite comfortable treating attractions, orientation, and identity as synonymous. This distinction is not for them. Other people, however, find this distinction useful. As someone recently shared, it may not be helpful for communicating to others as it can come across like splitting hairs. But the distinction can be important to those who are sorting out these issues because it provides space to think differently about themselves. Some people find it helpful to think about themselves as having same-sex attractions, which is a descriptive, honest way of talking their experiences, while also refraining from forming an identity around their attractions (or saying that they are a categorically different kind of person by virtue of their attractions to the same sex). They choose (for personal or religious reasons) not to form an identity around the fact that they experience same-sex attractions, even if those attractions are sufficiently strong and enduring so they might say of themselves that they have a homosexual orientation. They still might choose not to identify as gay.

In another writing (the book, Sexual Identity Synthesis), Yarhouse and co-author Erican S. N. Tan reported on the experiences of Christians in Exodus-affiliated ministries and Christians in the Metropolitan Community Church. They reported on the milestone events in their identity development and synthesis, as well as the attributions and meaning-making that went along with their identities. In any case, some Christians (from Exodus-affiliated ministries) chose not to identify with a gay identity and the persons and organizations that supported that identity. Other Christians (from the Metropolitan Community Church)
integrated their experiences of same-sex attraction into a gay identity. The three-tier distinction simply allows for a discussion of that process and these differences.

16

Colloquium on Sexual and Religious Identity

The Doctoral Program in Clinical Psychology at Regent University hosts a colloquia series each year, inviting leading scholars within the field of psychology to present and discuss relevant theories and research findings. Recently, Dr. Lee Beckstead (Aspen Grove Counseling) and Dr. Mark Yarhouse (Regent University) were invited to dialogue on sexual and religious identity. The event occurred February 15, 2008.

Dr. Beckstead’s talk was titled “Resolving the Unsolvable: Therapeutic Considerations for Those in Conflict with Sexual Orientation, Religious, and Social Identities.” He spoke for about 45 minutes and shared results from his qualitative research on LDS/Mormon persons who at one time participated in conversion therapy. He was able to place their request and motivations in context, while then expanding therapeutic options for resolving distress for those who are conflicted. Dr. Beckstead’s main “take-home” points:

Recognize that issues of self-determination are complex for conservatively religious, same-sex attracted individuals due to cultural norms/pressures, attachment needs, wrong and negative information, and lack of accurate and affirming information and the internalization, conformity, restricted views, lack of exploration, shame and compliance that may occur.

Recognize therapists’ responsibility to act both ethically and affirmatively by basing work on scientific knowledge; counteracting societal oppression while maintaining a broad view of acceptable lifestyle and identity choices.

Dr. Yarhouse also spoke for 45 minutes. His talk was titled “At the Intersection of Sexual and Religious Identity.” He defined sexual identity and provided examples of models of sexual identity development, including one he proposed that took attributions into consideration when one experiences attraction to the same sex. He distinguished between attractions, orientation, and identity (a “three-tier” distinction which can be helpful for clinical practice). He also reviewed milestone events among sexual minorities (e.g., first attraction, first behavior, first labeling, first relationship) and contrasted existing findings on gay youth and young adults with a survey he conducted of sexual minorities at Christian colleges and universities. Dr. Yarhouse also
discussed factors which may contribute to different people labeling themselves differently, including attraction, biological sex, gender identity, intentions, behavior, and valuative framework.

Dr. Yarhouse also discussed religious orienting systems and how central they can be to some individuals. He discussed, then, the conflict and drew from his clinical experience and two studies on persons sorting out these concerns. The major themes of realistic (modest) expectations when people desire to change sexual orientation, shame, isolation, negative emotions toward God, attributions (meaning), questions about authenticity, and congruence (lining up beliefs/values with behavior/identity and vice versa).

Both Dr. Beckstead and Dr. Yarhouse then fielded questions from the audience. The questions were primarily from people who were visitors to the Regent campus, and both presenters were able to discuss their views on the etiology of sexual orientation, the act of labeling, and other topics of interest to audience members.

The PowerPoint from both presenters is available in the File Library under “Documents.” Click here to be directed to a video of the presentations.

08
Sexual Identity Therapy Framework Being Revised in 2008
SIT Framework Comments Off
Dr. Mark Yarhouse and Dr. Warren Throckmorton (Grove City College) are in the process of revising the Sexual Identity Therapy Framework they first proposed in 2006. This decision and the framework itself recently received some good press. Please take the time to read over the proposed framework and send us your comments at issi@regent.edu or on the SIT Blog. Sexual Identity Therapy Framework (PDF resource)

02
Sexual Identity Synthesis
Sexual identity synthesis has typically referred to the endpoint of sexual identity development. Many models of sexual identity development end at some point that might be referred to as identity synthesis or identity achievement. The person is believed to have synthesized or achieved their sexual identity as gay, straight, bisexual, lesbian, queer, and so on. The idea of a synthesized sexual identity has been challenged by recent research that suggests greater fluidity among sexual minorities. For example, Lisa Diamond reported on a
longitudinal study of 89 women. It was normative for women to experience both same- and opposite-sex attraction. Further, many women did not prefer to label themselves. Diamond suggested that theorists talk more about “same-sex sexuality” rather than sexual orientation and labelling as such.

It is interesting that one reporter recently wrote about Diamond’s study as providing evidence for bisexuality being rather stable (rather than a phase) among women who are sexual minorities. This seems to contrast with the preference Diamond has stated for talking about “same-sex sexuality” and for a move away from identity labels.

**Sexual Identity Development**

Vivian Cass wrote one of the earliest and most influential and enduring models of sexual identity development. She was trying to understand how a person comes to have a gay identity - how it develops and consolidates over time. She wrote about a six-stage model of sexual identity development that was in some ways reminiscent of early racial identity models. The model began with identity confusion or the questioning of one’s sexual identity because of attraction toward the same sex. This was followed by identity comparison in which the person reached the conclusion that he or she is different due to attraction to the same sex. The third stage, identity tolerance, referred to the assumption that the person is likely or probably gay. This stage was followed by identity acceptance in which a person identifies or attributes same-sex attraction as signaling that he or she is gay. The next stage was that of identity pride - taking pride in one’s gay identity often in contrast to what might be good in heterosexuality. The final stage was identity synthesis or the point at which a person reaches the conclusion that his or her self-identification as “gay” is one part of who he or she is as a person.

This and other early models have been criticized for being too linear and for assuming that everyone has to go through each stage. But it remains a very popular model and is often seen in undergraduate psychology and human sexuality textbooks. It has also set the stage for how many view the conflict that some religious persons face when they have questions about their sexual identity in light of their religious identity. They can be viewed as not having achieved a healthy sexual identity synthesis - that they are “developmentally arrested” or some other pejorative term. But there are those who believe there is more to it than that. There are those who believe that while a lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) identity synthesis is one outcome, there are other possible outcomes for someone who holds strong, central (to identity) religious beliefs and values.

For example, as we suggested in our study *Ex-Gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation*, one possible outcome may be an apparent heterosexual adjustment resulting for some individuals from diminished same-sex attraction and (for a smaller percentage) a modest increase in attraction toward the opposite sex. It appears to also be possible to form an identity around one’s religious
commitments, as when some Christians form a primary identity “in Christ” rather than organized around their sexual attractions (see Sexual Identity Synthesis: Attributions, Meaning-Making and the Search for Congruence by Yarhouse and Tan). Perhaps for some people diminished intensity of same-sex attraction contributes to the capacity to find meaning and significance in chastity, a value upheld within traditional, orthodox Christianity.

01

What Contributes to Sexual Identity?

Sexual identity refers to communicating to oneself and to others something about one’s sexual preferences. But what contributes to a person’s sexual identity and the act of labeling? Why do some people prefer specific labels (or no labels) and feel that one label rather than another reflects who they really are? Of course, the amount and kind of attractions will contribute to sexual identity. People vary in how much attraction they report toward the same- and opposite-sex. Some studies suggest rather stable patterns of attraction over time; other studies suggest greater fluidity among some persons.

There may be additional factors that contribute in some way to the decision to label oneself as gay, straight, bi, lesbian, questioning, curious, queer, and so on. Elsewhere we have suggested that those other factors might include a person’s biological sex, by which we mean whether the person was born male or female. Intentions may also factor in here - what a person intends to do with his or her attractions. It might also include a person’s sexual behavior - what a person does (or chooses not to do) with the attractions he or she has. Sexual identity labels may also be influenced by personal and religious beliefs and values about human sexuality and sexual expression.

There may be other factors as well. What we would suggest is that these factors may vary from person to person - that they may be weighted differently for different people. For one person, prominent attractions toward the same sex may be the most significant consideration; for another, their biological sex as male or female may be a significant consideration in the decision to label themselves one way or another. For still others the decision to refrain from sexual behavior, informed by personal values, may factor into sexual identity and how they make meaning out of their experiences.

There are many reasons these distinctions may be important. One reason is that there appears to be significant heterogeneity among those who experience same-sex attraction. That these factors may be weighted differently for different persons suggests that we may see some people drawn to one identity label, while others may be drawn to different identity labels. Still others may move in another direction altogether, choosing instead not to label themselves with reference to their attractions as such. This is an important area for future research - what contributes to these various pathways toward sexual identity labeling? Can
What is Sexual Identity?

Sexual identity refers to the act of labeling one’s sexual preferences. The common labels used today include straight, gay, lesbian, and bi. Additional labels include queer, questioning, and curious. Others prefer not to label themselves at all. The preference not to label one’s sexual identity appears to be more common today, particularly among adolescents.

Research on sexual identity has been interesting to follow. As we have written about in other places, the earliest theoretical models and studies from the 1970s focused on general homosexual identity formation, while later approaches distinguished between gay male and lesbian sexual identity development. Still other models emerged for bisexual identity formation, recognizing that bisexuality necessarily involves different experiences in the formation of a sexual identity. More recent approaches have suggested differences for sexual minorities who are also ethnic minorities. Because the early models assumed a monolithic sexual identity experience, the challenges faced by ethnic minorities were often overlooked. For example, some have shared that they have a “double minority” status. They may be one of a few racial minorities among their gay, lesbian, or bisexual friends, and they may be one of a few sexual minorities among their friends of the same racial group.

Most recently, we have seen models proposed for the relationship between religious identity and sexual identity. The question that has been asked is: “In what ways is sexual identity influenced by religious identity and vice versa?” The theories and research in this area are in their infancy, but it is an important area for consideration, particularly for people of faith who are sorting out sexual identity concerns.