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“Queerituality”: Reforming What it Means to be a Religious Queer

Sean R. Smallwood

College settings often place students in a petri dish where they are able to reflect on their innermost identities, values, and how they come to know the world around them. Through intentional efforts, student affairs professionals can create spaces where students are able to explore identities that society often states as being mutually exclusive. There is a body of research to help student affairs practitioners support queer-identified students developmentally (e.g. Cass' Identity Model, Fassinger's Model of Gay and Lesbian Identity Development, and D'Augelli's Model of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Development). The topic of spirituality as it relates to queer students has been under-researched (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001; DuMontier, 2000; Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005; Stevens, 2004). Recent research has emerged providing a model to understand the complexity of multiple dimensions of identity and to infuse meaning-making as a part of identity development (Abes & Jones, 2004; Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones & Abes, 2013; Jones & McEwen, 2000). As we move forward, something to be considered is the way queer students shape their identity in the context of heteronormativity. The present models work well, but fail to understand the student experience in a world where queer students subvert heteronormativity in order to more fully realize their own identity (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Jones & Abes, 2013). In this article the author examines the ways in which queer students reform their queer and religious identities, grounding the discussion in queer theory, and examining the role of queer authorship as a developmental understanding of "queerituality".

College is often a time when students begin to form and reform their most salient identities. Identity formation is contextually bound, multifaceted, and increasingly complex as we begin to consider how society influences saliency and the development of college students on our campuses. Jones and McEwen (2000) developed the model of multiple dimensions of identity (MMDI) as a way

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to conceptualize and understand how identities develop. Recognizing the need to adapt to an evolving student culture, Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) reimagined the original model to consider meaning-making capacities as part of identity development. However, when understanding the dynamics of what it means to be “queer” it is evident that these students form their understanding of identity in the context of heteronormativity. The present models fail to understand the student experience in a world where queer students must subvert heteronormativity in order to more fully realize their own identity (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Jones & Abes, 2013).

This analysis attempts to explore those areas of contention while focusing on two social identities that society often constructs as being in opposition to one another. “Queerituality” is an idea that expresses the ways in which queer students reform messages about religious or spiritual identities. To understand queerituality, this examination will explore the dissonance some students might experience when considering their non-heterosexual and religious/spiritual identities, and how students have navigated these particular instances. The author will define key terms, review literature pertaining to queer theory and its connection to higher education, examine experiences of dissonance for students exploring their identities, and introduce the idea of “Queer Authorship” (Abes & Kasch, 2007) as a developmental tool for practice.

It should be noted that I approach this work of understanding queer and spiritual identity development from multiple frameworks. These frameworks are mostly informed by queer theory and constructivism. Juxtaposing multiple theoretical perspectives (e.g. queer theory and constructivism) seems inherently problematic, but as Abes (2009) describes in her own reflections, it allows for new possibilities in understanding heteronormative structures through student development theory, living in the “borderlands” of multiple perspectives of methodology.

Defining Key Terms—Religion, Spirituality, Queer Theory, What?

Before proceeding, key terms must be defined that this literature review uses to create a space for critical analysis of literature, as well as consistency for the rest of the article. The author uses the term “queer” to encompass many of the identities included in the sexuality spectrum (e.g. lesbian, gay, pansexual, bisexual, etc.). The author recognizes transgender, genderqueer, and gender nonconforming individuals are often included in this category. For the purposes of this analysis, gender identity will not be examined because this research is focusing on the variances of sexual orientation. Similarly, Renn (2010) explains, “political, social, and sometimes intellectual alliances of LGBT people have led to conflation of these distinct groups in campus contexts, where they are frequently treated as a monolithic community for the purposes of providing programs and services”

monolithic community for the purposes of providing programs and services” (p. 134). Queer theory is difficult to define due to its fluid framework. It is best understood as a large body of theories that critically examine our normative understandings of identity as they relate to gender and sexuality, focusing on the intersections of identity and how they resist the oppressive nature of social constructs (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Renn, 2010).

Additionally, the term religious and spiritual are often used interchangeably in the literature. Love, Bock, Jannarone, and Richardson (2005) proposed the following definition for spirituality, “it is our drive for meaning, authenticity, purpose, wholeness, and self-transcendence. It involves our self-awareness and the desire to connect with others” (p. 197). Often, structured religious settings provide a space for spiritual practices, but one does not need to practice a specific faith practice in order to connect spiritually with the world around them. Extending this further, I assert that religion and spirituality are the ways the individual connects to the world around them, finding meaning, authenticity, and purpose. Sometimes this is connected to specific faith practice and other times it is not. This review will use the words interchangeably.

It seems counterintuitive to define these terms for the purpose of this study, especially because queer theory informs us that definitions and categories are inherently problematic, and religious or spiritual definitions are often personal (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Love et al., 2005; Renn, 2010). Clarification of these terms allow for consistency throughout the review and invites others who might not be as informed to engage with the research presented here.

Queer Theory in Higher Education

Though many queer students have been researched in college contexts to understand their development, very few studies have actively interrogated using queer theory as a framework for understanding student development (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Renn, 2010). Renn (2010) describes how it has helped researchers critique linear models of development as more positivist and essentialist approaches to understanding queer students. Doing so has influenced more fluid life span models (e.g. D’Augelli, 1994) that consider context as a necessary part of development. However, research still produces a large number of linear or stage-like models of identity development, but those that employ a queered theoretical framework aid our understanding of identity development.

Renn (2010) discusses Abes and Kasch’s (2007) work, which will be examined further in another section, as an example of using queer theory effectively to understand the intersectional worlds of queer students. Renn (2010) argues that “[Abes] embraces the complexity and inherent contradictions of studying the

unstable concept of identity without further reifying identity categories and the construction of normal-against-queer” (p. 135). The use of queer theory is critical to understanding the complexity of identity and is central to inquiry surrounding heteronormativity. Using this framework enables researchers to inquire about narratives, but also allows for those narratives to question and deconstruct the power structures in which they operate (Abes, 2009).

Experiences of Religious and Queer Students

Research that focuses on the interaction between identities of sexual orientation and religion and spirituality is minimal. As Barret and Barzan (1996) accurately surmise, “gay men and lesbians face a unique challenge as they approach most traditional Western religious organizations. Since their sexual orientation is often judged as sinful, they are frequently given an indirect or overt message that they are not welcome” (p. 4). In recent years, some religious organizations have tried to create more inclusive spaces for queer individuals to be a part of their community. Nevertheless, the pervasive idea that individuals cannot be queer and religious is still common. This is exacerbated by media’s influence, which inherently paints religious groups and queer communities in opposition to one another (Barret & Barzan, 1996). Additionally, Rodriguez (2010) argues:

Not only do many religious and nonreligious individuals, groups, and organizations, share the belief that gayness is “unnatural,” “perverted,” and “a sin,” but a significant proportion of the gay and lesbian community also harbor strong anti-religion sentiments that exhibit themselves in a healthy disdain for anything and anyone having to do with an organized Christian religion viewed as being homophobic, heterosexist, and patriarchal. (p. 11)

Using the metaphor of the petri dish from earlier, college students experience all of these things while they navigate an institution with overt and covert heteronormative messages. Reconciling what all of these things mean and trying to understand identity presents a daunting task.

In Love et al.’s (2005) study, they explored the lived experiences of self-identified gay and lesbian individuals focusing on spirituality. The researchers found three emerging themes in their research: “reconciliation, nonreconciliation, and undeveloped spiritual identity” (Love et al., 2005, p. 198). Reconciled students were described as those who were able to embrace both aspects of their spiritual and queer lives, students with nonreconciled identities were categorized oppositionally to those considered to have reconciled identities, and undeveloped spiritual identities were regarded as students who “lack a purposeful approach to their spiritual development” (Love et al., 2005, p. 202). Rodriguez and Ouellete (2000) and Rodriguez’s (2010) findings support the idea of queer people seeking identity integration. A main component of people being able to reform a fully integrated

identity was through participation in communities that promoted a harmonious understanding of identity.

Limitations of Research

Much of the research about the spiritual experiences of queer people focuses on a western understanding of sexuality and religion and spirituality (Rahman, 2010). This article similarly fails to recognize the cultural dissonance of a western understanding of identity.

Using this perspective, queer theory has been particularly effective in analyzing the ontological production of gender and sexual identities as coherent formations, identifying and then deconstructing the binaries or dualisms that permit western cultural frameworks of ontology to achieve apparent coherence. Thus, gay Muslims can be understood as *queer* subjects who are negotiating their ontological deferment from coherent dominant identities, not able to live within specified categories (Rahman, 2010).

Using queer theory as a framework to understand the intersections of identity would be more useful in this sense because it allows for a deconstruction of these western myths and categories of gender and sexuality.

Queer Authorship

This theory is first introduced by Abes and Kasch (2007) as they seek to fuse together tenets of queer theory, self-authorship, and the MMIDI, attempting to understand identity in the context of heteronormativity. Abes and Jones (2013) argue, “if context is heteronormativity, an individual therefore transforms context through resistance. It is this resistance to heteronormativity that results in the identity formation and social transformation that Abes and Kasch (2007) described as queer authorship” (p. 205).

Desire acts as a filter where students are able to make meaning, and through a constant state of becoming individuals are able to change and resist heteronormative messages received about their queer religious identity. The complexity of this article positioned the researchers in between a constructivist and queered theoretical framework in their analysis of a single woman-identified student. Abes and Kasch (2007) were, “able to richly analyze her identity stories... typically considered on the margins, thus subverting the essentializing to which lesbian students are often subjected, which is one of the aims of queer theory” (p. 622).

In the queered understanding of this narrative, the authors found that the participant needed to reconstruct their understanding of their Catholic identity in

order to fully understand how this impacted their queer identity, and vice versa. Abes and Kasch (2007) observed:

Her faith in God offered KT a cohesive sense of self, a sense of self built on the idea of only heterosexual partnerships. When KT first identified as a lesbian, she necessarily [sic] excluded herself from the opportunity to have a relationship with God under this framework. This pushed KT into a liminal state, where she knew she believed in God but could not live her faith as she knew it. Instead she needed to create a new performative that resisted the idea of faith and God only supporting heterosexual relationships. (p. 627)

In other areas of the analysis, the researchers were able to understand how the participant relied on their faith in times of struggle, and how faith and sexual identities were able to impact and inform one another. Through the construction of a queered religious identity that rejected the notion of “religion is only for heterosexual people,” the participant’s performative identity constantly evolves and changes. The identities are interwoven into one another, along the same thread of understanding the self.

The researchers introduced the concept of queer authorship as a developmental process for changing the internal and external. In doing so, they argue that other student development theories (e.g. Baxter Magolda’s theory of Self-Authorship; Abes, Jones, and McEwen’s Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity) are incomplete, and lesbian college students must re-examine how their marginalized identities are effectively creating change on the internal and external world. Previously it was understood that the individual progresses from making meaning externally to internally, but this process, as argued by Abes and Kasch (2007), is incomplete and suggests the accommodation of heteronormativity. However, in this study their participant described an instance where identity was able to deconstruct and change heteronormativity. This article is central to our understanding of how heteronormativity impacts the formation of a queer religious identity, and illuminates a need for further inquiry.

Implications for Practice

Along with more intentional research to understand the role of queer authorship in student development theory, institutional policies need to create a climate where persons of nonheterosexual orientations feel safe and secure from discrimination. As Stevens (2004) argues, students experience societal heterosexism as they are forming a queer religious identity, and institutions need to be cognizant of how this is perpetuated through institutional policies and programs. This is especially true at religiously affiliated institutions where religious text could be used to project homophobic or heterosexist ideals on students developing a queer identity (DuMontier, 2000; Stratton et al., 2013; Yarhouse et al., 2009).

Similarly, Love et al. (2005) advocates for the creation of a space for students to come where they can discuss their spirituality and how it connects with their sexual identity. Providing these opportunities will allow students to grapple with the difficult questions they experience when trying to reconcile their queer and religious identities. DuMontier (2000) argues in favor of “small discussion groups on the topic of sexual orientation and faith for both gay and non-gay participants” (p. 334). Engaging students in a dialogue around these topics might be able to reduce the stigma associated with being either queer or having a religious identity, showing that the two parts of the student do not have to be mutually exclusive.

For those professionals that work with campus ministries, it will be equally important to understand and utilize safe resources for queer students who are seeking spiritual guidance. Exposing students to ministries or spiritual counselors who are not adequately prepared to deal with queer students could potentially do more harm than good and force students to compartmentalize aspects of themselves for the sake of one identity over the other (Love et al., 2005). Student affairs professionals should also consider their own bias when approaching situations where a queer student might be struggling to create a spiritual identity.

Conclusion

This understanding of queerituality seeks to disrupt our essentialization of identity development for college students. Considering a queered theoretical framework and the concept of queer authorship interrogates our assumptions of how students make meaning and reform their identities in a climate of heteronormativity. Emerging research should seek to do the same when trying to comprehend the queer student experience. Additionally, more research is needed to understand queerituality while also considering multiple forms of oppression, including how queer Muslims experience the clash between a western identity and their religious traditions (Rahman, 2010). Ultimately, a call to action is needed to create spaces where students can explore and celebrate their various queer religious experiences.

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