

Article

Reconciling LGB and Christian Identities in the Rural South

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Abstract: Drawing on in-depth interviews with rural Christians living in the South who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB), this study analyzes how they negotiate their religious, geographic, and sexual identities. We find that most interviewees employed two strategies to reconcile their Christian and gay identities: emphasizing a personal connection to an accepting God and finding a local church in their rural community in which they felt accepted. We argue that rural contexts influenced interviewees’ reliance on these strategies and show how individuals can construct multiple interpretations about themselves, which do not always align with existing cultural assumptions. In addition, we argue that gender differences exist with regard to participants’ residential choices and the importance they place on “community”. We find that, in general, women value the privacy and freedom afforded to them in rural areas, a sentiment that is echoed in their religious choices while many of the men value the close knit community they find in their small towns.

Keywords: identities; LGB; queer; rural; country; Christian

1. Introduction

The social landscape for sexual minorities has shifted dramatically in the past two decades [1,2]. One component of that shift is that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB)¹ individuals are integrating their sexual identity into their social lives, as opposed to separating it from other facets of their lives such as home, work, or places of religious worship [2]. For Christian LGB individuals, this shift has entailed negotiating two identities—religious and sexual—which are culturally understood to be incompatible [7,8]. In a related vein, researchers have noted a decline in gay men and lesbian women seeking out “urban gay enclaves”, or neighborhoods in cities with a visible and sizable gay population and gay-friendly establishments [9–11]. Although gay identities have been associated with urban epicenters or spaces [12,13], same-sex couples are increasingly more geographically diverse and visible in non-urban locales [14–19]. Such trends highlight the diversity within the lesbian, gay, and bisexual population, among such dimensions as race, class, religion, and geography.

Such trends also underscore the need for the increased focus among sexuality scholars on the intersectional nature of gay and lesbian identity [20]. An intersectional approach highlights the importance of understanding how other facets of identity (including religion and geography) might impact sexual identity. Work focused on sexual minorities outside urban areas, for instance, has shown that they construct sexual identities in a different context compared to their urban peers and thus the meanings attached to those identities differ [21–23]. Whereas the cultural assumption is that non-normative sexual practices and identities and rurality are incompatible [24,25], research has shown that this assumption does not adequately reflect all people’s experiences, as some rural sexual minorities experience no contradiction between these identities [22,26]. Gender appears to play a role here, insofar as gay men are more likely to live in cities compared to their lesbian peers [9,10,23,27–29]. Kazyak [23] illustrates that gender shapes the experiences of sexual minorities in small towns, as more masculine gay men and lesbian women experience greater acceptance. However, less is known about how and why gender plays a role in shaping the residential choices of gay men and lesbian women.

With regard to religion, researchers have asked how Christian sexual minorities reconcile two identities (religious and sexual) that are assumed to be incompatible and conflicting [7,30–35]. Christian LGB people who do not want to reject either their religious or sexual identity often seek out denominations or churches that have explicit welcoming stances towards sexual minorities, such as the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) or the United Church of Christ (UCC) [7,8,36]. Yet such denominations and churches are often in cities. This leaves unanswered the question of how Christian LGB people outside of cities, those living away from explicitly gay-friendly churches, negotiate their sexual and religious identities.

¹ This study is limited to lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals and did not include transgender individuals due to the differences associated with Christian teachings with regard to sexual orientation and gender identity. Whereas most anti-gay interpretations of the Bible refer to sexual behavior with someone of the same sex, anti-transgender biblical interpretations refer to dressing in the clothing of the “other” gender [3]. Future work should address the unique experiences of individuals who identify as both transgender and Christian. For work focusing on this topic, see Wilcox (2002), Kidd and Witten (2008), and Levy and Lo (2013) [4–6]. Our work suggests that their experiences are likely to differ depending on their geographic location. Future work should look at regional variations with this population.

Building on this existing research, we draw on data from twenty-four interviews with rural *and* Christian gay men and lesbian and bisexual women living in the South in order to examine two questions. First, we address why individuals chose to live in a rural area, paying special attention to gender differences in these choices. This focus adds to our understandings of how gender matters for this population. Second, we ask how individuals reconcile their religious and sexual identities. Our analysis draws attention to how a rural context shapes these processes. As such, we extend previous work focused on urban Christian sexual minorities. Whereas most studies have only focused on geography (rural) or religion (Christian) with regard to its impact on lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities, we focus on both. Doing so allows us to illuminate the variation in how individuals reconcile identities that are typically assumed to be (and sometimes experienced as) incompatible. Further, our analysis demonstrates the importance of employing interactionist and intersectional approaches in studies of sexual identity. Doing so underscores the fact that people make sense of themselves and their experiences within a certain context and in nuanced ways, and that oftentimes these individual interpretations do not align with cultural assumptions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Interactionism and Intersectionality*

This work is largely informed by a symbolic interactionist approach to identity. Specifically, we employ identity as a set of meanings that people use to define who they are based on the notion that the definition of self is constructed through our reflected appraisals of our interactions with others. As such, meanings emerge through interactions [21,37,38] as well as in narratives [39]. Further, identity construction is contextual and entails both identification and disidentification [40]. In other words, it is through our interactions with and understandings of others that we understand and explain ourselves. Since our identities are products of social interaction, we create, change, and maintain identities in every situation. It is because of these meanings that identities have real social consequences including how we organize our lives and how we feel [41]. For example, not being able to reconcile identities that are experienced as conflicting can lead to many negative outcomes for the individual including social isolation, depression, and suicide. This is especially important for this study as sexual minorities are already at an elevated risk for such outcomes due to the stigmatized nature of their sexual identity [42,43].

Furthermore, a person has multiple identities [44,45]. For example, someone may identify as a parent, a student, and a teacher all at the same time. Of particular interest to sociologists is when identities conflict—when the standards of one identity are socially incompatible with the expectations held within another identity. In such cases, there is an “identity dilemma”, which occurs when individuals have two or more identities that are seen as fundamentally incompatible [33,46–48]. In these cases, individuals are under added stress and must “work” to resolve the incompatibilities; at the most extreme this would be exiting from one of the conflicting identities. In fact, it is often assumed that identity alignment is improbable when multiple social locations have to compete in which case some identities become more salient than others.

The notion that people have multiple identities also aligns with an intersectional approach. Intersectionality posits that there are multiple oppressions that structure people’s experiences and

identities. Intersectional scholars note that individuals do not only have sexual identities, but, for instance, also have race, class, and gender identities, and that these multiple identities influence the meanings people make about sexuality [20,49–52].

In this article we focus on rural and Christian sexual minorities, and ask how individuals negotiate these three socially conflicting identities (geographic, religious, and sexual). This study is unique in that it addresses the intersections between sexual, religious, and geographic identities and documents the experiences of individuals understudied in current literature. It also provides an analysis of how social context, understood here as rural areas, impacts the interpretations individuals make while negotiating socially conflicting religious and sexual identities.

2.2. Christian Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identities

There is a fairly well developed literature on lesbian and gay Christians [8,30,31,33,53–55]. This research indicates that these identities—Christian and lesbian/gay/bisexual—are incompatible, which leaves LGB Christians experiencing varying levels of cognitive dissonance (feeling conflicted) related to holding these two identities [7,30–33]. Prior research also shows that LGB Christians use three different strategies to respond to the identity dilemma between their sexual and religious identities. Some feel they must leave their church and reject their religious identity in order to embrace their sexual identity [30,53]. In contrast, others attempt to reject their sexual identity in order to stay in their church and maintain their religious identity. Such individuals are often part of “ex-gay” groups like Exodus [33,56]. Yet others do not reject either their sexual or their religious identities and instead seek to integrate those identities [7,8,34,36,54,55].

The majority of work that analyzes how LGB Christians integrate their sexual and religious identities focuses on denominations or churches that have explicit welcoming stances towards LGB individuals, such as the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) or the United Church of Christ (UCC). This research illustrates that these contexts give sexual minorities a place to worship without fear of judgment based on their sexual orientation [8,57]. LGB individuals in these contexts also understand themselves to be in a unique position to make their church more inclusive and less homophobic [7,36]. The existing research on LGB Christians focuses almost solely on churches in urban contexts, which leaves a gap in our understanding of how experiences might differ depending on geographic context. Our analysis brings an attention to geography to the existing literature, focusing on what strategies individuals might employ in rural communities that may not have churches with explicit welcoming stances.

2.3. Rural Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identities

Also important for this study is the urban/rural binary in shaping constructions of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities. This binary reflects the cultural assumption that cities are the place where one can come out and find community, in contrast to small towns which are assumed to be the place where one is forced to remain closeted and isolated [24,25]. This assumption resonates with many individuals’ experiences. Some studies have found that sexual minorities living in small towns are often not out and do not have a connection to a gay community [58–62]. Many of their urban gay peers, in contrast, value a sense of attachment to a gay community [11]. Those living outside of urban places might travel to cities to be a part of such communities and to “‘turn on’ their gay selves” [21].

Yet another branch of this research illustrates that many sexual minorities are claiming lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities in small towns and are out, visible, and accepted [22,26]. Such work highlights that rurality and non-normative sexual identities and practices are not incompatible [22,23,63,64]. In particular, some rural gay men and lesbian women make sense of their sexual identities in opposition to “urban gays and lesbians” [22]. For instance, whereas rural gay men and lesbian women understand their urban peers to live “exciting” lives or fly rainbow flags to achieve visibility, they understand themselves as “boring” and rely on being seen around town with a same-sex partner as a way to achieve visibility. We build on this finding and illustrate that religious identity also impacts how rural Christian sexual minorities reify and distance themselves from their urban peers. We thus bring attention to how religion matters for rural sexual minorities.

Additionally, we also examine how gender matters to residential choices and experiences with religion within rural contexts. Demographic research indicates that gay men are more likely to live in more urban areas compared to lesbian women [10,27–29]. Past work shows how acceptance is gendered as both gay men and lesbian women in small towns engage with practices associated with rural masculinity in order to be accepted [23], which our findings corroborate. Yet we also extend past research by showing that gay men and lesbian women experience rural contexts in different ways insofar as they offer different reasons for why they prefer to live in a rural context. Moreover, we also show that gender impacts the strategies that rural LGB Christians use to negotiate their sexual and religious identities.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

Studying LGB Christians in the Rural South

Drawing on twenty-four in-depth interviews, this study examines the identities and experiences of self-identified, lesbian, gay, and bisexual, Christian men and women living in the rural South². Respondents were recruited via snowball sampling, beginning with insiders from four rural places, and followed by calls for participation on social media sites including Facebook and Twitter. To be included in the study, participants must have met three criteria: (1) identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual; (2) identified as having a rural or country identity, which could include people who both lived in or were from a rural area; and (3) identified as Christian. By asking respondents to self-identify their religious identity and denominational affiliation as well as report their church attendance, we were able to create a multidimensional measure of religiosity that included belief, affiliation, and behavior, which according to Steensland and colleagues [65], is an appropriate measure of American religion³. The relative small

² While we were initially interested in the experiences of anyone identifying as LGBT, Christian, and living in rural places, due to respondent interest and ensuing complexities surrounding definitions of rural and place, along with the diversity across rural places, we sought to narrow in and explicitly look solely at sexual orientation and Southern locals. In this way, we would not only be consistent with prior work on sexual orientation in rural places [22,23,26], but also extend it by focusing on the South.

³ We had a range of those who identified as Christian from those who did not regularly attend any certain church to those who attended Evangelical churches weekly or more.

size of our population of interest and snowball sampling⁴ had an effect on our number of participants and range of people reached. This study draws on twenty-four semi-structured in-depth interviews with fifteen men and nine women. Due to the stability of our phenomena, the homogeneity of responses across contexts, and our focus on meaning making for our participants rather than on making generalized hypothesis statements, we are confident our sample addresses precisely our study objectives [68].

The sample consists of fifteen gay men, seven lesbian women, and two bisexual women from seven Southern states (Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri⁵, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas, West Virginia) (See Table 1). Of the total interviews, four people are currently living in an urban environment. These four fit the criteria for eligibility because they grew up in a rural environment and identify as having country identities. Interviewees range in age from 18 to 51. We recognize the limitations of this sample. The respondents are almost exclusively young and we expected this to be the case due to the social networks of the initial snowball sampling and a methodology that involves online responses. The majority of the sample is white. However, one person identifies as Native American, one identifies as Black, one identifies as Black and Latino and one identifies as Hispanic. All of the participants are Christian, but they range in their levels of religiosity, with some participants attending churches regularly and others rarely attending formal church services. These respondents also reflect a range of religious dominations, including Methodist, Southern Baptist, Assembly of God, Metropolitan Community Church, and non-denominational as well as some who attended church sporadically and did not claim a specific denominational affiliation. Other than those who attended a Metropolitan Community Church, we did not find any differences in respondent discussions of maintaining a Christian identity in rural spaces by religious denomination. Likewise, little to no differences were evident in the responses of the bisexual women as compared to the lesbian women.

Interviews lasted one hour on average. Follow-up interviews were conducted with two respondents to gather more information about involvement in local church and gay communities as interviewee time constraints limited the discussion in the first interviews. Before the interview began, each participant was given an informed consent form to read and sign. The interviews were semi-structured, starting with basic demographic questions such as age, gender, race, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, place of residence, partnered or marital status, and educational background. In addition to these demographic questions, participants were also asked how “out” (openly LGB) to their community they were, how important it was for them to live in an area with other sexual minorities, how they felt about the area they live in, followed by questions about religious attachment, referring to church attendance as well as their commitment to their faith. While an interview schedule was used, questions were also asked regarding unique experiences of each participant. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and coded using an open coding format [70]. During this open coding process several themes were identified, including the different ways that individuals discussed their religious identity and the different reasons

⁴ Great care and consideration was put into our research design to gain access to the greatest range of participants. Purposeful and snowball sampling are the most effective ways of gaining access to this subset of an already hidden minority population [66,67]. It was largely through insiders and call respondents that access was granted. Having a local contact within these communities was key to gaining access.

⁵ Although Missouri is classified as a Midwestern state by the Census, it is commonly understood as a Southern state in practice due to large influxes of Southern settlers as well as Civil War politics [69]. This is particularly true of the southern half of the state, which is where the participant resided.

given for preferring to live in a rural environment. Once these themes were identified, the research team wrote memos that sought to make connections across themes and analyze nuances within each of them [70]. Memos that were written during the analysis process were developed into the findings section below. For instance, writing the memos allowed the research team to uncover that there were gender differences in people's discussion of their residential choices. During the analysis process, we returned to the data to look for disconfirming evidence as we developed our arguments. In order to ensure confidentiality, all names of people have been changed.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

	N	Mean/Percent	Min	Max
<i>Sexual Identity</i>				
Gay	15	62.50%		
Lesbian	7	29.20%		
Bisexual	2	8.30%		
<i>Gender Identity</i>				
Men	15	62.50%		
Women	9	37.50%		
<i>Race</i>				
White	19	79.20%		
Black	2	8.30%		
Native American	1	4.20%		
Other	2	8.30%		
<i>Age</i>		27	18	51
<i>Religious Affiliation</i>				
Mainline Protestant	9	38%		
Evangelical Protestant	3	13%		
Non-Denominational Christian	8	33%		
Christian: No Specific Church	4	16%		
<i>Partnered Status</i>				
Single	16	66.70%		
Partnered	8	33.30%		
Sample n=24				

4. Findings

Through our in-depth interviews, three overarching themes emerged: the rejection of “urban gay culture”, gender differences in experiences of rural spaces regarding privacy and community, and how rural contexts shape how interviewees maintain both Christian and gay identities. We find that rurality underscores how those interviewed experience resident choice, community, and religious identity.

4.1. Rejecting “Urban Gay Culture”

Interviewees made a clear distinction between their identities as rural and urban LGB individuals and rejected what they interpreted as urban LGB culture and stereotypes. This was paramount in their narratives. Building on previous work, we argue that the rejection of “urban gay culture” is amplified because of their religious identity, insofar as some respondents viewed urban gay men as “immoral” and sought to worship in settings they did not see as possible in urban environments. One interviewee, David, criticized urban gay men and thought better of rural gay men. David lives in an urban environment currently and recently moved there for his work. David has very strong opinions of gay men who live in urban environments. To him, an urban gay man is one that “does drugs” and “goes out drinking every night”. His quotes reflect his conflation of gay men in cities with culturally circulating stereotypes of gay men. Gay men in cities, in his mind, do not attend church and are not, as he put it, “quality people”. In contrast, when asked about the gay men he encountered in his rural community, he had very different things to say. David recalled a more tight-knit community in his small town and one that was explicitly tied to religion. As he put it: “There was a group of us [who were all] gay [and] all Christian”. David described that this group was always there for each other and would “call each other out on things we shouldn’t be doing”. He discussed missing such a group where members shared not only sexual orientation but also faith. For David, living in a rural place meant having close friendships with other gay and lesbian people that had similar values. Finding such close friends has not been David’s experience after moving to a large city. Several other interviewees, who still live in a rural area, had similar things to say. Many thought that in their small town (whether or not it was the one they grew up in) there was a community that was accepting of them. They were insiders to their small town community. They felt comfort in knowing everyone in town and being able to talk to them about church, school, and family life. Some felt they had to move out of their hometown to find acceptance, but still stayed in a rural area instead of moving to a larger city. Several of those interviewed expressed interest in living in a small town where they could know everyone, as well as going to a small church for the rest of their lives.

Further reflecting the distinction interviewees made, when Esther was asked specifically about stereotypes of rural people she recounted her experience of moving to and coming out in her small town, she said:

Once you break through people’s barriers I think it is okay. They think we [gay people in general] go out and party all the time or something like that. I mean I have three kids, I can’t even remember the last time I had a beer. They think we just go out and party and have “debaucherous” sex everywhere and things and they have that stereotype in their head but we [her and her partner] are pretty much as family-centered as you can get and once they realize that it breaks down the barriers a little bit.

Esther found that the stereotypes her town had about gay people fit in with similar religious and cultural stereotypes about gay identities, which are almost exclusively in reference to urban gay life [71,72]. Although the stereotypes that Esther lists (non-monogamous, partiers) are perhaps most commonly associated with gay men, her quote illustrates that the women of our sample also expressed the understanding that these stereotypes are associated with lesbian women. Thus, both the men and women sought to distance their own sexual identity from what they saw as stereotypes of sexual minority

identities more generally. In contrast to urban gay and lesbian individuals, Esther notes how she and her partner have “country morals and values”. For Esther and others, it was important to distance themselves from what they interpreted as negative stereotypes of gay identities. Rather than “go out and party”, she stresses that she and her partner are “as family-centered as you can get”. Due to their rural and Christian identities, individuals asserted difference from presumed urban LGB individuals (who party) and similarities to other rural dwellers (who are also family-centered). The rejection of urban culture meant that those interviewed were negotiating their religious and sexual identities outside of urban spaces. Feeling a connection to rurality and small town life was the most important underlying theme within these interviews; it also shaped the different experiences the men and women had in these spaces.

4.2. Experiencing the Country

We find gender differences with regard to residential choices and importance placed on having a community. These gendered narratives also emerge to some degree in participant’s narratives about the strategies they use to reconcile their religious and sexual identities, as we outline in Section 4.5.

4.3. Residential Choices

When discussing why they lived in a rural town, women, but not men, unanimously talked about the natural environment, the freedom, independence, and privacy they felt they were offered in rural places. The natural environment was an important aspect of rural living for the women in our sample. They described wanting to live somewhere “without seeing concrete” (Ruth), which is associated with cities and urban life. They wanted to see “something green when I go outside” (Lydia). As Deborah put it: “I am really outdoorsy. I grew up on a farm. I love fishing. I had pet cows. I love the opportunity to be outdoors...I like that aspect”. All of these quotes underscore the importance women placed on the natural environment. None of the men in our sample mentioned the need for nature and space in the same way.

Importantly, for the women, the natural environment afforded a sense of privacy, and freedom that was not seen as available in large cities. Sarah stated: “I really enjoy privacy. I want to live in a place where I can stand somewhere butt naked and not see anybody else’s house”. Leah’s comments echo that sentiment. “I like the laid back side of it [living in the country]. I like to have my space. I don’t want to live ass-to-ass to somebody. I am a country girl...I like to go out and hear the frogs and crickets...I like to be able to have my space and freedom”. These women talked extensively about wanting to be in areas with few people.

Women linked the privacy afforded to them by living in a small town to why they felt comfortable or safe being lesbian or bisexual in rural environments. When asked specifically whether or not they felt safe these women stated they not had experiences any physical or verbal violence of any kind. Indeed, aligned with previous work [22,23], we find that rural sexual minorities’ feelings of comfort and safety are gendered. The women in our study echoed the sentiments expressed by women in Kazyak’s sample: rural women’s masculine gender presentations are not wholly linked to lesbian sexuality and lesbian visibility because *all* rural women, regardless of sexuality, might enact more masculine gender presentations [23]. Here we show how the fact that rural environments afford privacy might also contribute to lesbian and bisexual women feeling more comfortable in rural areas. This is not to say that the lesbian and bisexual women in our sample are not out in their communities. Again, they expressed

being out and accepted. However, our findings indicate that they value the privacy of rural areas and that they feel that this privacy allows for their sexuality not always being under scrutiny. This interest in privacy is echoed in how some women explained their religious choices, which we will discuss in Section 4.5.

4.4. Importance of Community

Another difference we find between men and women is in how they talked about the necessity of community. All of the men interviewed described a need of some type of community support, while the women either did not mention it or specifically mentioned *not* needing or wanting a community. The men interviewed expressed the need to have a group that understood them, where they would fit in, and that would be there for them. Many cited their church communities or “church family” (Samuel) as being important to them. Through the course of the interviews, it was clear how they developed and maintained their Christian community; going to church together and/or meeting with one another outside of church to discuss their faith.

What remained in question was how does one maintain a gay community within rural communities that are unlikely to have specifically gay places? Respondents maintained a gay community within rural spaces in different ways. When asked to elaborate on their gay community, most cited just going out together, saying that everyone in town already knew that they were gay, so they would just meet up at someone’s house or at a bar or share a meal. This is very much in line with previous work regarding differences in what community sites look like in rural locales [26,64]. Adam stated that someone “can find a gay community anywhere” and cited that as another reason why he does not see a rural environment as restricting his ability to find a gay community. When Noah was asked what he looks for in a community, he said, “I am looking for accepting people”. For Noah, it did not matter whether someone lived in a city or in the country, one can find accepting people in both types of environments and cited his move from his non-accepting small hometown to a different small town that is a lot more accepting. Matthew cited having a loving and supportive environment that enabled him to create his gay community. Daniel cited driving to the next big town to go to the one gay bar in that town. Jacob mentioned the Internet and social media playing a huge part in how he met his partner while both were living in rural locations at opposite ends of the state of Louisiana. This suggests an important evolution in the creation of gay communities. Indeed, as Kelley *et al.* [73] found, socializing with other sexual minorities might lead to an increased sense of community connection, regardless of whether one lives in an “urban gay enclave”.

4.5. Integrating Religious and Sexual Identities: The Influence of Rural Contexts

Consistent with prior research, we find that some individuals did in fact experience a conflict between their religious and sexual identities, and found it necessary to worship in churches that had explicit welcoming policies. For example, a small number of our respondents, all men, ($n = 5$) sought out explicitly welcoming and affirming churches, such as the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) whose doctrine states that they are gay-friendly to resolve these identity dilemmas. Some of these individuals drive up to two hours to cities to be able to attend an open and affirming church. However, the majority of respondents ($n = 19$) employed strategies to integrate their sexual and religious identities *outside* of explicitly-welcoming churches in urban areas. Indeed, respondents create a clear distinction

between urban and rural gay identity and reject “urban gay culture”, including, for some, MCC churches. Seeking to integrate their sexual and religious identities outside of urban contexts, these individuals do so in two ways: (1) emphasizing a personal relationship to God rather than connection to a church community or (2) finding a local church in their rural communities in which they feel comfortable. We focus on these two strategies below and argue that both reflect how a rural context influences Christian and LGB identity formation.

4.6. *Personal Relationship with God*

While all respondents did speak to a personal relationship with God as the source of their faith, four spoke solely about this issue. For these respondents, a personal relationship with God rather than having a church community was how they experienced their religious and sexual identities within a rural context. They were trying to lead a Christian life, live the way their God wanted them to live and did not see participation in any formal institutions as necessary to do that.

There was a gender difference in how men and women talked about their personal relationship with God. Women valued independence and privacy to worship however they wanted, which they thought living in a rural environment facilitated. Sarah, for instance, talked about going outside to pray and “doing Christianity how I want to”. This narrative resonates with women’s discussions of privacy and freedom afforded to them in rural areas. In contrast, the men said it was important to have a personal relationship with God insofar as it provided a unique context to accept their sexuality. For these men, their faith in a Christian God that loved them no matter what, that would be there for them, and that would accept them given that He had created them is how they interpreted being Christian and gay. David explained it in the following way:

I can remember just thinking that honestly, I would be pissed the fuck off if God told me you know, it’s okay, you could have been gay and then I had to think, I thought to myself you know if I feel this strong about it could I stand before God and say yes I know this is wrong but it is who I am. Could I justify it to the face of God? Could I say yes sir I take my punishment, I know what I did was wrong, it is who I am, it is who you made me to be, I know you love me anyway, and I know I have to take this punishment? And I found that yeah, I could do that.

David’s quote reflects his interpretation that his sexuality is not only an integral part of himself (“it is who I am”), but also that it is something that God called him to be (“it is who you made me to be”). Moreover, his quote reflects his nuanced and at times contradictory interpretations of how God views his sexuality. On the one hand, his quote indicates that his sexuality is wrong (“I know this is wrong”) and something deserving of punishment (“I know I have to take this punishment”). This could reflect the degree to which the Bible Belt⁶, which overlaps with many of the Southern states discussed in this study, promotes a homophobic environment in where same-sex sexuality is defined as immoral [30]. Yet, importantly, David does not wholly embrace such a stance on same-sex sexuality. Again, he sees his sexuality as something that God created, which combats the idea that it is against God’s will to be

⁶ The Bible Belt refers to a large area of the southern United States where most of the population is fundamentalists Christian, who read the Bible literally, and exert influence of every aspect of life where they live [30,53].

gay. He also asserts a loving God (“I know you love me anyway”) who is potentially accepting of his sexuality (“it’s okay, you could have been gay”). Thus, his personal relationship with God allowed him to claim his gay identity as essential to his faith. Similarly, Jude said that no matter what, “God loved me anyway”. For him, he was able to combine what it means for him to be gay into his own religion that he calls his “God that is with me always”. Jude added, “God is bigger than our understanding”. This phrase is what Jude said he often repeats to himself and others. He believes this idea is important to having a personal and intimate relationship with God. He described this phrase as the foundation for his beliefs. For individuals like David and Jude, they believe God created them gay just like He created some people straight and it is up to all of God’s people to live a life worthy of Him. They did not see being gay as a hindrance in this mission. They were able to be both gay and Christian through their understanding of a loving and accepting God.

Extending prior work, our findings suggest that there are differences in the identity negotiations of rural LGB Christians as compared to urban LGB Christians. Whereas previous literature emphasizes individuals choosing one identity over another (gay and not Christian or Christian so not gay) [33,55] or attending an explicitly gay-friendly church [8], our findings show that for those who wanted to maintain both identities in a rural context chose to do so in ways that were influenced by both their gender and their rural context; specifically, these individuals maintained a personal relationship with God as their connection to Christianity instead of relying on an explicitly gay-friendly church that would be, for many, hours away. Those interviewed here created a space for themselves that was accepting and aligned with the principles of how they understood Christianity. This personal relationship with God in lieu of a church community was a unique feature of this group from the overall sample. This group was different in terms of how they maintained both identities as the first group sought out gay-friendly churches and the other group, as we turn to now, still wanted a church community but established different criteria as to what it means to be an accepting church.

4.7. *The Fit of the Church*

As discussed above, for some interviewed having a personal relationship with God is their connection to Christianity. This was true for many of the women in this study and aligns with women’s emphasis on privacy. In contrast, many interviewees did discuss wanting to worship with others and find a church community. This was largely, but not entirely, driven by the men in the study. However, the majority of the people interviewed did not mention anything about looking for a specifically gay-friendly church; instead they discussed finding a church that was a good fit. For them, this meant finding a church that first and foremost held *most* of their same religious beliefs and secondly accepted their sexuality in terms of not preaching openly about homosexuality as a sin. The rural context in which these LGB Christians live has perhaps shaped what they view as an accepting church. It is not a church that necessarily explicitly discusses LGB issues or has small group bible studies for LGB people, for instance. Rather, it is a church where homosexuality is not preached as a sin.

For example, Joshua discussed the need to attend a church that was accepting of him, although he did not specifically look for a MCC. Rather, he was able to find acceptance in his local Methodist congregation. “[Pastor] has never preached on homosexuality and my Sunday school hasn’t either...it is all inclusive. There is no separate thing for LGBT which I’m okay with”. He looked for a church that

held the same beliefs he did on building “community and having loving relationships” and he found that with this church. Simon wanted “fellowship with other believers” and cared the most about having people that shared his views “on the importance of what Christianity means”. Another man, Matthew, discussed the people within his church saying that although “the whole doctrine...of the Christian church condemns homosexuality...the positive thing about it (his church) is that the people are kind and accepting”. His quote illustrates that in terms of his feelings of being accepted as a gay man, he places more importance on the way he is treated in interpersonal interactions than on the official doctrine of the denomination. Matthew said “you can find this at different places; you just have to look for a church that fits you”.

Not only did people find churches within their rural communities within which they felt comfortable, but some explicitly distanced themselves from gay-friendly, urban churches. When asked why she does not attend the MCC that is close to her, Esther said “I go to church for religious reasons, not to feel affirmation for my gayness and it seems that church (the closest MCC to her) tends to preach that. They try to relate everything back to being gay and that’s not why I’m at church”. These quotes illustrate how the rejection of urban gay culture extends to a rejection of urban MCC churches. Rather than seek out an explicitly welcoming and affirming church, Esther, like the majority of other respondents, sought to worship in their rural communities. It was this aspect of community that they valued, a reason why they chose to live in rural places and a reason why they specifically sought out churches that were in their small towns.

The interviews suggest that individuals in small towns negotiate being both gay and Christian in ways that are specifically influenced by their rural contexts. For some, it is all about where God wants them to be, where they feel at home and comfortable. For others, it is about the people at the church making them feel welcome. A number of the experiences these men and women discussed reflect that they were out to the church community, and they felt accepted in churches that officially condemn or ignore homosexuality at the denominational level. Thus, interviewees pointed to how they were treated by individuals at church as the most important factor in whether or not they experienced acceptance at church. Individual congregations played an important role in the atmosphere of acceptance for gay individuals and the sense of community and comfort they felt in those churches. Indeed, being able to worship in a church in their community was an important facet of small town life they enjoyed.

5. Discussion

This study illustrates how rural contexts shape the way that LGB individuals make meaning of their lives related to their residential and religious choices. We find that gender differences are prevalent with regard to why those interviewed wanted to live in a rural area. In addition, we find that rural contexts also shape how the LGB Christians of this study negotiate multiple culturally conflicting identities. Our findings underscore the importance of employing an interactionist and intersectional approach in studies of sexuality and the importance of assessing how individuals’ understandings and experiences may or may not align with dominant cultural understandings.

Extending existing literature on rural sexual minorities, this work shows that there are gender differences with regard to: (1) the preferences people have for living in a small town and (2) the degree to which individuals value or want various community ties. We find a lack of overlap in experiences between men and women in their discussions of why they live where they live. When the women

discussed being in a rural place it was often in relation to their perceived freedom, independence, and privacy. The men on the other hand did not often mention this issue, rather they framed living in a rural place as “I just wanted to” or “I just do”. Like [23], we found that although the women felt less restricted in these rural settings, the men felt more restricted. Without the presence of others, women felt free to make their own choices and dress and behave as they wanted. The privacy afforded by rural areas, coupled with the meanings of rural women’s more masculine gender presentations, means that the sexuality of lesbian and bisexual rural women is not always immediately visible and under scrutiny. The same is not true for gay men whose gender presentations are expected to be more feminine. Perhaps this speaks to why more lesbian women and couples live in rural spaces than do gay men and gay couples [23,28].

Our findings also indicate that for the majority of our interviewees, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and Christian identities can be reconciled in ways that further reinforces their commitment to rural life. While previous work has focused exclusively on the conflict of maintaining incompatible identities [23,31] or on reconciling these identities through explicitly gay-friendly churches [8], our work shows the unique strategies that LGB Christians use in rural contexts to negotiate their religious and sexual identities. A small number of interviewees (five) sought out explicitly gay-friendly churches in nearby urban areas—in line with what would be expected based on previous research [8,33]. Yet the majority of interviewees reconciled their religious and sexual identities *outside* of explicitly gay-affirming urban churches and *within* rural communities. In other words, they negotiated what it meant to be gay and Christian within a rural context. Specifically, they employed two strategies: (1) emphasizing a personal relationship with an accepting God or (2) finding an accepting church community in their small towns. Perhaps reflecting a rural context (insofar as no church had an explicit welcoming or affirming policy towards LGB people as MCC churches do), their interpretation of an accepting church meant one where people treated them kindly and one that did not preach explicitly against homosexuality. This also reflects rural context insofar as they place importance on interpersonal ties and face-to-face interactions rather than what someone might actually think about being gay [22]. Moreover, it also reflects the fact that the church is a central institution in rural Southern communities [30,74,75], similar to how the church functions in black communities [32]. Thus, individuals must find a way to navigate and resolve tensions in order to maintain that important connection. It is important to note that our work focuses only on Christian identities broadly and does not distinguish among branches of Christianity. We suspect there are likely differences among denominations of Christianity and especially between Mainline and Evangelical Christians.

One unique contribution to the religion literature is the manner in which rural backgrounds intersect with gender, influencing how respondents made sense of their religious preferences. For the interviewees who emphasized a personal connection to God, there were gender differences in their narratives. For many of the men in this study, little importance was given to the actual physical space of where they worshipped. Women, however, had a preference as to where to worship: they preferred to be outdoors. This theme of privacy resonated with our respondents. It is in this way they discussed the freedom to worship, along with feeling closer to God, in nature.

Religion also appears to amplify the distinction made between urban and rural LGB culture and the rejection of urban gay culture [22]. The rural-identified respondents thought of themselves as more Christian in their way of life, more family-centered, and more of the right quality of people compared to their imagined more decadent urban counterparts. Moreover, they indicated that urban LGB people were too extreme and sought to frame themselves as something different than that. In fact, their narratives

suggest that respondents might be creating and attempting to maintain a Christian rural narrative in opposition to the stereotypes of urban life. Not only did these respondents understand themselves via Christian values, morals, and being “family-centered”, but they discussed the need to highlight their similarities to their small town counterparts over their differences associated with gay stereotypes that others may hold. Respondents may socially distance themselves from the stigma of their sexual orientation within these communities whether they were fully cognizant of it. Regardless, their alignment with these narratives is an effective mechanism in negotiating stereotypically conflicting identities. Indeed, one important route for reconciling these competing identities was to distance themselves from the “bad”, secular, urban gays.

Overall, our findings underscore the importance of employing an interactionist and intersectional approach in studies of sexuality and the importance of assessing how individuals’ understandings and experiences may or may not align with dominant cultural understandings or the expectations others have for them. Our work shows that people can reconcile identities that are culturally assumed to be incompatible—something that is often done regarding a multitude of identities from student athletes to Log Cabin Republicans. Despite the nuanced ways people make sense of their own selves, it is striking that they do not always extend the same potential for nuance to others. This is what makes clashing identities sensational until they become better understood. For example, our participants did not express nuanced understandings of their gay and lesbian peers in cities. Rather, their narratives reify “urban gays and lesbians”. Future identity work could build on these findings by addressing when and why people see their identities and experiences as similar to or different from others, particularly in terms of affording others the same possibilities for nuance. Future work might also address how the work that individuals do at the micro level in terms of reinterpreting existing cultural understandings does or does not produce change at the macro level.

6. Conclusions

The social landscape for sexual minorities has changed dramatically over the past two decades [1,2]. LGB individuals are diverse along such lines as race, class, religion, and are becoming increasingly more visible in non-urban locales [14–19]. This article explores how LGB individuals integrate their sexual identities in two contexts commonly assumed to be hostile to LGB people: rural areas and religious communities. We contribute to what is known about how LGB individuals make sense of themselves and their experiences within certain contexts, showing that they do so in nuanced ways that do not always align with cultural assumptions. Our work extends what is known about the diversity within the LGB population. Our work suggests that it is not only possible for lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals to be happy in rural areas and in rural church communities; it may even be common.

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Author Contributions

The first author designed the study for her thesis project, collected the interview data, and wrote the original draft. The second and third authors contributed revisions to the organization and framing of the article manuscript. All authors reviewed and made edits to the published article.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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