

## Theological and Clinical Considerations of Working with Sexually Fluid and Bisexual Persons

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**Abstract** In the past few decades, increasing numbers of pastoral counselors have been developing and adopting lesbian/gay-affirming practices. While this is an encouraging development in the field, the prevailing lesbian/gay-affirming psychotherapeutic theories of sexual orientation often embraced by pastoral counselors are grounded in essentialist constructions of sexual identity that assume sexuality to be a singular, fixed identity of human embodiment. Although such approaches rightly argue that the role of the pastoral counselor is to assist the person in accepting a newly discovered gay/lesbian sexual orientation, the result is often the rejection of bisexual and sexually fluid persons' lived experiences. How might pastoral counselors work with persons who identify as neither gay/lesbian nor straight? How might they work with persons who are bisexual or whose sexual orientation changes over time? In other words, how might they work with persons who are *sexually fluid*? Using case study material from my own research and from published cases in the literature, this article challenges pastoral counselors to reconsider embedded theoretical and theological commitments regarding sexuality in order to expand their clinical understanding of bisexual and sexually fluid persons. Moreover, several key theological resources are identified as critical to bisexual and sexually fluid persons in the construction of their fluid identities. The article concludes by suggesting several key

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competencies for pastoral counselors working with persons who identify as bisexual and/or sexually fluid.

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In the past few decades, increasing numbers of pastoral counselors have been developing and adopting lesbian/gay-affirming practices (Byrne, 1993; Graham, 1997; Malony, 2001; Marshall, 1997; Struzzo, 1989; Switzer, 1999; Tigert, 1999; Unterberger, 1993), and increasingly the field has been publishing introductory texts on pastoral counseling that include sections or chapters on gay- and lesbian-affirming approaches (Clinebell & McKeever, 2011; Culbertson, 2000; Townsend, 2009). In addition, a growing number of authors in African American communities have been writing about the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) persons in their congregations, primarily within the contexts of pastoral care and counseling (Comstock, 2001; Douglas, 1999; Griffin, 2006; Wilson, 1998).

While this is an encouraging development in the field, the prevailing lesbian/gay-affirming psychotherapeutic theories of sexual orientation often adopted by pastoral counselors are grounded in essentialist constructions of sexual identity, which assume that sexuality is a singular, fixed identity of human embodiment. Although such approaches rightly argue that the role of the pastoral counselor is to assist the person in accepting a newly discovered gay/lesbian sexual orientation, the result is often the rejection of bisexual and sexually fluid persons' lived experiences. How might pastoral counselors work with persons who identify as neither gay/lesbian nor straight? How might they work with persons who are bisexual or whose sexual

orientation changes over time? In other words, how might pastoral counselors work with persons who are *sexually fluid*?<sup>2</sup>

Using the first-person narratives of bisexual and sexually fluid persons from my own research along with cases published in the literature, this article challenges pastoral counselors to reconsider their embedded theoretical and theological commitments regarding sexuality in order to expand their clinical understanding of bisexual and sexually fluid persons. Moreover, several key theological resources are identified as critical to bisexual and sexually fluid persons in the construction of their identities. The article concludes by suggesting several key competencies for pastoral counselors working with persons who identify as bisexual and/or sexually fluid.

### **Bisexual experience**

Bisexuality is difficult to define. Etymologically the word “bisexuality” suggests the attraction to two genders, but many bisexuals are highly critical of the binary construct of sexuality that the term implies. Moreover, there is no monolithic bisexual experience: Some remain emotionally attracted and/or partnered with one gender, while engaging in sexual intimacy with partners of the other; some are attracted to and engage in sexual intimacy with any gender; some remain in monogamous relationships, but are attracted to others whose gender is different from that of their partner; some view sex and gender as irrelevant. One person named Rebecca, interviewed by Hutchins and Kaahumanu, reflects on her own experience of embodying a bisexual identity:

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<sup>2</sup> Here “fluidity” is being used as a metaphor for the constructed identity of human sexuality that is dynamic and constantly changing. For some, fluidity may represent a movement of sexual desire and attraction among and between genders. For others, fluidity may represent a movement of one’s own subjective sexual identity from gay, to straight, back to gay, or bisexual, depending on one’s partner or one’s season in life. The key criterion for sexual fluidity is that one’s sexual attraction and desire is in constant flux and change (rather than fixed or linear), particularly with respect to the gender identities of one’s partners.

When I think of being bisexual, I am reminded of my Jewish ancestors who, kicked out of different countries, tried to find a place to call home. I, too, have wandered, in the gay and straight worlds, Jewish and not, feeling kicked out and alienated... This eight-year search includes my struggle to develop a proud lesbian, then bisexual identity. Identifying as a lesbian for seven years made me see how much I love women and began my awareness of homophobia and heterosexism. When I came out as a bisexual, I realized that men are important to me, too. Being with a man again I had to deal with male-female differences, sexism, and heterosexual privilege. (as cited in Hutchins & Kaahumanu, 1991, pp. 252–253)

Rebecca's narrative illustrates several important characteristics common to many people who identify as bisexual: the role of community and social relationships, especially with their families of origin; the struggle to construct their self-identity(ies), particularly in terms of sexual identity politics; the interconnectedness of race, religion, class, and gender with sexuality; and the liminal experience of not fitting in with either straight or gay/lesbian communities. Indeed, articulating a definition of bisexuality that takes into account the wide range of experiences is challenging. Similarly, as a sexually fluid queer pastoral theologian, it is challenging for me to not use my own subjective experience of fluid sexuality as the only hermeneutical lens through which these life narratives may be read.

In the 20th century, several theorists attempted to construct models of the bisexual experience. Some theorists of sexuality focused on behavior rather than identity. Kinsey and his colleagues developed a 0 to 6 point scale of human sexuality based on the behavior of study participants (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948). While there has been significant criticism of Kinsey's work both methodologically and epistemologically (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Maslow &

Sakoda, 1952; Wallis, 1949), it is important for the discussion here to acknowledge that Kinsey's work proposed an entirely new paradigm for understanding sexuality. Rather than constructing human sexuality according to two binary categories (heterosexual and homosexual), Kinsey's scale introduced a spectrum metaphor for categorizing the sexual experiences of men (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948) and women (Kinsey, 1953/1998).

One of the criticisms of Kinsey's work is that the criteria used in his study of sexual identity were based on behavior, rather than on self-identity (Klein, 1993). What if one experiences attraction to someone, but does not express that attraction through sexual behavior? How do we account for bisexual identity when one never engages in sexual intimacy with anyone? In response to these questions, Klein (1993) developed the Sexual Orientation Grid, which included additional criteria beyond sexual behavior, such as sexual attraction, behavior, fantasies, emotional preference, social preference, lifestyle, and self-identification. The Klein grid was used to categorize persons using a numerical scale from 1 (straight) to 4 (bisexual) to 7 (gay or lesbian) for each of these criteria (not just behavior). While Klein's work moved Kinsey's toward more fluidity and complexity, it did not take into account how sexuality may change over time. For example, Rebecca described identifying as a lesbian for seven years, but then came to realize that she still experienced emotional and sexual attraction to men. When Rebecca enters into a relationship with a man after identifying as a lesbian for so long, does she become "straight?"

Despite these theoretical frameworks of human sexuality, it remains difficult to account for varieties in human sexuality when the variables used for constructing sexuality (e.g. attraction, gender, behavior, identity, etc.) do not remain constant. For example, must Rebecca engage in sexual activity with both sexes to assume a bisexual identity? What if she has sexual or

affectional desires for both sexes but does not act on them (Burleson, 2005)? Amanda's experience illustrates this dilemma. She is married to a man and is monogamous, but also identifies as bisexual. Dominant heteronormative discourses would suggest that, in fact, she is heterosexual not bisexual.

Not much of a bisexual you say. Yet my bisexuality influences my perception and my decisions. More than having sexual relations with both genders, bisexuality is a mind frame, a reference point from which to view the world. Being bisexual has more to do with potential than actuality. (as cited in Hutchins & Kaahumanu, 1991, p. 25)

Here, Amanda is challenging theories of human sexuality to account for a constructed bisexual identity that extends beyond sexual behavior and the gender of one's partner. In other words, how might we define bisexuality in a way that accounts for what Amanda calls "mind frame" or "reference point from which to view the world"?

Firestein (1996), a psychotherapist who specializes in working with bisexual persons, offered a helpful definition:

[Bisexuality is] pertaining to one's experience of erotic, emotional, and sexual attraction to persons of more than one gender. Such individuals may identify as a bisexual, homosexual, lesbian, gay, heterosexual, transgendered, or transsexual or may choose not to label at all... Bisexuality here is defined as the capacity, regardless of the sexual identity label one chooses, to love and sexually desire both same and other-gendered individuals. (pp. xix-xx)

In other words, bisexuality is the capacity to experience emotional or sexual desire for any gender – a capacity that may change over time or that may be embodied differently in different

relationships. Jody describes this change in sexual identity and emotional capacity in her own life:

Yes, I do [identify as bisexual], though now I'm kind of questioning that because right now sleeping or dating with men just isn't very appealing... I was involved with a man for a very long time and ended that relationship because I just really wanted to explore dating with a woman. [I] have found out that it's a lot better, and I'm really happy, and I really like that. I'm very attached to the bi label because the bi community helped me feel very safe... I think to do with that fluidity of [sexual orientation]...right now I'm not attracted to men but I can't guarantee when I'm fifty I might not be... Because calling myself a lesbian just doesn't fit. It just doesn't fit at all. (as cited in Burleson, 2005, p. 89)

Here, one can see the intersection of Jodi's capacity for emotional and sexual desire with behavior and identity, which does change over time.

Jodi's experience poses a significant challenge to the prevailing discourses in the gay and lesbian liberation movement. For example, it challenges theories of monosexism by critiquing the assumption that sexual orientation is naturally fixated on one easily identifiable sex and is static over time. Jodi describes attraction to both men and women, and her acting upon that attraction has changed fluidly over time. This poses an epistemological challenge to essentialist constructions of sexual orientation because it implies choice, rather than an inherent nature of one's "true" self. This, then, presents a dilemma for the contemporary gay and lesbian liberation movement, which has sought human and civil rights as a legally protected class based upon essentialist constructions of sexual orientation. Moreover, this construction of sexual orientation has also dominated the theological arguments of lesbian- and gay-affirming movements within

the churches – arguing that sexual orientation is immutable, unchangeable, and persons were “born this way.”

Yet, the argument for choice and fluidity in the bisexual experience is not without its liabilities. If bisexual persons are equally attracted to persons of any gender, then neo-orthodox perspectives argue they should choose the “normal” or “moral” option of an opposite-gender partner (Siker, 2007). And, if sexual orientation is fluid and unfixed, then supporters of reparative therapy can argue for the so-called conversion of homosexuals using a similar claim. Moreover, choice and fluidity have contributed to gay and lesbian communities’ criticism of bisexuals through assertions that bisexuals are either “riding the fence,” “going through a phase,” or “afraid to come totally out of the closet.” Kimberly describes this experience:

I don’t feel welcome in the overall gay community... In general I feel that most of the gay and lesbian people I’ve met think I’m using “heterosexual privilege” or that I just haven’t fully come out as homosexual. Now, I’m not gay bashing. I go to pride parades [and] I’m president of my campus gay-straight alliance, etc. But I have been asked to leave groups and mailing lists because they were for “homosexuals only.” Or because, as one woman told me, “Having a bisexual here would bring down the quality of the group.”  
(as cited in Burleson, 2005, p. 20)

Kimberly’s account echoes the earlier metaphor of “homelessness” that Rebecca used to describe her bisexual experience and presents a rich point of connection between theological metaphors of exodus, sojourner, aliens in a strange land, lost sheep, and wandering in the desert.

The embodied experience of fluid sexuality presents a critique of the binary construct of sexual orientation (i.e., heterosexuality and homosexuality). Indeed, there is far more variability and fluidity in many people’s sexual experiences (i.e., attraction, fantasy, intimacy, identity) than



most theoretical notions tend to provide. As a result, Paul (2000) noted that there is a “tendency...to deny the legitimacy of one’s erotic responsiveness to either males, or females; thereby, one assumes that all people are either basically heterosexual or homosexual” (p. 11). In this way, fluid sexuality presents an ambiguous embodiment because it transcends and transgresses the binary categories found in normative discourses on embodiment and human sexuality.

### **Considerations for clinical practice**

Bisexual-identified persons, as well as those who identify as sexually fluid, present three important challenges to pastoral counselors. First, working with bisexual and sexually fluid persons challenges pastoral counselors to consider their embedded theological anthropologies of human sexuality and their assumptions about what constitutes “normal” human sexuality. In other words, what theological criteria do pastoral counselors use in their clinical assessment and therapeutic objectives related to what constitutes a healthy sexual identity? What is the nature of human sexuality, particularly in light of theological constructs such as imago Dei, incarnation, and embodiment? Are humans created with an essential human sexuality (e.g., “I was born this way”), or are fluidity and change dynamics in human sexuality that are part of the created order? Who gets to decide the boundaries of practice and identity within these theo-anthropological discourses?

Second, identity change is normative, not pathological. Rebecca described the process of coming out as a lesbian and living in a same-gender relationship for seven years. Later, she came to realize that “lesbian” did not fully embody her own understanding of her sexual identity;

therefore, she decided to identify as bisexual. Is she confused? Was she just “in a phase” during those seven years, but really straight all along? Is she merely seeking heterosexual privilege?

Sexual fluidity demands that pastoral counselors reassess their theoretical constructs of sexual orientation in ways that allow for change over time. Prevailing theories on sexual orientation and the coming out process are often predicated on a stage theory of human development (Cass, 1979, 1984; Coleman, 1982; Grace, 1992; Lewis, 1984; Troiden, 1979, 1989). These sexual identity models assume identity stability as healthy and implicitly characterize continued identity change or fluidity as an indicator of psychosexual immaturity.

As a result, many gay- and lesbian-affirming pastoral counselors working with persons who are exploring sexual identity often encourage the person to explore the meanings of same-gender feelings and experiences with the therapeutic goal of sexual identity resolution. After disclosing their ethical commitment to being an LGBTQI-affirming clinician (or disclosing that they are not, if such is the case, and referring), the pastoral counselor is then likely to invite the client to explore the emerging self-understanding of same-gender attraction; to identify the fears and consequences of disclosing this new awareness to family, friends, and coworkers; and to strengthen supportive resources and relationships to equip the person to claim a new identity as gay/lesbian. In short, the therapeutic goal of this counseling process is the acceptance of the person’s new preferred sexual identity.

Such an approach is often helpful. Yet, a problem arises when the person does not choose a new gay/lesbian identity, but at the same time, does not wish to continue identifying as straight. In this case, the pastoral counselor may conclude that the person’s unwillingness, inability, or failure to claim a new stable gay/lesbian identity is indicative of resistance or pathology. Here, the pastoral counselor makes a clinical judgment that the person is not fully accepting a “true”

sexual orientation and/or is unwilling to deconstruct the heteronormative religious discourses necessary to accept a new gay/lesbian identity. The pastoral counselor, with the best of therapeutic intentions, may continue to encourage the sexually fluid or bisexual person to settle on an either/or identity (i.e., either gay/lesbian or straight), even though doing so may result in the imposition of both a heteronormative and homonormative binary construct of sexuality (Hays, 2015).

Once pastoral counselors recognize that, for the bisexual or sexually fluid person, identity change is normative (and not a sign of pathology), the therapeutic goal then becomes one of studying the identity change process in and of itself as an opportunity for insight. In other words, if pastoral counselors understand what motivates people to change the ways in which they construct their sexual selves – or in some cases resist labeling imposed by dominant heteronormative discourses – they can then map identity change as part of the “normal” human sexual journey (Paul, 2000).

Third, fluidity raises important questions about the role of choice in sexual experience and identity. As already noted, the contemporary gay and lesbian rights movement, both within the fields of psychology and psychotherapy and without, argues that people do not choose to be gay or lesbian. In other words, sexual orientation is viewed as an essential category of human sexuality – either because of genetic or early environmental conditioning. But, how then can one account for sexually fluid or bisexual persons’ experience of their sexuality changing over time? Kundtz and Schlager (2007), in their text *Ministry Among God's Queer Folk*, concluded, “being bisexual, transgender, lesbian, or gay is almost never a choice...this is the same for all: human beings very rarely choose their sexual orientation or gender identity – possibly never” (p. 6,

emphasis original). Indeed, this claim becomes less tenable when one shifts from theories of fixed, essentialist sexual orientation toward theories of fluid, socially-constructed sexual identity.

The logic would suggest that if bisexual and sexually fluid persons are equally attracted to persons of any gender, then heteronormative theological discourses could claim that such persons should choose the “natural” or “moral” option of an opposite-gender partner (Siker, 2007). Most gay- and lesbian-affirming pastoral counselors (including this author) would find such a conclusion highly problematic. In this way, pastoral counselors who are working with bisexual and sexually fluid persons must decide how to communicate their stance on the theological ethics of sexual choice. In effect, what are the ethical norms and boundaries the counselor subscribes to when sexual choice is seen as merely a normal part of the human experience, and when does choice become unhealthy, promiscuously dangerous, and/or unethical? Should pastoral counselors disclose to the person seeking counseling their ethical commitments regarding multiple partners, sexual exclusivity, and/or polyamory? These questions invite pastoral counselors to reflect critically on their embedded and operative moral theology of sexual ethics before working with bisexual and sexually fluid persons who, by their very embodiment, will challenge the dominant constructs of sexual relationships (Hays, 2015).

Moreover, if sexual identity change is normal for bisexual and sexually fluid persons (Burlison, 2005; Firestein, 2007), then proponents of so-called conversion therapy or reparative therapy can argue that sexuality can be changed. Or some neo-orthodox Christian counselors may maintain that any non-heterosexual sexual orientations are the result of a fallen humanity and can be redeemed through therapy (Nicolosi, 2001). Both of these conclusions are problematic for gay- and lesbian-affirming pastoral counselors, and would constitute violations of codes of ethics for nearly every professional guild in psychotherapy, counseling, psychology,

and social work that have taken positions against “reparative therapy” (Human Rights Campaign, 2014). Perhaps the American Association of Pastoral Counselors will one day add this stance to their code of ethics for pastoral counselors.

### **Fluid theological reflection**

One of the major contributions that pastoral counselors can offer persons seeking counseling is the ways in which counselors invite theological reflection in the midst of the therapeutic process. Indeed, doing so is a hallmark of the field. This is certainly the case with bisexual and sexually fluid persons who go to pastoral counselors for counseling. One common theme that has emerged in first-person narratives of bisexual and sexually fluid persons’ own theological reflections is the correlation between one’s deconstructive process with respect to one’s own fluidity and the process of deconstructing embedded images of God with fluid metaphors. In other words, fluid identity becomes theologically correlated with images and constructs of God that are more dynamic, relational, and fluid. Seth, a person who identifies as queer and sexually fluid, describes the relationship between the dynamic nature of God and his own dynamic experience of sexuality.

Any time I’ve made a decision about something that would lend to a non-dynamic or static identity it has ended poorly or I’ve found it doesn’t work in some way. I think a few years ago I gave up on that and came to acceptance around the dynamic mode, and maybe an acceptance around it through some permission I feel like that was given through theological discovery... God doesn’t actually expect me to be static. (as cited in Hays, 2013, p. 107)

Here, Seth is making a claim about theological anthropology, namely, that identity is dynamic – not static – and that dynamic, fluid identity is God’s intention and expectation for Seth (and, perhaps by extension, for all humanity). This claim raises considerable concerns related to personhood and human subjectivity. Seth correlates an experience of deconstructing the binary images of God’s gender through the pronouns in *Song of Songs* with an experience of deconstructing his own binary categories of identity. Indeed, an awareness of the fluidity of God’s identity in the scriptural text presents an opportunity for Seth to explore fluid identity in his own life.

Through this process, Seth identifies a shift in how he thinks about God, moving from a personified to a more relational construct.

So in the deconstruction of gender around God I was also...it’s not so established. And actually there are ways that God interacts with all of us through different gender expressions and different relational interactions. And that perhaps there is a purpose also in us having that kind of fluidity in our lives... So I think to me the piece around exploding God’s gender from a rigid binary also exploded the options around relationship and partnership and how those things aren’t actually just options but are critical parts of our growth and understanding of ourselves in the world by our relationships with others.  
(as cited in Hays, 2013, p. 109)

Here, the fluidity of God opens up a new paradigm of relationality and sexual partnering that correlates with the sexually fluid or bisexual person’s own self-construction of sexual identity. In other words, the rejection of the binary sexual orientation categories of identity – what Seth describes as “exploding” from a rigid binary – becomes a critically important space of

embodiment in which relational connections are developed, both with other persons and with God.

Mary, a woman who identifies as bisexual, describes this process in her own life around remaining connected to Spirit:

I told you about this epiphany when I finally had the sense that here comes God and I'm home, I belong somewhere. I'm this spirit that has this connection and I'm not adrift all on my own like I thought I was. But I'm always aware of not belonging and of always being on the outside. I'm not a Jew. I'm not a Catholic although I go to Sacred Heart with Sister. I'm not gay. I'm not straight. And yet it's okay. I'm here. And if I'm connected to Spirit I'm fine. But it's that thing of how do I stay connected and on the path and not feel alone or lacking. (as cited in Hays, 2013, p. 125)

In this interview, Mary is describing her fluid identity vis-à-vis a theological construction of the Divine as “connected to Spirit.” Mary is asking a critically important existential question, namely, how does one stay connected and on the path and not feel alone or lacking? This suggests something poignant about the theological metaphor of journey, particularly as it relates to sexual fluidity. This echoes the earlier metaphor of “homelessness” articulated by Rebecca and reflected in the theological metaphors of exodus, sojourner, aliens in a strange land, lost sheep, and wandering in the desert.

Mary continues this theme with comments about being “adrift,” “not belonging,” and “always being on the outside.”

Always being the other. Always being different. And even at this [gay and lesbian spiritual] gathering, when I organized it... I said this year we're going to have a bi [component]. And they said whatever for? I said for the bisexuals. Oh, we don't have any

bisexuals. And I said I'm bisexual. And the woman...who was a therapist lesbian, she would not hear that... There's no one who's bisexual. I'm bisexual! [They] never could hear it. (as cited in Hays, 2013, p. 126)

Mary seems to move beyond the metaphor of "homelessness," which suggests people who identify as bisexual do not belong or have a place, to an experience of being invisible, a non-person. The lesbian therapist described in Mary's account, along with the prevailing ethos of the gathering, "could not hear" that she identified as bisexual. Attempts to explicate the cognitive dissonance of the lesbian therapist in Mary's account is mere speculation, but this description does illustrate a common theme among persons who identify as bisexual, namely that they generally do not feel acceptance and/or "at home" in either the straight or gay/lesbian communities.

Through a more nuanced understanding of how sexually fluid and bisexual persons' experiences of invisibility and outsider status impact the therapeutic process, the pastoral counselor can shift the focus away from the person's difficulty in constructing a sexual identity toward the broader communal, systemic, and discursive dynamics at play in the person's life. Scott (2007) picked up this theme of intersectionality in his discussion of how racism and fluid sexuality is experienced by African American bisexuals. Such an embodiment, according to Scott, disrupts two binaries: the homosexual/heterosexual binary of dominant North American cultural discourses, and what he describes as the male-female gender/sex system of the patriarchal Afrocentric (sic) worldview. He correlated the historical predisposition of therapists to pathologize as an internal personality disorder what is, more accurately, a survival response to the injustice, racism, and social invalidation inscribed upon the lives of clients. He argued,



Here multiracial bisexuals of African descent ‘actively’ construct their identities and experience often in opposition to the moral, political, and ideological concerns of their families of origin and communities... Reading bisexuality in this manner redirects the therapeutic focus toward intersecting narrative of cultural histories, invalidation, and class dynamics that shape bisexuality and homoerotic desire. At times the story line reflects a critical reflexive movement away from the individual’s psyche toward a socially and historically informed focus on the particulars in that client’s experiences of oppression, ostracism, or liberation. (p. 207)

In the current postmodern era, notions of unitary fixed identities – particularly related to the subjectivity of so-called hybrid persons – are increasingly being problematized. As Scott (2007) argued, biracial-identified persons (as embodying hybrid identities) offer interesting points of connection with bisexual-identified persons insofar as they occupy liminal, borderland, and/or marginalized spaces in various binary discourses. Moreover, such social locations of fluidity represent potentially subversive qualities because they represent disruption and contestation of oversimplified, essentialist binary constructions of identity. This claim is therapeutically significant because it demands of the pastoral counselor a clinical orientation that takes into account how social, political, and historical discourses have impacted the lives of people through imposed difference, displacement, and oppression (Scott, 2007).

### **Pastoral counseling competencies for working with sexually fluid and bisexual persons**

This article began by exploring theories of human sexuality that allow for fluidity and change of sexual identity, particularly in contrast to essentialist theories of sexual orientation. It engaged first-person narratives from persons who identify as sexually fluid or bisexual. These narratives

raised several issues for pastoral counselors to consider when working with such persons. This led to an exploration of how, through theological reflection, such lived experiences are correlated with deconstructing images of God in fluid and transgressive ways – and how such theological reflection presents opportunities for persons to normalize their fluid identities within their own operative theological worldviews. The article now turns to several competencies that pastoral counselors might consider as they seek to become more skilled and nuanced in their work with sexually fluid and bisexual persons.<sup>3</sup>

### Identity Change is Normal

*Recognize that sexually fluid and bisexual are valid, psychologically healthy sexual identities and that one's subjective experience and identity may change over time.*

This first competency is based upon the recognition that fluidity/bisexuality is a valid, psychologically healthy sexual identity (i.e., sexual orientation) in its own right, equal in legitimacy to lesbian, gay, and heterosexual identities. Nearly every first-person narrative presented in this article demonstrates that fluid and bisexual persons almost always experience their sense of sexual identity as in flux or changing. For some, this flux is related to changes in intimate partners, while for others it is an internal, subjective sense of one's own sexuality. A common pattern for bisexuals in this regard is to identify as gay/lesbian (in order to differentiate from the assumed socialized heterosexual identity) and then, after a period of time, to identify as bisexual (or queer, fluid, pansexual, gay-identified bisexual, or polyamorous). It is critically important for pastoral counselors to remember that change in one's sexual identity over time is not necessarily an indicator of pathology or internalized homophobia. With such persons, it is

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed listing of competencies beyond those presented here, see Hays, J. D. (2015). Pastoral counseling and queer identities. In E. Maynard & J. Snodgrass (Eds.), *Understanding pastoral counseling* (pp. 327–352). New York, NY: Springer.

important for pastoral counselors to realize that what may be happening has more to do with language than with sexuality. In other words, the person is trying to externally construct through words the internal experience of a fluid sexuality that may, in the end, be unchanging. It is worth nothing here that the language of sexual identity discourse itself is fluid and changing; just a decade ago “queer” was a term of derision and subjugation, but it is now being reclaimed as one of liberation and emancipation. For others, the internal experience of sexuality is actually changing – and thus the language is changing as well. It may be helpful to consider these as seasons in a person’s life (Firestein, 1996, 2007).

#### Negotiating Counseling Goals/Objectives

*Be cautious of conflating sexuality with counseling goals/objectives. Sometimes sexuality is the presenting problem for persons seeking counseling, but often it is not. It is important to decenter oneself as counselor in ways that allow persons seeking counseling to establish their own goals.*

Page (2007) interviewed bisexual women and men about their experiences with psychotherapists. Approximately 55% of respondents described their therapists as erroneously assuming that sexual orientation was connected to their clinical goals, and nearly 40% described their therapists as confounding bisexuality and pathology in a way that was experienced by the person as invalidating. One respondent said, “I’ve had a therapist tell me that my bisexuality was just one more way that I was trying to avoid making clear choices in my life” (p. 60).

This clinical competency, therefore, is about understanding how human sexuality is (for many) not fixed, but rather is fluid and changing over a lifetime. As a result, pastoral counselors competent in working with sexually fluid and bisexual persons suspend clinical theories of fixed and essentialist sexual orientation in order to create space in the therapeutic process for persons

to both embody and identify sexual change. Moreover, it is important to remember that the “presenting problem” for sexually fluid and bisexual persons may have nothing to do with sexuality. Thus, pastoral counselors competent in working with sexually fluid and bisexual persons mutually negotiate clinical objectives and therapeutic goals with persons who consult them for counseling in order to keep from imposing binary norms on the person.

### Double-Bind Marginalization

*Be conversant in the normalizing discourses of power that place sexually fluid and bisexual persons in double binds and ground counseling practices within clinical theories of liberation and emancipation.*

Although the past three decades have resulted in a dramatic increase in the social acceptance of gay/lesbian persons, pastoral counselors should be mindful that such social acceptance still remains largely located within binary heteronormative discourses. In other words, gay/lesbian persons gain acceptance via dominant heteronormative discourses as an acceptable alternative – as a legitimate “other” – largely through the conflation that gay/lesbian persons are “just like us except they love someone of the same sex.” In this way, gay/lesbian persons are increasingly viewed as a minority class. But, for sexually fluid and bisexual persons who locate themselves between or beyond such binary categories, there remains limited acceptance (Burleson, 2005; Firestein, 2007).

As explored in the first-person narratives above, many sexually fluid and bisexual persons experience rejection from both gay/lesbian communities and straight/heterosexual communities. Mary puts it even more strongly, “So yeah, the bisexual, the one who everyone likes to hate. The queers don’t like us. The straights don’t like us” (as cited in Hays, 2013, p. 127). These experiences of rejection and judgment often result in real effects on the person’s

life: anxiety, fear, depression, and suicidal ideation (Meyer & Northridge, 2007; Moon, 2008). Attending to the systemic and discursive sources of these problems, rather than assuming an intrinsic pathology within the person, is clinically significant for pastoral counselors competent in working with sexually fluid and bisexual persons.

### Theological Integration

*Be effective in facilitating a deconstructive theological reflection with persons seeking counseling, particularly in light of theological themes such as incarnation, imago Dei, and embodiment.*

Embedded and operative theological assumptions shape sexually fluid and bisexual persons' constructions of sexual identity and impact their internalized images and beliefs about God. Pastoral counselors competent in working with sexually fluid and bisexual persons are able to facilitate a critical deconstruction of the person's theological worldview – often through exploring embedded beliefs about the nature of God and God's gender, and theological themes of imago Dei, incarnation, and embodiment – in order to assist the person in constructing theological foundations more helpful for the embodiment of fluidity. As previously discussed, there seems to be a correlation between how one images God and how one images oneself – particularly around sexual identity.

Through supervision or peer consultation, competent pastoral counselors participate in critical self-reflection upon their own embedded theological anthropology in order not only to ensure that it is not being imposed on the person, but also to seek clarity as to how the counselor's own operative theological anthropology is shaping clinical curiosity, questions asked, and conclusions made. To put it more concretely, this competency asks pastoral counselors to suspend their own theological commitments related to human bodies, sexuality,

and gender, in order to enter into de/constructive work with persons who consult them for counseling. If pastoral counselors are unable to make such a suspension in their clinical work, referral is the most ethical option.

### Transgressive Ethics

*Be critically aware of how binary discourses inscribe norms upon persons, render them invisible and/or pathological, and present real, consequential effects when contested.*

As discussed previously, an embodied fluid sexual identity not only refuses to be labeled by the dominant binary of sexual discourses, it often contests the binary itself. One can see this most clearly in Mary's description of the lesbian therapist who is incapable of hearing/seeing that Mary is a bisexual-identified person. Mary's insistence of claiming her bisexual identity contested the systemic power the lesbian therapist was exercising as a leader of the spiritual gathering. Moreover, Mary demanded that the lesbian therapist bear witness to Mary's fluid identity. This represents a *transgressive* ethic. When a fluid embodiment demands acknowledgment from the perspective of a binary discourse, the person is transgressing the binary discourse on two fronts: first, by embodying a fluid identity, and second, by doing so in the face of a binary discourse that rejects the existence of any liminal location in the first place. This transgressive identity construction echoes other ethical themes and metaphors common in queer theory, namely crossing, blurring, turning upside-down, and/or being contrary to dominant categories (Moon, 2008; Sullivan, 2003).

Pastoral counselors competent in working with sexually fluid and bisexual persons – especially those working from liberative and emancipatory orientations – locate their therapeutic work within the context of ethical practices that seek to equip, empower, and support the person's transgressive purposes in life. In this way, the pastoral counselor intentionally becomes

an ally, both within the counseling room and within the wider communal contexts of advocacy and care. In other words, the pastoral counselor is enacting a transgressive ethic both in allying with the person's desire to claim a fluid identity and in developing clinical competencies in models of human sexuality that resist hegemonic and pathologizing theories of sexual fluidity.

### Marriage and Covenant Making

*Be critically self-aware and transparent about one's embedded norms of covenantal relationships, particularly assumptions regarding sexual exclusivity and two-person models constituting stable, long-term relationships.*

Since the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, states are now legally required to recognize same-gender marriage. While this ruling represents an important legal battle for the gay/lesbian civil rights movement, it is important to recognize that many gay/lesbian couples have no interest in participating in what they view as an unredeemable heteropatriarchal institution. Indeed, the feminist critique of same-gender marriage goes back more than 20 years with Ettelbrick's (1993) essay "Since When Is Marriage a Path to Liberation?" and Lerner's more general feminist critique of marriage in *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986). Sexually fluid and bisexual persons have similarly challenged dominant models of relationships as problematic, either on the grounds that such models render fluid/bisexual persons invisible or on the grounds that marital exclusivity inhibits the full expression of a person's sexuality.

Pastoral counselors competent in working with sexually fluid and bisexual persons are challenged to evaluate their operative theological commitments on marriage and the ethical considerations of making those commitments transparent to persons who consult them for counseling. Moreover, counseling sexually fluid and bisexual persons who are in marriages (or

covenanted partnerships) requires counselors to intentionally deconstruct their theoretical models of marriage and family (especially for those trained in family systems therapy). Sexually fluid and bisexual persons challenge dominant norms of sexual exclusivity within marriages by negotiating polyamory and multiple intimate partners within their relationships. Furthermore, they redefine marital covenants as their sexuality changes over time. For some, this may mean having multiple partners at the same time, varying degrees of intimacy with different people in various contexts, or serial marriage with different gendered spouses.

In response to non-normative sexual behaviors, many pastoral counselors may experience the impulse to evaluate and assess such sexual behavior through the dominant paradigm of “healthy” or “unhealthy” (not to mention “normal” or “abnormal”). But, queer psychological theorists have challenged psychotherapeutic professionals – including pastoral counselors – to recognize how heteronormative assumptions are often embedded within such normative categories as “healthy” or “unhealthy” (Moon, 2008). Here, I argue for a clinical approach that resists the imposition of such normative categories and, instead, enables the person to clarify norms and ethical behavior within the context of his or her own theological commitments and moral worldview – irrespective of the limiting and disciplinary discourses of normalcy. Thus, it is important for competent pastoral counselors to make their operative norms of covenantal relationships and marriage transparent with persons seeking counseling, and to reflect on the ethical limits that are likely to cause them to terminate the counseling relationship and make a referral. For example, while there may be sexual practices that are ethically defensible (though not agreeable to the pastoral counselor), there may also be a point at which the person’s sexual practice becomes unethical or harmful (in the opinion of the pastoral counselor). In such cases, it



is important for the competent pastoral counselor to discern the most ethical way of disclosing this opinion and, if necessary, terminating the counseling relationship and referring the person.

### Intercultural/Intersectional Counseling

*Be conversant and competent in providing intercultural care, as many queer-identified persons are socially located differently than many pastoral counselors.*

The intersectionality – the interconnected and interdependent relationship between socially constructed categories of identity – of gender, sexuality, racial/ethnic, and class identity has been receiving important consideration in the field of pastoral theology (Cooper & Marshall, 2010; Ramsay, 2014), along with intercultural models of pastoral counseling that take into account sexual orientation (Marshall, 2009). Young’s (1990) framework of the “Five Faces of Oppression” is a helpful way to account for these interlocking oppressions within the context of fluid sexuality. While sexual minorities tend to experience common oppression resulting from marginalization, cultural dominance (especially in terms of normalizing discourses), and violence, exploitation and powerlessness are more often experienced in relation to other factors such as gender, class, and race.

As discussed earlier with Scott’s (2007) work, the intersectionality of race and sexuality presents an important area of additional study and practice in order for counselors to obtain competency in providing counseling to sexually fluid and bisexual persons. Sexually fluid and bisexual persons encounter multiple marginalizations in which they face both the dominant culture’s interpersonal and institutional racism, as well as the heterocentrism, homophobia, and/or biphobia of their own ethnic/racial community. Moreover, the prevailing clinical and psychological models of coming out are based largely on developmental and personality theories

most commonly located within the Eurocentric traditions of the field, with little or no acknowledgment of the impact of cultural context on the person. Competent pastoral counselors actively diversify their clinical theories in order to make them intentionally anti-racist.

For example, a pastoral counselor working with an African American man who identifies as bisexual may conclude that the client remaining “in the closet” within African American communities while being “out” in his predominantly white workplace environment may signal a lack of full acceptance or integration of his sexual identity, or a failure to fully differentiate; however, a competent intentionally anti-racist and intercultural pastoral counselor might recognize that the client’s changing and fluid identity may well represent a survival strategy necessary to navigate the intersections of his sexual, racial, and class identities vis-à-vis systemic and discursive relationships of power. Indeed, there are wide variations in the acceptance and affirmation of bi (and non-straight) people within different social spaces and locations: class, education, race and culture, geography, etc. Competent pastoral counselors are prepared to offer resources and support to persons seeking counseling within these diverse communities/contexts, and recognize the limitations of their knowledge and competencies. They consult, refer, and seek supervision as an ethical practice of pastoral counseling.

### **Conclusion**

This article began by discussing the lived experience of sexually fluid and bisexual persons, particularly in terms of their construction of fluid and liminal identities within the dominant binary discourses of sexuality and the theological discourse of incarnation, imago Dei, and embodiment. Then, the article presented several implications for clinical practice, particularly considering how persons seeking counseling may challenge pastoral counselors’ embedded

clinical assumptions about what constitutes healthy and stable sexuality, and force them to reconsider their operative theological anthropologies. The article concluded by highlighting several proposed competencies for pastoral counselors working with sexually fluid and bisexual persons.

The American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC) has taken an important position in adopting its *Anti-Racist Multicultural Competencies* for pastoral counselors working across racial and ethnic counseling relationships. As a growing awareness of intersectionality continues to shape clinical theories and practice, it may be time for AAPC to consider joining other professional guilds, such as the American Counseling Association, American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, and the American Psychological Association, in considering competencies for working with sexual and gender minorities (ALGBTIC LGBQQIA Competencies Task Force et al., 2013).

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