

Running Head: EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS AND THE GAY COMMUNITY

Evangelical Christians and the Gay Community:

A Case for Dialogue between Parties in Intractable Rights and Values Conflict

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### Abstract

This paper examines the intractable rights and values conflict between evangelical Christians (also sometimes referred to as the Christian Right) and the gay and lesbian community. With much political discourse on same-sex civil marriage, homosexual civil rights, and gay and lesbian adoption, no stronger reason than religious objection exists to bar gay men and lesbians from these and other civil privileges. However, evangelicals see this not as a human rights-based issue but rather in terms of moral right and wrong. The paper examines the conflict by understanding the language of the national debate using media data sources. It then provides analyses using conflict theories to define key aspects of the conflict. It also checks for interest in discontinuance of the current debate in favor of seeking meaningful dialogue. The paper also examines case studies where evangelical Christian families have had to face this issue with the revelation that their family member is gay. I will provide an analysis of these data with recommendations for ways to implement on the macro-level conclusions drawn from the micro-level. By doing so, I will propose a framework for better understanding the conflict and show wide-spread interest and need for dialogue between these groups.

Table of Contents

**DEDICATIONS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....4**

**PROLOGUE .....5**

**INTRODUCTION .....6**

    DIALOGUE VS. DEBATE .....7

    DEFINITIONS AND BACKGROUND .....8

        Christians .....9

        Evangelical Protestants .....10

        Gay men and lesbians .....12

        Situational View .....13

    CONFLICT .....16

        Conflict Theories.....17

        Intractable Values Conflict .....19

    INTERVENTION STRATEGIES .....21

        Conflict analysis.....21

        Confrontation .....23

        Conflict Resolution .....23

        Mediation .....24

**METHODOLOGY .....26**

    STUDY 1: MEDIA SOURCES .....26

    STUDY 2: LEARNING FROM EVANGELICAL FAMILIES.....29

**FINDINGS.....30**

    STUDY 1: MEDIA SOURCES .....30

        Finding 1: Language of Debate .....30

        Finding 2: Opinion from Professionals and Scholars .....33

        Finding 3: Inclusivity and Honesty .....35

        Finding 4: Outsiders’ Critique of Evangelical Ideology .....35

        Finding 5: Dialogue Interest.....37

        Unexpected Finding .....38

    STUDY 2: LEARNING FROM EVANGELICAL FAMILIES.....38

**DISCUSSION.....41**

    CONFLICT ANALYSIS .....42

        Gays .....42

        Evangelicals .....43

        Why the Conflict? .....44

    VALUES & MORAL CONFLICT .....46

        Moral Exclusion .....49

        Moral Inclusion .....51

    CONFLICT RESOLUTION VIA DIALOGUE.....52

    UNEXPECTED FINDING: MEDIA BIAS .....54

    FUTURE STUDY .....54

    IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE .....55

**CONCLUSION .....59**

**REFERENCES .....61**

**APPENDIX A.....73**

**APPENDIX B.....74**

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*“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall  
be called the children of God.”*  
– Jesus (Matt. 5:9)

### Prologue

One part this paper explores data from evangelical Christian families who have had to confront issues of acceptance of their gay children. There are countless stories like these in evangelical homes all across America. They are all different, and yet the same. I lived one of them myself. When I came out to my evangelical, fundamentalist parents in the spring of 2000, I encountered much of the same language I read in these data. Like Cynthia (n.d.) from Study 2 who “would fight the devil himself if it meant [her son’s] salvation,” my father offered to exchange his place in heaven for me if he thought that was possible. Over the years, we have learned to conduct a dialogue. I have stopped sending them scientific journals, liberal Bible reinterpretations, and welcoming congregation pamphlets. And they have stopped their efforts to promote reparative therapy and questioning when I will find a wife and stop this sinfulness. My parents are still resolute in their faith, and I am content and happy with my self-identity. I view my gay sexual orientation as positive, which was not always the case. What changed? My family and I have moved beyond debate to dialogue, creating new communication by “freely listening to each other, without prejudice, and without trying to influence each other” (Bohm, 1996, p. 3). This worked for my family and it could work for others, but is there enough interest in dialogue for people to try? This paper seeks to answer that question, as it tries to understand the parties that make up this conflict, and the meanings behind their language.

## INTRODUCTION

As a conflict resolution practitioner, how do you come to terms with the fact that while you are trying to “change the world” the reality is that people do not want to change? While change is slow, constant, and inevitable, even positive change is feared and unwanted by many who take comfort in the familiar status quo. Compounding this is the problem of what to do when two seemingly divergent opinions come into conflict. When one side will never adopt the view of the other, can there still be peace between parties engaged in an intractable conflict (Coleman, 2006)?

It is almost impossible to turn on the TV, pick-up a newspaper, or listen to the radio without hearing news about the conflict waging between evangelical Christians and the gay and lesbian community. Issues such as marriage, adoption, and anti-discrimination laws, appear benign to most Americans until the word *gay* is attached as a prefix. Then the situation gives rise to arguments and debates with no end in sight. Evangelicals are also facing a crisis of such, as Reverends Ted Haggard and Paul Barnes, two prominent evangelical ministers, have recently revealed their homosexuality (Banerjee, 2006). In this context of political discourse and community strife, this paper examines the conflict between evangelicals and gays and offers suggestions to promote dialogue.

It can and has been argued that other Christian and non-Christian religious groups or moralist/conservative secularists may have similar objections to gay equality as those expressed by evangelicals (Shell, 2004). However, those groups are not in the national media spotlight when it comes to this issue while the Christian Right has the attention of the Republican Party and the conservative media because of their size and political clout. This influence also causes evangelicals to act as gatekeepers (Lewin, 1947) for the acceptance of gays within the greater

U.S. culture (Mead, 2006). Gatekeepers are persons in key positions of influence who control the flow of ideas and morals of a society. Lewin (1947) researched ways to affect social change by identifying societal gatekeepers. By concentrating efforts here, it can be determined “who has to be educated if a change is to be accomplished” (p. 146). It is because of this role that I examine the opposition to gay rights through evangelical objection.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. One, it will seek to understand the history and rhetorical language used on both sides of the debate. And two, it will check for parties’ interest in discontinuing the debate and engaging in dialogue. The difference between these two presumably similar words – *debate* and *dialogue* – is a key concept to understanding this project. The following subsection explains these differences to frame the discussion that follows.

#### Dialogue vs. Debate

Much of what is called *dialogue* is not dialogue as used in mediation and psychology parlance. Often the word is used as a synonym for *discussion*, which actually more closely resembles distributive bargaining negotiation. A discussion means to “break apart and examine; to debate” (Random House, 2006). The problem with debate is that it does not get people far beyond their original point of view because everyone is analyzing the many points made. Dialogue, on the other hand, is more like collaboration, where parties come together to explore and create something new. Dialogue comes from the Greek word *dialogos* – *logos* meaning “the word” and *dia* meaning “through” (Bohm, 1996, p. 6). In his book *On Dialogue*, author David Bohm (1996) paints a vivid picture of this etymology as “a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which may emerge some new understanding” (p. 6).

Third-party intervention fosters open dialogue—not debate—between disputing parties. The act of engagement in a problem-solving workshop (Kelman & Cohen, 1986) allows the parties to focus on new ways of communication leading to mutual respect and understanding (Herzig, 2006). This is achieved through personal story exchange, encouraging each party to ask not assume, and through provocative, stimulative question asking. The role of the dialogue facilitators “is not to prevent the emergence of strong affect or past accounts but to encourage their expression in ways that lead to new respect and understanding rather than to intensified old suspicions and antagonism” (Chasin et al., 1996, p. 338). This process also helps to break parties from the ethnocentric cycle. Like transformative mediation (Bush & Folger, 2005), dialogue facilitation requires that the third party be non-judgmental and resist solution creation (Chasin et al., 1996). The goal is on helping parties to have meaningful communication and move beyond debate and derision, not on settlement.

The question then must be asked: Is there interest in coming to the table? Both sides spew much rhetoric, but how do the sides feel about dialogue? Would any of the parties be willing to sit down and engage in meaningful dialogue with third party facilitators? This paper seeks to answer these questions. First, in order to understand the conflict between evangelicals and gays we need to examine the parties, their values in conflict, and methods for solution.

### Definitions and Background

The Right Reverend John Shelby Spong (1998), retired Bishop of the Diocese of Newark (Episcopal), wrote on the topic of homosexuality and the Anglican/Episcopal Church: “One hundred years ago there was no debate of homosexuality in the life of the church. Today that debate is raging in every part of Christianity, sometimes above ground and sometimes

underground” (p. 1). How did this come to be, and what are the sources of this conflict? Before answering, let us quickly identify exactly which groups are in this conflict.

### *Christians*

Religious faith plays a central role in the lives of many people. In the United States, over two-thirds of the population is a church member, and over 60% identify their religious faith as a very powerful influence in their lives (Lease, Horne, & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005). The National Organization for Research (NORC) has conducted General Social Surveys every year since 1972 (NORC, 2006). These surveys show that 85-90% of Americans believe in God. Adding to these data is the Baylor Religion Survey (BRS) published in September of 2006, which bills itself as the “most extensive and sensitive study of religion ever conducted” (Baylor, 2006, p. 5). Its survey on faith shows that 83% of Americans identify as Christian. The survey breaks the Christian group down into four main categories (and provides its percentage of U.S. population): Black Protestant (5%), evangelical Protestant (34%), mainline Protestant (22%), and Catholic (21%). (The remaining 1-2% is comprised of smaller or unaffiliated Christians, or those not defined in the above categories.) A quick description of each group from the BRS, which may be helpful to later discussion, can be found in Appendix A.

Not all Christian groups share the same attitudes and viewpoints on gays and lesbians. So for further classification, I will divide the Christian cultural container into two camps by borrowing the labels *welcoming* and *non-welcoming* congregations.

*Welcoming.* Welcoming congregations, a term established in 1987 by the Unitarian Universalist Association (2001), are congregations who voluntarily “see a need to become more inclusive toward bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or transgender people.” This includes not just welcoming gays and lesbians as parishioners, but accepting them “as is” without the need for

change or sanction. Welcoming denominations are almost exclusively among the mainline Protestant denominations (listed in Appendix A) plus Unitarian Universalist and Metropolitan Community Churches. Individual churches can adopt this label even if the general denomination does not. In addition, it is worth noting that many major city Catholic congregations also welcome gay and lesbian couples although the pope does not officially sanction this stance.

*Non-welcoming.* Evangelical Protestants and Catholics (see Appendix A) are classified as non-welcoming Christian denominations. However, it is important to note that these groups often have gay members, and some of those gay members belong to gay religious organizations that are not endorsed by their religious governing body (e.g., Dignity [Catholic], Evangelicals Concerned, SDA Kinship). So, the focus from here will center on evangelicals, who are not only the largest group of American Christians, but also the largest political force against homosexuality in general.

### *Evangelical Protestants*

Evangelicals are a group of Christians that emphasize the authority of the Bible through a literal reading, salvation through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, personal piety, and the need to share the “Good News” of Jesus Christ with others (i.e., to evangelize). It is through evangelizing that they share the main tenet of their faith, which is the “Good News” that Jesus grants eternal life for all whom accept and believe. After acceptance, the next step is to endeavor to live a pious life free from sin as a child of God ought to do. This process is also commonly referred to as “born again” (John 3:3-7; Mead, 2006).

With many denominational affiliations, this group comprises the largest number of American Protestants (Baylor, 2006). The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) is a networking of churches and ministries from 79 Christian denominations, serving a constituency

of 30 million people. Their common identity comes from an acceptance of the “infallibility and plenary authority” of the Bible (NAE, 2006). Not all evangelicals are part of the NAE, namely Southern Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (NAE, 2006). Southern Baptists alone make up the largest Protestant group in the United States (Mead, 2006).

Often, fundamentalism is confused with evangelicalism. The difference between them is nuanced, but important. While fundamentalists are evangelical, not all evangelicals are fundamentalist. Many Christians use the terms interchangeably, which adds to the confusion (Mead, 2006). However, for purposes of classification, evangelical is an umbrella term which includes Pentecostals, charismatics, and fundamentalists (Winston, 1999). Both evangelicals and fundamentalists believe in the doctrine that the Bible is the only divine authority – *sola scriptura* (Godfrey, 1997) – but fundamentalists tend to be slightly more dogmatic in their beliefs. The key difference between evangelicals and fundamentalists is their view of the world. Fundamentalists insist more fully in seeing their ideology through to its logical conclusion. This makes them “more interested than evangelicals in developing a consistent and all-embracing Christian worldview and then in systematically applying it to the world” (Mead, 2006, p. 27). They see a doomed world awaiting Christian salvation. Evangelicals, on the other hand, have a less pessimistic world outlook. They see their message of Christian responsibility to the world to include social action, but not necessarily those causes set by humanitarian or secular leaders (Mead, 2006). Since the 1960s, the simultaneous rise in evangelical numbers and the decrease in mainline Protestants have brought a more conservative tilt to American politics due to evangelicals voting in larger number for candidates who hold their view of society. Contrast this

to fundamentalists Christians whose political pull remains less influential because of their religious conviction to distance themselves from a sinful world (Mead, 2006).

The evangelical view of public policy can best be summed by Gary Schneeberger, special assistant for media relations to Dr. James Dobson, founder and chairman of the evangelical group Focus on the Family. Schneeberger (2007) says that the role of his organization is a vehicle to empower their members to be heard by lawmakers. They provide websites and other media campaigns to allow evangelicals to “flex their muscles” (Schneeberger, 2007) in the political sphere. This is similar to other political action groups, except for one key difference; most political action leaders’ words are not delivered in the form of a sermon, whose listeners hear as moral truth. This coupling of faith and policy makes the loud evangelical voice heard by lawmakers (Mead, 2006).

#### *Gay men and lesbians*

Often referred to by the acronym LGBT, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender community is comprised of a diverse set of cultures and subcultures (GLSEN, 2003; Reis, 2004). The grouping together of sexual orientation and gender expression is usually done because this group is often a target of discrimination (GLSEN, 2003). Without listing these subcultures in detail, this analysis will focus primarily on gay men and lesbians, since bisexuals engage fluidly in same-sex relationships, depending on circumstances, and transsexuals can be oriented as homo-, hetero-, or bisexual. The term “gay” commonly encompasses the identity of “lesbian” as well and will be used uniformly throughout the paper to reflect both gay men and lesbians.

*History.* The American Psychiatric Association (1980) says homosexual orientation is not a mental disorder and cannot be changed. This view is shared by the American Psychological Association, who in 1974 defined homosexuality as a condition that “implies no impairment in

judgment, stability, reliability, or general social and vocational capabilities” (Conger, 1975). A process known as *reparative therapy* (also sometimes called *restorative therapy*) is an attempt to convert an individual from a homo- to a heterosexual orientation. It is practiced by various techniques including behavior modification, aversion therapy, prayer, and religious counseling (Haldeman, 2002). Most psychologists assert that the practice of restorative therapy can yield dangerous results for the patient, and such therapy is arguably unethical (Yarhouse & Burkett, 2002). These attitudes and beliefs are also deeply rooted and internalized in the gay and lesbian culture, which views successes of this procedure as ostensible and lacking in authenticity (Human Rights Campaign, 2006a).

One of the prominent and largest LGBT civil rights groups is the Human Rights Campaign (HRC). In their guide for *coming out* – the process of self-disclosing one’s sexual orientation to others – they state, “No one knows for sure what makes people gay. All available research on sexual orientation strongly suggests that there is some biological component that defines an individual’s orientation. [However,] at the end of the day, the ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ are not important” (HRC, 2006a, p. 5).

#### *Situational View*

With this unchangeable orientation in mind, gay men and lesbians view their plight in American society as a civil rights struggle for full equality. Though, frequently referred to negatively by Christian evangelicals as “the homosexual agenda,” the gay rights movement has achieved great strides toward the goal of inclusion since the Stonewall Riots in New York City in June 1969. It was there in a Greenwich Village gay bar where gay men and lesbians engaged in three days of rioting with police to protest discriminatory raids and arrests (D’Emilo, 1983). By the end of July, the Gay Liberation Front was formed. From that point forward, the homosexual

community “came out of the closet,” began to change the negative connotation of gay, and pushed for public acceptance and civil rights.

Reports show gays feel more accepted by society today than in years past (“Gays report,” 2001), and much of this is attributed to awareness and straight-gay friendships (“Gays report,” 2001; Rodriguez & Karkabi, 2005). Yale Law Professor Kenji Yoshino (2002) sums the history of attitudes toward gay Americans as taking “multiple forms, including the demands to convert [i.e., become straight], to pass [i.e., adopt evangelical norms], and to cover [i.e., not display public affection]” (p. 6). However, most evangelicals still hold to stage one – convert.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2006) published data on public opinion/acceptance of the condition of homosexuality and same-sex marriage. The findings show 49% of Americans view sexual orientation as an unchangeable characteristic, and that number increases to 51% among college graduates, 52% from mainline Protestants, 57% from liberals, and 52% from those who rarely or never attend church. In contrast, not only do 51% of evangelicals view homosexuality as a choice, but 56% of them believe change is possible. This is an important distinction, because the data show 58% of those who view homosexuality as innate support same-sex marriage; while those who believe it is a lifestyle choice (82%) or product of upbringing (71%) overwhelmingly oppose. Another annual study conducted by Rice University published similar results. The survey has tracked public attitudes in the conservative city of Houston for 24 years – from 1982 to 2005. According to the Rice survey, “half of those polled in 2000 believed homosexuality was not a choice but an immutable condition” (Rodriguez & Karkabi, 2005, ¶ 10); that grew to 57% in 2003 and 59% in 2005 (Ibid).

Studies on Census Bureau data estimate there are upwards of 9 million gays in America (Gates, 2006), and some claim the number is closer to 12 million or even higher (Rubenstein,

Sears, & Sockloskie, 2003; Pathela et al., 2006). Even by conservative estimates based on the lower number, there are millions of gay Christians in America. Many attend services at non-welcoming congregations and contribute their time, money, and emotional support to these organizations. Further, there are devout evangelical Christians who have gay and lesbian children, friends, and coworkers for whom they love, care, and pray. There are also many in the gay community who have turned their backs on evangelicalism, or on organized religion altogether because of the stigma placed on them by the dominant group – a stigma for, as they see it, their very being. In a larger sense, gay men and lesbians take issue with the denial of marriage and other civil rights. This resentment is compounded when evangelical Christians invoke their religion to trump secular civil liberties afforded to other non-Christians, something some gays view as discriminatory.

While same-sex marriage is still illegal in 49 of the 50 States (Massachusetts the sole exception; California, Connecticut, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Vermont, and Washington offer gay civil-unions), many municipalities have registered same-sex domestic partnerships in efforts to afford civil protections to gay relationships. Further, most Fortune 500 companies throughout the United States offer domestic partner benefits in response to a gay push for equality and for policies prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. No such protection exists on a federal level, and sexual orientation is not one of the protected groups in the Civil Rights Act or United States Code, which is the codification of general and permanent federal U.S. laws. In fact, only 8 American states have laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation, while 19 others offer limited protection via executive order, which could be rescinded at the will of the governor (Human Rights Campaign, 2007). So, in almost half of the

country (23 of 50 states) an individual may be legally fired or denied employment simply because he or she is gay.

Gay men and lesbians continue to fight for inclusion in society, but after the 2006 elections where states voted to ban same-sex marriage, it seems they are losing ground. Gay rights supporters frame the argument in terms of rights, but they have not learned that currently in this country creed trumps rights (Piazza, 2006). To better understand the situation, it might be helpful to pause for a moment to define conflict and some conflict theories.

### Conflict

Not all conflict is bad. There has been extensive empirical research into the positive benefits of conflict (Coser, 1956; Deutsch, 1973; Felstiner, Abel, & Sarat, 1980-1981). Conflict “prevents stagnation, stimulates interest and curiosity...and is the root of personal and social change” (Deutsch, 1973, p. 8). If approached correctly, conflicts give rise to positive social change. An example would be constructive controversy versus competitive debate (Deutsch, 2006a). The first offers a win-win attitude, where people work together to cooperatively problem-solve and/or share ideas and ideologies. The second promotes a win-lose orientation where the best ideas are judged and the winner takes all.

However, when conflicts appear impossible to resolve they are called intractable conflicts (Coleman, 2006). While there are many identifiers and factors to distinguish from more easily solvable conflict, deeply rooted intractable conflict normally occurs in groups or individuals where there exists a power imbalance and the powerful “exploit, control, or abuse the less powerful (Coleman, 2006, p. 534). This can be a dynamic in racism, sexism, or human rights abuses. Because these ideologies are embedded in cultural, structural, and relational levels, they are often difficult to recognize and change. Intractable conflicts are less about the scarcity of

resources or provocative actions of parties than they are about social interaction and the worldview of groups who make primary assumptions about “what is unquestionably ‘right’ in a given context” (Coleman, 2006, p. 545). Change in intractable conflicts can occur only when individuals examine these assumptions through critical reflection and direct confrontation. Carefully constructed dialogue is an opportunity for parties and individuals to come together to share their profoundly different views, which is distinct from negotiation as the focus is not on persuasion, but sharing and learning.

### *Conflict Theories*

I will briefly discuss three conflict theories that will help to define group roles and sources of values conflict. This will be helpful in understanding the history of the conflict between evangelicals and gays, useful in understanding the tension and intractability of the issue, and will aid in later discussion of the data.

*Social Identity Theory.* Work done by Tajfel and Turner (1985) into *social identity theory* defines groups as a collection of individuals who “(a) perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, (b) share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and (c) achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership in it” (Tajfel & Turner, 1985, p. 13). When members of one group interact with members of the other, their behavior reflects views of themselves as well as their views of others belonging to different cultures. Social identity theory explains how these identifications are “relational and comparative” (Tajfel & Turner, 1985, p. 16).

Groups to which individuals feel psychologically connected are considered in-groups, and groups where individuals are not associated are considered out-groups. When groups disagree on an issue, an intergroup conflict can develop. Studies show that the more intense an

intergroup conflict, the more likely opposing group members will “behave toward each other as a function of their respective group memberships, rather than in terms of their individual characteristics or interindividual relationships” (Tajfel & Turner, 1985, p. 8).

*Interdependence theory.* Building on social identify theory is the concept of interdependence theory, which states that while groups form on the basis of similarity/dissimilarity with others there is no in- or out-group until a threat is perceived (Flippen, Hornstein, Siegal & Weitzman, 1996). The authors argue that “in the absence of perceived interdependence, one will treat members of all varying social categories equivalently, because there is no reason to anticipate one’s self-interest being affected” (Flippen et al., 1996, p. 883). But when out-groups pose a threat, real or imagined, interdependence is produced and interest of in-group concerns is intensified. This behavior can cause a group to exhibit signs of moral exclusion.

*Moral Exclusion.* Morton Deutsch (2006b) defines the *scope of justice* as “who and what is included in one’s moral community and who is and is not entitled to fair outcomes and treatment” (p. 52). When one is inside the scope of justice, they are deemed worthy of fair treatment (Opatow, 1990), but when they are outside they are morally excluded. Moral exclusion can take many forms from bullying and discrimination to oppression and genocide (Opatow, 1990; Opatow, Gerson, & Woodside, 2005). Opatow (2006) warns that “structural violence flourishes when people who benefit from the status quo preserve their sense of morality by keeping themselves uninformed about the breadth and depth of structural violence and by avoiding questions that would yield answers they would rather not know” (p. 523). Over time, these actions become ingrained into a society and are even used as a defense against change. An example includes the moral exclusion implied in the phrase, “Preserve traditional marriage”

(Bush, 2006). The struggle over gay rights and same-sex marriage has become an intractable values conflict.

### *Intractable Values Conflict*

Discussing the conflict between evangelicals and the gay community in terms of an intractable conflict (Coleman, 2006) over values makes sense in this discussion. Evangelicals and gays are not fighting over scarce resources and are not competing for a commodity as defined by realistic group conflict theory (LeVine & Campbell, 1972). In fact, most Christians – welcoming and non-welcoming congregations alike – profess that gays and lesbians are God’s children same as they are (National Association of Evangelicals, 2006). With the issue of same-sex marriage, for example, gay men and lesbians are not advocating marriage rites in churches and cathedrals, but civil ceremonies performed by justices of the peace. It is important to note that many welcoming congregations voluntarily perform spiritual blessings for same-sex unions and have been doing so for decades.

Conflict between evangelicals and gays is somewhat distinctive because it centers on religious faith for one group, and human rights for the other. Gay political activist groups (namely HRC) frame the conflict in terms of a civil rights battle akin to the African-American struggle for equality. However, unlike that conflict, where the white majority imposed segregation and passed laws banning integration (including interracial marriage), Christian evangelicals welcome homosexuals into their churches provided they conform to evangelical cultural norms. Evangelicals identify all humans as “sinners,” and believe the “Good News” of God’s forgiveness extends to all, including gay men and lesbians as long as they convert and become straight. In fact, their name – evangelical – comes from the Greek *euángelos* meaning

“bringing good news” (American Heritage Dictionary, 2000). However, most gay people do not see these change efforts as good news to them.

While studies show the gap between these groups has narrowed over time, the recent debate over legal gay marriage in the United States threatens to widen these differences again. President Bush, a self-professed evangelical, called the New Jersey Supreme Court decision requiring the state legislator to give same-sex couples the same rights as married heterosexuals the act of “activists judges” (“Bush Defines Marriage As Man and Woman,” 2006, ¶ 1). Bush went on to say, “I believe [marriage is] a sacred institution that is critical to the health of our society and the well-being of families, and it must be defended” (“Bush Defines Marriage As Man and Woman,” 2006, ¶ 5). In his Saturday radio address of June 3, 2006, Bush adds that the voters, not the courts, should decide this issue (Bush, 2006). As a person who is sworn to govern for all Americans – gay and straight – he is implicitly saying that the majority should determine the rights of the minority. In countries where the majority had special rights over the minority (e.g., Malaysia, Nazi Germany, pre-1960s U.S.), the results were disastrous for the out-group (see Horowitz, 1991).

Both sides of the debate are invoking different language and ethical frameworks (natural law vs. rights based law). In doing so, both sides feel they are ethically right and do not want to yield or compromise position. From the perspective of gay rights activists, who see a rising increase in public support (Pew Forum, 2006; Rubenstein, Sears, & Sockloskie, 2003; Gates, 2006) and some of the laws preventing gay rights overturned (e.g., U.S. Supreme Court 2003 repeal of sodomy law, civil unions/same-sex marriage in 7 states) it initially appears as if history is on their side. However, public opinion is still not strong enough to pass same-sex marriage nation-wide or gay civil rights/anti-discrimination laws by popular vote (Human Rights

Campaign, 2007). In addition, any wins the gay rights activities find in the courts could prompt a defeat in congress. From the evangelicals' perspective, their existence comes with an explicit command (some in their ranks would say "moral imperative" from Christ himself) to spread their religion (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; John 21:15-19). This is sometimes called the Gospel Commission. Alienating millions in and out of their congregations is an anathema to this goal.

### Intervention Strategies

Where do we go from here? Ronald Fisher (1994) offers three stages for resolving intergroup conflicts: conflict analysis, confrontation, and finally resolution. In the first stage, parties share their views with each other in a manner that leads to "shared empathetic understanding" (p. 50). Stage two consists of collaborative problem solving by the parties in attempt to "deescalate and improve" (p. 51) the conflict. The final stage renews the relationship between the parties via transformation of the conflict using "decision-making procedures, social policies, and/or societal structures" (p. 51). This assumes that we can get the parties to the table. With public attitudes changing, interest from concerned people, and prominent evangelical leaders coming out (White, 1994; Banerjee, 2006), this approach may be timely and welcomed. Both sides should be made aware that the current strategies are no longer working.

#### *Conflict analysis*

Disengagement by both sides from the superficial rhetoric is key in the conflict analysis stage. Parties must move beyond positions and focus on interests, values, and needs (Fisher & Ury, 1991). The analysis must also focus on perceptions and fears of the two sides (Fisher, 1994). Clear and honest communication is paramount and can be best facilitated by a neutral

third-party. In this case, perhaps a Christian group who sees both sides of the debate can provide assistance.

*Episcopal/Anglican case study.* The on-going debate from a mainline Protestant group may provide such facilitation. The Episcopal Church has struggled with this topic for years and came close to severing ties with the Anglican Communion over the question of gay inclusivity into the priesthood. The current Episcopal Primate and presiding Bishop, The Most Reverend Dr. Katharine Jefferts Schori, says she is “fully committed to the full inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians in [their] church” (Davies, 2006, ¶10). Yet, others in the Episcopal Church oppose this, such as the Diocese of Fort Worth and other conservative dioceses in the worldwide Anglican Communion (LaFraniere & Goodstein, 2007). In an effort to heal the division, the church passed a resolution on June 21, 2006, that basically says they agree to disagree. They will remain a combined body, continue a listening process (i.e. dialogue), and keep an open mind to further conversation and study (Davies, 2006; Bishops, 2006). Bishop Spong (1998) sums the debate in his introduction paper that began the process. He writes that compromise is not suggested, “because we do not believe compromise is either possible or a proper way to proceed in reaching moral conclusions. We offer rather a way that members of this church might walk together into the future” (p. 2).

After almost 10 years of this process, the Anglican Church is growing tired. In February 2007, it demanded the Episcopal Church to stop blessing same-sex unions and ordaining gay clergy or face banishment from the worldwide communion (Goodstein, 2007a). At the time of writing, the Episcopal Church wishes to remain part of the Anglican Communion, but also is “unwilling to compromise its autonomy or policy of inclusion of all people, including gay men

and lesbians” (Goodstein, 2007b, p. A1). Episcopal leaders plan to hold conferences in the summer of 2007 to encourage further dialogue and understanding.

### *Confrontation*

In the second stage, confrontation, the parties must engage each other in a focus on mutually acceptable solutions through collaboration (Fisher, 1994). The term *confrontation* comes from the act of moving beyond intellectual exchange and confronting “each other’s fundamental group identity concerns” (Kelman & Cohen, 1984, p. 323). The idea is that once this occurs, the parties can treat their conflict as a shared dilemma requiring solution. This will not be easy, or even possible, for the evangelical group. Then again, there are many evangelicals who have gay friends and family members and struggle to reconcile their desire to befriend and accept while staying true to their convictions. These individuals may welcome this opportunity, as will be examined further in the methodology and discussion sections.

### *Conflict Resolution*

The motto posted on the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) website speaks to understanding the last stage in Fisher’s (1994) typology, conflict resolution. It reads: “Cooperation without Compromise” (NAE, 2006). Settlement is reached through compromise; resolution is an “outcome that develops out of complete analysis...which meets the needs of all concerned parties” (Fisher, 1994, p. 60). This stage requires transformation of the relationship so that the initial problem is removed. Resolution must encompass equality, autonomy, and respect, while addressing basic human needs (Fisher, 1994).

But before resolution happens – if resolution is even possible – concentration is needed on steps 1 and 2; understand and define the issues (conflict analysis) and confront them in a collaborative manner (confrontation). What would a collaborative mediation look like?

*Mediation*

Mediation can take many different forms. There is much scholarly debate on this topic, and there are many definitions and frameworks to describe mediation style. This is not surprising due to the nature of mediation itself, where practitioners cannot agree on a universal code of methods to apply. However, most seek the same goal – to help the parties (through either settlement or conflict resolution) negotiate their disputes. I will briefly examine two starting with perhaps the most commonly used and/or recognized style, that of facilitation (Beardsley, Quinn, Biswas, & Wilkenfeld, 2000).

*Facilitation.* A facilitative mediator is one who serves to guide the communication process between the two parties. In facilitation mediation, mediators “ensure that actors have access to all necessary information to best estimate the range of mutually preferable outcomes” (Beardsley et al., 2006, p. 63). The mediator here probes positions to identify interests, and allows for those interests to be discussed. Often facilitative mediators will use shuttle diplomacy (Wood, 2004) or private caucus (Welton, Pruitt, & McGillicuddy, 1988) in an effort to aid the conversation between the parties. Their goal is to clarify the issues, but the outcome or settlement terms are up to the parties. In this style, mediator neutrality is viewed as paramount (Smith, 1994; Wood, 2004). The focus here is on settlement, something that does not seem likely to occur between evangelicals and gays.

*Transformation.* Arguably the antithesis of facilitation, transformative mediation style seeks not to solve the issue at hand, but to restore the parties to their pre-conflict state or even better them in the process. In this style, the mediator does more than just guide the process; he or she aids the parties in making small but important shifts from self-absorption to understanding. The mediator does this by listening to the conversation and identifying areas for

change and growth, but does so at the pace and willingness of the parties (Bush & Folger, 2005). At the heart of this style is the theory that the mediator can “help parties transform their conflict interaction from destructive and demonizing to positive and humanizing” (Bush & Folger, 2005, p. 70). The goal here is not to solve the problems for the parties, but empower the parties to reach their own outcomes, regardless of how good, bad, or poor the mediator feels the agreement to be. It is important to underscore the role of the mediator in this style. He or she is not there to “*insist* on transformation, but rather to *assist* in identifying opportunities for empowerment and recognition and help the parties to respond to those opportunities as they wish” (p. 74).

A dialogue is a type of mediation that would best fall under the transformative style. While alike in many aspects, Chasin and others (1996) argue there are two key differences between dialogue and transformative mediation: (a) “unrestricted self-expression versus deliberately respectful self-expression” and (b) “spontaneous, skillful intervention versus planful, structured prevention” (p. 339). Organizations such as the Public Conversations Project facilitate private and public dialogues program on host of polarizing issues (Herzig & Chasin, 2006). Their goal is to get parties to talk in ways that reduce stereotyping and increase mutual understanding, while maintaining their values and underlying interests (Herzig & Chasin, 2006). By doing so, parties can work together collaboratively to resolve issues in ways they previously thought were impossible. Like mediation, the process is voluntary and parties must want to come together to talk. With much rhetorical debate in the media, on the internet, and from organizations and churches is there any real interest in trying dialogue? The following section is an attempt to uncover the true thoughts of the American public on this subject, and find out if there is such interest.

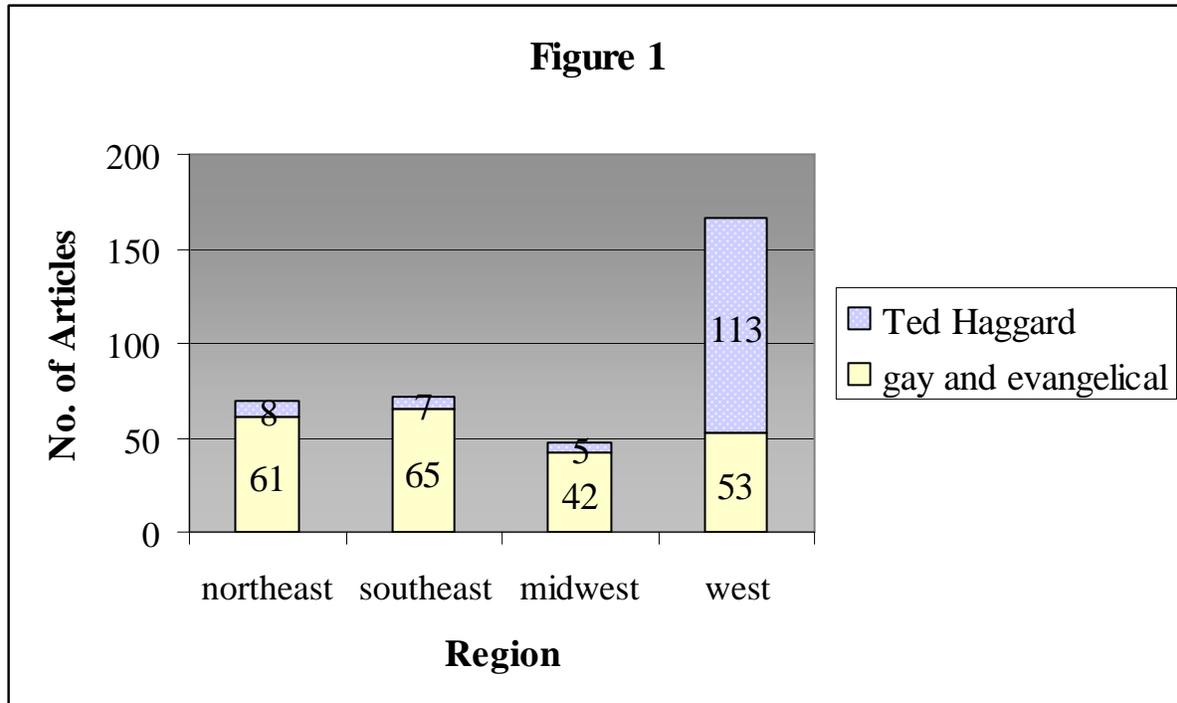
## METHODOLOGY

Initially, this project began using a national media search to better understand the conflict between evangelicals and gays, and to discover parties' interest in dialogue. However, I wanted to see how evangelical families with gay children dealt with this issue in a more in-depth way. What resulted was a short follow-up study using five family sources and a level of analysis (Rubin & Levinger, 1995) that allows translation of lessons learned from small to large scale. I will explain in detail the methods used for both studies in this section.

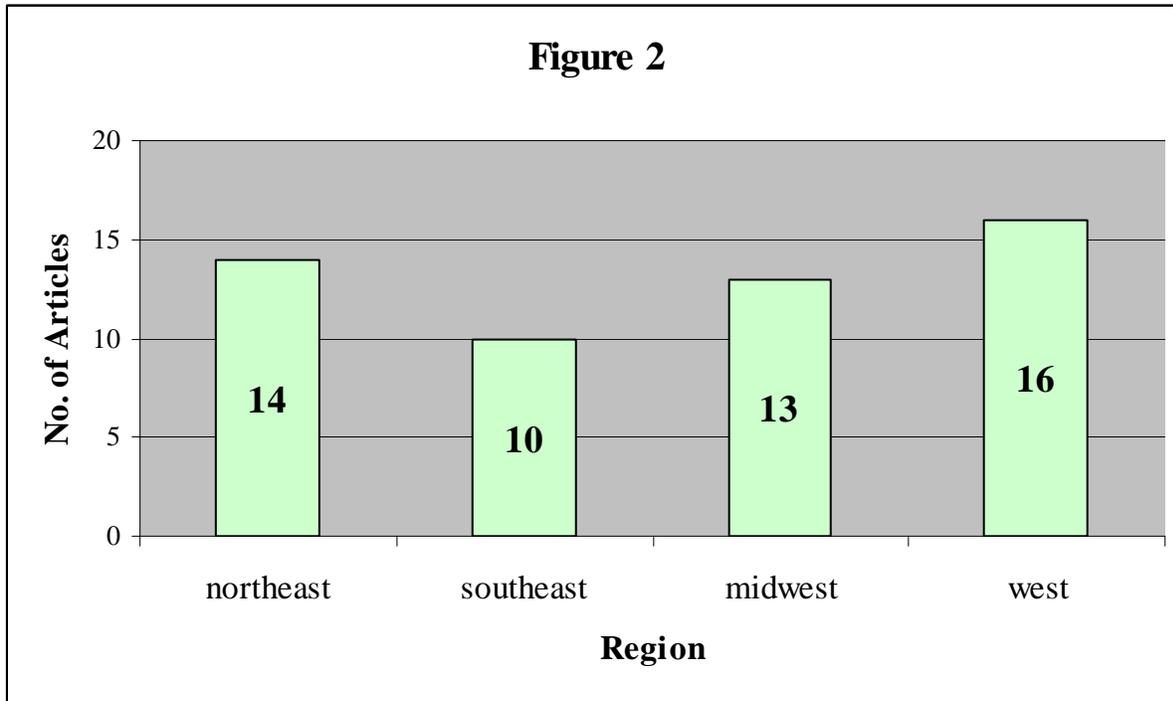
### Study 1: Media Sources

Borrowing from the research method developed by Susan Opotow using qualitative and quantitative coding for media data sources (Opotow, Fletcher, & Gyrog, 2007), I examined newspaper articles from the national press over a six-month period (August 23, 2006 to February 23, 2007) which specifically deal with evangelicals and gay issues. The previous six months prior to the time of study was chosen to provide the most recent public discussion and it was large enough to present ample data. Using Lexis-Nexis, I pulled articles containing both words "evangelical" and "gay" within the text of the article. This process was repeated four times to find articles by Lexis-Nexis geographical region descriptors (northeast, southeast, midwest, and west) taking careful note not to duplicate articles (as sometimes Associated Press stories are used by local newspapers).

Because of the time frame used, former National Association of Evangelicals president Ted Haggard's coming out was the subject of many articles. Much was published in all regions on this topic alone. Because this story originated in Colorado Springs, the western region had 113 articles out of 166 that contained the word "Haggard." Otherwise, the four regions contained roughly the same amount of reporting on the search terms (see Figure 1).



From the 334 articles retrieved, 53 articles were selected using an intensity sample (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which provides “information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely, but not extremely” (p. 28). In other words, the articles chosen were ones that discussed in-depth the issues in the American debate both for and against gay rights and same-sex marriage using multiple reference sources. I avoided selecting articles that offered only one voice (i.e., op-ed articles). By doing so, the data provides a snapshot of the current language and conflict framing used by Americans and their views on continuance of the debate or move toward dialogue. These 53 articles, which are comprised of roughly equal samples by region (see Figure 2), were coded using a systematic *a priori* coding structure (see Appendix B for code list), and then sorted by thematic relevance. Each article may contain more than one code; most contain three or four codes.



The coding structure identified themes in this conflict (e.g. political, civil rights issues, faith ethics, human rights ethics, dialogue, church internal struggle). Articles used were published in 33 different newspapers ranging from national newspapers (e.g., *New York Times*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Los Angeles Time*, *Boston Globe*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Washington Post*) to more regional papers (e.g. *Denver Post*, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Roanoke Times*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Richmond Times Dispatch*, *St. Petersburg Times*).

To correct for potential media bias, I examined the language of the interviewees' quotes. Forty-two of the 53 articles selected contain direct quotes from people on both sides of the issue. The articles containing direct quotes (42 of 53) were uploaded into the software program MAXqda2. The data were further sorted using the same *a priori* codes (Appendix B) and inductive codes, which are salient topics found while analyzing the data (Miles & Hubberman, 1994). Each article may contain more than one quote; in fact, many articles contained multiple

quotes. The data were then examined to identify common themes, which are presented in the Findings section.

### Study 2: Learning from Evangelical Families

To find data from evangelical families, I used a sample of typical cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which highlights what is normal or average, data sources were selected from sources that detailed the experiences of evangelical families coming to terms with a gay child. The cases were chosen using a convenience sample (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which allows for a quick selection of readily available, salient cases. After a Google search for “evangelical gay families,” the first five typical cases that provided information on family dialogue or family counseling were chosen. These sources are considered typical as their stories are similar and repeated by many American families, although the outcomes vary. This study does not provide in-depth data, but rather a glimpse into understanding this phenomenon.

The first was from a 2004 story in *The Washington Post* by Pulitzer Prize winning author Anne Hull. For one year, she followed the lives of two gay teenagers chronicling their struggles for acceptance in school and with their conservative, religious families. The second was a two-part follow-up story written two months later on one of the teenagers. The third source came from a radio interview transcript, from Gay Christian Network Radio, in which a mother and her gay son told the story of their struggle with reconciliation of faith and family. The fourth is from a mother and father who share their personal story in full detail on their website: <http://www.familyacceptance.org>. The fifth source is from a letter posted on-line by a mother identified only as Cynthia F. who describes her on-going dialogue and understanding on the subject (see Table 2, page 38, in the Findings section).

## FINDINGS

In this section, the data from both studies will be presented in order of study. These findings show how the conflict is debated in the public, and highlights the intractable values and morals conflict of that debate. The findings also suggest there is interest in dialogue from many. This section concludes with an unexpected finding for future investigation.

### Study 1: Media Sources

The 53 articles for this analysis provide rich data for examining what is in the nation's conversation by providing a sample that is intense and passionate, but not extreme. It is safe to assume that region has no bearing on this topic because the debate is lively nation-wide and reported via region relatively equally. The notable exception was the reporting on Rev. Ted Haggard. However, the Ted Haggard scandal sparked various opinions, debates, and interviews with and among scholars, seminarians, churchgoers, moral ethicists, and average citizens nation-wide. The admission of a gay affair from a married, self-pronounced, heterosexual evangelical preacher and National Association of Evangelicals president who was an outspoken advocate for laws banning same-sex marriage raised the ire of many writers.

Discounting the Haggard scandal, several key themes were salient from the articles. What follows are five findings/themes from these 42 articles. After the findings, I will further examine them in the Discussion section.

#### *Finding 1: Language of Debate*

Newspaper reporters held neutral views about the issue or offered opinion in support of gay civil rights. However, of persons quoted the data showed 35 who held an anti-gay position, and 27 used language in support of inclusion. These numbers do not include quotes from people

who self-identified as gay evangelicals or gay ministers. Data from these two groups will be discussed separately in Finding 3. What follows is the language from both sides of the debate.

*Anti-gay.* The vast majority (33 of 35) of those who view homosexuality as a sin were Christian evangelicals. The data showed quotes that are exemplars of the rhetorical debate, which have become for evangelical communities standard talking points. Most objections to gay people were framed in the language of political/legal issues, definition of homosexuality as a changeable condition, or a comparison to sin or morally questionable behavior. The political language varies from positional phrases like “marriage is not a human right, it’s a responsibility and gift” (Glauber, 2006, p. A9) and “we have to oppose anything that destroys the union of a man and a woman establishing a home for their children” (Vegh, 2006, p. A10) to alarmist cries of “an all-out spiritual war on Christianity” (Chadwick, 2006, p. A1). However, three evangelicals used language of compassion, wanting to help “some who are in gay life...struggling [to change their sexual orientation]” (Hendricks, 2007, p. D3). A good example of this language is a statement by the current National Association of Evangelicals president, Rev. Leith Anderson, who said, “When you discover people you know and respect are struggling with homosexuality, suddenly you’re more compassionate because they are real people who are around you, members of your church and community, and the compassion level rises. It should” (“Practicing what we preach,” 2006, p. B7).

There were also two secular people who had anti-gay sentiments. It is assumed they were secular since the reference was to their secular occupation and not their religious affiliation. These are from two different articles discussing the legal civil-rights issues of gays and lesbians, and not specifically the debate in a church setting. One was from an elderly mathematics professor who simply said, “Sex should only be for reproduction. Those [gay] people are sick!”

(Slevin, 2006). The other was from Republican political commentator David Frum. Speaking in the language of ethics, Frum gives a hypothetical of two men “inclined toward homosexuality” who both on occasion “hire the services of a male prostitute” (Campos, 2006). Frum continues:

One of them marries, raises a family, preaches Christian principles, and tries generally to encourage people to lead stable lives. The other publicly reveals his homosexuality, vilifies traditional moral principles, and urges the legalization of prostitution. Which man is leading the more moral life? It seems to me that the answer is the first one. (Campos, 2006, ¶ 5)

*Pro-gay.* The data showed 27 citations from people in support of gay issues. There were 18 from evangelicals and other Christians, and 9 from secularists. The contrast in the percentages is sharply noticeable. Many times more secular sources offered a pro-gay opinion versus an anti-gay one, which is likely representative of the larger population. Common themes throughout were framing the matter in language of civil rights, citing their belief that God was the creator of all, and appeal to other Christian values and principles. One exemplar of the first two of these themes is from Episcopal Bishop Croneberger who said, “In my view, the marriage of two men or two women in no way diminishes the marriage of one man and one woman. I pray that one day all God’s people could have the opportunity to name as well as claim the benefits of marriage” (Chadwick, 2006, p. A1). An example of the appeal to other ethical values comes from an evangelical minister who says, “The church preaches responsible freedom, combining honesty, biblical truth and a relationship with Jesus. That means encouraging monogamous relationships and healthy choices” (Gorski, 2006). He continues with a caution against dishonesty: “You marry someone of the opposite sex you’re not attracted to. You say you’re cured. But you’re not. So you do things in secret” (Gorski, 2006).

One Christian man tried to reframe the debate in a pro-gay way using the language and logic of evangelicals. He said:

Evangelicals preach allegiance to the omnipotence and absolute divinity of God. Evangelicals believe that God created all of the earth and heavens, all of the planets, every animal and every creature. Everything. And yet evangelicals question the Almighty's divinity to create some people homosexual? My God is omnipotent and makes no mistakes. (Norman, 2006)

*Finding 2: Opinion from Professionals and Scholars*

From the data, 15 quotes were from professionals and scholars. For purposes of classification, scholars are psychiatrists/psychologists and professors of law, theology, and psychology. Thirteen used language in support of gay rights, speaking in terms of politics, opposition to reparative therapy, and the dangers of repression of self-recognition of same-sex attraction. Examples of the later include: "Studies have shown that some of the worst homophobes are gay. They don't want to live that way, so they punish everyone who is" (Cooper, 2006); "It's common to hate in others what you hate in yourself. Gay men are reviled so much in this society, they often internalize the hate" (Cooper, 2006).

Six scholars spoke on reparative therapy, which is the process for psychologically changing one's sexual orientation from homo- to heterosexual. While all of them were against the concept, four were strongly against it saying that there are no peer-reviewed studies showing this therapy works. Speaking about this lack of proven success, one professor of psychiatry at Columbia University said, "The Christian Right never mentions that conclusion. I find their whole agenda obnoxious. They want to humiliate gays and deprive them of civil rights" (Simpson & Gorski, 2006). Another scholar addresses how his theory is often misquoted by

proponents of reparative therapy saying, “I don’t think my theory, even though there’s room for experiences, gives any strategy for changing a gay child to a straight child” (Simpson & Gorski, 2006, p. A1). Two scholars, while still skeptical of the practice, tried to analyze the reasons why evangelicals would try and do this. One said that while reparative therapy “is not consistent with clinical presentations” it is “totally consistent with theological belief” (Banerjee, 2007, p. 11).

He continues:

Some people in the [evangelical] community believe homosexuality is a form of behavior, a sinful form of behavior...so they define it as a behavior that can be changed, and there is this thinking that if you can control those behaviors enough, heterosexual attractions will follow. (Banerjee, 2007, p. 11)

Another example includes a psychology professor who says, “For people of the evangelical persuasion, they believe that the core of their being is about their relationship with God. If they’re truly being who they are, for them that means bringing their sexual feelings into alignment with their religious beliefs” (Simpson & Gorski, 2006, p. A1).

One scholar, Associate Professor Gagnon from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, offered an opinion more in line with the evangelical position. He called gay evangelicals a “contradiction,” saying, “Scripture clearly, pervasively, strongly, absolutely, and counter-culturally opposes all homosexual practice. I trust that gay evangelicals would argue otherwise, but Christian proponents of homosexual practice have not made their case from Scripture” (Banerjee, 2006, p. 11).

Referring to the evangelical soteriological term “born again,” which is a spiritual rebirth for evangelicals (John 3:1-5), one historical Jesus scholar, Marcus Borg, offered his critique of evangelical fundamentalists saying, “Most of us know at least one person who has been ‘born

again' in a remarkably unattractive way" (Whitney, 2007). Borg points out that after conversion to evangelicalism some people become dogmatic in their beliefs and intolerant of non-believers.

*Finding 3: Inclusivity and Honesty*

Sometimes referred to as "walking contradictions" (Banerjee, 2006), 12 gay ministers and 22 gay congregants offered their viewpoints. The majority of the comments from the gay churchgoers (13 of 22) talk about unconditional love and acceptance from God. Examples include "God is big enough to love people just the way they are" (Hendricks, 2007, p. D3) and "I felt that if God created me, how is that wrong?" (Banerjee, 2006, p. 11). Three other quotes were defending why a gay person would want to attend an evangelical church. The reasons ranged from traditional ties to belief in the other tenets.

The language from the gay ministers also focused on unconditional love and compassion, and struggling with the decision to come out. Five others used language strongly focused on honesty and trust, such as "How could I minister to them when I was not being honest with myself?" (Johnson, 2006, p. 6A).

*Finding 4: Outsiders' Critique of Evangelical Ideology*

From the data, there were 8 quotes against the evangelical's hard position against homosexuality. Four of these were from other Christians who used language of dialogue and inclusion, and warned the current "agenda of the religious right is far too narrow and partisan" and that "people are tired of the monologue" (Miller, 2006a). One theologian called the issue of dialogue a return to "good old-fashioned American pluralism" (Miller, 2006a). Another theology professor offered a starting place for dialogue saying it would help to "place our methodological assumptions on the table at the start" (Miller, 2006a).

The data showed 4 quotes from secular sources, trying to analyze the evangelical position and how it affects others in this country. One spoke of what *sola scriptura* means in political terms: “A literal interpretation of the Bible all but requires one to believe God’s law supersedes man’s law, sinners should be punished, and moral issues can be seen in black and white terms. When you inject that worldview into politics, it leaves little room for tolerance or compromise” (Jacobs, 2006). Offering a harsher critique of evangelical ideology, one says, “The ultimate goal of Christian nationalist leaders isn’t fairness. It’s domination. The movement is built on a theology that asserts the Christian right to Rule. That doesn’t mean that nonbelievers will be forced to convert. They’ll just have to learn their place” (Reardon, 2006). The other two quotes talk to issues affecting evangelical children. One speaks of education gaps saying, “For millions of kids, creationist science is already the status quo” (Reardon, 2006). The other speaks to how evangelical gay youth experience “the horror of uncertainty – the stomach-clenching experience of looking outward at a world that guarantees neither safety nor peace, and looking inward into a personal realm that promises neither clarity nor surety” (Reardon, 2006).

These findings highlight the current language used in the debate, and show opinions vary widely. There is consensus that this debate is not advancing the interests of either side, and dialogue interest has wide support. While data from how organizational spokespersons view dialogue is missing, there is good reason to believe this might be due to a methodological challenge since the function of a spokesperson is to be a voice for the organization and not necessarily an individual. At a lecture on evangelicals and the media, Jon Walker, spokesperson for 20,000-member Saddleback Church and Pastor Rick Warren author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, said that evangelicals “want a place to come to the table and talk” (Walker, 2007). He continued by saying that evangelicals “have no objection to plurality” (Walker, 2007). Granted,

he was not specifically addressing the topic of gay inclusion, but his comments were on the topic of evangelicals and public policy and are in harmony with findings on dialogue interest.

*Finding 5: Dialogue Interest*

In my sample of newspaper articles, interest in dialogue between evangelicals and gays has broad support from secularists, evangelicals, and other religious Judeo-Christian groups. Evangelicals who are pro-gay rights and those who see homosexuality as sin are both interested in meaningful discussion while moving away from the current language of debate. Opinion from non-evangelical Christians indicates the same. What is missing from the data is opinion about dialogue from organizations on both sides of the debate. The quotes from their spokespersons offer only the standard rhetoric, such as “This is a culture war. How many churches have jettisoned the authority of Scripture?” (Glauber, 2006, p. A9) from the Right, and from the Left language that bashes evangelicals as people who are withholding civil rights and equality.

Of those interested in dialogue, opinions vary from annoyance to consternation at the current surfeit of debate. One minister says, “We’ve taken a beating over the last couple of years around issues of sexuality. I think we’re tired of it and are trying to focus on things that are really positive in our faith and life together” (Vegh, 2006, p. A10). A congregant said about the gay debate raging in his church, “It’s an enormous mess. Some people are very tired and would like to get along with other things so there’s some sense of trying to compromise” (Blake, 2007).

Many people wanted to expand the conversation, another function of dialogue. Bishop Mark Hanson of the evangelical Lutheran Church sums up this sentiment best:

I hope we can expand the discussion. My fear is that we who are heterosexual will find it easier to talk about how gays and lesbians should live than about how all of us are sexual creatures. We must take the discussion of sexuality back from the culture, from media

and marketing that make it an exploitative tool. In this broader context, we could talk more easily about homosexuality, a divisive issue some people are weary of and others believe must stay at the fore. Sex should not define or divide the church. (Miller, 2006b, ¶ 17)

Other people do not claim to have the answers, but are open to listening. Says one man, “I don’t have the answers, but we can pray together and see where God takes us” (Banerjee, 2006). A student at an evangelical college says something similar: “It’s important to my generation to listen to both sides. Christians need to be educated about what’s happening around the world, and then they can bring their faith to bear as diplomats and peacemakers, and be a new generation of leaders” (Miller, 2006a).

#### *Unexpected Finding*

A common finding among all the articles was the degree of polemicism in the reporter. It was either neutral – just reporting the facts – or the author framed the discussion using pro-gay civil rights language. The only voice offering an anti-gay stance comes from interviewees’ direct quotes. It would suggest that the press is liberal on this issue, as the conservatives often asserts, or that the evangelical opinion is not the majority opinion, as it often seems. Further research into the phenomenon of gatekeepers might be interesting to study in further research.

#### Study 2: Learning from Evangelical Families

Although this study was abbreviated, it still provides some interesting results. Upon examining the data from stories of how evangelical families deal with conflict over this issue, they have several outcomes in common. Families tend to do one or more of the following five things: (a) reject their churches and seek a different denomination who accepts their kids; (b) pick and choose which tenets of faith to follow/not follow (i.e., “cafeteria style Christianity”); (c)

love the sin, hate the sinner (don't ask, don't tell approach); (d) feign ignorance; or (e) become an agent for change within their faith communities. Table 2 below illustrates these findings showing the source from where the data was taken, the voice of the persons telling the story, and the outcome of their dialogues.

**Table 2: Evangelical Family Dialogue Outcomes**

Source	Voice from Family	Outcome
<i>Washington Post</i> Story	teen and mother	feign ignorance
<i>Washington Post</i> Story	teen and mother	cafeteria style; love the sinner, hate the sin; feign ignorance
Gay Christian Radio	mother and adult son	cafeteria style
www.familyacceptance.com	mother and father	reject their denomination; become agents for change
Cynthia F	mother	cafeteria style; love the sinner, hate the sin

Once parents move from confusion, shock, and fears of eternal damnation for their children, thoughts go to survival. One mother said after her son came out, "I didn't know what to think...but I got up and hugged him and I said, 'If any family can get through this, we can.' And I meant that but I really didn't realize just how hard it was going to be" (GCN Radio, 2004). Another mother sums the purpose of dialogue best: "I started asking God to explain the whole gay thing to me. And of all the answers God could have given me, the answer I heard was that I didn't have to understand it. I was not put on this earth to judge these people but it was a requirement to love them" (Cynthia, n.d.). She continues, "I would fight the devil himself if it meant [my son's] salvation" (Cynthia, n.d.).

However, regardless of outcome there are four key elements of the dialogue process (Chasin et al., 1996) found in each account: (a) the stories are personal accounts rather than positional stances; (b) conversation explores the complexity and ambiguity of the issue versus hardliner either/or opinions; (c) parties sincerely inquire to achieve understanding, avoiding

rhetorical question asking; and (d) new understandings breakdown established self-servicing stereotypes of what it means to be gay. Examination of these elements will occur in the next section.

## DISCUSSION

What lessons can we draw from these data? Both sides resort to language the other is unable or unwilling to hear. The current language of talking points have become, in debating parlance, *argumentum ad nauseam* – rhetoric repeated so often it is assumed true. Neither side is listening to the other because they think they are correct. Those who experience a foot in each world – gay evangelicals – try to bridge the gap, but too often their message of God’s unconditional love is not heard. Evangelicals think the language of love under defines the issue, and gay people can be irritated and/or repelled by anything relating to evangelical Christianity. This makes comments from this group, however well intended, difficult for many to hear.

In examining the positional rhetoric from both sides, one thing is common. All view the question over gay rights as a problem, and all are looking for solutions – although each side seeks different solutions. Study 1 suggests that when groups wish to engage in dialogue, they do not seem to know how to get started. Many psychological barriers must be faced by dialogue facilitators (Coleman, 2006; Herzig & Chasin, 2006), and those wishing to facilitate this dispute need to be aware of them. However, this intractable dispute can be transformed into a tractable one through a thorough analysis of the conflict situation, and an engagement in dialogue (Coleman, 2006).

Taking the extreme viewpoints and putting them aside, are there any underlying interests in common? Possibly. Gay individuals want civil protection and social normalization. Evangelicals want to worship as their conscious allows and not be dictated to by the state. These interests seem complimentary. A quick solution to this type of problem would be the advice of Jesus Christ who said, “Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21). Paraphrasing, this means leave matters of faith to

the church and civil liberties to the state. However, the problem is murkier than that. The conflict needs to be more fully understood before constructive dialogue takes place. An examination of the data using conflict theories can shed light on the underlying conflict.

This section will discuss the conflict between evangelicals and gays using social identity theory and interdependence theory to understand the group dynamics. Then through moral exclusion theory, it will examine the intractability of the values and morals conflict. The section continues with ways that dialogue can help the conflict. It will conclude with a brief examination of media bias, ways a more in-depth study on the issue could be done, and implications for practice.

### Conflict Analysis

#### *Gays*

Studies have shown that when differences in social structures have been institutionalized and legitimized by the dominant culture, the result leads to lower self-esteem on the part of the subordinate culture (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). When gay individuals start to question this low status position, they reject their previously accepted negative self-image (i.e., remaining closeted, passing for straight) and with it the status quo. By actively working to change societal norms, gay individuals raise the image of themselves and how they are perceived from out-groups. Two examples from my data include the quotes, “I thank God for making me gay” (Hendricks, 2007, p. D3), which is an embrace of the new norm; and this argument for justice by a Baptist, Republican physician: “There is no hidden ‘gay agenda,’ for their agenda is the same as ours. Our gay fellow [citizens] are our relatives, friends, and co-workers. They are us” (Priddy, 2006). What gays started at the Stonewall Riots in 1969 continues today in the fight for legal protections and civil marriage. The push for equality is a rejection of low status position.

*Evangelicals*

Like all groups, according to social identity theory, evangelical Christians need to maintain positive social identity so that their group “must be perceived as positively differentiated or distinct from relevant out-groups” (Tajfel & Turner, 1985, p. 16). Evangelicals embrace a love-the-sinner-not-the-sin approach. As the president of Denver Seminary said, “The vast majority of evangelicals believe the Bible clearly prohibits homosexual relationships. Sin occurs not in being gay but in acting out on those tendencies or feelings” (Gorski, 2006). One of their main values is to live a Christ-centered lifestyle, which means avoiding activities such as alcohol use or drunkenness; easy divorce; and sexual promiscuity, while encouraging sexual abstinence outside of marriage (NAE, 2004a). The struggle against secularism is a difficult road for some. Given the stress evangelicals place on being a sexually wholesome group, the gay community, which is often portrayed as sexually liberal, is a likely target for positive differentiation.

Using social identity theory, we find keys to understanding the evangelical argument in the language of “protect marriage.” If gays can marry it will elevate their same-sex relationships to the status of heterosexual ones, therefore the Christian Right loses its differentiation. A Baptist Church minister echoed this fear when he said, “I think when we begin to change the definition of marriage, we open the door to a myriad of other arrangements that will be extremely detrimental” (Chadwick, 2006, p. A1). Evangelicals view this as a slippery slope. If they accept gay congregants and bless same-sex relationships, what else will they have to compromise? Fears range from polygamy (Stanton, 2005; Chadwick, 2006) to loss of autonomy in favor of governmental control of worship services (Chadwick, 2006).

Research in 1972 by LeVine and Campbell (as cited by Brewer, 1986) into frustration-aggression theory addresses the frustration of individual gratification that can occur during *intra*-group cooperation. As an outlet to preserve disruption of group cohesion, institutionalized displacement of hostility occurs against a chosen out-group (Brewer, 1986). Proximity plays an important factor in determining which out-group is targeted. They must be “close enough to provide justification for hostility, yet distant enough to reduce the threat of counteraggression” (Brewer, 1986, p. 91). The ethnocentric need for the Christian Right to find a group to represent the opposite of the values for which they stand in the face of rising American liberalism (Pew Forum, 2006) make gay men and lesbians a likely candidate. By proximity, gays make a perfect target—close enough to be relevant, distant enough not to pose a threat. After all, not many Americans are opposed to concepts of family, community, and God. From this process, the elements of stereotyping and ethnocentrism are introduced which can, and normally does, exacerbate conflict (Brewer, 1986).

#### *Why the Conflict?*

Acceptance of unapologetic gay men and lesbians would pose a direct threat to the evangelical doctrine of *sola scriptura*, the belief that the Bible is the only true definite authority versus papal authority or human exegesis (Godfrey, 1997). Their group identity is founded on this belief (National Association of Evangelicals, 2006). The fear that the government would force evangelicals to include openly gay members is expressed well by a man in the data who said, “Our concern is potential censorship of what could be said from our pulpits. Will our ability to declare our interpretation of the Bible on this issue be somehow interfered with or prohibited?” (Chadwick, 2006, p. A1).

Citing a few biblical passages (Lev. 18:22, 20:13; Rom. 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 6:9-10) they read as condemning homosexual activity, evangelicals cannot by their very group identity definition compromise their beliefs to make allowances for gay members, or show civic support (NAE, 2004b) to something they view as a “deviation from the Creator’s plan for human sexuality” (NAE, 2004a, p.1). To do so would call into question all their beliefs, thus unraveling a key element in what it means to be an evangelical.

While other religious scholars interpret those same texts as a condemnation of homosexual rape, ritual homosexual prostitution used in fertility cult worship, and homosexual lust and behavior from heterosexuals (Barnett, 1979/1990), evangelicals adhere to a strict literal interpretation, viewing acts of liberal exegesis as a threat. Interdependence Theory (Flippen et al., 1996) explains why evangelicals discriminate against anyone who acts contrary to their group’s best interests. From the data, a quote by a Baptist Church minister wary of Rev. Jim Wallis, a prominent evangelical committed to social justice, exemplifies this. He says, “Our beliefs are theologically based. A true evangelical will stick with the [literal] biblical perspective” (Miller, 2006a).

In a statement of civic responsibility, the National Association of Evangelicals (2004a) sees a God-given mission to use their majority status to “shape public policy in ways that could contribute to the well-being of the entire world” (p. 1). It continues, “As Christian citizens, we believe it is our calling to help government live up to its divine mandate to render justice” (p. 3). Their ethnocentric views are to fashion an America, and a world, based on evangelical ideals and values. Their view of marriage and family is paramount to this vision, and attempts to weaken marriage via divorce and same-sex marriage are opposed (NAE, 2004a, p. 7-8). Others see this viewpoint as moral exclusion.

## Values &amp; Moral Conflict

While the motto of America may be *E Pluribus Unum*, cynics say the concept is simply an ideal we have yet to realize. The notion of diversity is something the larger American culture seems to embrace in rhetoric, but the belief that one's own group is the center of everything – the definition of ethnocentrism – prevents that goal from coming to fruition. Borrowing from William Graham Sumner's classic work on in-group, and out-group theory, Marilyn Brewer (1986) defines ethnocentrism as the process by which the in-group examines its own culture and "all others are scaled and rated with reference to it" (p. 88). She continues by stating, "each group thinks its own folkways [are] the only right ones" (Brewer, 1986, p.88).

The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), in a 2004 re-affirmed statement on homosexuality, encouraged its members to "compassionately proclaim the Good News of forgiveness and encourage those involved [in] homosexual practices to cease those practices, accept forgiveness, and pray for deliverance, as nothing is impossible with God" (NAE, 2004b, p.1). The statement continues to say that "homosexuals as *individuals* are entitled to civil rights, including protection of the law" however "the NAE opposes legislation which would extend special consideration to such individuals based on their 'sexual orientation'" (Ibid.). So gay individuals are welcome if they conform to evangelical identity; gay as its own identity is not. This pernicious manifestation of ethnocentrism is what Milton Bennett (1993) calls *transcendent universalism*. This is when groups believe that "all human beings are products of some single transcendent principle" (Bennett, 1993, p. 23), which lends evangelicals to attempt conversion prior to acceptance. Conversion here can mean gay to straight, and if needed non-Christian to Christian. This is seen in the data as one minister who is trying to promote restoration therapy said, "I've had gay friends all my life. I'm not homophobic or anti-homosexual. But I am very

pro-Jesus. Our goal is to help people...who are in the gay life struggling [with their orientation]” (Hendricks, 2007, p. D3).

However, gays do not want individual mobility (moving from one group the other), but social change. One way this is achieved is by “changing the values assigned to the attributes of the group” (Tajfel & Turner, 1985, p.20). By pushing for marriage, the gay community tries to join the American normative value of monogamy. This act shows that same-sex relationships have merit and are not just fleeting phases. Historically, many negative stereotypes have been assigned to homosexuals, specifically gay men, citing they are highly sexual and promiscuous, engaging in sex with multiple partners with a flagrant disregard for American – ergo Christian – sexual mores. This begs the questions: If Christians value sexual propriety, and gays want monogamous relationships, is this not a value overlap? Where is the conflict in both sides wanting loving commitments and family values? This is often posed another way: How does same-sex marriage threaten traditional marriage? Liberals, secularists, and the LGBT community ask this question, hoping the logical, fair-minded audience will see things their way. From the data, the quote “in my view, the marriage of two men or two women in no way diminishes the marriage of one man and one woman” (Chadwick, 2006, p. A1) is another way of reframing for the logical listener. Yet, what this approach fails to take into account is the underlying cultural phenomenon of the evangelical majority, who rightly see this as a threat. To explain this, I offer the hypothesis of Tajfel and Turner (1985) on status differences between groups.

When status between groups is immutable, then social identity is secure. However, when the status quo is called into question, social identity becomes insecure (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). This threat becomes a loss of positive comparisons and raises the potential for negative

comparisons, which must be defended. As a high status group, evangelicals “react to social identity by searching for enhanced group distinctiveness” (Tajfel & Turner, 1985, p. 22). Protection against same-sex marriage and against recognition of gay identity as legitimate, ensures a fundamentalist majority and status is secured. Plus, if Christians think sexual orientation change is possible (Hendricks, 2007), then logically they must believe the reverse is true. They, or their children, could be “corrupted” and become gay and their majority status threatened. Examples are found in the Ted Haggard data. After being pronounced “completely heterosexual” (Banerjee, 2007) following reparative therapy, Haggard said, “I have spent so much time in repentance, brokenness, hurt and sorrow for the things I’ve done....[but] Jesus is starting to put me back together” (Banerjee, 2007). Haggard may or may not believe that his sexual orientation can be changed, but he continues to champion the cause that it can. This stance ultimately promotes fear – fear from gays that this rhetoric will continue from evangelicals once a hero of the church was “cured,” and fear from evangelicals who may think that if someone like Haggard could be affected by gayness it might also come for them or their children.

When the belief that sexual orientation is a fluid state that can be altered is understood in the context of social identity theory, it becomes clear how the gay lifestyle threatens the evangelical social identity majority status. It sheds new light on phrases like “gay marriage threatens the family” (Chadwick, 2006, p. A1), “protect traditional marriage” (Tu, 2007), and other phrases viewing gay marriage as a threat to heterosexual marriage. Guarding against this intrusion by the gay community, evangelicals react in an “intensely discriminatory fashion to any attempt by the subordinate group to change the intergroup situation” (Tajfel & Turner, 1985, p. 22). While gay rights activists are pushing for equality, evangelicals see the scenario as a zero-

sum negotiation, without room for compromise. Protection against their values and those who would change it lead evangelicals to place gays outside their scope of justice (Deutsch, 2006b) where they are morally excluded (Opatow, 1990).

### *Moral Exclusion*

Germane symptoms of moral exclusion as it relates to evangelicals' view of gay men and lesbians as shown in the data, include condescension, victim blaming, transcendent ideologies, fear of contamination, unflattering comparisons, and double standards. Table 1, below, best illustrates these concepts by using examples from my data in Study 1.

**Table 1: Moral Exclusion Symptoms** (*Definition source: Opatow, 1990*)

<b>Moral Exclusion Symptom</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Data example</b>
Condescension	Regarding others with disdain	“You are a sinner. There’s something wrong with you.” (Hendricks, 2007) “Those [gay] people are sick!” (Sleven, 2007)
Victim blaming	Placing blame on those who are harmed	“Gay marriage – it threatens the family just like drugs and gangs.” (Chadwick, 2006) “Why does the group with the highest suicide rate call itself gay?” (Hull, 2004)
Transcendent ideologies	Experiencing one’s group as exalted, possessed of higher wisdom	“God has ordained man for woman, not man for man or woman for woman. We encourage you to not only be good citizens but to take a stand for Christ.” (Vegh, 2006)
Fear of contamination	Perceiving contact with others as posing a threat to one’s own well-being	“Pray that none of your children become homosexuals or lesbians or have abortions or live a life of crime.” (Tu, 2007)
Unflattering comparisons	Using derogatory contrasts to bolster one’s superiority over others	“For those who overcome the wickedness of lesbianism, sexual violence, and child molestation a rich and eternal inheritance; for those who refuse...eternal judgment.” (Hendricks, 2007)
Double standards	Having different moral norms for different groups	“Straight Christians are called upon to resist the temptation to steal, cheat, or look at porn; and gay Christians are called upon to resist any longings for same-sex intimacy.” (Simon, 2006)

Moral exclusion in these examples lead to justified structural violence, which is a way that society determines who gets certain civic resources and who does not. This includes unequal access to societal norms like civil rights and marriage.

*Double standards.* To further illustrate this process, I will examine the pernicious moral exclusion symptom of double standards manifested in the evangelical view of divorce. While the discussion may be seen by the reader as polemical, I feel that it is worthwhile to highlight this moral exclusion symptom manifested in the issue of divorce acceptance. By doing so, it serves to both understand the mind-set of evangelicals, and provides background to an argument that will no doubt surface during a public dialogue.

While Jesus Christ says *nothing* on the topic of homosexuality, he does weigh in heavily on the topic of divorce. The New Testament is clear on what act ends marriage: death (Rom. 7:3; Mark 12:24, 25; 1 Cor. 7:39). To be fair, Jesus said that adultery was the only acceptable grounds for divorce, but that divorce did not end the marriage (Matt. 19:9). Thus, according to Jesus, remarriage *is* adultery (Matt. 5:32, 19:9; Mark 10:11, 12; Luke 16:18; Rom. 7:3). Yet, Evangelicals do not hold this view. It is interesting to note here that one of the same scriptures used by Evangelicals to support their position on the rejection of homosexual orientation (1 Cor. 6:9), includes reference to adultery. Other translations of the Bible (e.g., Revised Standard Version, New International Version) do not list “homosexual acts” among the list of immoral acts in this verse, but do list adultery.

According to a Rutgers University study of U.S. statistical data, 40-50% of marriages will end in divorce (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2005). A religious organization, The Barna Group, conducted surveys in 1999 and again in 2004 and found Evangelicals are more likely or as likely to divorce than the national average (Associated Press 1999; Barna Group, 2004). Further, the

Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission cites statistics showing 80% of those who divorce remarry, and the remarriage divorce rate is 60% or more (Price, 2006). Therefore, the Evangelical need to minister to this condition is salient, and to do so a relaxing of *sola scriptura* is required. The empirical question is why cannot the same be done for homosexuals?

An essay on the topic of divorce and remarriage from the Worldwide Church of God (n.d.), a member in full agreement with the statement of faith of the NAE, advises that divorce is a fact in human society. It admits that people make bad choices in marriage, choose the wrong partner, or situational issues arise requiring divorce due to unfaithfulness or abuse. Then it asks the question about Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:32 (New International Version). There, Jesus said, "Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery." The essay continues: "Obviously, we cannot apply Jesus' words in a literal manner, because then the apostle Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7 would contradict Jesus" (Worldwide Church, n.d., ¶ 12). Numerous books and essays on this topic support the Evangelical position of remarriage and conclude that situations of remarriage arise that were not addressed by Jesus or Paul, and Christians should make new exceptions based on the Christian principle of peace (Morrison, 2001). It is clear from this interpretation that double standards exist in how evangelicals interpret scriptures to maintain their own morality, while holding others morally accountable using the same texts.

### *Moral Inclusion*

One way of reversing moral exclusion and promoting moral inclusion is by educating for coexistence (Opatow, Gerson, & Woodside, 2005). This process seeks to "replace dehumanizing

stereotypes, chronic distrust, hostility, violence, and moral exclusion with, first, tolerance and minimal cooperation and, ultimately, with moral inclusion” (Ibid., p. 307). One such method of coexistence education is by group dialogues.

Then again, is there enough interest? The findings indicate yes. Gay, straight, religious, and non-religious peoples all use language in the data quotes that signal dialogue interest. However, initial dialogue with evangelicals might be difficult because the goal of dialogue is not settlement, but rather understanding and comfort in the vagaries of those different from oneself. One of the defining characteristics of evangelicals is their certainty of belief. Part of the attraction to this branch of Christianity is, precisely, clarity and rigid adherence to doctrine. The followers are people who are not comfortable in living with open-ended ethical situations. Said differently, for many evangelicals, especially fundamentalists, it is not “I do it my way; you do it your way” but rather “my way or the highway.” However, as Americans living in a multi-cultural, diverse country it is in everyone’s best interest to try to get along.

#### Conflict Resolution via Dialogue

The findings on gay evangelicals offer hope, and a starting place for the two communities to live harmoniously. What has this group done in regards to dialogue? Historically, the evangelical Christian family often rejected the openly gay child. However, today more and more families face this issue. While society has slowly started to accept gay and lesbians, evangelical family members are often faced with the dichotomy of accepting their gay children/siblings versus staying true to their strong religious beliefs. Festinger’s (1957) *cognitive dissonance theory* can be a tool to explain how families cope with this scenario while remaining true to their faith and reconciliation of their religious views. The theory “refers to the discomfort felt at a discrepancy between what you already know or believe” (Atherton, 2005, ¶ 1) and the need to

accommodate new information. Festinger (1957) argued that social groups are the source for causing and reducing cognitive dissonance. One way of reducing dissonance is through dialogue. By doing so, Chasin and others (1996) believe as therapists do “that in dialogic relationship family members can meet, see, talk with, and listen to one another in new, more effective ways” (p. 334). Study 2 examines family dialogues in further detail and provides a framework for extrapolating lessons learned by families for dialogues to be conducted in larger group settings.

The next step is to think about whom to invite to a third party facilitated dialogue on this topic. Introducing dialogue to people who are motivated to make a concerted effort (e.g., families, churches) would be good starting place. The data from Study 1 confirms the philosophy of dialogue fostering organizations like the Public Dialogue Consortium and the Public Conversations Project, whose method is to offer dialogue to local actors since sometimes primary stakeholders may have more to lose/gain by continuing the debate or have no interest in doing so (Herzig & Chasin, 2006). In this case, examples of such groups who would have more to lose include political and religious organizational spokespersons.

The data from organizational spokespersons show hints of how “organizations tend to develop powerful institutional structures that may benefit from the perpetuation of conflict and mistrust” (Rubin & Levinger, 1995, p. 30). Groups like Focus on the Family and even the National Association of Evangelicals have rallied a lot of political and parishioner support, as well as money, fighting gay civil rights. However, evangelical churches also have a mandate for peacemaking and sharing the love of Jesus Christ (Mathew 5:9; 28:19). Further, groups like the Human Rights Campaign and Lambda Legal are organizations committed to cooperation and respect for all Americans. As Rubin and Levinger (1995) said, “when institutions operate in the

service of cooperation, so much the better for the prospects of conflict [resolution]” (p. 30). However, as a caveat it must be noted that given the information provided by the media, it is often difficult to gauge the true opinions of such organizations. Good journalism requires the press to report both sides of an issue, but does not necessarily allow for well-rounded story telling. When one dissenting voice is given equal coverage it appears that objection is larger than it may or may not be. This phenomenon gives rise to complaints of media bias.

#### Unexpected Finding: Media Bias

As discovered in findings, the articles from the data pointed to the degree of reporter polemicism. Most of the language was neutral, keeping discussion to the facts. However, when a side was taken the reporter used pro-gay civil rights language. Evangelicals often refer to the press as liberal, and complain that their viewpoints are not properly heard (Schneeberger, 2007). Gary Schneeberger, a spokesperson for Focus on the Family, claims that only the most extreme quotes from evangelicals are presented by the press, which raises the concern for data error. However, since quotes were sampled from both evangelicals and non-evangelicals, any error in the sampling would have been the same for both sides. With the margin of error roughly equalized, it is assumed that these data offer a snapshot of the current climate in America in the evangelical and gay debate. Further study into reporter polemicism of this issue may be worthwhile.

#### Future Study

In addition to studying potential media bias, the data presented in Studies 1 and 2 were a brief, preliminary search. The methods used could be repeated in an in-depth future study to better understand the issue. For example, the analysis of Study 2 indicates there are differences between conducting family conversations and public ones. While there are some pitfalls in the

extrapolation, they are minor and should be easily adjusted for in the public dialogue planning processes. This extrapolation method shows promise and can be explored further in future research. However, for now, I will examine the findings in Study 2 for implications for practicing community-wide, public dialogues.

### Implications for Practice

We learn that some families who have faced the reconciliation issue of a gay child to their religious beliefs have done so through dialogue. These families have been satisfied with the outcome and changed or retained their beliefs as they deemed appropriate. The gains appear positive to parent-child relationships and they have discontinued the back and forth of debate where no one was the winner.

In order to create a dialogue framework, there may be merit in analyzing the conversations families have already had with this issue and seeing what fits on a larger scale. Using a readily available framework, *levels of analysis* by Rubin and Levinger (1995), I will examine a few points here that might prove relevant in making this connection in preparation for dialogue and highlight some of the obstacles. While there is a danger of extrapolating lessons from the micro level to the macro, Rubin and Levinger (1995) argue that a “comparative appraisal of conditions at each level can improve our understanding of conflict” (p. 35).

#### *Number of parties*

As the number of parties increases, it becomes more difficult to reach agreement. While agreement on settlement is not the goal of dialogue, agreement here can mean buy-in to the dialogue process. When families are in dialogue the number is much smaller than in community-wide or church-wide dialogues. On the other hand, with the increase of people an “opportunity to develop cross-cutting ties among the disputants” increases (Rubin & Levinger, 1995, p. 23).

Where mom and dad might become rigid in communication, a church-wide scenario might yield better results by offering a richer story telling experience for all. The opportunity to hear a story that strikes resonance is greater when more voices are heard.

### *Exit*

In the family scenario, although painful, one can walk away from the conversation and never talk to the others again. In the community-wide discussion, this is more difficult if not impossible. Barring any unforeseen cataclysmic or genocidal event, evangelicals and gays are here to stay indefinitely. Since withdrawal is not an option, there “should be increased pressure to cope with the conflict” (Rubin & Levinger, 1995, p.25). Although some in the evangelical community believe they can isolate themselves, they should be reminded that this is an issue from where there is no escape. Gay individuals continue to self-identify in and out of evangelical churches at an increasingly rapid pace (Rubenstein, Sears, & Sockloskie, 2003).

### *Power asymmetry*

In most voluntary interpersonal relationships, power is roughly symmetrical (Rubin & Levinger, 1995). In family dialogues, parents have to deal with the adult gay child as an adult. Since power is roughly the same, either has the option of exit. On the community level, the larger group can impose its will on the smaller by voting as we have seen in statewide ballot initiatives aimed at banning same-sex marriage and lawmakers passing or not passing bills to inhibit gay civil rights legal protections. While evangelicals are currently the fastest growing religion in America (Aikman, 2003), the majority and its opinion changes over time. While many evangelicals think that homosexuality is a condition that can be cured and thus gays will go away, statistically and scientifically speaking gay men and lesbians are 4-10% of the population (Rubenstein, Sears, & Sockloskie, 2003; Gates, 2006; Pathela et al., 2006) and

assumably a similar proportion of their congregation or at least children of their congregants.

Maybe in light of this, evangelicals will find it in their interest to come to the table for dialogue and resolution.

### *Representative negotiation*

In family dialogue, the parties represent themselves. On a macro-level, the church groups and other organizations have representatives who speak on behalf of the group. This may be “a source both of greater difficulty and of greater opportunity” (Rubin & Levinger, 1995, p. 28).

The representatives may come to know one another through dialogue and try to work on understanding. However, if that representative is changed the synergy is squashed and the process has to start over with someone new. Another difficulty with representatives, called the hero-traitor dilemma (Rahim, 2001), is when the parties come to new understandings, change their positions slightly, and return to their groups feeling successful but are seen as traitors. In the evangelicals’ case, they might be accused by their church members of being “succumb by the devil.” There are ways to counter this, but dialogue facilitators need to be aware of this phenomenon.

### *Trust*

“Trust is an individuating process that develops from lengthy series of mutually positive experiences” (Rubin & Levinger, 1995, p. 29). A family and a gay child have built trust over the years. Speaking from personal experience, my family trusted that I told them this is who I am and that I did not seek to hurt or embarrass them. We could engage in dialogue because of a history of shared trust. One parent echoed this by saying, “When someone is preaching to you in the pulpit that is their opinion; that is not what you know about your child. As a mother, you know in your own heart about your own child” (GCN Radio, 2004). On the community level,

both sides highly distrust the other due to histories of misperception on both sides. As already uncovered, gay people hear rhetoric of hate, cure, and hell, while some evangelicals think gays seek to destroy their churches, communities, and all that is morally decent. In a larger dialogue setting, this may come up and should be addressed directly.

*“Come now, and let us reason together.”*  
(Isaiah 1:18)

## CONCLUSION

Most gay individuals believe their sexual orientation cannot be altered or changed. They wish for full acceptance “as is” into the greater society and for equal protection under the law. Most evangelical individuals reject this notion since it contradicts their reading of the Bible. The prospect for possible intervention lies in understanding, which can be fostered in dialogue. If not resolution, then at the very least the conflict might be managed.

As one who is interested in this case and one who hopes to foster future dialogue between these two groups, I am reminded of the advice of Ronald Fisher (1994) who advocates for change agents to state their positions. He writes, “since differences in assumptions, expectations, and preferences abound in the practice domain of conflict resolution, the first step is an explication of one’s own values followed by efforts to gain insight into the other parties’ cultural expectations and preferences” (p. 50). As an openly gay man, who was raised evangelical Christian, I can relate to both sides of this debate. I understand firsthand the struggles that homosexuals in this country must endure. However, I also have deep respect for evangelicals, as all of my family is still devoutly religious, evangelical Christians. I understand they are trying to live a holy, wholesome life in accordance with their beliefs, and I am doing the same. I have experienced the power and peace that open dialogue can bring and wish to promote these conversations between the gay and evangelical communities.

I have described the current conversation between evangelical and gay communities as more like a debate. Yet, a large cross section of people are interested in a third way, but do not know how to get started. What is needed will require many people working individually and in

concert to promote open dialogue. One by one and group by group, people can affect a change in the national discourse. Lyrics by Holly Near (1977) in the folksong *The Rock Will Wear Away* ring true: “Can we be like drops of water falling on the stone splashing, breaking, disbursing in air; weaker than the stone by far; but be aware that as time goes by the rock will wear away and the water comes again.” With enough voices working together, the rock of prejudice and intolerance can wear away and honest and powerful conversations will flow.

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## Appendix A

The following are definitions of the four main categories of Christianity as identified by the Baylor Religion Study (2006):

### ***Black Protestant:***

A strand of American Protestantism borne out of and specifically linked to the African American experience in the United States. Prominent denominations are African Methodist Episcopal, Church of God in Christ, and National Baptist Convention of USA.

### ***Evangelical Protestant:***

Protestant groups that emphasize the authority of the Bible, salvation through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, personal piety, and the need to share the “Good News” of Jesus Christ with others (i.e., to evangelize). A long list of theologically conservative denominations define this tradition, such as Anabaptist, Assemblies of God, Bible Church, Brethren, Christian Church, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Christian Reformed, Church of Christ, Church of God, Church of the Nazarene, Free Methodist, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, Mennonite, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Church in America, Seventh-day Adventist, and Southern Baptist.

### ***Mainline Protestant:***

Historic Protestant denominations are more accommodating of mainstream culture, including American Baptist, Congregational, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal/Anglican, Evangelical Lutheran Church, Presbyterian Church USA, Quaker, Reformed Church of America, United Methodist, and United Church of Christ.

### ***Catholic:***

The form of Western Christianity promoted by Roman Catholic and National Catholic churches stressing papal authority and apostolic succession.

## Appendix B

Codes used for newspaper article search:

gay ministers
people quotes
scholars quotes
dialogue
churches internal struggle
ethics
gay evangelical quotes
family dialogue on topic
national stats
lang. of debate
gay civil rights/politics
secular/straight critique