



The Role of Religious Abuse in the Development of Internalized Homonegativity and Shame in the LGBTQ+ Community

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In this expansive research article, Jaryn Stringfellow first surveys extensive scholarship correlating religious and spiritual abuse with psychological distress among LGBTQ+ populations, who often experience irreconcilable tension between their religious and sexual identities. Stringfellow then details a prospective study that would test correlational data about sexuality and religious abuse among a population of LGBTQ+ college students. This essay was written for Research Methods in Psychology with Dr. James Vaughn.

ABSTRACT

Religion and spirituality are key aspects in the individual's identity because they offer comfort and security and bring meaning to life. Both terms, *religion* and *spirituality*, can apply to Christianity and new-age spirituality. Though religion and spirituality can allow positive experiences for the general population, the same is often untrue for LGBTQ+ individuals. Negative attitudes towards LGBTQ+ peoples are harmful and can cause a strain on individuals' religious and queer identities. These negative attitudes and religious abuses are defined by Ward (2011) and separated into six

different themes. These religious/spiritual (R/S) abuse themes perpetuated on LGBTQ+ are directly correlated to religious trauma, and therefore internalized homophobia. LGBTQ+ individuals who are more involved with non-affirming R/S groups experience higher levels of internalized homophobia, more sexual risk-taking and self-harm (Sowe et al., 2017; Crockett et al., 2014). Extending such connections, the purpose of this proposed study is to investigate if there is a direct link between religious abuse and internalized homophobia in LGBTQ+ college students.

To investigate if religious abuse and internalized homophobia, I will conduct a correlational study. I will gather the population by sending a mass email to the University of Science and Arts student body and randomly select participants. The participants will fill out a questionnaire consisting of questions about the individual's sexuality, gender, R/S history and experiences, religious or spiritual beliefs and their families. I will be using correlational research to investigate a possible relationship between the independent variable, intensity of R/S trauma or abuse, and the dependent variable, rejection of queer identity. I predict that there will be a positive correlation between the two variables, indicating mutual association. If an LGBTQ+ college student experiences a high level of religious abuse, it is likely that individual will struggle with internalized homophobia.

FREE EXPRESSION BY SPIRITUALITY is important to the development of one's psyche because individuals find security and comfort in religion and spirituality. Though these terms, *religion*, and *spirituality*, are often used interchangeably, there is a key difference between the two (Stone, 2013): Religion is the worshiping of a Divine being in a ritualized practice based on an organized belief system, while spirituality is individual development through spiritual connection, often motivated by personal experiences (Wood & Conley, 2013). Spiritual practices lack the denominational and the social aspects, whereas religion is communal practice that satisfies the human need for social interaction. In this paper, *religion* and

spirituality is referring to Christianity and New-Age Spirituality unless specified otherwise.

Often, religion has brought a sense of meaning, comfort, and support to the general population; however, for LGBTQ+ individuals, it can be a source of trauma. Members of a religious or spiritual group may view religion as a magic solution for trauma and mental illness, but for sexual minorities in non-affirming churches, an internal battle can take place, resulting in further trauma. In our society, LGBTQ+ individuals are more susceptible to discrimination and prejudice. Due to scriptural literalism, religious morals are the source of oppression against the queer community (Harris et al., 2007). Yen and Zampelli (2016) find that religiosity and frequent church attendance lessens the likelihood of support for same-sex marriage. The religious or spiritual groups that emphasize historical context when interpreting scripture allow for considerable variation in interpretation, resulting in less discrimination and prejudice against queer individuals (Harris et al. 2007).

FORMS AND EFFECTS OF R/S ABUSE

Experiences of Religious Abuse

Leadership representing God. Religious and spiritual trauma is a result of negative interactions with other individuals in the same religious/spiritual community. Ward (2011) found that there are six core themes that represent the experiences of religious abuse, the first being leadership representing God. This type of abuse presents the belief that religious, or spiritual (R/S) leaders speak the literal words of God. If their religious/spiritual leadership team denounces LGBTQ+ peoples, then God also denounces all LGBTQ+ peoples.

Spiritual bullying. Spiritual Bullying occurs when R/S peers and leaders bully the individual to conform to said religion/spirituality. This bullying refers to harassment or physical/emotional abuse from R/S peers, leaders, and communities (Wood & Conley, 2013). An example of this could be fearmongering, using fear as a

tactic to get people to accept a certain religion/spiritual practice. Another example of this could be an LGBTQ+ individual enduring spiritual bullying and abuse in conversion therapy.

Acceptance via performance. The third type of religious or spiritual abuse is acceptance via performance. This occurs when an individual performs R/S practices to feel accepted by their religious/spiritual peers. Ward (2011) argues that this type of abuse is fear-based; due to fear of rejection from peers, the individual will continue to perform for acceptance. An example of this could be an individual converting to Christianity at summer camp because their friends have also converted to Christianity. I propose that the individual may not be aware that they are performing and conform to a religion/spirituality with full intent. If the said religion/spiritual group is revealed to be non-affirming, against LGBTQ+ peoples, the individual may experience trauma from the rejection.

Spiritual neglect. Spiritual neglect occurs when R/S leaders and members ignore and neglect physical and/or emotional pain. Members of an R/S group might claim that mental or physical struggles are only occurring because the individual's faith was weak and slipping. This is an issue; extremely serious mental and physical struggles need to be addressed and acknowledged or the symptoms will worsen. These struggles are typically blamed on the individual, lessening the chance that person would seek help again. An example of this is members of R/S groups claiming the individual's pain is only occurring because they have sinned, and God is punishing them. LGBTQ+ people may feel they have been influenced or distanced from their religion, and their struggles are repercussions for being queer.

Expanding external/internal tension. The fifth theme that Ward (2011) addresses is expanding external/internal tension, which occurs when tension exists between the individual's internal and external worlds. One cannot express their individuality due to identifying with religious/spiritual groups. LGBTQ+ individuals may compartmentalize queer identity because they feel it conflicts

with their R/S identity; this can lead to internalized emotional distress and trauma.

Manifestation of internal states. Manifestation of internal states occurs when religious/spiritual abuse yields physical and psychological repercussions. LGBTQ+ individuals may experience stress, anxiety, and depression as a result from encountering the other five themes of abuse. An example of this is an LGBTQ+ individual experiencing sweating, trembling and other trauma indicators in church because of stress that has been perpetuated by R/S abuse.

Sexual microaggressions. Wood and Conley (2013) suggest a seventh type of religious and spiritual abuse, sexual microaggressions. This theme of abuse allows religious/spiritual leaders and peers to combine microaggressions and sexual microaggressions to use against LGBTQ+ individuals. The use of these microaggressions can increase discrimination against queer individuals in non-affirming R/S groups (Sue, 2010). Within this theme of R/S abuse, there are three types of sexual microaggressions that are used against LGBTQ+ people:

- *Microassaults:* These occur when R/S leaders feel protected by majority of an audience because they have common viewpoints. When the majority of the audience agrees with R/S leaders, leaders feel comfortable enough to perpetuate microaggressions against LGBTQ+ individuals. An example of this would be a minister condemning the LGBTQ+ lifestyle while giving a sermon to the clergy.
- *Microinsults:* These are comments that insult or belittle the individual. Though R/S leaders or peers may not intend to cause any harm, this microaggression is all the more dangerous because the perpetrators do not notice the impact microinsults have on LGBTQ+ individuals (Wood & Conley, 2013). The effect of these microinsults may go unnoticed and cause further damage. An example is a Minister saying, “God still

loves you,” when speaking to an LGBTQ+ individual (Sue et al., 2007).

- *Microinvalidations*: These are comments that invalidate a LGBTQ+ individual’s queer identity. This can cause a disconnection between the individual’s religious and queer identities and can yield feelings of otherness among LGBTQ+ people within non-affirming organized religions. Often the effects of the microinvalidations go unnoticed. An example is when a clergy member explains that they “love the sinner, hate the sin” when speaking to LGBTQ+ individuals (Wood & Conley, 2013).

R/S Abuse Linked to Mental Illness and Internalized Homophobia

Many current organized religions promote conservative views that teach members to “love the sinner, hate the sin,” despite this maxim itself being a sexual microaggression. These teachings suggest a separation between an individual’s sexual and religious identities and can result in internalized homophobia and existential issues related to sexual identity (Shannon and Woods, 1991). Christian religious fundamentalism entails the belief that the religious community has complete authority over said religion, which can yield negative attitudes towards non-Christians and LGBTQ+ individuals (Harris et al., 2007). Scriptural literalism, the belief that the scripture is the literal and the ultimate truth from God, is a key component to fundamentalist religious affiliation. When these negative attitudes and religious morals are taught to LGBTQ+ individuals, it can result in deep self-evaluation and ultimately internalized homophobia (Harris et al., 2007).

Sexual identity development is a process that occurs when an individual begins to understand their sexual orientation, but both positive and negative attitudes are integrated into the individual’s identity. Internalized homophobia refers to a negative belief system towards LGBTQ+ people that is developed prior to the individual’s

realization of sexual identity and is applied to their perception of self. Higher levels of internalized homophobia have been linked to shame and lower levels of self-acceptance and self-esteem (Harris et al., 2007). It has also been associated with guilt, fear, depression, suicide ideation, isolation, struggles with addiction and less involvement in intimate relationships (Harris et al., 2007; Sowe et al., 2017).

LGBTQ+ individuals who are more religious or more involved with R/S groups report higher levels of internalized homophobia, more sexual risk-taking, and more self-harm. (Sowe et al., 2017; Crockett et al., 2014). This is a result of R/S groups teaching and associating negative attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people. However, those who attend LGBTQ-affirming churches have reported positive outcomes and higher self-esteem (Sowe et al., 2017). This suggests that negative religiousness, rather than religiousness itself, is associated to psychological decline. Though negative attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals are harmful, religion functions as a positive experience for the general population. For the majority, being religious or spiritual is linked to improved mental health and lower levels of suicidal ideation and addiction (Sowe et al., 2017). This may be a result of enhanced levels of social support from said religious groups, which explains the disconnect from religion in LGBTQ+ people.

Disconnection Between Identities

Though *religious and spiritual abuse* is a catch-all term for the themes Ward (2011) discusses, we will be focusing on the theme of *expanding external/internal tension* in this article. Religion and spirituality bring a sense of meaning to life and are important for the individual's development of identity. However, it is not uncommon for members of the LGBTQ+ community to experience discrimination from R/S groups and conflict between their sexual and R/S identity (Crockett et al., 2018). When conflict between religious and

sexuality identity takes place there are four strategies that individuals use to deal with those conflicts: (a) reject the religious identity, (b) reject the sexual identity, (c) compartmentalize, and (d) integrate the identities (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000).

Whether an LGBTQ+ individual integrates their religious and sexual identities depends on whether the R/S groups are affirming or non-affirming and/or the individual's commitment to said religion. An affirming R/S community accepts LGBTQ+ members into their congregation and does not view queerness negatively or as a sin. In affirming religious/spiritual groups, LGBTQ+ individuals can integrate their R/S identities and their queer identities. They are permitted to accept their LGBTQ+ identities and are not forced to choose between the two; this leads to a more secure R/S practice and increased self-esteem (Rosmarin et al., 2013). Studies found that individuals with positive religious experiences have lower rates of internalized homophobia, improved psychological well-being, and increased healthy behaviors (Crocket et al., 2014). In addition, research indicates that R/S practices establish forms of coping that are frequently beneficial. (Barret & Pargament, 1998).

However, among non-affirming religious/spiritual groups, LGBTQ+ people may compartmentalize their queer identities in fear of rejection from the R/S group and/or God. Perhaps they compartmentalize their LGBTQ+ identities in fear for their lives. When an individual's sexual and religious identities conflict, they are forced to choose between the two identities or compartmentalize. If a LGBTQ+ individual experiences conflict and they choose to reject their religious identity, they may avoid all R/S groups or find another group that is affirming. Avoiding all religious or spiritual groups can lead to confusion, lack of comfort or support in community, and ultimately lower levels of mental stability (Crocket et al., 2014). Strengthening spiritual practices that are non-denominational has helped alleviate mental illness and lead to overall happiness and acceptance among LGBTQ+ individuals (Rosmarin et al., 2013).

Those who choose to reject their sexual identities will continue to suppress their queerness and avoid partaking in any queer or homosexual behavior (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). Suppressing one's sexual identity can lead to increased anger, depression, shame, and internalized homophobia, and can ultimately have negative consequences for the LGBTQ+ individuals' mental health. (Crockett et al., 2014; Heermann, 2007). Compartmentalizing to deal with conflict between religious and sexual identities may result in chronic anxiety, guilt, paranoia, and self-doubt (Harris et al. 2007). LGBTQ+ individuals often believe they must lead two separate lives, by hiding their sexual identities from their R/S groups to ensure those lives do not intertwine.

Non-affirming religious or spiritual organizations enforce beliefs that being queer is unnatural and sinful. This entitles these organizations to impose negative attitudes on LGBTQ+ individuals, therefore perpetuating religious and spiritual abuse. The six themes of R/S abuse proposed by Ward (2011) and the seventh proposed by Wood and Conley (2013) have been linked to longstanding mental health issues, identity issues, and a decreased sense of meaning (Sowe et al., 2017). In particular, internalized homophobia has been linked to religious or spiritual practices that are non-affirming (Sowe et al., 2017; Crockett et al., 2014). The purpose of this prospective study is to investigate if there is a direct link between religious abuse and internalized homophobia in LGBTQ+ college students.

METHODS

Participants

The population for this study will be college students who attend the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma and also identify as LGBTQ+ individuals. We will gather the population by sending out a mass email to the student body. The email will contain information on the study and a link to sign up for the survey. We will emphasize that students can only participate if they identify as LGBTQ+. The

email will also explain that some of the questions on the survey may be triggering for those with unresolved R/S trauma. All participants will be made aware that if they are randomly selected to take the survey, their names will be put in a drawing for a reward. We will recruit as many queer students as possible, but a population number between 100 and 150 would be beneficial to measure for external validity. From there, we will randomly select three quarters of the population that signed up. The challenges associated with random sampling include the time needed to gather the list of participants from the population, the large sample size necessary for measuring external validity, and risks that the sampled group from the population may be less diverse and therefore less effective.

Materials

The materials used in this study includes computers or internet access and a digital questionnaire. Because the survey will be taken through electronic mail, computer or internet access is necessary to conduct the study. The questionnaire will consist of questions relating to R/S abuse, internalized homophobia, LGBTQ+ identity, religious/spiritual history and experiences, and similar topics.

Design

The purpose for this research is to test the strength of association between the two variables. In this study we will investigate whether religious trauma or abuse is associated to internalized homophobia among college students. The design we will be using employs correlational research, which investigates a possible relationship between the independent variable, intensity of R/S trauma or abuse, and the dependent variable, rejection of queer identity. Neither of the variables are manipulated or controlled. Correlational research uses quantitative methods to measure the direction or strength of the relationship between the two variables. The strength of the relationship can either be negative or positive. Quantitative research collects

and analyzes numerical data; in this case, quantitative research methods will collect the data from the survey and analyze or investigate the possible correlation between the variables. Correlational research allows us to confidently generalize our findings toward other people in the population in an externally valid way.

We will use an online survey as our method to collect data from the sample of individuals. The questionnaire is designed to measure the intensity of R/S abuse and an individual's rejection of their queer identity. We decided to run this study through a questionnaire because it is cheap, efficient, and easily administered. Though there are advantages to using a survey for this study, we must be aware of the disadvantages to prevent inaccurate results. The disadvantages include, but are not limited to, desirability bias, limited answer choices, and nonresponse bias. The questionnaire will consist of questions about the participants' sexuality, gender, sexual identity history and experiences, R/S history and experiences, religious or spiritual beliefs, and family.

Procedure

The first email to the population includes a link in which they could sign up to be randomly selected for the study. The population will be informed that this study was designed to investigate the correlation between religious violence and internalized homophobia. They will be made aware that some of the questions in the survey may be offensive and possibly triggering for those with unresolved trauma. We will provide the definitions of religious violence and internalized homophobia in the email, as well as a brief summary of the planned study. We will also make the population aware that their names will be put in a drawing to win a reward if they are selected and complete the survey. The population will be instructed to sign up through the link in the email if they are interested in participating. This link will take them to a page where they record names, birthdates, pronouns, sexual identifications, and school emails.

To randomly select participants from the population, we will assign a number to every person who has signed up. From there, we will use a random number generator to randomly select three quarters of the population that signed up. Those participants who are randomly selected from the population will be emailed another link thanking and congratulating them on being selected. They will then be instructed to follow the link to a waiver they will sign electronically. This waiver will be used as replacement for an informed consent form. After participants sign the waiver, they will be directed to the questionnaire. Here, they will fill out their names and demographic information and answer the questions that follow. The questionnaire will take about 10-15 minutes to complete. Once finished, participants will be thanked, congratulated for completing the survey, and dismissed.

PREDICTED RESULTS

CORRELATIONAL ANALYSIS IS THE statistical method we will be using to extract data for this research study. A correlational analysis investigates the linear relationship of variables; in this case it will examine if there is a connection between religious abuse and internalized homophobia among college students. If the correlation analysis shows that the two variables are related, we can examine whether the variables can be used to predict one another. To study the strength of the correlation, we must investigate the correlational coefficient. The correlational coefficient tells us if the linear relationship between the two variables is positive, negative, or neutral. Ultimately, the correlational coefficient, r , measures the strength and direction of the association between the two variables in a range from -1.0 to +1.0. If the coefficient is -1.0, it is a perfect negative correlation. If the coefficient is +1.0, it is a perfect positive correlation. A value of zero indicates a neutral relationship where there is no correlation between the two variables.

We can identify the strength and the direction of the correlation with a scatterplot. A scatterplot is a graph that plots both values of the variables, called data points, along the *x-axis* and the *y-axis* to observe if a pattern emerges. To understand the direction and strength of the correlation we will investigate the placement of the data points relative to the regression line. The regression line is the best-fitting straight line that aligns with the placement of the data points. Using the survey data, we will run a correlational analysis to investigate the relationship between the two variables. Consistent with research from Wood & Conley (2013), I predict that the scatterplot will show a positive relationship, around $r = +0.7$, between the religious abuse and internalized homophobia (Figure 1).

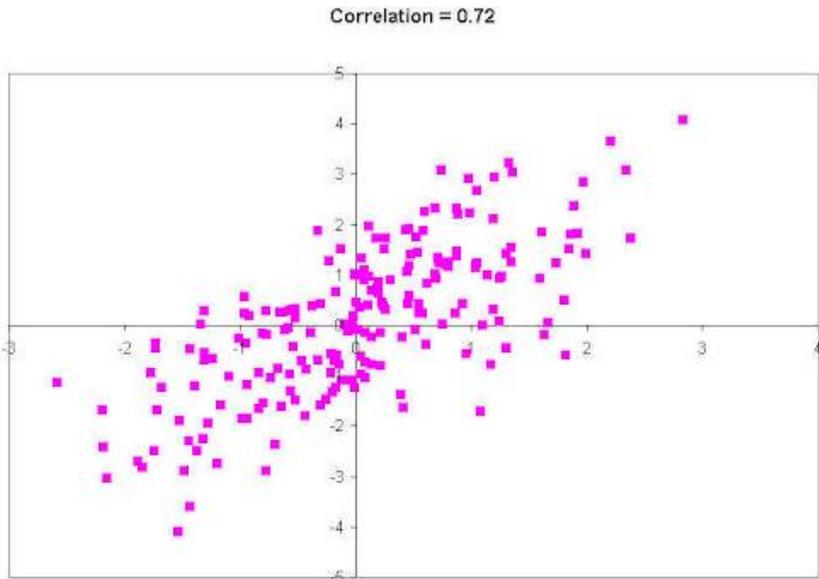


Figure 1: Example of the predicted scatterplot.

DISCUSSION

IF RESULTS OF THE STUDY indicate a high positive correlation of $r = +0.7$, findings would suggest the dependent variable is accompanied by higher levels of the independent variable. In the case of this study, the analysis could support the theory that rejection of an individual's queer identity is accompanied with higher levels of religious abuse. If we can support this hypothesis, it would mean that there is a high association between the two variables. If an individual experiences a high level of religious abuse it is likely that individual will struggle with internalized homophobia. This can result in anxiety, isolation, struggles with addiction, guilt, fear, lower levels of self-acceptance and self-esteem, more sexual risk-taking, increased self-harm, anger, depression, shame, suicidal ideation, and less involvement in intimate relationships (Heerman 2007; Sowe et al., 2017; Crockett et al., 2014; Harris et al., 2007). Furthermore, high levels of religious/spiritual abuse could lead to trauma in the individual and can keep the individual from seeking help.

If the research supports our hypothesis, it could begin a conversation about the danger non-affirming religious organizations and the attitudes towards LGBTQ+ college students. Ultimately, raising awareness for the discrimination of LGBTQ+ peoples in those non-affirming churches and working to correct abuse tactics used by the organized religions. This is imperative because the abuse and discrimination LGBTQ+ individuals face often lead to a decline in one's psychological well-being, mental stability, increased identity conflicts, and prevent the individuals from seeking support in the future (Crockett et al., 2014; Wood & Conley, 2013). If this research does not support our hypothesis, further study will be necessary to better understand the effects of R/S among LGBTQ+ college students.

If we cannot prove this hypothesis, it could also raise question about a third variable problem. The third variable problem occurs when two variables are correlated through an outside third variable; this could ruin the internal validity of the research. In this case, the

third variable could be parental, cultural, or societal pressures. For example, if an individual has parent or family member who openly condemns LGBTQ+ peoples, it could cause harm to the individual because those attitudes were introduced during an impressionable age and before they had opportunity to shape their sexual identity. Either way, it is important to remind the world that people who identify as LGBTQ+ still deserve to express themselves without repercussions. ►►

►► REFERENCES

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