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“God Made me Gay for a Reason”: Young Men who have Sex with Men’s Resiliency in Resolving Internalized Homophobia from Religious Sources

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Abstract

Research investigating the role of religion in the lives of young men who have sex with men (YMSM) is limited. Given the unique developmental stage of emerging adults and the fact that most religions have restrictions on homosexual behavior, it is important to understand how YMSM integrate their sexual and religious/spiritual identities. Drawing upon a longitudinal, mixed methods study, we explore the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of a sample of YMSM. Presented are descriptions of messages about homosexuality from religious contexts and how these messages are internalized. The process used to resolve the conflict between these messages and their sexual identity is then described. Findings discuss how to help YMSM retain the more supportive and nurturing aspects of religion to integrate their sexual and religious identities for a functional support system.

Keywords

religion; spirituality; gay; young men who have sex with men; internalized homophobia

There has been a growing body of research focused on the relationship between religiosity and adolescent health and well-being (Nonnemaker, McNeely, & Blum, 2003; Werner & Smith, 1992). Prior studies of religiosity, which have focused primarily on heterosexual adolescents, found positive associations between higher religiosity and familial support (Ellison, Boardman, Williams, & Jackson, 2001; Regnerus & Elder, 2003), improved mental health (Eliassen, Taylor, & Lloyd, 2005; Ellison et al., 2001; Nonnemaker et al., 2003), lower drug use (Nonnemaker et al., 2003; Steinman & Zimmerman, 2004) and safer sex (Hardy & Raffaelli, 2003; Nonnemaker et al., 2003; Steinman & Zimmerman, 2004).

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However, few studies have explored the intersection between sexuality and religion among adolescents and emerging adults (Sherkat, 2002). In fact, the ongoing longitudinal National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), while contributing a great deal to the knowledge about the role religion plays in adolescent and young adults' lives, does not include questions related to sexual identity or sexuality, limiting their findings for non-heterosexual adolescents and young adults. While this and other studies have found religiosity to be associated with better mental health and fewer risk behaviors, some research suggests that young men who have sex with men (YMSM) may experience higher levels of stress when attempting to integrate their sexual identity with their religious and/or spiritual beliefs (de Montefiores, 1993; Gonsiorek, 1995). Given the unique developmental stage of adolescence and emerging adulthood and the fact that most religions across the globe offer teachings that condemn or restrict homosexual behavior, it is particularly important to understand YMSM's experiences and challenges as they struggle to integrate their sexual identity with their religious/spiritual beliefs.

Religion in the Lives of Emerging Adults

Emerging adulthood, typically defined as the time between the ages of 18–25, is a developmental period distinct from adolescence in that it is a time of greater independence and a time when young people may explore different life goals and opportunities in school, work, relationships and spiritual and religious beliefs (Arnett, 2000, 2002). The focus during this period is often on self-development, beginning to be self-sufficient and achieving greater independence from parents and other family members (Arnett, 1998). Similarly, it is a time when individuals often undergo a period of self-exploration in beginning to define and express their identity. One important aspect of this period is making decisions about religious beliefs and participation (Arnett, 2002).

Religious beliefs during this time period may be quite different from adolescents and older adults. Prior research has noted a decline in outward religious expression (e.g., attending religious services) during this developmental period. Among the reasons for this are: leaving home for this first time, being exposed to new experiences such as college or work, as well as less parental influence on attending religious services (Brinkerhoff & Mackie, 1993; Sandomirsky & Wilson, 1990; Uecker, Regehr, & Vaaler, 2007). Other researchers have suggested that given the individualistic nature of American society, emerging adults today may view religious institutions with greater skepticism and place a greater value on personal experiences and beliefs than on religious organizations (Arnett, 2002; Beaudoin, 1998), which may result in a more individualized belief system that has been termed “a congregation of one” (Arnett, 2002).

Religion in the Lives of Young Men who Have Sex with Men

Gaining independence from parents and other family and developing one's own belief system can be a difficult process for some emerging adults. YMSM often face additional challenges in gaining independence and forming a sense of identity. For some, they are in the process of figuring out when and to whom they can disclose their sexuality while still maintaining familial support (Carpineto, Kubicek, Weiss, Iverson, & Kipke, 2008); they are trying to learn about how to protect their sexual health in a time when relevant sexual education information is not readily accessible (Kubicek, Beyer, Weiss, Iverson, & Kipke, in press); and they are dealing with the typical challenges emerging adults deal with - figuring out career and relationship aspirations – while also facing discrimination from their peers, co-workers, family, religious figures and others (Kipke, Wong, & Weiss, 2007).

There has been limited research on the role of religion in the lives of YMSM. A national survey of adolescents found that although religiosity was protective against binge drinking, marijuana use and cigarette smoking for heterosexual adolescents, religiosity had no significant effect on

past-year substance use among sexual minority youth (Rostosky, Danner, & Riggle, 2007). Rosario, Yali, Hunter and Gwadz (2005) too found no correlation between religious affiliation and substance use among a sample of sexual minority youth. However, our own research suggests that YMSM who report being “somewhat” or “very” religious are less likely to use club drugs (Kipke, Weiss et al., 2007).

Research among older populations of MSM and other lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) adults indicate that religiosity can contribute to identity dissonance between sexual desires and religious beliefs for sexual minority individuals, which can be resolved by changing religions, reexamining religious texts and doctrine, abandoning religion, or turning to a more individualized sense of spirituality (Leong, 2006; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Thumms, 1991; Yip, 1997, 2005). Ream (2001) found that the presence of homophobic messages in religious contexts can diminish the associated health benefits for gay and bisexual individuals, but again, this sample was limited to adults.

Minority Stress and Internalized Homophobia

Internalized homophobia, also referred to as internalized heterosexism (Szymanski & Chung, 2003) or sexual prejudice (Herek, 2004), can be defined as directing anti-gay social attitudes towards the self, leading to a devaluation of the self, internal conflicts and poor self-regard (Meyer & Dean, 1998). The most recognized model that focuses on the effects of homophobia in the lives of sexual minorities is Meyer’s minority stress theory (Meyer, 1995). This model posits that various forms of stress related to being homosexual or bisexual have a deleterious effect on the health and well-being of sexual minority individuals. One type of minority stress is internalized homophobia, which has been linked to psychological distress including guilt, sex difficulties, demoralization, suicidality and AIDS-related traumatic stress response. Internalized homophobia has also been linked to substance abuse, lower levels of self esteem and eating disorders among both gay and lesbian populations (Cabaj, 1996; Ross & Simon Rosser, 1996; Rowen & Malcolm, 2002; Williamson & Hartley, 1998).

Research on internalized homophobia and religion is scarce; however, intrinsic religiosity or a strong religious commitment has been shown to predict internalized homophobia in sexual minority individuals (Herek, 1987). Following on this work, Ream (2001) found that intrinsic religiosity was not inherently a risk factor for internalized homophobia among sexual minority youth; rather, the homophobic messages often present in religious views and delivered in a religious context tend to predict internalized homophobia. Ritter and O’Neill (1989) reported that gays and lesbians in their sample often moved away from the religion they were raised in and also developed a range of ways to cope with and grow from their encounters with religious homophobia. Their methods of coping with these encounters included becoming involved in gay-affirming religions and developing a sense of an individual spirituality. Stokes and Peterson (1998) found that among their sample of African American young men, churches were generally described as the primary source of anti-gay messages in their communities. Exposure to these messages led respondents to typically view homosexuality as a sin that would condemn them to hell, and to want to change their sexual orientation. Our own research suggests that YMSM may employ a variety of strategies to manage these experiences in a variety of settings (e.g., religious, school) such as: avoiding church altogether, seeking an alternative church, or using “selective listening” to avoid internalizing homophobic messages (McDavitt et al., 2009).

Given the range of decisions and experiences that YMSM will make during their emerging adulthood, it is important to understand the processes and growth that young men experience while sorting out potential conflicts between religious/spiritual beliefs and their sexual identity. To address these issues, this paper uses a mixed methods approach to explore the role of religion

and spirituality in the lives of a sample of YMSM from the Healthy Young Men's Study (HYM). As an introduction and background, descriptions of messages about homosexuality heard in religious contexts are presented, as well as how YMSM internalize these messages. The process these young men use to cope with the conflict between what they have heard and their growing awareness of their sexual identity is then described in relation to the importance and role of religion and/or spirituality in these young men's lives and how they manage to integrate these beliefs into their identity.

METHODS

Quantitative Study Design, Sampling, and Measures

Between February 2005 and January 2006, a total of 526 young men were recruited into the HYM Study, a two-year longitudinal study of a cohort of ethnically diverse YMSM in Los Angeles. Young men were eligible to participate in the study if they were: a) 18- to 24-years old; b) self-identified as gay, bisexual, or uncertain of their sexual orientation and/or reported having had sex with a man; c) self-identified as Caucasian, African American, or Latino of Mexican descent; and d) a resident of Los Angeles County, and they anticipated living in Los Angeles for at least six months.

Young men were recruited at public venues (e.g., bars, clubs, streets, and special events) using a stratified probability sampling design (MacKellar, Valleroy, Karon, Lemp, & Janssen, 1996; Muhib et al., 2001). HYM participants completed a 1 to 1 ½-hour survey every six months over the course of two years. The surveys were administered in both English and Spanish, using audio computer-assisted self-interviewing (ACASI) technologies and an on-line testing format. Descriptions of the sampling procedures and methodology are described elsewhere (Kipke, Kubicek et al., 2007; Kipke, Weiss et al., 2007). For the purposes of this analysis, the following measures were included:

Demographic variables—Participants were asked to report their: age; race/ethnicity; residence; employment status; sexual identity; HIV serostatus; HIV testing history; whether they were diagnosed with an STI since their baseline interview; and whether they had ever engaged in sex exchange.

Religious affiliation and beliefs—Participants reported whether or not they currently practice the same religion in which they were raised; their current religious affiliation; the importance of religion or spirituality; level of religiosity of the people who raised the respondent; how religious beliefs influence sexual behavior; frequency of attending faith services; and how religious and spiritual respondents describe themselves currently.

Qualitative Study Design, Sampling and Measures

A total of thirty-six respondents were selected, stratified equally across the three ethnic groups. We randomly selected twelve young men from those who reported high levels of religiosity; an additional twelve who reported high levels of spirituality and low levels of religiosity; and twelve who reported low levels of both religiosity and spirituality. These selection criteria were used to provide a variety of perspectives and experiences with regards to religion and spirituality. (See Kubicek, Weiss, Iverson, & Kipke, in press for further detail on methods).

The interview discussion guide used in this phase of the HYM Study was designed to gather in-depth information on a variety of constructs related to religion and spirituality such as: familial religious beliefs; positive and negative associations with religion; respondents' definitions and differentiations between religion and spirituality; types of messages related to sexuality heard in religious settings; and detailed information regarding their exploration and

perspectives on different belief systems. Each interview lasted 1 ½ to 2 ½ hours and was digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. All interviews were conducted in the HYM project offices or at a location convenient to the respondent (e.g., coffee house). Respondents were provided a \$35 incentive for completing the interview. The research received approval from the Institutional Review Board of Childrens Hospital Los Angeles.

Quantitative Analysis—All statistical analyses were conducted with responses from wave 3 data using SPSS version 15.0. Descriptive analyses were conducted to examine the distribution of socio-demographic and religious variables for the entire sample and the sub-sample included in the qualitative interviews. A list of more than 30 different religions was included on the survey and respondents were asked to select all that applied to them. Because of this, broad groupings of religions they grew up with and what they identify with currently were developed such as Eastern (e.g., Buddhist, Hindu), Protestant/Christian (e.g., Baptist, Christian Scientist, Episcopalian, Christian, Lutheran, Methodist) and Other (e.g., Wicca, Scientology, New Age, Pagan, Santeria religions).¹ Those selecting multiple religions across these groupings were coded as having “multiple religions”.

Qualitative Analysis—The qualitative analysis was based on grounded theory, which entails the simultaneous process of data collection, analysis and theory construction (Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and conducted with Atlas.ti software. As the data were collected, they were immediately analyzed for patterns and themes, with the primary objective of discovering theory implicit in the data.

Members of the research team reviewed an initial sample of interviews to identify key themes, which formed the basis of the project codebook. Codes focusing on a range of topics were identified and defined based on the key constructs included in the discussion guide. The codebook was modified as needed, and once finalized, four members of the research team were responsible for coding the interviews. Inter-coder reliability was assessed through double coding a sample of approximately 15% of the interviews. Differences in coding were discussed and resolved by the team. After the initial coding phase, the open coding process began, to identify codes related to the influence of religion on sexual behavior, family religious beliefs, conflicts and doubts with religious upbringing and exploration of other religions were included in the analysis. Axial coding was then conducted to piece the data back together to fully describe the processes, leading to the structure of this paper which describes: 1) the homophobic messages heard in religious contexts; 2) how these messages were internalized; 3) the effects of the messages on identity and self perception; and 4) the often complicated strategies these young men employed to cope with these messages and continue their spiritual, religious, and/or personal development. Throughout the paper, pseudonyms are used to identify respondents.

RESULTS

Quantitative

Table 1 presents the demographic data for the full sample of HYM respondents (N=483) who completed the wave 3 survey (12-month follow-up). Qualitative respondents do not differ considerably from the rest of the sample. The majority of the HYM sample (81%) identified as gay, with 12% identifying as bisexual.

Table 2 presents data related to religious affiliation and the past and present role of religion and spirituality in respondents' lives. Catholicism was the most often reported religion growing

¹There is some limitation in using these categories as we cannot ascertain whether the Protestant indicated is one that would be considered “liberal” or one considered “conservative”. However, given how the survey items were constructed, we cannot make assumptions on the political leanings of each religion.

up (40%), followed by a Christian/Protestant belief (36%). A small percentage (12%) reported being raised in multiple religions. Slightly less than half (43%) of the HYM sample reported currently practicing the same religion in which they were raised, and an additional 35% reported currently being “not religious”. When asked how religious beliefs influence their sexual behavior, about half of the total sample (49%) reported “not at all.”

Qualitative

Sources of Messages about Homosexuality—Among the qualitative respondents, all thirty-six reported being raised in a religion that could be classified as Christian (e.g., Protestant, Catholic). Respondents who described their religious upbringing as Christian, Pentecostal or Evangelical typically reported hearing the most severe homophobic messages in church. Statements such as: “Gay is bad. Gays go to hell” or “You’ll burn... You’ll go to hell for being gay” were commonly heard. In these churches, it was not uncommon for respondents to report that sermons seemed to often return to the subject of homosexuality, making the young men feel uncomfortable or fearful as Royal, an African American respondent who reported that both his grandmother and mother were pastors in a Christian church, describes:

It’s like he [the pastor] would preach a different thing but it would always go back to homosexuals and sexuality for some reason. And he seemed like he looked dead at me and it’s like, “Gays would go to hell,” and stuff like that... And it’s like every time he would say that, it would always seem like he was saying it directly to me and it would scare me. It would scare the crap out of me. I would like, hold my mom’s arm like real tight. Like why is he talking to me? Like why me?

Those raised in the Catholic faith reported fewer direct messages about homosexuality. Catholic respondents noted that the church characterized sex in general as “sinful”, part of the “Catholic guilt thing”, rather than taking targeted aim at homosexuality. Morgan whose family converted from Catholicism to Protestantism explained:

Yeah, I remember being in a Catholic church and not hearing anything about homosexuals at all... It wasn’t until I got into the Protestant church that it was blatantly like brimstone, hell fire... He [the pastor] would start to preach about God and blah, blah, blah. ‘But the people in this country, the gays, oh my god especially the gays... The gays and the lesbians and the atheists and the socialists, they are going to bring this country down and this country was founded on the grace of God’.

Like many adolescents, about half of the YMSM in this study felt they had few choices in whether or not they attended religious services growing up. Depending on their family’s religious beliefs and structure, some felt “forced” to go to religious services. Santos described how difficult it was for him to tell his mother “I don’t want to go to church anymore. I am not a Christian! I don’t want to go back there anymore!” In spite of him directly telling her this, she still required him to go. He reported that this was “really, really hard” because he was starting to have feelings for other men and did not want to be involved with something that conflicted with “basically what I am.”

Respondents who heard repeated homophobic messages (some of the more religious young men reported going to church four or five times a week) described different processes they employed to evaluate these messages into their personal belief system. These young men described having a great deal of anxiety believing that because of who they are, they would eventually be sent to hell – a place described as having “eternal misery.” In contrast, heaven was seen as a place where “you could relax and be you.” Rodrigo, a young man who described himself as “spiritual”, was born into a Catholic household, and after his mother converted to

a conservative Evangelical church, he described a lengthy internal struggle as this newer religion taught that homosexuals had a “demon” inside of them:

In the Evangelical belief, it's not that it's [homosexuality] just a sin, it's a demon inside of you... whenever they did mention that, they'd say 'Ooh, this person has the demon in them. We have to pray for them. We need to cast that demon out'. It's pretty intense and you're thinking 'Oh my god. They're going to look at me next. I don't want to be like the Blair Witch'... It's horrible. You're just, when are they going to look at me next and want to cast whatever I have inside out. And then after a while you start believing that it's true.

These messages were not necessarily limited to church settings. Respondents reported hearing homophobic messages from family members as well, particularly from family members who were described as religious. Quite a few respondents reported having close family members such as parents, grandparents or siblings who were ministers or pastors; this was particularly common among the African American respondents (7 of the 12 mentioned this in the interview). These respondents commonly reported having family members pray for them to be “normal” and state that gays would “burn in hell.” Many of the respondents in this group reported that they were not “out” to their family members due to hearing these messages and believing that they would be forced from their home or rejected by family members if they revealed their sexuality. Indeed, several respondents reported being forced from their home because they “came out” to their family. Martin, a Latino young man raised in a non-denominational Christian church, reported choosing to live with his brother in a nearby city to get away from “bad influences” at home. His brother was a pastor in the church, and while he knew that Martin was gay, he avoided talking about it with him. Martin described how his brother would tell him that he was “no earthly good”, which he said “felt ugly and it made me feel ugly” and ultimately made him leave this house as well:

My brother knew I was gay and when I broke out of my shell, I got more involved I would want to have Bible sessions at my house. And he liked the fact that I was being more involved but it's like he'll sometimes try to cut it short... So then we had a discussion about me, about me and my sexuality and he said that I am heavenly minded but no earthly good... Meaning I can think about God and pray about God and talk about God as much as I want but I am no earthly good because I am gay... I am a sinner. I have no purpose here.

Manifestations of Internalized Homophobia—Hearing and internalizing these types of messages often had a detrimental effect on respondents, particularly for those who felt a strong religious connection. These young men felt that religion should provide comfort or support, and that hearing the negative messages that seemed to be aimed directly at them was anything but comforting or supportive.

I just remember hating myself so much and I tried to-- I tried to run into the religion that was supposed to protect me. This religion that was teaching me about Jesus and the powerful love of God... God would never test you more than you could handle and this to me was the biggest test of my life...

For those young men who had never had a strong religious or spiritual affiliation, these messages were less harmful. For them, going to church or other religious services was a part of a childhood routine, something that they did as a matter of course, but they did not usually listen or absorb much of the messages from the religious leaders or congregation. Philip, a young man raised as a Presbyterian, reported that “walking around the church, I never just really felt like it was a part of my life and that I belonged.” However, for a large proportion of the qualitative respondents, these messages ultimately had considerable impact as they were internalized and led to respondents questioning who they were. In the most severe cases,

respondents reported being in a depressive state, contemplating suicide, and fasting or overeating to alleviate their feelings of despair and hopelessness.

Among the most common expressions of what we consider to be internalized homophobia were respondents' continuing questioning of themselves, wondering if the fact that they were attracted to other men automatically meant that they would not "be saved." In these instances, young men described feelings of fear and guilt for having sexual attraction to other men and asking for God's forgiveness or for those feelings to somehow be turned off. Esteban, a Catholic respondent, described a constant feeling of fear because he felt that, "I am always committing a sin just because me being me." His fear was derived from not only the church but also from his grandmother who had told him if he did "something wrong you would go to hell and the devil will put you in this inferno."

Some respondents described that hearing how "wrong" being gay was made them start to not only question their "goodness" as a human being, but also to develop what some described as a sense of self hatred that resulted in some young men wanting to hide that part of themselves, and with some dating women or wearing "straight" clothes as a way to deflect attention. When asked how they handled these feelings at the time, respondents usually stated that they simply did not act on their sexual urges – with one respondent noting that his Catholic church taught that it was not a sin until you "acted on it." Others, like Ken who said he struggled from the age of ten, thinking "if I died tonight, I'd go to hell", reported being fearful because "you can't lie to God." Suppressing sexual feelings was described as extremely difficult; Ron, who was raised Catholic and currently practices a spiritual-based religion called Novus Spiritus, reported that doing nothing essentially made him feel numb, which for him was preferable to feeling pain or shame.

It felt like the rest of my life pretty much. Very numb. And I was really good at not feeling. So it felt kind of easy. To not feel, to be numb...Not liking who I am or what I'm not doing, but I'm just going to be here you know, going along with my daily activities. However, not really feel that I am myself. And that's okay, because I'm never myself anyways and I've always been numb in a lot of ways.

For several respondents, hiding a part of their identity represented a lie that they characterized as another burden or sin in addition to their sin of having homosexual feelings. One respondent commented that the deception and lying made him feel "even more doomed." In the more extreme cases, this sense of self hatred at times resulted in respondents taking out their frustration on gay men or women. Ruben, a young man who in late adolescence found an accepting Catholic Church to attend, described himself as the "star" of the Church:

In middle school it was just like I was so angry at myself because I was that and I couldn't accept it. So it was like religion was telling me I had to be one thing, society was telling me I had to be that one thing. I had to be straight and it made me angry. I took it out on a lot of people. Mostly on a lot of people who were gay and it turned me into those people that were yelling on the streets... I would be like, "Faggot," or push people or get into fights, just stupid things. And I slowly went into a transition when I was in high school. I hid in the shadows...I slowly started to hate myself, hate religion and hate everybody who believed in it because I was this and God made me like this.

In some cases, particularly those who were raised in more conservative religions, the homophobic messages resulted in feelings of distress, depression and suicidality, particularly for those who relied on the church community for a great deal of social support. As one respondent described, "all of a sudden I am realizing that I am gay and my entire world starts to crash around me and I just remember falling into a huge depression." The young men who fit this description were often those who had been forced to deal with the conflicts between

their sexuality and religious teachings from a very early age. Ken, an African American man, related a story of being sexually involved with a pastor's son when he was younger. This partner told him that they could not continue their sexual relationship, because homosexuality was immoral and pulled out a Bible and read scriptures condemning homosexuality. Ken said that he felt "ambushed and bamboozled" and that this incident set him off on a course that he described as "tearing myself up emotionally...to a point where I felt either suicidal or crazy."

Rodrigo too reported hearing repeated messages from the church that he had a demon inside him that needed to be cast out. Consequently, he isolated himself to the extent that he did not leave his home for a period of time and reported being afraid of other people. He realized that he was depressed and that the one place where he thought he should be able to turn for support had betrayed him:

It was like slowly realizing that the religion was only suppressing me and not uplifting me where it should...I was depressed and I was turning to religion because it was supposed to be an answer, but it was not helping me; if anything it was making things worse. Because you're told that you're not supposed to be this way [gay]. It's a sin. You could go to hell. I think that is a big one to be depressed about. The one answer you know that's supposed to be there for you and to motivate you to keep going and it's telling you that you're going to be doomed and have everlasting fire burn on you. It's kind of...not too uplifting.

A few respondents reported engaging in self-destructive behavior such as drug and alcohol use and under or overeating as a means to cope with the stress caused by these homophobic messages. For example, one respondent described "healing myself with food" and overeating to alleviate his feelings of guilt and shame. Ignacio described hiding his sexual attraction to other men from his friends and having secret "gay dates" where afterwards he would go home and tell himself "this is wrong" and he would feel "sick inside" to where he would throw up. Morgan, a young man whose family converted from Catholicism to a Pentecostal church, which he described as the "pinnacle of what it is to be a Christian Protestant", reported developing what he later referred to as an eating disorder. He fasted to "feel closer to God", and reported using drugs and alcohol to numb the pain he felt, trying to reconcile his homosexuality with the negative messages he heard from his church:

What I did was instead of finding proper help, maybe talking to a counselor or something, I got into this huge depression and it's ridiculous but...I would fast four or five times a week because I felt that I needed to be closer to God. I would pray. I would wake up at six in the morning to pray...and at the same time I knew what was bubbling inside of me. I knew that I couldn't help the fact that this little preference for boys had turned to attraction to boys and it was seriously a sexual desire for boys. Like you know, I couldn't get it over, I couldn't. And it just made me miserable.

Processes of Dealing with Homophobic Messages—Respondents dealt in a variety of ways with these messages; most of their strategies involved critically rethinking the religious ideas they had been taught about homosexuality. Most of the young men who initially adhered to the Biblically-based assertion that homosexuality is an "abomination" were able ultimately to accept their sexuality. Although many respondents had gone through periods of self-judgment, nearly all of them had adopted a more accepting attitude by the time they were interviewed. This gay-affirming outlook reportedly provided relief from intense shame and guilt. For one respondent, "it just felt like a big weight came off my chest. So I was able to run without weights." Several respondents stated that being true to their sexuality was a way of fulfilling God's expectations, or that "God wouldn't want us to be fake." This perspective helped them see God as more accepting, and to live in accordance with an inner sense of their authentic identity:

The pastor was preaching about gays and how homosexuality is a sin and how guys are supposed to be with a girl. I am like, “Why are they saying this? That sounds wrong.” I was like, “How can God punish people for who they really are?”

One strategy respondents employed to process homophobic religious messages was to critically evaluate the source of the message, including the origins of the religious text and the religious individuals who expressed anti-gay sentiments. Respondents shared the belief that interpretations of religious texts vary dramatically, and that “you can translate the Bible in so many different ways.” Several respondents asserted that religious scripture was written or recorded by individuals driven by their own particular perspectives and motives:

Who wrote [the Bible]? That’s my whole thing. I know back in the time people re-wrote stuff. I don’t feel like everything in that Bible was wrote from Jesus and God and “that’s what it is.” Because I feel like it has a lot to say in there, but I feel like people added stuff.

People and groups whose views appeared to be hypocritical were also evaluated. Several respondents stated that observing such hypocrisy enabled them to feel confident that the people who judged them for being gay were not expressing God’s actual attitude toward gays. Several commented that their churches taught that it is wrong to judge. Yet, church leaders and other members of the congregation were very judgmental of them. Respondents observed that “pious individuals” making antigay remarks demonstrated their hypocrisy, especially when those individuals engaged in what respondents identified as sinful, dishonest, or morally questionable behavior such as adultery or, in one case, throwing a “passion party” with paid strippers.

I learned how to identify hypocrites. That also helped me deal with my gayness too... My mother would tell me when I was little, “People will always tell you ‘You got the splinter in your eye,’ but won’t notice the demon hangin out of their’s’. Everybody thinks their shit doesn’t stink... ‘Oh, you’re gay? You’re doin this and this?’ And it’s like ‘What are you doing? Aren’t you doin such n’ such? What’s the difference?’ Sort of like that. So that helped me a lot.

Quite commonly, young men identified what they described as logical contradictions in anti-gay religious doctrines. They sorted through such contradictions in a number of ways, including discussing these issues with friends, reading relevant texts, keeping a journal, or engaging in an internal dialogue with themselves. The most frequently cited contradiction was between the idea that gay people will be punished by God, and the concept that God is a loving, omniscient, perfect creator. Respondents reported a period of confusion, wondering, “Why would [God] make one of his children gay if He wants it to be man and a woman? It just doesn’t make sense.” The idea of being created gay led the majority (30 out of 36) to feel that their homosexuality was “not a mistake, not an accident.” To reach this perspective, respondents relied on the idea that a loving God would not create people in a way that is wrong or that dooms them to hell. Rodrigo was raised to believe that homosexuality was a demon that must be “cast out.” Over time he decided that such a view “did not add up” with his concept of God:

I couldn’t sit down and believe that someone that created me, created me in a way that was wrong. The Bible says He knows everything and He knows you before you were born. So why would He let me live if I was not going to be to what He wanted?

A number of respondents referred to the concept that “God creates everything for a reason.” Sexual desire was therefore seen as something acceptable and a valued part of a person’s life: “Why would God give you something if He doesn’t want you to use it?” One respondent believed that God had made him gay in order to help his family become more accepting of gay people and other minorities. Interestingly, the notion that God had made them “gay for a reason” provided the basis for seeing their sexuality as a spiritually meaningful aspect of their identities. This attitude reportedly gave them a greater sense of purpose, helped to diminish feelings of

internalized homophobia and fostered an increased sense of self-worth. Ken said he felt “suicidal” at times due to his religious upbringing, but developed a self-accepting attitude based on the spirituality of being gay:

If He created me, He created me being gay. He created everything... So you have to say, “Okay, God created everything so this was created by Him, so it may have a purpose.” So maybe my purpose is to find out what the purpose of me being gay is.

To support the view that people are born gay, young men relied on various observations and beliefs. Some mentioned knowing while they were still young that they had attractions to the same sex, or that their behavior was different from other boys. For some respondents, such memories confirmed that their sexual orientation was fundamental to their being since birth. Ivan had been told by his parents that his homosexuality was due to a lack of paternal involvement; however, he disagreed with their view because he recalled feeling “different” at an early age:

When you are younger, it’s like you know that you are different but you don’t know why you are different and when you grow up you start to realize that... I knew I was [gay]. I knew that those small little things could lead up to that and it’s like I didn’t choose to like what I like when I was four or five. I didn’t choose to like the Spice Girls. [chuckle]

For some respondents, realizing that their sexual orientation was not a choice took time and involved a personal struggle of trying to alter their sexual desire. Respondents who had been raised in more religious settings were more likely to have believed at some point that their sexual orientation could be changed, a view that also was expressed often by religious leaders and family members. Several respondents with religious upbringings had been told by adults that prayer could make them heterosexual, and such arguments were often reinforced with stories of gay people who had become heterosexual through prayer.

Relatively few of the respondents reported engaging in efforts to change their sexual orientation in spite of often feeling pressure from family and their religious communities. The journeys these individuals described were difficult and painful, but in every case led to the conclusion that their sexual orientation could not be altered. Morgan’s effort to become heterosexual involved daily prayer beginning at six in the morning, attending church twice a day, and fasting for days at a time to demonstrate his devotion to God. When his fasting led to a hospitalization, Morgan finally conceded to himself that change was not possible:

At that point is when I made a decision -- when I passed out and I was in the hospital with an IV in my hand because I was dehydrated and I was collapsing because I didn’t have any food -- I made a choice that apparently God really didn’t care so why should I...I decided that I would no longer be chained to this notion that I have to turn myself into something, that I have to cure myself, that I have to be someone else in order for me to find happiness. That’s when I realized that I need to just be me.

Integrating Religious/Spiritual and Sexual Lives

Exploring Other Churches, Religions or Belief Systems: Many described conflicts between their intrinsic religiosity and their desire to avoid the negative messages that they often encountered in religious settings. For some, being involved in a religious community was a meaningful and valuable experience that they wished to continue; others expressed an interest in leaving their religion but felt they could not due to a long personal involvement in their religious group. Thus, young men investigated other religions and belief systems for one that would “let me know that I can be me and still be accepted by God.” For these young men, their journeys often included exploring other “traditional” or Western religions such as Islam, Judaism and other Christian faiths; or Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism.

Eastern religions in particular were seen as attractive as they were perceived to be more “liberal”, allowing “everyone the right to choose whatever path they want.” This exploration led them to believe ultimately that all religions teach essentially the same thing, as Ivan explained:

I just kind of put all these religions together and I was like, “Damn no matter what, if you live a good life you are going to go to a good place, and if you live a bad life you are going to go to this place.” I am like, I just kind of thought to myself I am like, “Okay, that’s what every religion teaches maybe they are not all connected in the same way with the same worthy God, but they have the same beliefs.

What many respondents seemed to desire most in this exploration was a sense of acceptance and tranquility that they felt religion or spirituality should provide. Thus, this journey led some to explore beliefs such as Kabbalah and Wicca/Paganism. Respondents described seeing friends develop greater clarity or a “differentness about them” that they attributed to these beliefs. Practices such as meditation or connecting to a natural or spiritual being provided respondents with some of the support and “tranquility” that their religious upbringings seemed to lack. Exploring these beliefs sometimes led the young men to pick aspects from the belief system that they incorporated into their lives.

As part of their exploration in trying to find a religion or faith that would provide them with this tranquility and acceptance, several respondents reported having visited or wanting to visit a “gay church.” The idea of such a church seemed appealing, with several believing that the environment would be welcoming and accepting, no questions asked. Manuel reported seeing a church in his neighborhood with a sign that indicated they support gay marriage. Having been raised in the Catholic faith, he explained that marriage was the only “core Catholic value” that he would not achieve, but this church seemed to give him some hope that gay marriage may someday be a reality. While he had not yet attended this church, he was encouraged that he may have found a church that would accept him: “in our church when they talk about homosexuals, it’s wrong.... Now it’s like, that’s why I don’t really go...But I know if we go to this church, we’re actually gonna listen to the priest to see what he has to say cause it’s our time. I’m pretty sure we’re gonna like it. We’re gonna be able to go.”

However, respondents did not always feel comfortable with the idea of attending a “gay church”, and doing so was particularly challenging for those who had been brought up in conservative religions or households. For these young men, walking into a church that visibly identified itself as “gay” with rainbow flags and men sitting with other men could be jarring. One respondent described how the first time he entered such a church he was “scared”, describing the feeling as “I guess I’ve been waiting for so long to see something like this and to see it was a shock.” These churches and what they preached were difficult for some to process, with Royal remarking that while his mother was becoming more accepting of his sexual identity, he would not feel at all comfortable bringing her to that church, describing his difficulties as:

When I was in the Christian churches in Tennessee, they’re like being gay is not of God. It’s like you are going to hell, like it’s not what the Lord put you on earth for. But in the ‘gay church’ that I used to go to, it’s like God loves us regardless of our sexual orientations, like he put us on this earth for a reason. He loves all his creatures. He made us this way. I am like, ‘Did he really, like for real?’ ...That’s what makes it so confusing, I am like, I want to believe them but then I’ve been raised on this.

Defining and Developing an Individual Spirituality: Some respondents explored the possibility of adopting a different organized religion; others developed their own personal spirituality as a way to retain a connection to a higher power and have the sense of support it

provided. The processes used to develop this sense of spirituality were often complex and occurred over a long period of time as described below. Figure 1 provides a schematic of this often complicated process.

Respondents were asked specifically to explain how they differentiated religion and spirituality. Some had difficulty in articulating how these two concepts differed, maintaining that “everyday people get mixed or confused” on the distinction between the two. In general, respondents seemed to agree that spirituality ultimately was connected to nature and that it is something that is generally internalized, emphasizing an individual connection to a higher power—similar to how spirituality has been defined elsewhere (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001). Spirituality was often described as being related to Karma (“all the good and all the bad you do all adds up in the end”). Being a spiritual person meant that you did good things and believed in the “good things of the world love, happiness, luck, good fortune, just being able to relate to another person and enjoy the experience of being alive.” Perhaps most importantly to these respondents, spirituality provided the relationship to a higher power that was desired by many, but also gave individuals more choice in how they practiced their beliefs, as Antonio, an “ex-Catholic” explained:

It’s open to making it what you want it to be or what you think applies to you. Being spiritual you can say ‘Well, I am a spiritual person and I agree with this and I agree with this...’ It’s open to having an opinion and open to really “being at yours” I guess...mean[ing] taking from different things that you agree with.... So I think you kinda just grab what you think is who you are and what you agree with.

Religion on the other hand was most often described in terms of “rules” – having to go to church on Sunday, listening and adhering to the teachings of the minister or priest, reading the Bible each day or saying a prayer at night. Respondents often described religion as being “structured” and something that was practiced externally by attending services and prayer groups. Some respondents felt that people who described themselves as religious were not necessarily the closest to God or a higher power. For example, Deren was raised in a conservative church where his mother was a minister. She taught him that being religious is not “all about being inside a building”, and he described her as someone who was “pure light and just moves”, praying in the middle of an aisle at Wal-Mart if she was moved. His father, on the other hand, did not become a Christian “‘til Sunday”; someone who went to church and listened to the minister, and for Deren this exemplified what it meant to be “religious”:

When I think of religion, I think of my father. I think someone who - they live in a structured world of black and white.....I think of structure, black and white, right and wrong and hierarchy.

For those who felt that having a connection to a higher power or other spiritual world was essential, developing an individual relationship with that world was often the most realistic way to retain this relationship. For many who decided to develop a personal spiritual system, the primary impetus for this was the rejection they felt from the religion in which they were raised. The exploration and examination of different religions led some of the young men, who had heard that they could not be both Christian and gay, to develop a sense of spirituality because as one respondent explained, “I’ve never heard one person say you are spiritual so you can’t be gay.”

For religion I feel like for my personal experiences, religion is a mandated, routine type of, this is how, this is why, this is because, you will worship God. God won’t listen to you if you are like this X, Y and Z. All these norms, mandates and rules that can really alienate you more from God and make God this sort of impossible person to reach. Whereas now I feel like, on a more spiritual sort of connection where it’s a personal thing with me and God, where it’s nobody else is going to tell me how I am

suppose to deal with things. I am living my life to what moral standards I feel I should...and I feel at peace now.

This sense of spirituality was important for a number of reasons. For some, it provided a sense of purpose in life, letting them know there “is something more”; for others it ensured that they always had someone available to help them sort through their problems. Others described this relationship as giving them “strength” to overcome challenges such as family and relationship problems. For these individuals, this personal relationship with the spiritual world contributed to their belief that they had the inner strength to overcome hardships in their lives.

Probably 3–4 years I was just, you know, being myself, just doin’ whatever I wanted to do at any time. And life was horrible. I was losing jobs... money was a stretch... So church was good for the structure but not good for the overall well being of my spirituality. Because a lot of times in church they don’t teach you spirituality. And so I saw the extreme of me completely being out of the church and not around any positive influences or anything. I was just - I was a mess

Developing this relationship took several different forms. Respondents described pulling bits and pieces from religions such as Buddhism or Christianity that might include a belief in God as well as a strong respect for nature:

Meditation or learning about your past lives and karma and the ten commandments and just different things from different religions... if you’re gonna do something, you might as well find out all the best ways to do it and kind of get it all together...Have the ultimate super way to do it.

Some respondents felt that the religion you were raised in had a strong influence on any belief system you developed later in life – meaning that if you were raised as a Christian, discarding all of the beliefs from that religion would be difficult. For instance, those who had developed this individual spirituality retained the idea of a single benevolent god and the general tenets of Christianity such as redemption and kindness. Similarly, a few respondents felt that you could not be “completely spiritual without a little bit of religion.”

Because being spiritual...means a lot of stuff. It means you feel like you’re who you are and you’re comfortable with yourself and you’re happy with yourself. And I’m spiritual that I have these morals and these values and I know who I am...But there’s a little bit of religion that kinda influences you to be that way. You’re not necessarily religious but there was some religion that influenced you to think that way.

Spirituality for these respondents in essence provided them the sense of support and acceptance that for many was not available to them in organized religions. Young men acknowledged that they often had a great deal of help along the way in their spiritual exploration. This help came in the form of friends, family members, selected members of religious communities, as well as the gay community itself. Some young men who had moved to Los Angeles from another region of the country reported that just being in an environment where you could feel comfortable with your sexuality was helpful to reconciling their conflicting beliefs and developing their spirituality. Interestingly, one of the most common responses from individuals concerning where they found the strength or reserve to overcome the conflicts they had experienced was from themselves. Manuel, who described himself as spiritual and someone who worships and prays to one God, reported that being gay and embracing that part of his identity also contributed to his sense of spirituality.

Pretty much I can say it’s not that I’m worshipping something for me to be gay but it’s just like being spiritual about it, like having stuff that will say “Okay, I’m gay”... I’m spiritual in that sense. Yes, I have a rainbow kind of spiritual because I decide I have a rainbow there...when it comes to being gay, to me that’s being spiritual....

Like okay that's our flag, it represents us...I smile all the time when I see a rainbow out there or whatever it is, I smile.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study are striking in many ways. Other studies have investigated the process of integrating sexual identity and religion with older lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals (Leong, 2006; Mahaffy, 1996; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Schnoor, 2006; Thumms, 1991; Yip, 1997, 2002, 2005). Our study is unique in that it focuses on emerging adult YMSM who, given their unique developmental stage, are making a number of important choices about their lives, including religious and spiritual beliefs, in an effort to solidify a sense of identity. This study describes their experiences and processes in identifying the positive and nurturing aspects of religion such as feeling a sense of acceptance and support from a higher power and how these were integrated into their lives. While integrating the positive, YMSM in this sample eventually reframed or at times rejected the negative messages they heard while growing-up. In contrast to the stereotype that being homosexual precludes active involvement in religion or spiritual worlds, this study indicates that YMSM may be determined to find a way to develop a rich sense of religious or spiritual well-being. Although some respondents stated that when they were younger, they too felt that religiosity and homosexuality were mutually exclusive, their efforts to deal with the homophobic messages they encountered enabled many of them to incorporate a strong sense of spirituality in their lives.

For most respondents, the positive aspects of religion centered on the idea of a personal or individual relationship with a higher power who was generally seen as loving and non-judgmental, similar to the shift in beliefs noted in the NSYR, which identified a shift from previous generations that have perceived God as demanding or punitive (Smith & Denton, 2005) as well as studies among LGB adults which indicate that belief in God's unconditional love and acceptance of all people is important in resolving identity dissonance (Thumms, 1991; Yip, 1997). This was best illustrated in the discussions that described how young men evaluated anti-gay messages and developed their individual sense of spirituality. This shift from perceiving God as once punitive to a more non-judgmental and caring God may have benefited the religious respondents in our sample for whom the belief that God is loving and non-judgmental was a critical aspect of self-acceptance and integration into spiritual support systems.

The individual relationship that some respondents developed with God is similar to those described by Sheila Larson, a pseudonym of a research participant, who described her beliefs as "Sheilaism" or a sense of personal faith and relationship with God (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, & Tipton, 1985; Wilcox, 2002). This is important in light of how young men in this sample differentiated religiosity and spirituality, with religion often described as having "rules" and "structure" while spirituality was described as something internal and based on an individual relationship with a higher power. This is similar to what others have reported among emerging adults (Arnett, 2002; Yip, 2002), with individuals often picking and choosing from a menu of religious and spiritual options to form an "a la carte belief system" (Arnett, 2002).

What is different about the young men in this sample is that they were often exposed to homophobic messages in religious settings and made to feel unwelcome and fearful while attending religious services. In spite of these messages, the presence of a higher power was a source of comfort and support for many of the young men and thus they developed this individual relationship as a means to integrate their spiritual and sexual lives and further solidify their identity. This shift to an individualized spirituality is something that has been documented among other segments of American society. Roof (1999) likened this new emphasis on spirituality to a "lived religion" which is formed based on teachings from parents,

religious messages and doctrine, societal forces and personal experiences, arguing that spirituality is never entirely a personal issue as it is shaped by societal influences. Similarly, Wuthnow (1998) argued that religion in America has shifted from a “spirituality of dwelling” (e.g., a congregation or religious structure) to a “spirituality of seeking.” In the latter, individuals create a religious or spiritual identity through their life experiences.

Our qualitative data suggest that young men in this study showed a great deal of resiliency in their ability to define, integrate and express their religious and spiritual beliefs with their sexual identity. Despite the often difficult process, few of the qualitative respondents chose to change from one religious affiliation to another. Clearly, the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of these young men should not be disregarded, as many of them struggled to find a way to effectively integrate these two seemingly opposed identities.

The respondents in this study are still relatively young and are developmentally in the stage of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), a period when many gay and bisexual youth are coming to terms with their sexual identity (Savin-Williams, 1998) and learning ways of coping with homophobic influences (McDavitt et al., 2009). Our qualitative findings indicate the extent to which these young men are additionally engaging in a complex process of revising their beliefs about the moral acceptability of being gay, and of determining how involved they wish to be with religion or spirituality in general. This study helped us to understand the complexity of assessing religiosity among individuals who are engaged in these processes which, in fact may lead to changes over time in their level of religiosity. Respondents were selected for the qualitative interviews based on their self-reported levels of religiosity and spirituality in the 12-month follow-up survey, completed on average about 7 ½ months prior to the qualitative interview. We found that when they were asked to describe their religious beliefs, about half of the qualitative respondents clearly differed from their original survey response. This was most common amongst those who identified as primarily “religious” on the survey, but in the qualitative interview described themselves as non-religious or more spiritual than religious in their beliefs and practices. This indicates the importance of conceptualizing the religious or spiritual beliefs of YMSM as an on-going process, for as they mature and become exposed to additional belief systems or ideas, their beliefs may continue to develop. One respondent summed this up nicely, saying *“I’m constantly growing and I don’t like putting definitive answers to anything.”*

It is important to note again that we selected these qualitative respondents to provide us with information on a variety of experiences and perspectives. Therefore, we ensured that a third of the sample reported having low levels of religiosity and spirituality. To that end, it should be clarified that not all of the respondents reported experiencing these types of homophobic messages or reactions to them. In these cases, the respondents reported going to church services infrequently and that religion did not necessarily play a prominent role in their families’ lives. This was consistent with other research, which has found that parental religiosity and involvement in a religious community is related to how religious and/or involved in a religious organization an adolescent may be (Smith, Denton, Faris, & Regnerus, 2002). This is particularly important for this population who were exposed to homophobic messages from family members whom they described as religious.

While the qualitative sample is small, we did notice some differences between the racial/ethnic groups in the sample. In general, the African American respondents tended to report having family members who were highly religious, and a considerable proportion of them reported having a family member who was a member of the clergy. Among the White respondents, those who were members of a more conservative religion (e.g., Pentecostal, Evangelical) tended to report having some of the more distressing effects as a result of the negative messages. The Latino respondents generally reported being raised as Catholic and did not describe

experiencing the same types of homophobic messages or distress as the White and African American YMSM. Among the Catholic respondents, several reported that the church taught that sex in general was considered a sin, and they did not necessarily feel singled out as a result of their attraction to other men. What these data do indicate is that religion may be more intimately linked with the family among African Americans, a finding that others have reported in research among African American individuals. These findings also suggest that religious affiliation may play a role in the types of messages heard related to sexuality, more so than ethnic/racial identity.

There are several limitations to this study. While attempts at generalizability are not made with this analysis, the small sample size of qualitative respondents may have limited the range of experiences and perspectives described by respondents. In addition, the developmental trajectories of these YMSM should be explored to understand how their religious identity and belief systems may continue to change over time. Future studies should explore how religious and sexual identities are integrated in other sexual minority youth, particularly those with limited connections to gay communities. Most research conducted with YMSM has recruited respondents from venues such as bars and clubs, and little is known about those who do not have access to and/or choose not to attend gay-identified venues. Therefore, research focusing on YMSM who do not frequent these venues may reveal different perceptions or behaviors.

The present findings have several implications for clinicians working with YMSM. Respondents who encountered sustained or intense homophobic messages in religious contexts were likely to internalize such attitudes, leading them to feel sinful, evil, or shameful, and in several cases seeking to change their sexual orientation. Ultimately, all of these young men concluded that change was not possible, and instead endeavored to accept their sexual orientation, an outcome that they described as highly beneficial in a number of ways, including increased ability to care for themselves and locate support. Thus, at times, young men may approach counselors hoping to change their sexual orientation; however, these findings indicate that the most beneficial strategy for their long-term well being is to help them accept their sexual orientation and work to identify ways to more fully integrate their religious/spiritual beliefs with their sexual identities. Because some respondents described dissociating from intense negative emotions they experienced in response to the trauma of repeatedly encountering homophobic attitudes, therapists should offer an approach that is not only gay-affirmative, but that also focuses on helping individuals pay attention to and work through feelings that are repressed or difficult to face. Additionally, as individuals in this study sought support from a number of different sources, including clergy, it may be advantageous to engage gay-friendly clergy in dialogues on how best to support these youth.

In order to attain self-acceptance in the face of homophobic messages, most respondents relied on the idea that sexual orientation is an innate and unchangeable aspect of their personalities. Young men may benefit from being informed about research that supports the idea of gay or bisexual identity as integral to their being. Given the challenges in assessing religion identified in this study, future research in this area should include a qualitative component to provide respondents an opportunity to explain and contextualize their survey responses. In addition, while most of the respondents in this study appear to have resolved the conflict between their religious and spiritual beliefs and their sexual identity, younger adolescents may still be in the midst of this conflict. Future research should explore this issue with a younger sample of adolescents to provide additional perspective and nuance to this process.

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Figure 1.
Process of Resolving Internalized Homophobia from Religious Sources

Table 1

Description of the Study Sample from Wave 3 Survey (N = 483) and Qualitative Study (N = 36)

Variables	Categories	Total Sample n (%)	Qualitative Respondents n (%)
Age	18 – 19 yrs	88 (18)	6 (17)
	20 – 21 yrs	195 (40)	18 (50)
	22+ yrs	200 (41)	12 (33)
Race/ethnicity	African- American	115 (24)	12 (33)
	Caucasian	192 (40)	12 (33)
	Mexican descent	176 (36)	12 (33)
Residence	Family	237 (49)	16 (44)
	Own place/apartment	203 (42)	17 (47)
	With friends/partner	31 (6)	1 (3)
	No regular place/other	12 (3)	2 (6)
Employment	In school	50 (10)	6 (17)
	In school, employed	149 (31)	6 (17)
	Employed, not in school	235 (49)	19 (53)
	Not employed, not in school	49 (10)	5 (14)
Education level	Less than high school	26 (5)	2 (6)
	High school/GED	110 (23)	6 (17)
	Vocational	17 (4)	- (0)
	Some college	284 (59)	26 (72)
	College degree	46 (10)	2 (6)
Sexual identity	Gay	390 (81)	28 (77)
	Other same-sex identity	23 (5)	2 (6)
	Bisexual	57 (12)	4 (11)
	Straight	6 (1)	--
	Don't know/Refuse	7 (1)	2 (6)
Sexual attraction	Males only	339 (70)	25 (69)
	Males and females	131 (27)	10 (28)
	Females only	7 (1)	1 (3)
	Neither/don't know	6 (1)	--
Immigration status	Born outside US	74 (15)	7 (19)
	Born in US	407 (84)	29 (81)
Level of religiosity	Not at all religious	138 (29)	10 (28)
	Not very religious	124 (26)	14 (39)
	Somewhat religious	172 (36)	11 (31)
	Very religious	43 (9)	1 (3)
Level of spirituality	Not at all spiritual	37 (8)	4 (11)
	Not very spiritual	60 (13)	8 (22)
	Somewhat spiritual	216 (45)	12 (33)
	Very spiritual	168 (35)	12 (33)

Table 2

Religiosity and Spirituality from Wave 3 Survey (N = 483) and Qualitative Study (N = 36)

Variables	Categories	Total Sample n (%)	Qualitative Respondents n (%)
Importance of religion or spirituality	Not at all important	7 (2)	--
	Not very important	45 (12)	3 (13)
	Somewhat important	164 (42)	12 (52)
	Very important	177 (45)	8 (35)
Frequency attend religious services	Never	170 (35)	12 (33)
	Less than once a year	77 (16)	7 (19)
	Several times a year	113 (23)	12 (33)
	Once a month or more	85 (18)	5 (14)
Religious beliefs influence sexual behavior	Once a week or more	38 (8)	--
	Not at all	236 (49)	16 (44)
	Not very much	74 (15)	9 (25)
	Neutral	66 (14)	5 (14)
Religion growing up	Somewhat	76 (16)	4 (11)
	Very much	29 (6)	2 (6)
	Agnostic or Atheist	9 (2)	1 (3)
	Eastern religion	2 (0)	--
	Muslim	1 (0)	--
	Catholic	195 (40)	14 (39)
	Jewish	10 (2)	--
	Spiritual	--	--
	Non-religious	24 (5)	2 (6)
	Protestant/Christian	174 (36)	16 (44)
	Other religions	7 (1)	--
	Multiple religions	60 (12)	3 (8)
	Don't know/Refused	1 (0)	--
Current religion	Agnostic or Atheist	76 (16)	10 (28)
	Eastern religion	3 (1)	--
	Muslim	--	--
	Catholic	102 (21)	7 (19)
	Jewish	6 (1)	--
	Spiritual	32 (7)	3 (8)
	Non-religious	79 (16)	3 (8)
	Protestant/Christian	134 (28)	10 (28)
	Other religions	12 (2.5)	--
	Multiple religions	32 (6.6)	2 (6)
Changed religion	Don't know/Refused	7 (1)	1 (3)
	Yes	257 (53)	19 (53)