

5-2014

Faith and homosexuality: grace, religious problem-solving styles and the internalized homophobia of homosexuals

Maria R. Matty

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, mmatty10@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholar.utc.edu/honors-theses>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Matty, Maria R., "Faith and homosexuality: grace, religious problem-solving styles and the internalized homophobia of homosexuals" (2014). *Honors Theses*.

Faith and Homosexuality:
Grace, Religious Problem-Solving Styles and the Internalized Homophobia of
Homosexuals
Maria Matty
Dr. Paul Watson

Abstract

The current research examines the grace-orientation and problem-solving styles of gay and lesbian people of faith relative to their relationship with God and the extent, if any, of their internalized homonegativity. This issue was investigated using psychological measures involving a) the style of religious problem-solving, b) internalized homonegativity, c) feelings of shame and guilt and d) personal experiences of grace. Statistical analyses found that having less homonegativity toward oneself and the disclosure of homosexuality is associated with higher levels of experienced grace and lower feelings of shame and guilt. Collaborative and deferring religious problem-solving styles correlated positively with both experienced grace and awareness of grace. Additionally, personal feelings of guilt are significantly positively correlated with the awareness of grace. The lower feelings of shame, guilt, and internalized homonegativity suggest that an adaptive integration of sexuality and spirituality is positively correlated with experiences of grace.

Faith and Homosexuality:

Grace, Religious Problem-Solving Styles and the Internalized Homophobia of Homosexuals

As the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) community continues to make strides in the fight for civil rights and social acceptance, the demand for a scientific study of the many aspects of their community is increasing. The “mental illness” models of homosexuality have long ago been found to lack empirical support (Hooker, 1993). Furthermore, current research suggests that sexual orientation may be strongly influenced by prenatal brain hormonal organization effects, as well as by postnatal socialization. Similar to many other aspects of human personality and identity, early learning within the first few months of life also involves changes in both brain chemistry and structure (Money, 1987). However, despite the empirical support for biologically intrinsic sexual orientation, the persistent disbelief of many individuals continues to affect the LGBT community. Research has indicated that gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals have higher prevalence of depression, panic attacks, generalized anxiety disorder, and psychological distress than their heterosexual counterparts (Cochran, Sullivan, & Mays, 2003). This difference is often attributed to the harmful effects of social stigma and discrimination in heterosexist and antigay societies (Fife & Wright, 2000). Although circumstances have changed over the last decade, evidence for the pervasiveness of homonegative discrimination and social stigma remains abundant. Homonegativity is so widespread in American society that many researchers view the internalization of homophobia as a normative developmental event of homosexual individuals (Herek, 1991).

The increased risk for adjustment problems in the homosexual population could be attributed wholly or in part to an internalization of homophobia. Internalized homophobia is functionally defined as a set of negative attitudes and affects toward homosexuality in other persons, toward homosexual features in oneself, and towards one's homosexuality being disclosed to others (Nungesser, 1983). Maylon (1982) proposed that individuals incorporate these negative attitudes into their self-image and that this causes fragmentation of sexual and personality facets that disrupt the developmental process. He hypothesized that internalized homophobia causes depression, influences identity formation, low self-esteem, the elaboration of defenses, psychological integrity, and superego functioning. For Maylon (1928), the pathological effects of internalized homophobia are a result of a suppression of homosexual feelings, a façade of a heterosexual identity, and an interruption of identity formation. Confronting and working through such internalized homophobia can be a long and arduous process.

As they move through life, gay and lesbian individuals face spiritual or existential crises, just as all humans do. Unfortunately, the traditional sources of spiritual guidance, such as religious leaders, often do not provide comfort or reassurance for homosexual individuals. Because most of the core values and structures of American society have evolved from the Judeo-Christian heritage, commonly accepted scriptural interpretations and doctrinal traditions has established a societal framework of shame and sinfulness for gay and lesbian people (Boswell, 1980). Participation in organized religion is usually thought to include negative messages about one's sexuality through religious teachings, faith group activities directed at heterosexual couples, prohibition of openly gay clergy or religious leaders, and isolation or avoidance of identified LGBT individuals in the faith.

According to Ritter (1989), gay men and women are usually offered only three moral choices by Judeo-Christian religions: conversion/repentance, celibacy, or an unauthentic heterosexual marriage. These limiting options can result in either living with the pain and frustration of continual attempts to deny one's biological nature or the anguish of remaining forever in perceived sinfulness or "unlovableness." For many gay men and women in the Christian tradition, the best-case scenario is to be treated as invisible, with one's orientation merely whispered about but never openly mentioned.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that internalized homophobia in the United States is especially prevalent in religious cultures. Greater endorsement of internalized homophobia is associated with higher levels of shame and psychological distress (Shildo, 1994). Higher internalized homophobia is also related to low self-esteem and lack of perceived social support among gay and lesbian individuals (Szymanski, Chung, & Balsam, 2001). Research has more specifically shown that the more individuals experience religious doubts as positive and view the church in which they were raised as liberal-minded, the less shame and internalized homophobia these participants display. Conversely, higher levels of shame, guilt, and internalized homophobia were associated with the view that doubting one's religion was unacceptable and a history of perceived conservatism in one's childhood religion (Sherry, Adelman, Whilde, & Quick, 2010). Some have argued that the negative associations between well-being and religion are attributable to negative religious teachings about homosexuality, failure of religious communities to honor and support gay and lesbian partnerships and families, the lack of gay and lesbian leadership models, and the absence of welcome for gay men and lesbians (Lease, Horne, & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005). Similarly, Ritter and O'Neill (1996) have

also attributed the negative relationship between religiosity and measures of well-being in homosexuals to religiously validated shame and self-hatred that undermines self-esteem and leads to depressive symptoms.

Given these circumstances, it would seem that the logical, reasonable action for lesbian, gay or bisexual individuals would be to denounce their religion and join atheists or embrace agnosticism. Indeed, Franks, Templer, Cappelletty, and Kaufman (1991) found 49% of respondents endorsing “no affiliation” within the gay and lesbian population. And yet, there are those that maintain, “with God, all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26). Four strategies for dealing with homosexual and Christian identities have been identified (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000): a) rejecting the religious identity altogether, b) rejecting the homosexual identity and attempting to either transform his or her homosexual desire or control behavior, c) compartmentalization of the separate identities and switching between the two, or d) identity integration and thus becoming simultaneously religious and gay.

Individuals who attempt the fourth strategy hold a positive gay identity, a positive religious identity, and do not feel conflicted or hold self-imposed walls between the two. In their analysis of gay-affirming religious communities, Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) found that participation in a supportive religious congregation, as well as openness about one’s sexual orientation, helped gay and lesbian people to integrate their sexual and religious identities. Similarly, another study of affirming faith experiences and psychological health for a homosexual population suggested that current affirming faith group experiences are indirectly related to psychological health through lesser endorsement of internalized homophobia and higher scores on measures of spirituality

(Lease, Horne, & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005).

These results were echoed by Daniel Helminiak (1989), who stated that acceptance of one's sexuality is critical for positive self-esteem, which is a prerequisite for post-conventional, spiritual development. Helminiak defines spiritual development as "the ongoing integration that results in the self-responsible subject [that comes] from openness to an intrinsic principle of authentic self-transcendence" (1987). Understood from this perspective, gay and lesbian people must accept their homosexual erotic feelings as part of their own personhood before they can be comfortable with themselves. Discomfort with sexuality is discomfort with one's body, and at a very basic level discomfort with one's body impedes self-esteem. Lack of self-esteem blocks advanced human development and therefore spiritual development (Helminiak, 1989).

In this light, identity integration seems like the choice strategy for negotiating conflicting beliefs about religion and homosexuality; however, this is much easier said than accomplished. Levy and Reeves (2011) proposed a 5-stage identity integration process by which gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve their conflicting sexual identity and religious beliefs. They used a grounded theory approach to develop this process through analysis of interviews from 15 homosexual participants. This process involves: 1) an awareness of the conflict, 2) an initial response to the conflict, 3) a catalyst of new knowledge propelling participants forward, 4) steps of working through the conflict, and 5) resolution of conflict.

This entire process is affected by personal factors (such as reflective abilities, strength and resiliency, anger, creativity, and humor) and contextual factors (such as family, community resources, and church doctrine). The initial response after realizing

the conflicting identities (through church teaching, Bible reading, etc.) was secrecy, increased religious involvement, and depression, as would be expected based on research into internalized homophobia in religious cultures (Shildo, 1994). However, the turning point in integration was acquiring new knowledge. Some participants reported realizing a “disconnect” between church doctrine and participants’ experiences of the world, which caused them to question their faith and to begin to work through the conflict on their own terms. The first aspect of resolution was acceptance of their sexual identities as gay, lesbian, or queer. After this acceptance, most participants continued to seek out additional information about various religious beliefs concerning sexual orientation. Respondents also became more reflective about what they were learning, hearing, and experiencing in order to define their beliefs more concretely. In addition to accepting their sexual identity, many participants embraced a more personalized faith upon resolution of their conflicting identities. One respondent stated “really, truly what Christianity is about is fully being the person that you are, that God made you.” (Levy & Reeves, 2011).

Walton (2006) conducted another study based on interviews of 8 Christian gay men, in which he outlined three strategies for the process of identity integration: “Biblical Interpretation”, “Christianity of Questions”, and “Choice”. The “Biblical Interpretation” strategy emphasizes an exegetical, as opposed to literal, interpretation of the Bible in which the reader considers the social, historical, and political contexts in which the text was written. One of the participants explained that “one of the things that the church doesn’t realize is that homosexuality is not about sex. For me, even back then, it wasn’t about sex, it was about two people loving each other,” (as cited in Walton, 2006).

The “Christianity of Questions” strategy is a second integration strategy involving

the ability to recognize and accept inconsistencies between God and church without feeling compelled to resolve them. When faced with exile from his church, one of the participants remarked that he had to “focus on the Lord, because it’s really our relationship with the Lord, it’s not our relationship with the church,” (as cited in Walton, 2006). For these men, the contradiction allowed for growth and self-definition. One participant summed up his integration by stating he prefers “a Christianity of questions rather than a Christianity of answers because the former, but not the latter, allows for personal growth and change.”

The third strategy outlined by Walton (2006) concerned the matter of “Choice”. Most of the participants viewed their homosexuality as God-created and God-approved. A participant remarked, “The religious right uses the term ‘lifestyle choice.’ [Being gay] is not a choice. The choice is whether you accept it or not.” (as cited in Walton, 2006). Although the population size in this study was small and male-only, these strategies provide possible avenues for gay men and lesbian women alike to integrate their conflicting homosexual and spiritual identities.

This research seeking identity integration strategies for Christian homosexual individuals rests solely upon qualitative interviews with 15 or less participants. The present study aims to supplement the existing qualitative data quantitatively. As fundamentalist, conservative religious beliefs appear to negatively affect the psychological health of homosexual individuals, this study seeks to broaden the analysis by studying different strategies in which religious people could use their relationship with God to address contradicting issues associated with their homosexuality. Procedures explored this issue by examining religious problem-solving styles and Christian beliefs

about grace.

The Religious Problem-Solving Scale (Pargament, Kennell, Hathaway, Grevengoed, Newman, & Jones, 1988) measures the application of one's beliefs about relating to God in everyday decision-making processes. This scale identifies three styles of problem-solving 1) deferring, 2) collaborative, and 3) self-directing. A deferring style indicates that the individual waits for solutions from God and relies entirely on divine intervention. The report of a problem-solving style involving active and cooperative personal exchange with God is identified as collaborative. A self-directing style emphasizes the freedom people have to direct their own lives and is largely viewed as non-religious. Both self-directing and deferring styles have been shown to correlate positively with depression in a homosexual sample (Fontenot, 2002). However, the collaborative problem-solving style was negatively related with depression. This study investigates possible reasons for why a collaborative relationship with God is less negative than others.

The Nungesser Homosexual Attitudes Inventory (NHAI; Nungesser, 1983) was developed to study the attitudinal differences between homosexual individuals who feel positively about themselves and about the label, and those identifying as homosexual and those who do not. A person scoring high on this test feels positively about his or her homosexuality and other homosexuals, and is not overly concerned or sensitive to the expressions and disclosure of information regarding his or her homosexuality. This inventory studies homosexual attitudes 1) towards oneself, 2) toward homosexuality in general and toward other homosexual individuals, and 3) towards the disclosure of one's homosexuality. The "self" dimension examines the attitudes toward the fact of one's own

homosexuality. This includes reactions to one's own behavior or attraction and reactions to being homosexual. The "other" dimension studies the attitudes toward homosexuality in general and toward other homosexual individuals. This includes negative traits of homosexuals or absence of positive traits, attitudes concerning the legal status of homosexuality, and attitudes concerning the morality, biology, and value of homosexuality. The final "disclosure" dimension studies the attitudes toward the fact of one's homosexuality being known by others. This includes reactions toward other's knowing and expectations of repression.

The Harder Personal Feeling Questionnaire (PFQ2; Harder & Zalma, 1990) was developed to measure shame and guilt with high scores on either dimension indicating high shame or guilt. Previous research has frequently linked depression with shame and guilt, but more strongly with shame. Whereas guilt has been described as having a more internal locus of origin and evaluation than shame experiences (Harder & Zalma, 1990).

The perseverance of a homosexual orientation in the face of intolerance, homophobia, and depression exhibited in the lives of devout gays and lesbians is a feat of strong faith. The current research hypothesizes that grace may be the source of this courage. Grace generally refers to the unmerited favor shown by a superior to an inferior, especially the favor shown to humankind by God's kindness. The newly developed Amazing Grace Scale (TAGS) will investigate how LGBT individuals integrate their identities to make decisions and solve problems (Bassett, 2013). Grace is defined as a state of right standing with God and an impartation of power to live and act in a godly manner. This scale identifies two dimensions: an identified grace and an awareness of the nature of grace and an experience of the fruits of grace. A high score of an identified

grace subscale indicates a notion that because of God's work in the person's life, the person is now free to act in ways that would please God. A high score on the awareness of grace subscale would demonstrate an internalization that recognized the need for God and a sense of understanding of what God has done for them with resulting gratitude and love toward such a gracious God (Bassett, 2013). This internalized faith and grace could counteract the internalized homonegativity that has been shown to result from a homosexual individual's religious involvement.

The present research proposes the following hypotheses:

- 1) Low scores on the Nungesser Homosexual Attitudes Inventory will be associated lower scores of grace, and higher feelings of shame and guilt.
- 2) High scores on the Nungesser Homosexual Attitudes Inventory will be associated with higher levels of experienced grace, and lower feelings of shame and guilt.
- 3) The collaborative and deferring religious problem solving styles will be negatively correlated with shame and guilt and positively correlated with grace.
- 4) The self-directing religious problem-solving style will be positively correlated with shame and guilt and negatively correlated with grace.

These findings may provide a quantitative basis for reasoning behind the resilience some faithful homosexuals have towards the negative attitudes and the successful integration of these two "identities".

Methodology

Participants

Two hundred and sixty two participants responded to the nationwide survey requests posted on online LGBT community forums, websites, and email addresses. Of the participants, 133 were female (50.4%) while 125 were male (47.5%) and 1.9% responded as “Other”, mostly in the Transgendered or Pansexual category. In this sample, 117 of the participants identified themselves as gay, with 94 identified as lesbian, 36 identified as bisexual, and 15 identified as “Other” designated an asexual or pansexual orientation. Online research participants have been shown to have greater sample diversity (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004) and greater likelihood of honest responding (Locke & Gilbert, 1995).

Measures

Researchers created and secured a self-report online questionnaire with Transport Layer Security (TLS) encryption, hosted on an SSAE-16 SOC II certified data server using the university’s “Qualtrics” account. The principal investigator provided the questionnaire website to participants. Participants responded to the online questionnaire at their own time and on their own computers connected to the Internet. The Qualtrics portal, which can only be accessed through a password-protected account, recorded the responses. The principle investigator then exported the data from Qualtrics to a personal computer and removed all personal identifiers to ensure participant anonymity. Responding to each item occurred along a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from “strongly disagree” or “never” (1) to “strongly agree” or “all the time” (5). Scales appeared within the questionnaire in the order in which they are reviewed below.

Nungesser Homosexuality Attitudes Inventory (NHAI; Nungesser, 1983). This 34-item scale conceives of internalized homophobia as consisting of negative attitudes towards one's own homosexual orientation (self subscale, 10-items), negative attitudes toward homosexuality in general and towards other gay persons (other subscale, 12-items), and negative reactions toward others' knowing about one's homosexuality (disclosure subscale, 10-items). High scores indicate low internalized homophobia. This scale was modified for use in a lesbian population as well as with gay men.

Representative items of the self subscale said, "I am glad to be gay" (M response per item = 4.15, $SD = .606$, $\alpha = .817$). Items indicative of other subscale said, "Homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in humans" (M response per item = 4.30, $SD = .426$, $\alpha = .655$). Representative items of disclosure subscale said, "I would not mind if my boss found out I am gay" (M response per item = 3.85, $SD = .670$, $\alpha = .860$).

The Pargament Religious Problem-Solving Scale (Pargament, Kennell, Hathaway, Grevengoed, Newman, & Jones, 1988). Thirty-seven items made up the Pargament Religious Problem-Solving scale. This scale measures the application of one's beliefs about relating to God in the everyday decision-making process. Again, this scale identifies three styles of problem-solving 1) deferring, 2) collaborative, and 3) self-directing. A deferring style indicates that the individual waits for solutions from God and relies entirely on divine intervention (M response per item = 2.26, $SD = .875$, $\alpha = .953$). A representative item said, "God solves my problems for me without my doing anything." The report of a problem-solving style involving active and cooperative personal exchange with God is identified as collaborative (M response per item = 3.09, $SD = 1.23$, $\alpha = .986$). A representative item said, "When a hard time has passed, God works with me to help me

learn from it.” A self-directing style emphasizes the freedom people have to direct their own lives and is largely viewed as non-religious (M response per item=2.97, $SD=.944$, $\alpha=.960$). A representative item said, “I act to solve my problems without God’s help”.

Harder Personal Feeling Questionnaire-2 (PFQ2; Harder & Lewis, 1987)

Harder and Lewis’s 16-item scale assessed daily feelings of shame and guilt on a scale of “never” (1) to “always” (5) (1987). Indicative of the 10-item shame scale was the emotion, “Embarrassed” (M response per item = 2.43, $SD = .564$, $\alpha = .838$). The daily guilt scale included 6 items such as, “Feeling you deserve criticism for what you did” (M response per item = 2.52, $SD = .659$, $\alpha = .812$).

The Amazing Grace Scale (TAGS; Bassett, 2013). Rodney Bassett’s 16-item

Amazing Grace Scale measures an individual’s conceptualization of grace-orientation (Bassett, 2013). Grace is defined as a state of right standing with God and an impartation of power to live and act in a godly manner. This scale identifies two dimensions: internalization of faith (9 items) (M response per item=2.52, $SD=.659$, $\alpha=.974$), such as “I enjoy simply being in the presence of God,” and an awareness of the nature of grace and experiencing the fruits of grace (7 items) such as, “I find myself longing for God” (M response per item= 3.33, $SD=1.18$, $\alpha=.944$).

Procedures

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Research Subjects of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga approved all procedures. Participants were contacted initially through snowball sampling in the local Chattanooga LGBT and open and affirming church communities. Secondly, a national sample was obtained through email contact of LGBT open and accepting church communities and gay Christian

organizations. The recruitment email provided the link to the survey in Qualtrics. Participants were instructed of their anonymity and that consent was implied with completion of the online survey.

Results

Correlational analyses examined relationships among the Homosexual Attitudes towards Others, Homosexual Attitudes towards Self, Homosexual Attitudes towards Disclosure, Collaborative Religious Problem-Solving, Deferring Religious Problem-Solving, Self-Directed Religious Problem-Solving, Personal Feelings of Shame, Personal Feelings of Guilt, Grace Identified, and Grace Awareness scales. An α -level of .05 defined statistical significance.

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for and the correlations among the 9 variables. There were 25 significant correlations ($p < .05$). All three dimensions of the Nungesser Homosexual Attitudes Inventory correlated positively with each other. These data revealed that if individuals felt positively towards their own homosexuality, then they also felt positively about the homosexuality of others and about the disclosure of homosexuality in general.

Additionally, all three homosexual attitude dimensions correlated negatively with Personal Feelings of Shame and Personal Feelings of Guilt. This was also predicted as homosexual individuals with high positive feelings towards the disclosure of their own and others' homosexuality would have low feelings of shame and guilt. The Grace Identified, but not the Grace Awareness, factor correlated positively with Homosexual Attitudes towards Self ($r = .132$) and Homosexual Attitudes towards Disclosure ($r =$

.180). Neither grace dimension displayed a significant correlation with Homosexual Attitudes towards Others.

The Self-Directing Religious Problem-Solving factor correlated negatively with both the deferring ($r = -.710$) and collaborative ($r = -.874$) dimensions of the Religious Problem-Solving Styles. As self-directed problem solving is largely thought as a non-religious style compared to collaborative and deferring problem solving, this result is not surprising. The Deferring Religious Problem-Solving and Collaborative Religious Problem-Solving factors correlate positively with each other ($r = .791$).

The Collaborative Religious Problem-Solving factor also correlated positively with Grace Identified ($r = .888$), Grace Awareness ($r = .843$), and Personal Feelings of Guilt ($r = .121$). The Deferring Religious Problem-Solving factor also correlates positively with both Grace Identified ($r = .774$) and Grace Awareness ($r = .765$). The non-religious Self-Directing Religious Problem Solving factor correlated negatively with Grace Identified ($r = -.807$), Grace Awareness ($r = -.784$), and Personal Feelings of Guilt ($r = -.123$).

The Personal Feelings of Guilt and Personal Feelings of Shame factors correlated positively with each other ($r = .660$), as did both of the Grace Identified and Grace Awareness factors ($r = .912$). Finally, Personal Feelings of Guilt and the Grace Awareness" factor correlated positively with each other ($r = .191$). This may indicate that individuals with high guilt feel indebted to the grace of God.

Discussion

These results partially confirm hypothesis 1 & 2 by showing that high scores on the Homosexual Attitudes towards Self and Homosexual Attitudes towards Disclosure, but not on the Homosexual Attitudes towards Others, were associated higher scores of Grace Internalized, and lower feelings of shame and guilt. This result may indicate that those with high acceptance of their own homosexuality feel comfortable disclosing their homosexuality because of God's work in their life but they may not feel as comfortable with others' homosexuality because they doesn't know the extent of God's work in others' lives.

Hypotheses 3 & 4 were not supported by the present research as the collaborative and deferring religious problem solving styles were not negatively correlated with shame and guilt and positively correlated with grace. Nor was the self-directing religious problem-solving style positively correlated with shame and guilt and negatively correlated with grace.

However, the Collaborative Religious Problem-Solving factor did correlate positively with Grace Identified, Grace Awareness, and Personal Feelings of Guilt, perhaps because, as an individual works together with God, he is more aware of his wrong choices and therefore, feels guiltier and has a deeper understanding of God's grace. Tangeny and Dearing (2002) suggest that guilt aligns with adaptive behavior and shame aligns with maladaptive behavior. Shame, in this model, is thought of as a public moral dimension that can harm one's self-esteem. Guilt, however, is private, internalized, and constructive in knowing right action from wrong. Self-Directing Religious Problem Solving factor correlated negatively with Grace Identified, Grace Awareness, and

Personal Feelings of Guilt. This result may be attributed to less religious individuals feeling less guilt because they are not holding themselves to any preordained, God-sent moral standards and therefore have less of an understanding of God's grace.

The results of this study were remarkable in several ways. Not only was the relationship between shame, guilt, and positive homosexual attitudes significantly negative, as hypothesized, the relationship between internalized grace and positive homosexual attitudes were significantly positive as well. These results are especially interesting because personal feelings of guilt increased as the awareness of grace increased, yet, internalized homonegativity decreased as internalization of grace increased. The increased guilt may be caused by an increased awareness of God's grace. As grace also increased with collaborative and deferring religious problem-solving styles, homosexual individuals may feel guiltier for their shortcomings and sins because they feel undeserving of God's grace. However, when grace is internalized, positive feelings towards oneself and the disclosure of homosexuality increased. This may suggest that an individual's understanding God's grace as undeserved, yet unwavering, is key to self-acceptance of one's homosexuality. These findings seem to agree with the previous research of Helminiak (1989) who stated that to love God, individuals must love themselves, as humans are created by His hand and in His image.

Furthermore, once individuals internalize this understanding of God's grace and accept themselves, they no longer fear public disclosure or shame, yet they do feel private guilt due to their personal relationship with God. An interview by Walton (2006) further supports this notion, as one participant noted, "I realized that for so long I was mad at God, and I had embraced the church. But at that point, I realized that it's not God that I

should be mad at. It's the church that I should be mad at. I was able to embrace God" (as cited in Walton, 2006).

With only 262 participants, the sample size was one limitation of this study. This sample size limited the strength of the statistical analysis. With so much controversy and public scrutiny surrounding the sensitive topic, it is difficult to find and recruit gay Christians to participate in such a study, especially as the researcher was an outside recruiter. Nevertheless, recruitment and data collection is continuing for further research with a larger sample size. As the sample consisted of 238 white and 23 minority participants, the lack of racial diversity in the sample was another limitation of the study. This lack of diversity is not thought to reflect the demographics of gay Christians. Other factors, such as the outspoken opposition of homosexuality of many black Protestant pastors, add another complexity that requires further research.

Furthermore, the participant pool for the present study consisted largely of individuals involved in gay Christian organizations, and therefore already at least somewhat open and affirming in their homosexuality. Further research will need to include Christian homosexual individuals who are still closeted or undergoing conversion therapy in order to have compare those who have accepted the homosexual identities with those who have rejected it.

In summary, further research should investigate a larger, more diverse sample of religious, spiritual, or faithful homosexual individuals. This sample should include individuals who integrate by denying their faith or denying their homosexuality, along with those who accept and integrate both.

Additionally, a qualitative element for participants to explain their feelings and thoughts more fully and exactly would be an interesting addition in efforts to further understand this complex and developing issue.

In conclusion, the present research investigated the grace-orientation and problem-solving styles of gay and lesbian people of faith and the extent of their internalized homonegativity. This issue was investigated using psychological measures involving a) the style of religious problem-solving, b) internalized homonegativity, c) feelings of shame and guilt and d) personal experiences of grace. Correlational analyses found that having less homonegativity toward oneself and the disclosure of homosexuality was associated with higher levels of experienced grace, and lower feelings of shame and guilt. Also, collaborative and deferring religious problem-solving styles correlated positively with both experienced grace and awareness of grace. Additionally, personal feelings of guilt significantly increase with increased awareness of grace. The lower feelings of shame, guilt, and internalized homonegativity suggest that an adaptive integration of sexuality and spirituality is positively correlated with experiences of grace. Therefore, the data support the possibility that an integration of spiritual and homosexual identities can be achieved through acceptance of one's homosexuality, which can result from, rather than contradict, one's particular belief in Christianity and the grace of God.

Table 1
Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|---|----------|-----------|---------|---------|---------|--------|--------|---------|---------|---------|--------|
| 1. Homosexual Attitudes towards Self | 4.15 | 0.606 | - | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Homosexual Attitudes towards Others | 4.3 | 0.426 | .653** | - | | | | | | | |
| 3. Homosexual Attitudes towards Disclosure | 3.85 | 0.67 | .694** | .573** | - | | | | | | |
| 4. Personal Feelings of Shame | 2.43 | 0.564 | -.285** | -.219** | -.330** | - | | | | | |
| 5. Personal Feelings of Guilt | 2.52 | 0.659 | -.316** | -.206** | -.303** | .660** | - | | | | |
| 6. Collaborative Religious Problem-Solving | 3.09 | 1.23 | .091 | -.012 | .107 | -.057 | .121* | - | | | |
| 7. Deferring Religious Problem-Solving | 2.26 | 0.875 | .002 | -.108 | .027 | -.032 | .097 | .791** | - | | |
| 8. Self-Directing Religious Problem-Solving | 2.97 | 0.944 | -.065 | -.005 | -.100 | .088 | -.123* | -.874** | -.710** | - | |
| 9. Grace Identified | 2.52 | 0.659 | .132* | .016 | .180** | -.068 | .090 | .888** | .774** | -.807** | - |
| 10. Grace Awareness | 3.33 | 1.18 | .000 | -.088 | .074 | .031 | .191** | .843** | .765** | -.784** | .912** |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

References

- Bassett, R. (2013). An empirical consideration of grace and legalism within Christian experience. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity, 32*(1), 43-69.
- Boswell, J. (1980). *Christianity, social tolerance, and homosexuality: Gay people in Western Europe from the beginning of the Christian era to the fourteenth century*. Chicago; University of Chicago Press.
- Cochran, S. D., Sullivan, J. G., & Mays, V. M. (2003). Prevalence of mental disorders, psychological distress, and mental health services use among lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults in the United States. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 71*, 53-61
- Fife, B. L., & Wright, E. R. (2000). The dimensionality of stigma: A comparison of its impact on the self of persons with HIV/AIDS and cancer. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 41*, 50-67
- Fontenot, E. (2002). *The use of religious resources in response to anti-homosexual religious attitudes and behavior*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Boston University, MA.
- Franks, K., Templer, D., Cappelletty, G., & Kaufman, I. (1991). Exploration of death anxiety as a function of religious variables in gay men with AIDS. *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying, 22*, 43-50.
- Gosling, S. D., Vazire, S., Srivastava, S., & John, O. P. (2004). Should we trust Web-based studies? A comparative analysis of six preconceptions about Internet questionnaires. *American Psychologist, 59*, 93–104.
- Harder, D. W., & Zalma, A. (1990). Two promising shame and guilt scales:

- A construct validity comparison, *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 55, 729–745.
- Helminiak, D. (1989). Self- esteem, sexual self-acceptance, and spirituality, *Journal of Sex Education & Therapy*, 15, 3, 200-210
- Helminiak, D. A. (1987). *Spiritual development: An interdisciplinary study*. Chicago: Loyola University Press
- Herek, G. M. (1991). Stigma, prejudice, and violence against lesbians and gay men. In J. C. Gonsiorek & J. D. Weinrich (Eds.), *Homosexuality: Research implications for public policy* (pp.60-80), Newbury Park, CA: Sage
- Hooker, E. (1993). Reflections of a 40-year exploration: A scientific view on homosexuality. *American Psychologist*, 48, 450-453
- Lease, S. H., Horne, S. G., & Noffsinger-Frazier, N. (2005). Affirming faith experiences and psychological health for Caucasian lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. *Journal Of Counseling Psychology*, 52(3), 378-388. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.52.3.378
- Levy, D. & Reeves, P., (2011) Resolving identity conflict: Gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing, *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 23,1, 53-68, doi: 10.1080/10538720.2010.530193
- Locke, S. D., & Gilbert, B. O. (1995). Method of psychology assessment, self-disclosure, and experiential differences: A study of computer, questionnaire, and interview assessment formats. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 10, 255–263.
- Maylon, A. K. (1982). Psychotherapeutic implications of internalized homophobia in gay men. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 7, 59-70

- Money, J. (1987). Sin, sickness, or status? Homosexual gender identity and psychoneuroendocrinology. *American Psychologist, 42*, 384-399
- Nungesser, L. G. (1983). *Homosexual acts, actors, and identities*. New York: Praeger.
- Pargament, K., Kennell, J., Hathaway, W., Grevengoed, N., Newman, J., Jones, W. (1988). Religion and the problem-solving process: Three styles of coping. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 27, 1*, 90-104.
- Ritter, K. Y., & O'Neill, C. W. (1989). Moving through loss: The spiritual journey of gay men and lesbian women. *Journal of Counseling & Development. 68*, 9-15.
- Rodriguez, E. M., & Ouellette, S. C. (September 01, 2000). Gay and lesbian Christians: Homosexual and religious identity integration in the members and participants of a gay-positive church. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 39, 3*, 333-347.
- Sherry, A., Adelman, A., Whilde, M. R., & Quick, D. (2010). Competing Selves: Negotiating the intersection of spiritual and sexual identities. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 41, 2*, 112-119.
- Shildo, A. (1994). Internalized homophobia: Conceptual and empirical issues in measurement. In B. Greene & G. M. Herek (Eds.), *Lesbian and gay psychology: Theory, research, and clinical application* (pp. 176-205). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Szymanski, D. M., Chung, Y. B., & Balsam, K. F. (2001). Psychosocial correlates of internalized homophobia in lesbians. *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development, 34*, 27-49.
- Tangney, J. P., & Dearing, R. (2002). *Shame and guilt*. New York: Guilford Press.

Walton, G. (2006). Fag Church: Men who integrate gay and Christian identities. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 51, 2, 1-17.