

The Intersectionality Identified within Cognitive Dissonance with a Concentration on the Interactions between Religiosity and the LGBTQ+ Community

The LGBTQ+ Community's Status Quo

The LGBTQ community's relationship with religion is an interesting and constantly shifting one. This relationship is abstract in its nature, meaning that there is no one definition as the word "religion" cannot stand for any single principle or essence.¹ However, in concrete terms, it can be stated that the LGBTQ+ identity has been impacted by geographic location and religious involvement. Hence, research in the South may provide new insights into the role of religion in the everyday lives of LGBTQ+ people.² Drs. Brenda Beagen and Brenda Hattie noted from one of their studies on LGBTQ experiences with religion that many of their participants who were raised Christian described deep shame as they struggled to come to terms with their sexual orientation.³ Stuart Roe found that many LGBTQ children felt a lack of support from parents or parent figures, and that they felt that the church or religion acted as a barrier to support from their parents at best—and at worst, [religion] was a source of pain.⁴ One major problem that was seen was the presence of religious-based exclusion and internalized religious-based homophobia. Religious-based exclusion is often described as being excluded by churches once [individuals] could no longer hide their gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender identities.⁵ A study by Ruud Ganzevoort, Mark van der Laan, and Erik Olsman sought to see how individuals growing up in religious communities while experiencing sexuality/gender identity confusion navigate the information being taught to them. They found that churches teach four fundamental values that undermine sexual identity exploration: holiness, subjectivity, obedience, and responsibility.⁶ They identified the four negotiation tactics used by LGBTQ individuals: recognizing the Christian lifestyle, identifying with a gay lifestyle, compartmentalization, and

social integration. In another study, the researchers examined the ways in which students used religion to determine and facilitate aspects of their identity. They found that identity was linked to seeking out both belief-confirming consultation (BCC) and belief-threatening consultation (BTC) for religious doubts.⁷ Another way that people aligned their sexual identity and their religion is to participate in religious groups or churches that, “gave lesbian women and gay men a space to redefine their stigmatized sexuality by constructing and performing identities as lesbian/gay and Christian.”⁸ This identified a method of normalizing sexuality and religious texts in order to create unity. One common alternative to these two possible options, is completely removing yourself from religion.

The Goal of this Research

The goal of this study is to examine LGBTQ+ individuals who have either left religion or who are still active in a religious practice. For the individuals still active in religion, this study aimed to identify sub-groups based on the coping mechanisms used by those participants to resolve the potential dissonance they feel between the two facets of their personality. Then these subgroups are compared to those who had left religion (which comprises its own dissonance reduction strategy) in order to examine which coping mechanism promotes the best mental health outcomes in terms of self-esteem, authenticity, and meaning in life. The current study represents an exploratory study of what dissonance reduction mechanism are most common and most effective in terms of mental health.

Methods

Participants were contacted via a variety of different methods. The three recruitment methods were flyers, listserv emails, and Sona. The listserv emails were sent to all the students, staff, and employees of Texas A&M that are enrolled in the campus-wide email chain. Sona is a

subject pool used by the university to attract and organize students who are interested in participating in research and this study used the psychology Sona subject pool. There were three requirements to participate in this study. The first two were parameters regarding age and accessibility. Each participant had to be between eighteen and twenty-seven years old. Twenty-one point three four years old was the average age of all participants who completed this study. They had to be connected to the university; this ensured that they had access to a university recognized Zoom account. The final requirement served as the prescreen for this study. Every participant had to be a member of the LGBTQ+ community and had to have experience in an organized religion. Thirty-nine participants register to participate but only twenty-nine students completed the study. There were thirteen male participants, twelve female participants, and four non-gender conforming participants. To differentiate the participants by sexuality: there were ten gay participants, three lesbian participants, one transgender participant, nine bi-sexual participants, four pansexual participants, and two queer participants. This was followed by the distinction between past or current religious involvement; one Jehovah's Witness participant, seven Catholics, four Lutherans, one Seventh Day Adventist, two Pagans, and fourteen Christians. Each participant was grouped based on their personal identification. It is essential in research conducted on personal identity that the participants are grouped via their personal experiences rather than the social or group belief. Each participant was sent a Google form that logged their information, availability, and answers to prescreening question. After completing this, they were contacted to set up an interview.

The groups that participants were assigned to Group A and Group B served as the independent variable, whereas the questionnaires served as a dependent variable since it was composed of a variety of measures for authenticity and well-being.

This study is dependent upon the use of a variety of questionnaires. The questionnaires were given to every participant after the completion of their interview. The purpose of these questionnaires was to gain a holistic perspective on the mental health of the participants. Each participant completed the following measures.

Multidimensional Meaning in Life

Meaning, Coherence, Purpose, Matterings were tested via the Meaning in Life scale. Participants completed the Multidimensional Meaning in Life Scale at both time points. The scale is composed of separate subscales to gauge Meaning in Life Judgments, Cosmic Matterings, Coherence, and Purpose.⁹ Meaning in Life Judgments is composed of four items (ex: “My life as a whole has meaning,” and “My existence is empty of meaning.”) Cosmic Matterings is composed of four items (e.x. “Even considering how big the universe is, I can see that my life matters;” “My existence is not significant in the grand scheme of things.”) Coherence is composed of four items (e.x. “Looking at my life as whole, things seem clear to me;” “I can’t make sense of events in my life.”) Purpose is composed of four items (e. x. “I have a good sense of what I am trying to accomplish in life;” “I don’t have compelling life goals that keep me going.”) In each subscale, participants rate their agreement with each item on a scale from one (“Strongly Disagree”) to seven (“Strongly Agree”).¹⁰

Self-Concept Clarity

Participants took the Self-Concept Clarity Scale¹¹ at both time points in order to get a more detailed quantitative measure of life story and/or identity coherence. The scale is composed of twelve items (e.x. “I seldom experience conflict between the different aspects of my personality;” “On one day, I might have one opinion about myself, and on another day, I might

have a different opinion.”) Participants rate their agreement with each item on a scale from one (“Strongly Disagree”) to seven (“Strongly Agree”).¹²

Meaninglessness

Participants will take the Crisis of Meaning Scale¹³ at both time points to evaluate the extent to which they feel an immediate lack of Existential Meaning in their lives. The scale is composed of five items (e.x. “My life seems meaningless;” “I don’t see any sense in life.”). Participants rate their agreement with each item on a scale from one (“Strongly Disagree”) to seven (“Strongly Agree”).¹⁴

Authenticity

The Authenticity Personality Scale¹⁵ was administered at both time points. The Authentic Personality Scale is comprised of three subscales intended to gauge different facets of authenticity: self-alienation (i.e., awareness of one’s physiological states, emotions, and cognitions), authentic living (i.e., congruence between one’s behavior and one’s physiological states, emotions, and cognitions), and accepting external influence (i.e., the extent to which one believes they must conform to others’ expectations). All three subscales are rated on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). While the subscales can be analyzed separately they can also be treated as a single composite as well, which this study did.¹⁶

Life Satisfaction

Participants took the Satisfaction with Life Scale¹⁷ at both time points. The scale is composed of five items (e.g. “In most ways my life is close to my ideal;” “The conditions of my life are excellent;” “I am satisfied with my life;” “So far I have gotten the important things I want in life” “If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.”) Participants rate their

agreement with each item on a scale from one (“Strongly Disagree”) to five (“Strongly Agree”).¹⁸

Positive and Negative Affect

Participants took the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule¹⁹ at both time points in order to test their state affect. Participants rate to what extent they feel certain positive (e.g. “Happy”) or negative (e.g. “Angry”) emotions “right now” on a scale from one (“very slightly or not at all”) to five (“extremely.”)²⁰

Materials and Procedure

Prior to their appointments, each participant was prescreened to ensure they were eligible for the experiment. At their scheduled time, each participant was contacted through Sona to join a Zoom meeting with an interviewer. The interviewer introduced themselves and sent the participant a link to a Qualtrics survey which contained the consent form. Once the consent form was explained and signed, the interviewer started recording and began the experiment. The first part of this experiment was to place each participant into the correct group, either Group A or Group B. Group A consisted of LGBTQ+ individuals still involved in religion, whereas Group B consisted of LGBTQ + individuals who are no longer involved in religion. Every participant started the interview in the Comfort Section. The Comfort Section has two purposes: 1) to assign the participant to either Group A or Group B; 2) help create a space where the participant is comfortable talking to the interviewer about such sensitive topics. The questions covered in the Comfort Section are heavily centered on contemporary ethics. The questions included the participants opinion on their interpretation of religion, the variety of perspectives on the LGBTQ+ community, and their personal opinions regarding the state of their mental health. The questions went as follows: “How do you feel about the current status of the

LGBTQ+ community within society?,” “Why do you think that people participate in religion?,” “How do you feel that sexuality and gender interact with religion?,” “Are you a part of the LGBTQ+ community?,” “How would you define your sexual orientation or gender identity?,” “Have you ever participated in any formal religion, if yes, what religion?,” “Are you still religious?,” and “What role does religion play in your life?” These questions provide a comfortable space, so when it was time to introduce more heavy questions, the participants knew they were in a safe space. Question seven, "Are you still religious," serves as the dividing question that places the participants in either Group A or Group B.

Once each participant was sorted into their groups, the interview would continue with the group specific script. Group A continued speaking about religion and LGBTQ+ identity, but with a focus on why they continue to maintain religious participation. Group B also continued speaking about religion and LGBTQ+ identity, but theirs focused on why they decided to cease religious participation.

After the completing the interview, participants took a series of questionnaires. The portion was the same for every participant, no matter their group. It was essential that every participant participated in both. The order would always begin with the interview followed by the series of questionnaires. The interviewer would guide the participants so that each secondary interview lasts between ten and twenty minutes. After the completion of the secondary interview, they were debriefed and allowed to leave the Zoom room. Once the participant had left the Zoom room, the interviewer would download the entirety of the transcript and the video. They would upload the video and the transcript to the locked shared drive. Then a proper form of the transcript would be completed. Once all this work was done, the video and the transcript were

downloaded onto an experiment specific flash drive, in order to take it off the shared drive within the lab.

Results

Participants Involved in Religion

Compartmentalization

This coping mechanism is defined by the transition in one's identity depending upon the situation. Meaning that an individual will alter their clothing choices, voice, mannerisms, and overall personality based on the situation and people they are around. Many of the participants that utilized this coping mechanism described their relationship with religion as, "...very difficult to choose between these two things when you believe one of them to be absolute truth and the other to be an inseparable part of yourself." These participants recognize that there is a difference in representation when it comes to religious expression and sexual identity; however, the momentary convenience is greater than the emotional vulnerability needed to sort out the clear cognitive dissonance. One participant said,

When I'm home or in church, I definitely try to act more straight or try to embody that stereotypical good Christian boy or good Christian man. And on the opposite side, I don't talk about outside things as much, you know. Especially other people in the LGBT community that I've interacted with that have this hostility towards Christianity, so maybe I don't talk about my faith as much with people that I'm not sure how they're going to react or how they feel about it. And so, I think that leads me to pack away that Christian side of myself, so that I can feel my sexuality.

The results of the subscales are illustrated in Table 3.1. This coping mechanism had an average Satisfaction with Life score ($M = 3.47$, $SD = .305$). They scored relatively high on the Crisis of Meaning subscale ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.01$). They had a rather low score for the Self Concept Clarity subscale ($M = 3.03$, $SD = .897$). These participants had an average range on the Authenticity subscale ($M = 4.83$, $SD = .629$). The PANAS subscale was separated to identify

specifically the different emotions experienced by the participants. These participants had an average Positive Affect score ($M = 3.53$, $SD = .611$), and a relatively high Negative Affect score ($M = 3.24$, $SD = .278$).

	SWL	CRISIS	SCC	Auth	PA	NA
N	3	3	3	3	3	3
Mean	3.46	3.13	3.03	4.83	3.53	3.24
St. Deviation	0.306	1.01	0.897	0.629	0.611	0.278

Table 3.1. Compartmentalization Subscales Scores

Organized Religion to Spirituality

An individual who uses this coping mechanism will typically recognize religion as something that is meant for the individual rather than the group. Many of the participants in this group utilize the mindset of redefining religion to fit the status quo of the individual rather than maneuvering one's life around an organized religion. For many, it is important they are able to maintain certain aspects of religion, but without the criticality of members of a congregation. It is religion on their terms. Many participants were motivated to transition to a sense of spirituality because "so much of what [they were] doing was always in question. It created [a] lack of stability."

The results of these subscales are recorded in Table 3.2. Typically, individuals in this group are lacking in the Satisfaction with Life subscale ($M = 3.00$, $SD = .894$). They scored average on the Crisis subscale ($M = 2.23$, $SD = .909$). These participants scored averagely on the Self Concept Clarity subscale ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.05$). Similarly to the Satisfaction with Life

subscale, these participants scored lower on the Positive Affect subscale ($M = 2.80$, $SD = .899$). Finally, these individuals had an average score for Negative Affect ($M = 2.66$, $SD = .723$).

	SWL	CRISIS	SCC	Auth	PA	NA
N	8	8	8	8	8	8
Mean	3.00	2.23	3.90	4.93	2.80	2.66
St. Deviation	0.894	0.909	1.04	0.681	0.899	0.720

Table 3.2. Spirituality Subscales Scores

Reinvestment of Religion

Many of the participants that fall into this coping mechanism utilize a foundation of investigation to bridge the divide between their sexuality and their religious identity. Many of these participants have spent their time diving into their respective religious texts to try and identify any slanderous or anti-LGBTQ+ verbiage. One participant stated that, “some people have told [them] that they can’t be a Christian, even though biblically, that is just not true.” Some participants recognized that the divide between their religious divide and their sexual identity largely comes from one’s family. One participant said,

There's no actual evidence for that, but people will still tell you. I feel like there's just a lot of built-up hatred in the community of Christians, and a lot of them don't understand that what you've been told from your parents and from their parents might not necessarily be what's actually true of what you believe your religion is.

The results of these subscales are recorded in Table 3.3. This group of participants scored on average for every subscale except the Crisis subscale where they scored low ($M = 1.52$, $SD = .657$). On Satisfaction with Life subscale, they held a standard score ($M = 3.56$, $SD = .767$). This standard score continued on the Self Concept Clarity subscale ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.22$). Similarly with Authenticity subscale ($M = 5.18$, $SD = .760$). These participants held an average score for

both the Positive Affect ($M = 3.56$, $SD = .416$), and the Negative Affect subscale ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.05$).

	SWL	CRISIS	SCC	Auth	PA	NA
N	5	5	5	5	5	5
Mean	3.56	1.52	4.19	5.18	3.56	2.75
St. Deviation	0.767	0.657	1.22	0.760	0.416	1.05

Table 3.3. Reinvestigation Subscales Scores

Conversion

The people that utilized this coping mechanism believed that converting to a different religion, that accepted their sexual identity, was better for their mental health than staying with their original religion. Two of the participants that were in this group converted to paganism as a way of reconciling their cognitive dissonance. At the time of the study, they no longer were dealing with the effects of cognitive dissonance as they had transitioned to a supporting religion. “Being pagan, I don't have any cognitive dissonance with being queer and being religious, because I perceive that the pagan community perceives the sexuality and gender to be morally neutral.” However, they described their overarching identity still being in transition as many of these participants are still in a place of transition.

The results for these participants can be found in Table 3.4. These participants had an average score for the Satisfaction with Life subscale ($M = 3.80$, $SD = .721$). These participants scored low on the Crisis subscale ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.19$). They had a high score for both the Self Concept Clarity subscale ($M = 4.23$, $SD = .954$), and the Authenticity subscale ($M = 5.12$, $SD = .811$). These participants continued on the standard course by having an average score for the

Positive Affect subscale ($M = 3.43$, $SD = .770$). They simultaneously scored averagely on the Negative Affect subscale ($M = 2.67$, $SD = .262$).

	SWL	CRISIS	SCC	Auth	PA	NA
N	3	3	3	3	3	3
Mean	3.80	2.34	4.23	5.12	3.43	2.67
St. Deviation	0.721	1.19	0.954	0.811	0.770	0.262

Table 3.4. Conversion Subscales Scores

Participants Not Involved in Religion

Left Religion

The participants that utilized this coping mechanism served as a standard group for the entirety of this experiment. Meaning that instead of diving into the specific coping mechanisms utilized by these participants, we just grouped them together into this category. These participants reasoned that the religion, they were connected to, was not worth the emotional and social demands created by cognitive dissonance. Many of these participants recognized that their cognitive dissonance was influenced largely by the church, their families, and the people that created the congregation of the church. Though some of the participants were able to distinguish between the cognitive dissonance brought on by the church, for some the line was blurred because, “[it was] so hard sometimes because I, kind of, had my two different groups, it was like leading two lives.” This internal battle was unequivocally burdensome and led to the eventual downfall between their relationship with religion. One participant said,

I think you constantly sit there, and you're trying to be better. You trying to be a better person because you're trying to follow [all] the rules, you're just trying to be good person, and ultimately fail every time because that's just how you are. That's how you're made!

So, it's like [you are] constantly setup, just trying and failing then trying and failing. I think it wears down your self-worth because you feel like you're not worthy enough to be a good person or to be to go to heaven.

The results for these participants can be found in Table 3.5. These participants scored average across the board. They were neither high nor low in any category. This is likely because there were a variety of people that fell into this category. On the Satisfaction with Life subscale, they had ($M = 3.68$, $SD = .725$). For the Crisis of Meaning subscale these participants scored, ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.19$). Similarly, these participants had an average score on the Self Concept Clarity subscale ($M = 4.23$, $SD = .954$). On the Authenticity subscale, these participants scored, ($M = 5.12$, $SD = .811$). These participants had an average score for the Positive Affect subscale ($M = 3.43$, $SD = .770$). Finally, these participants continued with their score on the Negative Affect subscale ($M = 2.38$, $SD = .658$).

	SWL	CRISIS	SCC	Auth	PA	NA
N	10	10	10	10	10	10
Mean	3.68	2.34	4.23	5.12	3.43	2.38
St. Deviation	0.725	1.19	0.954	0.811	0.770	0.658

Table 3.5. Left Religion Subscales Scores

Discussion

Coping Mechanisms

The results of this study are an initial investigation of the variety of coping mechanisms that can be utilized to address the potential cognitive dissonance that occurs when an individual's sexual identity and religious identity are at odds. Based on the data, this study was able to explore potential advantages and disadvantages of each of the coping mechanisms that emerged

in this small sample. These were only descriptive patterns based on trends in the data that should be explored further in larger data sets.

Compartmentalization seemed to have potential short-term advantages, yet long term disadvantages. The data showed that participants in this subgroup benefitted from a sense of life satisfaction, authenticity, and positive affect. One can suggest that these participants felt this way because they were fully living in one of their identities. For example, when that participant is at church, they are living the most authentic version of their religious identity. When they are around other LGBTQ+ members, they are living the most authentic version of their sexual identity. When analyzing this coping mechanism with a short-term lens, these participants are not having to sacrifice any part of their identity. It appears they are getting the best of both worlds. However, these same participants reported relatively higher scores on the crisis of meaning, relatively low self-concept clarity, and relatively high negative affect. This shows that the cost for short-term peace is long-term pain. It is likely during the times of transition that these participants suffer the most. Times where they might leave their LGBTQ+ friends and then attend church or vice versa. These periods of times will elicit high levels of cognitive dissonance. It appears to be a good strategy in the moment, while simultaneously leading to an overall sense of confusion regarding one's personal identity.

The transition from organized religion to spirituality seems complex from an outsider's perspective; however, many participants described this transition as natural. These participants made it clear that they enjoyed having a religious identity, they just wanted more control over what that religious identity looked like. Participants within this groups did report a somewhat lower satisfaction with life and positive affect. However, the caveat is that these participants were doing so on the more existential variables on the PANAS subscale. It is important to note

that these same participants did not score high on the negative affect. These scores likely reflect that these participants are currently going through the process of self-discovery. They are redefining a very important aspect of their identity—their religious identity. So, it is expected to see a lower satisfaction with life and positive affect. The coping mechanism has a clear potential cost to hedonic well-being rather than to eudaimonic well-being.

Redefinition scored relatively well on all subscales. This is probable because this coping mechanism leads to a large amount of change without the large social change. Meaning that participants in this category can continue to go to church, so there is low social demand. But they attend church with the knowledge that their sexual identity is not wrong or bad—despite what their church or church leadership might say. This largely reduces cognitive dissonance as the common problem that were identified throughout the course of this experiment are addressed with the use of this coping mechanism. Most likely, this will eventually require maintenance, especially as these participant's lives continue to grow and develop. The participants understood that this coping mechanism was useful for the time being but would eventually need to be adjusted. For example, none of the participants in this category are married. Once they join a long-term or committed relationship, it is likely that they would need to adjust their coping mechanism as a new layer of cognitive dissonance would arise with this new addition.

Nonetheless, for this stage of life, redefinition is a very effective coping mechanism.

Converting to a new religion or faith was a very interesting method, but an unequivocally effective method. Members within this groups seemed to be doing very well. They had low levels of crisis of meaning, while maintaining high levels of self-concept clarity and authenticity. This leads to the belief that converting to a religion that supports that LGBTQ+ community has definite benefits. There were no costs, according to the subscales that were run in this study;

however, it is likely that one experiences loss when leaving a religious community where they attached a piece of their identity. But, depending on how long along the participant converted, the emotions of finding a supporting community could outweigh the costs of losing a non-supporting community.

The participants who had left religion entirely had interesting interviews but were not high or low on any of the variables tested in this experiment. This led to the belief that there are possibly subgroups within this group that are hiding important differences. It is also very possible that there specific, individual differences that could possibly sway that data. Having this group be so large allows for the possibility for one person's experience to be masked. So, there is no clear way of determining whether or not leaving religion is beneficial for any one specific individual. There are individuals who did benefit, but there are also participants who are still searching for that answer. This entire group is subject to the variable of time. Time away from religion will drastically influence how someone answers the questions they were presented in the interview and how they would answer the questions in the survey.

Conclusion

The results of this study largely supported the hypothesis. It is impossible to say that one coping mechanism is consistently better than another, it appears as though redefinition was the most effective. This coping mechanism is beneficial because the participants are able to continue on with their life while still having large amounts of emotional change. Moreover, these findings are relative with the previous literature that was read in preparation for this experiment. Specifically, research analyzing the effects of one's religious identity on their sexual identity and vice versa.

There are some things to note that influence the data at hand. Firstly, our sample size is relatively small—so none of the statistical differences between the coping mechanisms are statistically significant. More work is needed to see if these results would replicate or are simply a function of our small sample size. Another aspect is that all these students are from Texas which is commonly considered part of the “Bible Belt,” meaning that religion is instantiated within everything that is done here. This simply reaffirms the overall importance of this research in this location because without it many of these students would continue to live in a culture that denies their freedom and self-expression. It is essential that this type of research is continued. It is likely that as research goes further north, the connection to religion would decrease. Similarly, another important aspect of this research that is important to note is the age of the participants—approximately twenty-one years old. It is possible that individuals who are much older would have a different perspective on the interactions between religion and sexual identity. That perspective would be wildly advantageous in this research.

Continuation of Research

This research lit a light on a topic that has plagued the lives of so many people within the LGBTQ+ community. The fear, the guilt, and the shame that comes along with being religious is difficult and demeaning. This research needs to be a launching pad for further research. The pain that these people feel should not be kept in the dark, it needs to be recognized, and there is a need to fund research that will uplift this community. Research is a tool to support those who do not have the ability to help themselves, and it is the time that we start acting like that. When we create research projects that shift the status quo, the fabric of society will begin to change. When our societal view changes, people will then have a home. A space where our differences are

glorified. A space where individual authenticity is valued. It is imperative that we utilize science to be proactive and world changing.

ENDNOTES

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