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Forgive Me Father for I Have Sinned: The Role of a Christian Upbringing on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Development

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This study (n = 84) examined the extent to which a Christian upbringing may inhibit same-sex attracted individuals from accepting a lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) identity. No significant differences were found between current and former Christians' positive or negative gay identities. Participants who had left Christianity were more liberal and viewed God as hostile. Participants' "outness" as LGB to their primary network was associated with a greater positive and lesser negative gay identity. Participants' LGB network size was not related to either their positive or negative gay identifications. Finally, the participants' sexual histories were not related to their negative identities, but were related to their positive identities.

KEYWORDS *Christian upbringing, LGB identity, religion and homosexuality*

Research has examined the general identity development of classical psychological groups, especially various minority groups (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Cramer, 2000; Kroger, 2000; Roberts, Phinney, Romero, & Chen, 1996). Sexual identity development among lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) individuals is a growing empirical question in current psychological literature. A number of studies have examined genetic, environmental, or individual factors that may play a role in the identity process (Elizur & Mintzer, 2001; Halpin & Allen, 2004; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2008). Two major models have been developed to characterize homosexual identity development (HID). Cass (1979) proposed a linear, six-stage model wherein people progress

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from identity confusion and comparisons, through acceptance and pride, to identity synthesis. Troiden (1989) also proposed a linear framework wherein people become “sensitized” to being different, work through identity confusion, assume an LGB identity, then fully commit to their identity. Despite differences between these models, both share three key stages: an initial period of confusion, exploration, and personal turmoil; followed by a period of gradual acceptance of an LGB orientation; and finally a stage where one’s LGB orientation is fully synthesized with one’s personal identity.

More recent studies have emphasized different aspects of these general models (Rosario et al., 2008; Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2006), and have suggested that a linear, stage-wise process may not adequately capture the range of individual differences in the emergence of an LGB identity. Consistent with these more recent perspectives, we propose a general, nonlinear identity process, given in Figure 1.

Drawing on several recent perspectives (Morris, 1997; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004; Rosario et al., 2006), we view an LGB identity as consisting of three major processes: formation and conflict, acceptance, and integration. Identity formation involves becoming aware of one’s sexual orientation and discovering what it means to be gay or lesbian (Cass, 1979; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Morris, 1997; Troiden, 1989), and consists of confusion, denial, and exploration. Identity acceptance is a crucial transitory stage between the initial formation of an LGB orientation and full integration of an LGB identity. Identity integration involves accepting and committing oneself to one’s sexual orientation (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989). Of course, none of these processes are linear but, rather, ebb and flow in response to personal or social changes, as outlined in the following.

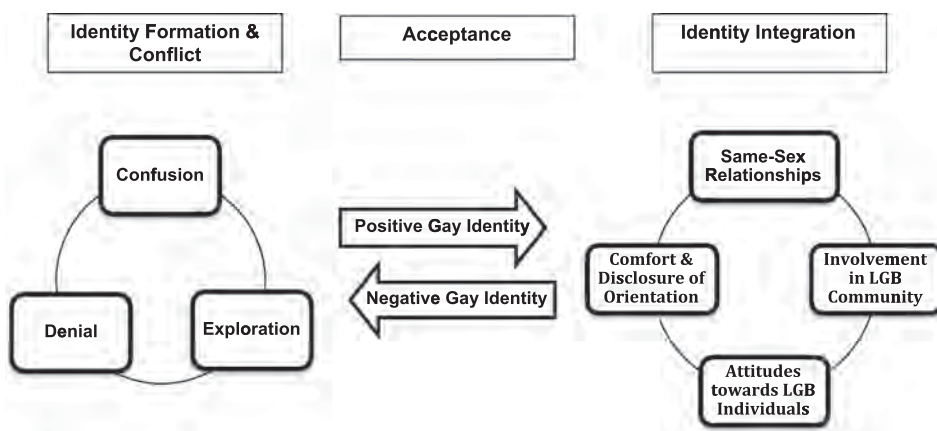


FIGURE 1 Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) identity development model.

LGB IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Identity Formation and Conflict

First becoming conscious of same-sex attraction can yield confusion, a sense of puzzlement, turmoil, or alienation (Cass, 1979; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Troiden, 1989). These incipient same-sex attractions are typically kept secretive and personal (Levy & Reeves, 2011; Rowen & Malcolm, 2002). In religious individuals, this secrecy is particularly associated with increased involvement in religious activities (Levy & Reeves, 2011). Confusion over emerging same-sex attraction may be accompanied by denial or “bargaining”: The individual may attempt to explain his or her desires as a transient phase and belittle their attraction toward the same sex, rationalizing that they are merely platonic (Troiden, 1989). Some individuals may choose to label themselves as *bisexual*, allowing them an “escape route” if need be (Rosario et al., 2006); this does not negate the existence of a bisexual identity but, rather, constitutes a potential transition in lesbian and gay identity formation. Of course, during this time, the individual may begin to explore his or her same-sex attraction, often in a safe environment where their identities cannot be jeopardized.

As time progresses, the individual may begin to increasingly accept *gay*, *lesbian*, or *bisexual* as descriptive of themselves (Rowen & Malcolm, 2002). This process is nonlinear; one individual may progress from confusion and denial, through exploration and greater acceptance, which leads to lower denial. Another individual may go through this same process, but during exploration may encounter negative reactions or a lack of social support, which may lead back toward denial and confusion (Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, & Meyer, 2008).

Acceptance

Acceptance underlies the crucial transition from identity formation to identity integration (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989), and is vital in resolving conflict between an individual’s religious identity and sexual identity (Levy & Reeves, 2011). Acceptance requires that the individual not only acknowledge same-sex attraction, but also move away from mere tolerance of gays and lesbians toward positive approval. We view acceptance as a dynamic process during which the individual lessens a negative LGB identity (i.e., internalized homonegativity; desire for secrecy and privacy) and enhances a positive identity or attitude. Acceptance encompasses both self-acceptance and acceptance within a primary social network. We do not view acceptance as unidirectional; rather, a balance of positive and negative attitudes may oscillate depending on the availability of social support, cultural shifts, or personal experiences. For instance, acceptance may be compromised in a culture that maintains negative views of same-sex attraction, which characterizes many religious organizations.

Identity Integration

As personal acceptance of same-sex attraction increases, the individual has the opportunity to integrate the LGB identity into their larger self-schema (Rowen & Malcolm, 2002). Thus, engaging in same-sex relationships (Morris, 1997; Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001) and becoming involved with the gay and lesbian community (Morris, 1997; Rosario et al., 2001) facilitates an increasingly positive outlook toward one's homosexual orientation (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989). By "gay and lesbian community," we are not referring to a single, larger gay community but, rather, any social network of other LGB individuals. Thus, one would predict that the more LGB individuals one has in their social network, the more likely they are to display a positive gay identity. As gays and lesbians fully integrate their sexuality into their everyday lives, it becomes easier and less stress-evoking to disclose one's sexual orientation and garner LGB social support (Rowen & Malcolm, 2002). Therefore, one would predict that the more "out" an individual is to their social network, the more likely they will exhibit positive outlooks toward their homosexuality.

Once again, identity integration is a nonlinear process, although in our perspective, it does require all four elements in the model. Therefore, identity integration encompasses practicing one's orientation, not mere acceptance of same-sex attraction.

BARRIERS TO ACCEPTANCE

Negative social relationships act as barriers to homosexual identity integration (Elizur & Mintzer, 2001; Rosario et al., 2006), whereas positive relationships lead to greater identity integration (Elizur & Minter, 2001; Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Jordan & Deluty, 1998; Rosario et al., 2006; Wright & Perry, 2006). Supportive families and friends appear to be essential elements in the integration process (Levy & Reeves, 2011). Studies have shown that lower social support is associated with negative attitudes toward one's own homosexuality and, in turn, to various psychosocial stressors (Szymanski et al., 2008).

Research has consistently shown that people in the later stages of identity integration report lower levels of negative beliefs and feelings about LGB orientation (Halpin & Allen, 2004; Mayfield, 2001; Piggot, 2004; Rowen & Malcolm, 2002). These negative beliefs, variously labeled *internalized homonegativity* or *internalized heterosexism*, have been found to hinder sexual identity development (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Shidlo, 1994; Szymanski et al., 2008). Internalized homonegativity is correlated with less disclosure of one's sexual orientation (Lewis, Derlega, Griffin, & Krowinski, 2003; Rostosky & Riggle, 2002), higher conflict over one's orientation (Szymanski,

Chung, & Balsam, 2001), increased “passing” as heterosexual or bisexual (Nungesser, 1983; Szymanski et al., 2001), and lower involvement in the LGB community (Ross & Rosser, 1996; Szymanski et al., 2001). Religious affiliation may constitute an important source of internalized homonegativity for many individuals with same-sex attractions.

RELIGION AND SAME-SEX ATTRACTION

Approximately 90% of Americans acknowledge affiliation with a religious institution (Bader et al., 2006). A majority of mainstream religions condemn same-sex attraction. Different religious doctrines characterize homosexuality as a disorder, unscrupulous, degenerative, aberrant, and against God’s will (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Bellis & Hufford, 2002; Levy, 2009). This negative view of homosexuality is especially applicable to many Christian denominations (Robinson, 1999). In addition, many denominations adhere to the policy that being homosexual is not a sin, but participating in gay or lesbian behaviors is (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001). Studies suggest that LGB individuals perceive their religious and spiritual practices to be crucial to their identity schema (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Davidson, 2000; Haldeman, 1996). Accounting for both these statements, one would predict that religion will hinder LGB identity development, which, indeed, previous research has suggested (Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 1996; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Wagner, Brondolo, & Rabkin, 1996).

Research suggests that conservative religions oppress both the LGB community (e.g., through opposition to gay marriage) and LGB individuals (Davidson, 2000; Haldeman, 1996). Affiliation with such an institution results in higher internalized homonegativity and negative views toward same-sex attraction (Rowen & Malcolm, 2002; Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994). The condemnation that LGB individuals encounter leads to feelings of guilt and shame (Ritter & O’Neill, 1989), which can result in self-loathing, depression, and suicidal ideation (Schuck & Liddle, 2001). These studies suggest that LGB individuals who are active members of conservative religions will have a difficult time reconciling their sexual identities with their religious beliefs (Hood et al., 1996; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Oetjen & Rothblum, 2000; Wagner et al., 1996).

Full integration of an LGB sexual orientation and a religious affiliation is problematic (Buchanan et al., 2001; Couch, Mulcare, Pitts, Smith, & Mitchell, 2008; Dahl & Galliher, 2009). These difficulties are especially visible in individuals with a religious or spiritual upbringing (Buchanan et al., 2001; Wagner et al., 1994). Singer and Deschamps (1994), for example, found 60% of gays and lesbians to report that religion no longer played an important role in their lives. Gays and lesbians have found a variety of ways to respond to religious conflict, such as considering oneself to be spiritual

rather than religious, reinterpreting religious teachings, changing religious affiliations (participating in a more gay-positive church), and only sporadically or not attending religious institutions (Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Wilcox, 2009; Yip, 2003). These mechanisms allow individuals to better integrate their sexual identities with their newly modified religious identities (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Yip, 2003).

Research has suggested that gay and lesbian individuals with a Christian upbringing (being raised in a Christian household or environment) may experience conflict between their sexual and religious identities (Levy & Reeves, 2011). This conflict tends to be addressed in a variety of ways, and may result in the rejection of either one's sexual or one's Christian identity, or in the integration of these two identities (Couch et al., 2008). Usually, rejection of religious identity causes individuals with a Christian upbringing to leave their faith (Couch et al., 2008).

We examined the extent to which a Christian upbringing may inhibit same-sex attracted individuals from accepting an LGB identity. We predicted that participants who described themselves as currently affiliated with a Christian church would display higher negative and lower positive gay identities, and would be more conservative than would participants who were raised Christian, but who were currently unaffiliated with a church. We expected that participants whose primary social networks were comprised of more LGB individuals would display more positive and less negative gay identities. Finally, we predicted that the more "out" participants were as LGB to their primary networks, the more likely they would be to identify with positive, rather than negative, gay attitudes.

METHOD

These data are from an anonymous, self-completed, Web-based survey administered to individuals who were recruited to a study examining religion and same-sex attraction.

Participants

A total of 192 participants entered the survey Web site and started the online questionnaire. The core enrollment criterion was that the participant had experienced same-sex attraction at some point in their lifetime. Religious affiliation was not an entry criterion on the survey. The questionnaire was preceded by an informed consent and an outline of entry criteria.

From this total, 58 participants dropped out by means of not answering all the required survey questions. In particular, individuals who skipped the sexual history questions were excluded from the study. Lower age and education predicted failure to complete the survey ($p < .05$). Gender,

race, income, and marital status were not associated with participant survey completion. This left 134 participants with complete data.

This analysis addressed same-sex attracted individuals who had a Christian upbringing, defined as having been raised in a family where both parents were Christian and who, at some point in their lives, had sex with the same gender. Individuals who were raised in a household where only one parent was Christian were excluded to eliminate the potential confounding influence that the non-Christian parent may have had. This represented 62.3% ($n = 84$) of the initial sample of 134.

Procedures

Participants were recruited for an individual, computerized, anonymous, online survey via both active and passive methods. Active recruitment consisted of street outreach and recruitment at venues, including local churches, bars, clubs, gay businesses, and other locations where LGB individuals socialize or congregate. Participants were given a card or flyer that provided basic information regarding the study and the survey link. A list of “gay-friendly” churches in the Chicago-land area was obtained, and a random sample was contacted (either physically or via e-mail) and asked to discuss congregation involvement in the study.

Passive recruitment consisted of advertisements placed on Internet sites, primarily Craigslist and About.com. Ads were placed within these sites that promoted the study and provided the participants with the survey link. In addition, “snowball” sampling in the LGB communities was utilized. At the end of each survey, participants were asked to recruit other individuals by sharing the survey link.

Participants entered the questionnaire by typing the survey link into their browsers. Once the survey link opened, an informed consent page appeared; participants were instructed to read this over. Participants clicked the “next page” button to certify that they had read and understood the form, and then entered the questionnaire. The questionnaire was composed of scales that are standard in the field and have been used in multiple studies (Bader et al., 2006; Coyne & Schwenk, 1997; Mayfield, 2001; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000; Rosario et al., 2008; Rosario et al., 2006). The institutional review board of the University of Illinois at Chicago approved all study procedures.

Measures

Demographic variables. Basic demographic variables consisted of gender, age, race, marital status, education, annual income, and employment. We assessed religious affiliation using a compound scale adapted from the Baylor Religion Survey (Bader et al., 2006). Participants were given a general

scale of religious identity—Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and “personal”—then, for each general identity, were asked to indicate their specific affiliations. For our analyses, we collapsed this scale to a simple three-level index: Christian, personal spirituality/other, or no religion. (No participants identified as being Muslim, and only 2 participants identified as being Jewish. They were not included in the study.) Within the Christian category, we differentiated Catholic, Mainline Protestant, other, or Evangelical Protestant. Participants were asked to identify the religion they grew up with by classifying their mothers’ and fathers’ religious identities. Finally, participants were categorized as either Christian or non-Christian, with non-Christian participants being those who were raised in a Christian household, but left Christianity.

Sexual history questionnaire. Participants responded to face-valid items addressing whether they had ever had sex (oral sex or anal or vaginal intercourse) with someone of the opposite gender or someone of the same gender, their total lifetime partners, and whether they had engaged in unprotected anal or vaginal intercourse.

Negative Gay Identity Scale. The Negative Gay Identity Scale examined negative aspects and reactions to one’s homosexual identity. The scale consisted of five subscales that have been shown to correlate with negative gay identity (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .86$) (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000).

Internalized homonegativity. This nine-item scale assessed deeply seated, negative attitudes toward same-sex attraction (e.g., “I would rather be straight if I could”); assessed on a 5-point scale; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .91$.

Need for privacy. This six-item scale assessed individuals’ (un)willingness to be open about their homosexual identities (e.g., “I prefer to keep my same-sex romantic relationships rather private”); assessed on a 5-point scale; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .83$.

Need for acceptance. This five-item scale assessed individuals’ desires to have people in their lives approve of their orientations (e.g., “I will never be able to accept my sexual orientation until all of the people in my life have accepted me”); assessed on a 5-point scale; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .79$.

Difficult process. This five-item scale examined the extent to which various aspects of an individual’s sexual orientation are (un)problematic (e.g., “Admitting to myself that I’m a lesbian, gay, and bisexual person has been a very painful process”); assessed on a 5-point scale; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .83$.

Positive Gay Identity Scale. The Positive Gay Identity Scale examines various constructive outcomes and attitudes toward one’s homosexual identity (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). The 5-point scale consists of three questions (e.g., “Being gay or bisexual has had a positive effect on me as a person”); Cronbach’s $\alpha = .69$.

Primary social network matrix. To identify each participant’s primary social network, we instructed them to list the six people they interact with

the most. They then provided the following information about each person: gender, whether they are LGB, whether they ever had sex with the person, whether the person is aware of the participant's same-sex feelings, and how long they have known the person. We used this information to create primary social network matrixes for the sample.

God View Scale. The God View Scale examined the participants' perceptions of God, characterizing God as either benevolent or hostile (Bader et al., 2006). A benevolent view characterized God as an ever-present, loving force that is forgiving and nonjudgmental. A hostile view characterized God as a wrathful, punishing God that is angered by human sins. The scale is comprised of 19 items (e.g., "God is concerned with the well-being of the world"; assessed on a 4-point scale; Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$).

Conservative vs. Liberal Religious Views Scale. The Conservative vs. Liberal Religious Views Scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$) examined the participants' opinions on controversial topics revolving around abortion, sexual relationships, and marriage and family issues (Bader et al., 2006). The 4-point scale consisted of five abortion questions, three sexual relation questions, and six marriage and family issues questions.

Method of Analysis

Categorical variables were examined using one-way analyses of variance, whereas continuous variables were examined using multiple regressions. All analyses entered age, gender, education, income, and race as covariates.

RESULTS

Participant Characteristics

The sample had about equal numbers of males and females, with a relatively even age distribution, consistent with the general population (see Table 1). A majority of the sample consisted of White, highly educated, high-income individuals. Over one-half of the participants were currently single and had a sexual history that included sex with both genders. This history suggests that over one-half of the participants displayed fluidity within their sexual identities.

The study sample resembled the general distribution of religious affiliation within the population to some extent, but showed some major differences (see Table 2). Evangelical Protestants are the single largest group in the population, but were not represented in this sample. The sample contained a slightly higher percentage of participants who identified themselves as being personally spiritual/other, Catholic, or Mainline Protestant, compared to the general population.

TABLE 1 Sample Demographic Characteristics

Sample characteristic	%	<i>n</i>
Gender		
Male	52.4	44
Female	46.4	39
NA	1.2	1
Sexual history		
Sex with both genders	57.1	48
Sex with same gender only	42.9	36
Age		
18–24	29.8	25
25–34	20.2	17
35–45	15.5	13
46–55	21.4	18
55+	13.1	11
Race		
White	85.7	72
Non-White	14.3	12
Relationship status		
Single	57.1	48
Partnered	33.3	28
Separated or divorced	9.5	8
Education		
College or technical	58.3	49
Any post college	41.7	35
Income		
\$20,000 or less	19.0	16
\$20,001–\$50,000	32.4	27
\$50,001–\$100,000	34.5	29
Over \$100,001	7.1	6
NA	7.1	6
Employment status		
Employed	86.9	73
Unemployed	13.1	11

Identity and Social Variable Composition

Positive and negative gay identity were strongly correlated ($r = -.47$, $p = .00$). We examined them individually because we considered them to be different core constituents within our identity model. Consistent with the model, research has shown positive and negative affects to be correlated, but not a simple continuous variable (Reich, Zautra, & Davis, 2003). Table 3 displays participants' standings on each of these variables. Although the original variables consist of five levels, for descriptive purposes, Table 3 displays a condensed, three-level coding. As is evident from the table, negative gay identity is not prevalent in the sample, but positive gay identity is. According to the transitory stage of the model, this characterization currently places a majority of the sample in the integration stage (Cass, 1979; Rosario et al., 2004; Rosario et al., 2006; Troiden, 1989). Because only three participants fell into the

TABLE 2 Religious Affiliation Breakdown of Sample Versus General Population

Religious affiliation	Study sample		General population (%) ^a
	%	<i>n</i>	
Personal spirituality/other	13.1	11	11.6
No religion	13.1	11	4.0
Christian affiliation	73.8	62	81.9
Catholic	28.6	24	21.2
Mainline Protestant	29.8	25	22.1
Other/not specified	11.2	5	4.9
Evangelical Protestant	0.0	0	33.6
Express as % of complete sample			97.5 ^b

^aAs reported by Baylor University, Institute for Studies of Religion (see Bader et al., 2006). ^b2.5% of general population reported as being Jewish (see Bader et al., 2006).

TABLE 3 Negative and Positive Gay Identity Frequencies

Variable	Negative gay identity		Positive gay identity	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Disagree	73.8	62	9.5	8
Neither	22.6	19	36.9	31
Agree	3.6	3	53.6	45

formation stage, no conclusive comparisons between the two stages could be made. Therefore, the following results mostly apply to individuals with a Christian upbringing that fall within the integration stage of the model.

Tables 4 & 5 display the composition of the participants' primary social networks. Table 4 examines the LGB composition of the primary social network, and Table 5 displays "outness" to the primary social network. Although the original variables consist of seven levels, Tables 4 and 5 display a condensed, three- and four-level coding, respectively. From these tables, it is evident that the primary social network is composed of about equal heterosexual and LGB individuals, and that participants are out to at least one-half of their networks.

HID Variables

Christians versus non-Christians. We compared participants who were raised in Christian households, but left Christianity ($n = 22$) to current Christians ($n = 62$). Contrary to our hypothesis, these groups did not differ in either their positive or negative gay identities, $F_s(1, 76) < 1.00$, *ns*.

TABLE 4 Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Composition of Primary Social Network

Variable	Frequency	
	%	<i>n</i>
Exclusively/primarily heterosexual	26.2	22
About equal heterosexual and lesbian, gay, and bisexual	67.9	57
Exclusively/primarily lesbian, gay, and bisexual	6.0	5

TABLE 5 "Outness" to Primary Social Network

Variable	Frequency	
	%	<i>n</i>
No one in network knows about same-sex feelings	3.6	3
1–2 people in network know about same-sex feelings	4.8	4
3–5 people in network know about same-sex feelings	27.4	23
Everyone in network knows about same-sex feelings	64.3	54

None of the individual variables that comprised these composites differed between the two groups.

LGB composition of participants' primary social networks. The LGB composition of the participants' primary social networks was not significantly related to either their positive gay identities, $F(1, 70) = 1.55, p = .22$; or negative gay identities, $F(1, 70) = 2.35, p = .13$. This also was contrary to our hypothesis and suggests that, unlike social networks in the general population, among those with a Christian upbringing, the sexual orientations of primary social network members is not strongly related to identity development.

Outness to primary social networks. The participants' outness to their primary social networks was significantly related to both their positive gay identities $F(1, 70) = 5.77, p = .02$; and negative gay identities, $F(1, 70) = 9.38, p = .00$. In general, the more a person is out to his or her primary social network, the more likely one is to display a positive gay identity ($\beta = 0.27$) and the less likely one is to display a negative gay identity ($\beta = -0.35$). From the general literature, we expected both the number of LGB network members and participants' outness to them to be associated with positive development. Instead, we found outness, but not the composition of participants' networks, to be associated with less negative and more positive gay identities.

Sexual history. The participant's sexual histories were not significantly related to their negative gay identities, $F(1, 75) = 1.49, p = .23$; but were significantly related to their positive gay identities, $F(1, 75) = 5.76, p = .02$. Participants who exclusively had sex with the same gender only ($M = 5.09$,

$SD = 0.69$) displayed higher levels of a positive gay identity than did those whose sexual histories involved both genders ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.84$).

Attitudes Toward Religion

Christians versus non-Christians. Former Christians scored higher than did current Christians on the God View Scale, indicating that they were more likely to view God as a hostile force ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.34$ vs. $M = 2.75$, $SD = 0.60$, respectively), $F(1, 74) = 17.84$, $p = .00$. This suggests that these participants view God as wrathful and punishing and, thus, angered by their perceived “sins.”

Former Christians were also more likely to be liberal in their religious outlooks than were current Christians ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 0.41$ vs. $M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.43$, respectively), $F(1, 76) = 12.88$, $p = .00$. This suggests former Christians are more likely to maintain views that go against common church doctrine in terms of controversial topics revolving around abortions, sexual relationships, and marriage and family issues.

LGB composition of primary social networks. The LGB composition of the participants' primary social networks was not significantly related to either their view of God, $F(1, 76) < 1.00$; or their liberal or conservative views on religion, $F(1, 76) < 1.00$. This did not support our hypothesis that among participants with a Christian upbringing, the LGB composition of their primary social network would moderate attitudes toward religion.

Outness to primary social networks. The participants' outness to their primary social networks was not significantly related to either their view of God, $F(1, 76) < 1.00$; or their liberal or conservative views on religion, $F(1, 76) < 1.00$. This suggests that in a sample with a Christian upbringing, how out one is to his or her social network is not related to attitudes toward religion.

Sexual history. The participant's sexual histories were not significantly related to either their view of God, $F(1, 76) < 1.00$; or their liberal or conservative views on religion, $F(1, 76) < 1.00$. This suggests that in a sample with a Christian upbringing, one's sexual history is not related to one's attitudes toward religion.

DISCUSSION

We examined several factors of LGB identity development among same-sex attracted individuals with a Christian upbringing. Previous research has suggested that belonging to a religious institution can hamper self-acceptance, which is a crucial variable in identity development (Davidson, 2000; Haldeman, 1996; Rowen & Malcolm, 2002; Wagner et al., 1994), and that gay and lesbian individuals with a Christian upbringing may encounter

difficulties in integrating their sexual and religious identities (Levy & Reeves, 2011). This study sheds some new light on this topic.

We had expected to find higher negative and lower positive gay identification in current Christians, which has been suggested in previous studies. For example, Rowen and Malcolm (2002) found that homosexuals who reported belonging to a religious institution displayed high levels of internalized homonegativity. In contrast, we found no significant differences in current versus former Christians' positive or negative gay identities. Once current Christians are able to integrate their same-sex attractions into their identity schemas, they display the same characteristics as those who left Christianity. This displays the potential for reconciling homosexuality with Christian religious beliefs, thus allowing individuals to maintain both their religious and sexual identities. Future research should examine the mechanism by which this potential reconciliation occurs.

As we had predicted, individuals who left Christianity were more liberal and viewed God as more hostile. It appears that this harsh view of God, and liberal opinions that go against traditional Church teachings, makes it difficult to integrate one's same-sex attraction with one's religious beliefs. This results in an ultimatum: religion or sexuality. The participants in our sample appeared to be more likely to leave their religious upbringing to develop their homosexual identifications. This supports previous research which displays that gays and lesbians are likely to modify or totally abandon their religious beliefs due to conflict between religion and homosexuality (Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Singer & Deschamps, 1994).

These findings suggest that two distinct groups evolved in our study. The first group was able to integrate their same-sex attractions with their religious traditions. These individuals are not only displaying positive homosexual development, but are also doing so while being involved in a Christian faith. The second group, however, was not able to undergo this integration. Instead, they left their religious upbringing to develop in their homosexual identities. Following this logic, and previously displayed in other studies (Hood et al., 1996; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Oetjen & Rothblum, 2000; Wagner et al., 1996), a third group should evolve in future research—those who chose their religious affiliations over their homosexual identities.

Examining the LGB composition of the participants' primary social networks resulted in some contradictory findings. We had expected that the more LGB people were present in the primary social network, the more likely the participant would be to display a positive gay identity and the less likely they would be to display a negative gay identity. However, the participants' LGB networks were not significantly related to either their positive or negative gay identifications or to their attitudes toward religion. Potentially, this could be due to the participants' definitions of their primary social networks. Growing up in a religious environment, the participants were probably less likely to be exposed and interact with openly LGB individuals. As such, they

had to form positive or negative self-views, independent of the LGB composition of their primary social networks. This suggests that in a sample with a Christian upbringing, the LGB composition of one's primary social network does not play a significant role in identity development or religious outlooks.

In support of our hypothesis, we found that the participants' "outness" to their primary social networks was significantly related to both their positive and their negative gay identities, in the direction suggested. This corresponds to previous research which suggests that disclosure increases when comfort and acceptance of one's same-sex attraction increases (Rowen & Malcolm, 2002). In regards to religious attitudes, the participants' outness to their primary social networks was not significantly related to either their view of God or their liberal or conservative views on religion. Taken together, these findings suggest that being "out" is an important element in identity development, but it does not seem to play a role in one's religious viewpoints. Potentially, once individuals have accepted and are more comfortable with their sexual identities, their religious attitudes play less of a role in these identity processes.

Finally, the participant's sexual history was not significantly related to a negative gay identity or to attitudes toward religion. However, it was significantly related to a positive gay identity, with participants whose histories consisted of same-sex only partners displaying higher scores. This suggests that for individuals with a Christian upbringing, positive identification is somehow intertwined with limiting one's sexual experiences to the same sex only. Potentially, experimenting with both genders served as a method for trying to conform to the Christian norm and "become" straight, making these participants less likely to have positive views about their homosexual identities. On the other hand, participants who were more certain of their sexual identities appeared to view their sexuality in more positive terms. Potentially, this is one approach that allows same-sex attracted individuals to combine their sexuality with traditional religious beliefs on monogamy. Therefore, they are able to view their same-sex identification in a more positive light because they reconciled it with basic Christian teachings.

It must be noted that because very few participants fell within the formation stage, the results mostly apply to those within the integration stage. This sample bias was a major study limitation. The self-selection process of entering and completing the survey resulted in a relatively homogenous group of White, educated, integrated participants. Dropout rates seemed to escalate at the homosexual identity questionnaire. This could explain the very small number of formation-stage individuals in the sample. Potentially, they felt threatened by these questions, and were not ready to begin to examine these elements of their identities. This might suggest that a Christian upbringing would have a much greater effect on the formation stage than it does on the integration stage, as well as on racially marginalized, less-educated individuals. Future research should begin to examine this area.

Although future research is undoubtedly necessary, this study sheds some positive light on a relatively proscribed topic in today's religious institutions. First and foremost, it suggests that it is possible for certain Christians to properly integrate their same-sex attractions into their overall identity schemas. This opens the doors for reconciliation between homosexuality and Christian religions. However, being that a second group of participants appeared (who were not able to undergo this reconciliation), future research is necessary. With various studies displaying the existence of a third group (Hood et al., 1996; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Oetjen & Rothblum, 2000; Wagner et al., 1996), research needs to begin to examine what distinguishes the individuals within these three groups. Research should focus on personality facets, familial influences, and cultural and congregational contexts that could be used to distinguish these groups. In addition, future research could more closely examine potential differences between specific Christian denominations, focusing on the implications for conflict between religions and homosexual identities (especially within extremely conservative denominations).

Second, this study displays that demeaning church doctrines could force many Christian gays and lesbians into a difficult, and potentially dangerous, choice: their religion or their sexuality. For the most part, our participants seemed to choose their sexuality. However, future research should further examine the effects of choosing one's religious beliefs over one's sexuality. Third, the study suggests that being out to one's primary social network is important for proper identity development. This finding, which is supported by numerous studies, highlights the importance of religious families and friends to be supportive during the developmental process (Elizur & Minter, 2001; Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Jordan & Deluty, 1998; Rosario et al., 2006; Wright & Perry, 2006). Future research should examine the potentially harmful effects of having a disapproving, religiously conservative, primary social network.

Finally, this study highlights the importance of looking more closely at the specific sexual patterns that people engage in. Future research should more closely examine these patterns and their developmental trajectories. In addition, it appears that having a Christian upbringing instills people with certain traditional religious views. In our case, participants whose sexual histories consisted of same-sex only partners displayed higher positive gay identities, suggesting that limiting one's sexual experiences is important in the HID of people with a Christian upbringing. Future research should examine this potential phenomenon, expanding it to other traditional Church doctrines.

Overall, the integration of religious and homosexual identities appears to be a multifaceted process that requires further research. The implications of this process are vital for LGB individuals who are raised in Christian environments. By better understanding the constituents within this process,

future research can provide solutions and help transform an apparently challenging and demeaning developmental aspect within the lives of many LGB individuals.

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