

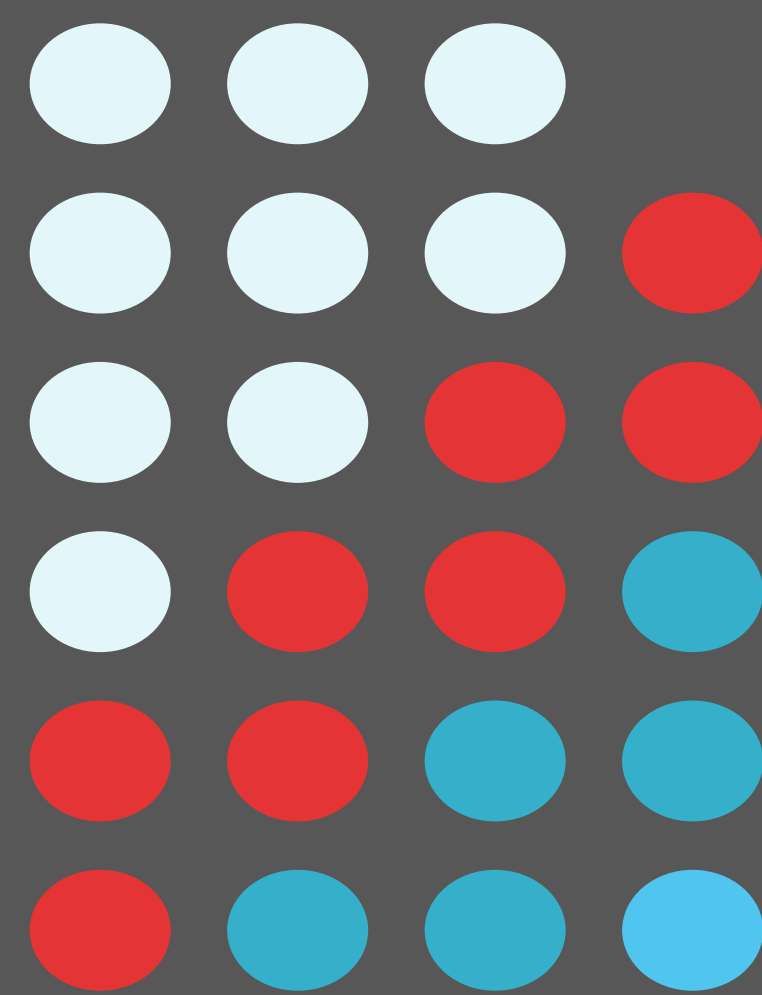
Spiritual Experience, “Outness” and Gay Identity Affirmation in a Select Sample of Urban Same-Sex Attracted Men

Alexandra Thakkar, BS, Jude Elysee, MS and Nicholas A. Grosskopf, EdD, MCHES

Collaborative Research Group on Health Policy and Promotion

Department of Social Sciences-Social Work/Department of Health and Physical Education/Gerontological Studies

School of Health & Behavioral Sciences, York College of The City University of New York



Background

Spirituality can provide individuals with the sense of purpose and a sense of self, particularly among those struggling with their sexuality (Rostosky, Riggie, Brodnicki, & Olson, 2008). Religion is generally seen as “relating to beliefs, doctrines, and practices associated with membership in a religious institution.” Spirituality, in contrast, is considered to entail an experientially grounded sense of connection with, or participatory consciousness of, the “sacred,” “transcendent,” “numinous” or some form of higher power or intelligence (MacDonald, 2009).

Sexual identity development can be described as individuals exploring congruence among their sexual orientation (i.e., sexual attractions, thoughts, and fantasies), sexual behavior, and sexual identity. Identity formation consists of becoming aware of one’s unfolding sexual orientation, beginning to identify feelings and attractions and assigning a label both internally and externally. During this time, some individuals may also experience feelings and attractions that do not coincide with societal norms. These individuals may begin to question whether or not to adopt a lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) identity and thus, begin to explore an emerging LGB identity by becoming involved in gay-related social activities and/or sexual activities (Rosario, Scrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2006).

The published research thus far has largely been qualitative-based and focused on religion, spirituality and opposite-sex attracted individuals, but little has been done to investigate the importance of spirituality in the lives of same-sex attracted men.

Research Questions

Drawing from a diverse sample of same-sex attracted men and using the McDonald model (2009) and current research and theory on LGB identity development as a framework, the following research questions guided this study:

- 1) What are the characteristics of urban same-sex attracted men?
- 2) To what extent do these men report: a) spiritual support and spiritual openness; b) gay identity affirmation; and c) being “out?”
- 3) How are urban same-sex attracted men’s reported spiritual support and spiritual openness, gay-identity affirmation, and “outness” related?

Methods

194 male participants were drawn from a 3-month study that focused on same-sex attracted men and the role that spirituality and/or religion played in sexual identity development. Using a cross-sectional, street-intercept approach, project staff recruited potential respondents at 4 outdoor gay pride events in and around New York City during the summer months of 2011.

Measures

The Spiritual Experience Index-Revised (SEI-R)

A 23-item instrument that measures faith and spiritual journey. A revised version consisting of two subscales: *Spiritual Support* (SS, 13 items, $\alpha=.97$) and *Spiritual Openness* (SO, 10 items, $\alpha=.71$). Total scale reliability $\alpha=.92$ (Genia, 1997).

The Gay Identity and Affirmation Scale

Consists of eleven items used to assess participants’ involvement in gay activities and association with a gay identity. The scale consists of two subscales: 1) Gay Identity Affirmation ($\alpha=.74$) and 2) Internalized (self) homophobia ($\alpha=.85$) (Flores, Mansergh, Marks, Guzman, & Colfax, 2009).

The Outness Inventory (OI)

A 10-item scale used to assess the degree to which lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals are open about their sexual orientation. Outness to family ($\alpha=.87$), to religion ($\alpha=.92$) and to world ($\alpha=.88$) were measured. Total scale reliability was $\alpha=.93$. (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000).

Results

Sample ($n=194$)

Participants ranged from 18 to 78 years of age ($M= 34.83$; $SD= 10.01$). Men self-identified as White/Caucasian ($n= 71$, 46.1%), Black/African American ($n= 39$, 25.3%), Latino/Hispanic ($n= 27$, 17.5%), Asian/Pacific Islander ($n= 7$, 4.5%), Native Person/Alaskan Native ($n= 1$, .6%), and Other ($n= 9$, 3.7%). The majority ($n= 112$, 71.8%) reported being employed for wages/salary during the last three months and more than half ($n= 123$, 79.9%) of the sample was well-educated, reporting having earned a bachelor’s degree or higher ($n= 94$, 59.9%). The most commonly reported annual household income from all sources was $>\$75,000$ ($n= 59$, 37.6%). Reported were Christianity ($n= 70$, 45.8%), Judaism ($n= 9$, 5.9%), Buddhism ($n= 6$, 3.9%), Hinduism ($n= 1$, 0.7%), Atheism ($n= 17$, 11.1%), Agnostic ($n= 7$, 4.6%), Spiritual, but not religious ($n= 35$, 22.9%), and Other ($n= 8$, 5.2%).

Univariate Analysis

Study participants reported average levels of spiritual support ($M= 47.36$, $SD= 20.31$) and spiritual openness ($M= 44.43$, $SD= 7.12$) on the SEI-R subscales.

Men in the study reported moderate to high levels of gay identity affirmation and relatively low levels self-homophobia ($M= 3.96$, $SD= .75$ and $M= 1.74$, $SD= .91$, respectively).

Additionally, participants reported being most “out” to family ($M= 4.18$, $SD= 1.91$), followed by world ($M= 3.61$, $SD= 1.67$) and finally to religion ($M= 2.73$, $SD= 2.11$). Overall “outness” was moderate ($M= 3.58$, $SD= 1.68$).

Results (continued)

Bivariate Analysis

African American men exhibited significantly higher levels of spiritual support than their White and Asian counterparts, $F(4, 139) = 4.33$, $p < .01$, while Latin men possessed significantly less gay identity affirmation than White men, $F(4, 149) = 2.97$, $p < .05$. In addition, men who identified as believing in/practicing Atheism demonstrated significantly lower levels of spiritual support than those reporting Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Spiritual (but not religious) or “other” faiths. Similarly, Agnostic men had lower levels of spiritual support than men who identified as Christian, $F(6, 137) = 12.03$, $p < .001$. With regard to self-homophobia, Christian men exhibited significantly higher levels than men who practiced/believed in Atheism, $F(6, 145) = 3.40$, $p < .01$. No significant differences in “outness” were found.

Race and religious/spiritual affiliation were significantly related both spiritual support/openness and gay identity affirmation/self-homophobia. Spiritual support was positively related to self-homophobia ($r = .23$, $p < .01$) while “out to religion” was negatively related to self-homophobia ($r = -.19$, $p < .05$) (Table 1).

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations and Intercorrelations Among Subscales

| Subscales | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
|-------------------------------|---------------|--------------|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1. Spiritual Support (SEI-R) | -- | | | | | | | |
| 2. Spiritual Openness (SEI-R) | .31** | -- | | | | | | |
| 3. Gay Identity Affirmation | -.09 | .13 | -- | | | | | |
| 4. Self-Homophobia | .23** | -.15 | -.30** | -- | | | | |
| 5. Out to Family | -.03 | .30** | .11 | -.20* | -- | | | |
| 6. Out to World | -.08 | .14 | .06 | -.23* | .71** | -- | | |
| 7. Out to Religion | .12 | .20* | .15 | -.19* | .65** | .60** | -- | |
| 8. Outness Composite | .03 | .27** | .12 | -.24* | .93** | .91** | .80** | -- |
| Mean (<i>SD</i>) | 47.36 (20.31) | 44.43 (7.12) | 3.96 (.75) | 1.74 (.91) | 4.18 (1.91) | 3.61 (1.67) | 2.73 (2.11) | 3.58 (1.68) |

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Discussion

These findings show that there are significant differences for spiritual support and gay identity between racial groups (specifically Latin and Black men)—this mirrors heterosexual religious patterns. Educating religious institutions on the the impact of religious messages on sexual identity, orientation and behavior may serve to counteract the negative effects of homophobia on identity. Future research should include assessing religiosity and gay identity formation among MSM.