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Violeta Bangiyev

Binghamton University--SUNY

Dana Ergas

Binghamton University--SUNY

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Associations Among Internalized Homonegativity, Adverse Childhood Experiences, and Religiosity in a Community Sample of Sexual Minority Individuals

Violeta Bangiyev, Dana Ergas, M.S., and Christina Balderrama-Durbin, Ph.D.
Binghamton University – State University of New York



Abstract

Coming from a religious background may increase the negative experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals (Houp, 2019), but less is known about how the religiosity of the individuals, rather than their family, is related to internalized stigma. While religion often helps improve health and coping skills, it may negatively impact LGBTQ+ people due to the stigma experienced (Valdiserri et al., 2019). This study examined the associations among internalized homonegativity, adverse childhood experiences, and religiosity.

The current sample was comprised of 107 community individuals who identified as a sexual minority. A majority (75.21%) of individuals had at least one adverse childhood experience. 30% identified as Christian, 19% identified as Atheists, and 9% identified as Agnostic. These proportions differ substantially from the national average whereby 65% of Americans identified as Christian, 4% as Atheists, 5% as Agnostic (Pew Research Center, 2019). This suggests LGBTQ+ individuals may be less likely to affiliate with a religion compared with the general American population. Additionally, adverse childhood experiences and degree of self-reported religiosity/spirituality were both positively and independently correlated with internalized homonegativity.

This research is important to help us understand and support the LGBTQ+ community since it may help religious communities/leaders, and mental health practitioners in the future.

Demographics and Descriptives

This study included 107 community individuals that identified as a sexual minority. Out of these, 100 individuals responded with which religious or spiritual practice (if any) they identified: 30% identified as Christian, 13% identified as Jewish, 14% identified as Muslim, 8% identified as Buddhist, 6% identified as Hindu, 19% identified as Atheist, 9% identified as Agnostic, 1% identified as "Not listed" and wrote in their answer.

When asked how religious/spiritual the participants were from a scale of one to five, 1 = "*Not at all*", 3 = "*Somewhat*" and 5 = "*Very*" 13.1% identified with 1, 3.7% identified with 2, 45.8% identified with 3, 37.4% identified with 4, and 0% identified with 5.

When asked about adverse childhood experiences (ranging widely from divorce to physical abuse), 75.2% of the sample reported adverse childhood experiences.

The ages ranged from 19 to 47 years old with a mean of 25.80 and a standard deviation of 5.16. Sex assignment at birth was 43% Male and 57% Female. Gender identity was reported as 34.6% Man, 46.7% Woman, 15.9% Transgender, 1.9% Agender and 0.90% Nonbinary. Race/Ethnicity was reported as 44.9% Black/African American, 32.7% White, 10.3% Latinx/Hispanic, 7.5% Asian, 2.8% as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 0.9% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander and 0.9% not listed. Sexual orientation was reported as 34.6% Bisexual, 21.5% Gay, 24.3% Lesbian, 16.8% Queer, and 2.8% Pansexual.

Descriptive Statistics Table

Descriptive Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
All things considered, how religious/spiritual would you say you are?	3.07	.968	107
ACE Total	3.6262	3.01106	107
Total IHNI	73.5327	17.33973	107

Methods and Measures

Data were collected from 107 community individuals who identified as a sexual minority using online surveys. In order to analyze the data, SPSS was used to analyze frequencies, histograms, correlations, t-tests, and regressions.

The variables analyzed were:

- “*With which religion or spiritual practice (if any) do you most identify?*”
- “*All things considered, how religious/spiritual would you say you are?*”
- Total Internalized Homonegativity Inventory (IHNI)
- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Total

Results

There was a medium positive correlation of .33 between level of religiosity/spirituality and total adverse childhood experiences. There was also a medium positive correlation of .35 between religiosity/spirituality and total IHNI. Likewise, there was a strong positive correlation of .46 between total IHNI and total adverse childhood experiences. Additionally, there was a strong positive correlation of .45 between adverse childhood experiences and religious/spiritual level. When running the regression of total ACE and level of religiosity, an R-square value of .26, $F(2,104) = 18.23$, $p < .001$. Both religiosity/spirituality level and total number of ACEs independently predicted total internalized homonegativity.

Table 1. Correlations

		All things considered, how religious/spiritual would you say you are?	ACE Total	Total IHNI
All things considered, how religious/spiritual would you say you are?	Pearson Correlation	1	.330**	.354**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001	.000
	N	107	107	107
ACE Total	Pearson Correlation	.330**	1	.463**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001		.000
	N	107	107	107
Total IHNI	Pearson Correlation	.354**	.463**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	107	107	107

Table 2. Regression Results

Coefficients							
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B
		B	Std. Error				
1	(Constant)	52.999	4.874		10.873	.000	43.333 62.665
	All things considered, how religious/spiritual would you say you are?	4.041	1.601	.226	2.525	.013	.867 7.215
	ACE Total	2.236	.515	.388	4.345	.000	1.216 3.257

a. Dependent Variable: Total IHNI

Figures

Discussion

Several medium-to-large positive correlations were found supporting our initial hypotheses. These correlations show associations between level of religiosity/spirituality and adverse childhood experiences, religiosity/spirituality and total IHNI, and total IHNI and total adverse childhood experiences. These data suggest that sexual minorities who are more religious/spiritual do indeed have more internalized homonegativity and more adverse childhood experiences. Moreover, both adverse childhood experiences and religiosity/spirituality were predictive of more internalized homonegativity.

Discussion Continued

These findings align with past research that suggests being religious may negatively impact sexual minorities and increase their levels of homonegativity (Sowe et al., 2014). Additionally, sexual minorities internalized having such high levels of adverse childhood experiences are consistent with past research which suggests that sexual minority individuals are at a higher risk for experiencing adverse childhood experiences than heterosexual individuals are (Anderson and Blosnich, 2013).

Limitations/Further Research

Unfortunately, the study did not collect the levels of religiosity the participants were raised in or the religiosity of their parents. Therefore, some of the individuals who identify as Agnostic or Atheist may have been raised in religious households but left the religions and that was not measured. Interestingly, nobody in the current sample identified on the furthest end of the religiosity spectrum, this may be due to the item wording/response options or it could be a reflection of a lack of high levels of religiosity in individuals who identify as a sexual minority. Further research can also conduct longitudinal studies to help determine causality between these correlations and see if and how these are causally related to and impact one another. Finally, these findings are important for mental health practitioners and religious leaders to keep in mind to help support LGBTQ+ individuals as patients and as valued members of the community.

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