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Positive Effects of Conservative Religion on the Mental Health of Sexual Minorities

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Abstract

Sexual minorities often struggle to navigate their sexuality and conservative religious beliefs. Conservative religion is often thought to be toxic for sexual minorities because of the emphasis on traditional marriage (Anderton et al., 2012), and often, the LGBT community will reject sexual minorities that choose to remain in religion (O'Brien, 2007). Conservative religion, however, provides many resources that could benefit sexual (and other) minorities. Religion can help create a sense of identity through teachings and community involvement that may strengthen positive self-perception; it may also create a sense of belonging within a supportive community, especially when individuals are raised among those with similar values and standards (Snapp et al., 2015). Families within conservative religious spaces also tend to be more functional; therefore, despite not always being accepting of sexual minorities when they initially “come out,” families can often learn to become more accepting over time due to their religious convictions (Goodrich & Gilbride, 2010). These identity and social supports, along with other factors, including lower perceptions of burdensomeness and higher feelings of belonging, can help buffer minority stressors that sexual minorities could face and may therefore mitigate feelings of suicidality (Dyer & Goodman, 2021). Thus, sexual minorities should consider remaining in conservative religions and embracing such beliefs despite the common assumption that they should leave to improve overall well-being.

Keywords: sexual minority, LGBQ, conservative religion, religiosity, mental health, suicidality
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Sexual minorities (SMs) who mature in conservative religions often become aware of their same-sex attraction (SSA) after they have developed their religious identity, which can lead to confusion on how to integrate these identities (Gibbs & Goldbach, 2020). This conflict often leads to depression or more severe mental health issues (Schuck & Liddle, 2008). To avoid such difficulties, many SMs may abandon their belief systems entirely (Wilcox, 2009). Others, however, will decide to remain in their religious traditions and disaffiliate themselves from any identity or try to merge these identities and make the conflict an integral part of their lives (Lefevor et al., 2020a; O’Brien, 2007). SMs who choose one of these latter two options run the risk of being rejected by the LGBQ community, even to the point of being booed at pride parades (O’Brien, 2007).

It is not surprising that 48% of LGBT Americans are not affiliated with any specific religious practices (compared to only 20% of the general public as seen in Figure 1), and those who are affiliated tend to be less active in their religions due to rejection from both conservative religious cultures and the LGBT community, if they choose to identify with a specific religion (Pew Research Center, 2013). Despite these pressures, however, about 17% of the LGBT community sees religion as a very important part of their lives, and of those who do identify with a specific religion, many identify with religions that are seen as more conservative and less accepting of members of the LGBT community (Pew Research Center, 2013). Given the conflicts that these SMs may face by continuing to participate in their religious practices, there must be some benefit that would alleviate or negate the potential negative effects on one’s mental health. Sexual minority status is characterized by non-heteronormative orientation, sexual identity, or attraction, whether the individual identifies as a member of the LGBTQ community.
or not (Lefevor et al., 2020b). In recent years, higher rates of acceptance for SMs have allowed for more studies on this subgroup, including on how they are affected by conservative religion.

When SMs affiliate themselves with a conservative religion, they tend to create an identity and purpose within their religious tradition that supports increased mental health. If someone with such strong traditions as those found in conservative religions decides to leave behind their belief system, they will likely develop a strong sense of cognitive dissonance and struggle to find an identity and purpose that will fill the resulting void (Jindra, 2022). Often, a more helpful alternative can be integrating one’s sexual identity with their religious identity in some way (Schuck & Liddle, 2008). When they choose to remain in their belief system, SMs can benefit from a group of like-minded people and a sense of connection to a higher power (i.e., God) (Lefevor et al., 2021b). These sources, along with religious doctrines that allocate meaning to suffering, sadness, and living can help SMs within conservative religions to find their own purposes in life and enhance satisfaction with their personal beliefs.

The social support developed within conservative religions may constitute an influential positive effect for SMs. Conservative religions typically allow individuals to be surrounded by other people who have similar beliefs and practices. Goodrich and Gilbride (2010) concluded that family functioning and support within conservative religions is significantly higher than outside such settings. Support from family is thought to have the greatest impact on SM adolescents as they mature into adulthood and typically has strong effects on their mental health (Ryan et al., 2010). In addition to familial support, support from peers is also highly influential, especially when said peers have similar ideologies and speak openly about opinions (Snapp et al., 2015). If SMs remain in conservative religions and express concerns openly with trusted
family and peers, the support that they can find will likely help them navigate religious living and healthy sexual identity development.

The above aspects of religious affiliation may help to mitigate stressors often experienced by SMs and allow those who would otherwise feel this minority stress to minimize the repercussions on their mental health. Minority stressors, such as lack of belonging and a perception of burdensomeness, have been linked to an increase in suicidality (Pate & Anestis, 2019). When religious beliefs and a system of support help mitigate these stressors, they can create a protective buffer and essentially bolster the mental health of SMs (Kralovec et al., 2014; Lefevor et al., 2021a). Due to these buffers created through religion, it would be beneficial for SMs to remain in their religious belief system and seek support through it.

Many SMs find religion to be a source of tension in regard to their personal identity due to feelings of SSA, for example, that may keep them from fitting the status quo within their congregations. This tension can lead to negative consequences for mental health. Although conservative religion can have a negative effect on members of the LGBQ community, SMs should consider continued religious participation because such congregations are thought to (a) provide doctrine and practices that can create a strong sense of identity and purpose, (b) offer a community that can lend social support, and (c) often buffer against minority stressors, which may help prevent mental health issues and reduce suicidality.

**Identity and Purpose**

Membership and practice within a conservative religion typically create a sense of purpose and meaning in life for those involved. Religion encourages individuals to develop a personal connection with God, wherein individuals commit to obeying the commandments necessary to strengthen that relationship. The structure a person creates in their life through the
process of coming closer to God often gives them a sense of purpose in their life (Galbraith et al., 2019). Further, the doctrine taught in conservative religions can give meaning to suffering by reframing life’s challenges as trials that will build character and promote personal growth (Dyer et al., 2022). Teachings like these can help SMs to navigate the difficulties they may encounter within conservative religious communities (Dyer et al., 2022). These findings indicate that purpose and meaning of doctrine and practices within conservative religions can benefit all people but especially SMs who deal with navigating their place at the intersection of religiosity and sexuality. Focusing on these positive aspects can help SMs find that their lives have meaning and purpose within conservative religion.

Teachings within conservative religions can also affect one’s sense of identity. Conservative religions often teach that the human family is one race; thus, all people should be treated with love and fairness. This teaching can lead some SMs to prioritize use of labels such as “child of God” rather than giving priority to other identifiers within the LGBTQ community (Lefevor et al., 2019). Along with this sense of identity, Lefevor et al. (2021b) concluded that the connection one feels to a higher power can bring a sense of security because SMs can turn to Diety in times of need. McGraw et al. (2023) recently added that these doctrines can also have a positive impact on SMs’ self-image because of the inherent value associated with divine worth and knowing that they will always be loved by God as His children. These findings demonstrate that conservative religions can provide SMs with a sense of identity (as children of God) and that this identity helps create a sense of security because of the connection members have to others through their shared identity and to God.

Although conservative religions can have negative effects on SMs, the impact of leaving conservative religion can be similar or worse. Anderton et al. (2012) explained that many SMs
feel cognitive dissonance or identity conflict due to religious beliefs that discourages same-sex sexual activity. Interestingly, Jindra (2022) observed that leaving behind a religious identity can cause similar effects and even result in a loss of identity. Thus, SMs who leave conservative religions could end up creating a worse situation for themselves by adding dissonance rather than alleviating cognitive dissonance. According to Lefevor et al. (2023), this trend continued with SMs who left the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, especially if their attendance had included interpersonal religious commitment rather than just the behavioral religiosity such as simply attending services. Lefevor et al. (2019) studied SM religiosity and how they identified, and it seemed that those who tried to integrate both a religious and sexual identity experienced the highest levels of conflict, whereas those who rejected either identity had improved mental health. According to these studies, SMs who choose to leave religion completely may experience increased internal conflict, especially if they have deep roots in their religious beliefs. So rather than rejecting their religious identity, it could be more beneficial to reduce the prominence of sexual identity.

To mitigate identity issues, SMs can find ways to integrate their two conflicting identities or justify allowing one to take priority over the other to overcome feelings of cognitive dissonance. McGraw et al. (2023) showed that certain religious beliefs had a negative effect on SMs when paired with ideas that promoted homonegativity. Positive or negative connotations of words (including labels) matter, especially within a religious setting; SMs within conservative religion can navigate cognitive dissonance between their sexual and religious identities by consciously changing the connotations that they give to their sexual identity (i.e., having a queer identity does not mean that God does not love them) or by changing the sexual identity with which they identify to an identity that does not have such strong negative connotations (i.e.
same-sex attracted, which does not infer that one has sexual relations with the same sex, but rather they merely experience said feelings) (Brown, 2015). Lefevor et al. (2019) supported this claim, as the SMs in this study who chose to reject labels (such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer) (i.e., redefine their attraction as an experience rather than something that defines them) to minimize the importance of sexual identity. SMs in this study, had higher levels of religiosity and activity in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints than their LGBQ identifying peers. Results in mental health seemed to be similar for all those involved, despite those who identified as SSA having faced more possible homonegative ideas than their peers who identified as LGBQ (Lefevor et al., 2019). Therefore, if SMs choose to remain in conservative religion, they can protect their mental health by minimizing the importance of an identity while still accepting their experience with SSA or by disassociating their identity from harmful connotations that could cause them to think that they are inferior to their non-SM peers.

**Social Support**

Although the social aspect of conservative religions is often thought of as homophobic and unaccepting of SMs, the social support that SMs can find within conservative religions can benefit them. Dahl and Galliher (2012) found that many SMs felt conflict between the religious beliefs of their friends and families and their sexuality. To avoid such conflict, many SMs within conservative religions choose to reject a label of sexual identity, and this allows them to continue to receive social and congregational support (Brown, 2015; Lefevor et al., 2019). Complete rejection of labels, however, may not be necessary, as Dahl and Galliher (2012) also found that, despite the narrative that people within conservative religious communities would reject loved ones if they identified as LGBQ, many participants received positive reactions from religious friends and family members upon sharing their sexual identity. This evidence indicates that SMs
may find difficulties in being accepted by peers and loved ones due to certain religious beliefs, but they may also find acceptance and support within their faith community by adjusting their use of labels and/or searching for friends and family that are more accepting.

SMs who choose to remain in conservative religions can also benefit from increased support from family members. According to Snapp et al. (2015), of all sources of social support, family acceptance of an SM loved one and their sexual identity had the greatest impact on SMs’ personal acceptance of themselves. Further, Ryan et al. (2010) shared that family acceptance of SMs had a positive correlation with physical and mental health outcomes. Conservative religion can play a role in acceptance of a SM family member, as certain beliefs within conservative religions can facilitate familial acceptance (Rosenkrantz et al., 2020). Goodrich and Gilbride (2010) demonstrated that religious families tended to have higher levels of family functioning, which had a positive effect on family acceptance, and in more actively religious families, the parents tended to be more accepting after the child disclosed their sexual identity. According to this research, SMs can benefit from conservative religious beliefs because some aspects of such beliefs strengthen families and allow families to be more accepting, and the support that SMs receive from their families can support their mental and physical health.

Similarly, social support from friends and peers with shared religious beliefs may also have a significant impact on SMs’ mental health. Snapp et al. (2015) found that friends had a positive effect on SMs’ mental health simply by knowing of their sexual identity or by showing support specifically related to being a SM. Lefevor et al. (2019) explained that peer support continued to buffer mental health for SMs who chose not to identify but to be open about their experience with SSA. This social support from peers can help mitigate internalized homophobia, stressors of coming out, and related issues (Dahl & Galliher, 2012). Religious friends can also
help SMs by promoting healthy practices that are encouraged by their faith, such as abstaining from substance use and unsafe-sex practices through supporting the integration of these values and through mitigation of minority stressors (Dahl & Galliher, 2012; Dyer et al., 2022; Lefevor et al., 2019). This evidence shows that the congregational support from within conservative religions can serve as a protection for SMs against mental health issues and against other unsafe coping mechanisms that could exacerbate poor mental health.

**Buffer Against Minority Stressors**

Conservative religion can help decrease levels of suicidality among SMs. Rates of suicidality and suicide tend to be much higher among SMs compared to heterosexuals (Dyer & Goodman, 2021; Dyer et al., 2022; Pate & Anestis, 2019). According to Dyer and Goodman (2021), religion has often been blamed for the higher rates of suicidality among SMs. However, many studies have shown that SMs who are more religious tend to have lower or similar levels of suicidality compared to SMs who are less religious or not religious at all (Dyer & Goodman, 2021; Dyer et al., 2022; Kralovec et al., 2012; Lefevor et al., 2021a). These evidences show that religion likely does not have a causal effect on higher rates of suicidality of SMs because those who participate in conservative religion seem to have similar or lower levels of suicidality.

Through the support found in conservative religion, SMs can mitigate feelings of perceived burdensomeness that could otherwise lead to suicidality. According to Pate and Anestis (2019), SMs in a conservative area felt as though they were a burden to their families and friends who knew about their sexuality. The perceived burdensomeness felt by SMs is understandable because of the common belief that people with conservative religious values often express: that SMs are sinners (Dyer & Goodman, 2021). This common belief can lead SMs to feel as though they are a burden to their religious family and friends who would have to...
defend their friend’s sexuality to others (Pate & Anestis, 2019). In a study done by Dyer and Goodman (2021) within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, this common belief seems to be false. Social connections that were created among religious participants seemed to lower rates of suicidality (Dyer & Goodman, 2021). According to these studies, a perceived burdensomeness felt by SMs may be the result of the false narrative that friends and family would feel burdened due to SM loved ones sharing their life experiences with them.

Similarly, a sense of belonging created within religious communities could offer another buffer against suicidality. According to Pate and Anestis (2019), despite SMs having similar levels of a sense of belonging as the heterosexual individuals studied, belongingness had a significant impact on the levels of suicidality among participants. Religion can mitigate this factor in suicidality by providing a community with shared beliefs (Dyer & Goodman, 2021). Recently, many religious communities, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, have increased their efforts to show SMs that they do belong and to resolve misconceptions regarding their beliefs about SMs, which could also help increase a feeling of belongingness (Dyer et al., 2022). This evidence suggests that the increased sense of belonging religion is striving to create for SMs could help mitigate feelings of suicidality and improve mental health in this demographic.

Another possible reason for the difference in suicidality rates between religious SMs and non-religious SMs could be related to their religious beliefs, specifically. Hill and Pergament (2008) found that a perceived closeness to God along with a religious belief of purpose in life could provide motivation enough to continue forward in life. Dyer et al. (2022) added that religious beliefs that give meaning to suffering could also help SMs cope with difficulties in life (which could otherwise lead to higher levels of suicidality). Such beliefs can help SMs as they
cope with burdens in life because they understand that these burdens have meaning; further, their connection to God may provide a source of relief. Many conservative religions also believe that suicide is against the will of God; therefore, SMs within these religions often choose not to turn to the option of suicide because of their strong beliefs against it (Dyer & Goodman, 2021). This information shows that the beliefs of conservative religions may create protective buffers that decrease suicidality among SMs.

**Conclusion**

Considering the common experience of SMs as they come to terms with their religious beliefs and their feelings of SSA and the almost 50% of LGBT Americans who are not affiliated with religion, it is easy to understand the difficult decisions that SMs must make regarding their religious beliefs and embracing their sexual identity. SMs, however, when making these decisions, should consider the consequences of leaving their conservative religious traditions because of the sense of identity, social support, and mental and emotional support that such beliefs and communities offer.

Conservative religions offer a sense of identity through their teachings and communities that can benefit SMs who practice such beliefs. The doctrines and practices can bring meaning and purpose to the lives of SMs (Dyer et al., 2022; Galbraith et al., 2019). Doctrines can also teach that individuals have a divine worth (McGraw et al., 2023). Despite identity conflicts thought to be caused by religion (Anderton et al., 2012), leaving religion can contribute to similar conflicts (Jindra, 2022; Lefevor et al., 2023), and SMs can mitigate conflicts by integrating their sexual identity with their religious identity or by modifying priority or adjusting use of a sexual identity label (Brown, 2015; Lefevor et al., 2019). When SMs use these resources and/or employ such methods, they can improve their own view of their identity.
Conservative religions also provide a social support that can provide support in navigating sexuality and mental health. Despite the common belief that conservative religions are homophobic and harmful to SMs, many supportive members of conservative religions continue to support SMs, and SMs can improve this likelihood by modifying how label of sexual identity are used (Brown, 2015; Dahl and Galliher, 2012; Lefevor et al., 2019). Despite religious families not showing as much acceptance when an SM first reveals their sexual identity, such families tend to be more functional than those who are less religious, and family functionality and religious beliefs tend to lead to greater acceptance over time (Goodrich & Gilbride, 2010). SMs’ religious friends can also have an impact through being a trustworthy confidant and supporting them in using safe practices that are supported by their religion (Dahl & Galliher, 2012; Dyer et al., 2022; Lefevor et al., 2019; Snapp et al., 2015). The communities within conservative religions, therefore, can provide a social support for SMs to support them in navigating life decisions and difficulties.

Conservative religion is also thought to have a positive benefit on mental health by creating a buffer for stressors, which can contribute to better mental health and decreased suicidality. Despite suicidality being much higher among SMs than heterosexuals generally, those with firm religious beliefs tend to have lower suicidality rates (Dyer & Goodman, 2021; Dyer et al., 2022; Kralovec et al., 2012; Lefevor et al., 2021a; Pate & Anestis, 2019). Perceived burdensomeness, a factor that is thought to increase suicidality, appears not to be caused by religion or religious individuals but rather by a false narrative that religious people hate SMs (Dyer & Goodman, 2021; Pate & Anestis, 2019). Religious communities can mitigate this by helping SMs feel that they belong (Dyer & Goodman, 2021; Dyer et al., 2022). Religious beliefs also play a role in mitigating suicidal ideation through doctrines that teach SMs that they matter.
and that taking one’s life is not an option (Dyer & Goodman, 2021; Hill & Pergament, 2008). Thus, the support that conservative religions provide may mitigate minority stressors to the point that maintaining such beliefs could prove beneficial.

Such evidence can provide insights that help create more diversity, both within religious communities and within the LGBQ community, because a better understanding of these points may lead to more acceptance for SMs with varying degrees of religiosity. Future research should focus on methods that SMs can use to navigate their religious beliefs and their sexual feelings as well as how therapists can be aware of and help navigate such conflicts (Lefevor et al., 2020a, 2019). With such research, SMs could better make decisions regarding religiosity and conservative religious beliefs, which could have a large impact on their life path, mental health, and relationships. In sum, further research in this area could improve the experience of SMs both inside and outside of conservative religions.
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Appendix

Figure 1
Religious Affiliation of LGBTQ and General populations in the United States

Note. These pie charts depict religious affiliation among LGBTQ Americans (top) and the general population (bottom). Adapted from “A survey of LGBT Americans” (Pew Research Center, 2013).