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The Role of Spirituality in Sexual Minority Identity

A. Jordan Wright and Suzanne Stern
Empire State College, State University of New York

Spirituality has been widely associated with positive well-being within the general population. Although there is limited research on the impact of spirituality on sexual minority individuals, some evidence suggests it is associated with positive psychological outcomes and contributes to the development of a positive lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) identity. The present study aimed to elucidate the relationship between spirituality, gender normative beliefs, and LGB identity development. It was hypothesized that spirituality would be negatively associated with both heteronormative beliefs and attitudes and negative sexual minority identity, and that heteronormativity would mediate the relationship between spirituality and negative identity. Contrary to expectations, spirituality predicted greater heteronormativity and greater negative identity. The association between spirituality and negative identity was fully mediated by heteronormativity. Limitations and implications are discussed.

Keywords: homosexuality, bisexuality, spirituality, heteronormativity, gay identity

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Within the general public, spirituality has been reliably connected to numerous positive outcomes (Garfield, Isacco, & Sahker, 2013; Paranjape & Kaslow, 2010; Thoresen, 1999). It has been found to promote resiliency and self-esteem (Haight, 1998; Kashdan & Nezlek, 2012), and predicts a greater ability to adapt and cope with stressful situations (Gnanaprakash, 2013; Salas-Wright, Olate, & Vaughn, 2013), including illness (Lo et al., 2010; Nelson et al., 2009; Pagnini et al., 2011; Visser, Garssen, & Vingerhoets, 2010), exposure to violence (Benavides, 2012; Schneider & Feltey, 2009; E. A. Walker, 2000), psychological aggression (Austin & Falconier, 2013), and substance abuse (Turner-Musa & Lipscomb, 2007). Further, spirituality is associated with personality traits that are health-protective (Labbé & Fobes, 2010); it is also significantly protective against adverse mental health outcomes, such as depression and anxiety (Bennett & Shepherd, 2013; Hourani et al., 2012; Hsiao et al., 2012; Sorajjakool, Aja, Chilson, Ramirez-Johnson, & Earll, 2008), and suicidal ideation (Henley, 2014; Kyle, 2013; Meadows, Kaslow, Thompson, & Jurkovic, 2005).

While the research on the impact of spirituality on sexual minorities is more limited, there is evidence that spiritual well-being functions as a protective factor and a predictor of adjustment. Greater spirituality has been associated with positive outcomes such as increased self-esteem and identity affirmation, lower internalized homophobia, and fewer feelings of alienation (Lease, Horne, & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005; Moleiro, Pinto, & Freire, 2013; Tan, 2005), and with greater positive affect and satisfaction with life (Harari, Glenwick, & Cecero, 2014). However, awareness within this population of spirituality's role as a protective factor may be limited: in a study of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) individuals conducted by Halkitis and colleagues (2009), only 1% of all participants (N = 428) actively identified spirituality as a coping or resiliency mechanism.

These findings are particularly notable because the LGB community is at increased risk for a number of adverse psychological and physical outcomes (Diamant, Wold, Spritzer, & Gelberg, 2000; Ungvarski & Grossman, 1999), resulting from overt factors such as stigma-related and minority stress, perceived or experienced discrimination or violence, and negative social reactions (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Lick, Durso, & Johnson, 2013; Plöderl, Kralovec, Fartacek, & Fartacek, 2010), as well as exposure to unintended, minor, or transitory homophobia (Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz, & Yu, 2012; Wright & Wegner, 2012). Overall, sexual minorities experience higher rates of mood and substance use disorders, suicide ideation or attempt (Fergusson, Horwood, & Beautrais, 1999; Gilman et al., 2001; Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999; King et al., 2008; Meyer, 2003), and psychosomatic disorders (Lick et al., 2013) than their heterosexual counterparts.

Accordingly, given that spirituality has health protective and coping effects among the general public, and that these effects could positively impact psychological outcomes in the LGB community, a more precise elucidation of the effect of spirituality on sexual minority individuals would be both clinically and theoretically relevant.

Spirituality

As interest in spirituality within the social sciences increased throughout the past few decades, the need arose for conceptualization. Broadly, spirituality can be defined as an individual relationship with or connection to a higher power or intrinsic belief that motivates behaviors and provides meaning and purpose (Coward, 2014; Hill et al., 2000; Hodge & McGrew, 2004). It is intrapsychic, experiential, and noninstitutional; it can complement, overlap with, or exist in the absence of organized religion. However, the concept of spirituality is rich, complex, and defined in multiple ways throughout the scholarly and popular literature.

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A. Jordan Wright and Suzanne Stern, Empire State College, State University of New York.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to A. Jordan Wright, Empire State College, State University of New York, 325 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10013. E-mail: jordan.wright@esc.edu

Some researchers (e.g., Miller & Thoresen, 2003) have posited that spirituality is sufficiently multifaceted as to belie a precise definition, and numerous studies elucidate spirituality's complex and multidimensional nature. For example, Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, and Saunders (1988) identified nine discrete dimensions of spirituality, while Derezotes (1995) reported seven definitions. However, major themes in both studies included meaning, purpose, and mission in life. Similarly, the top three descriptors in a study by Canda and Furman (1999) were "meaning," "personal," and "purpose," and Zinnbauer and colleagues (1997) noted the salience of a personal relationship with a higher power. While these similarities span across some studies, the stark differences in definition underscore how complex the concept is.

The aforementioned studies used general populations, whose experiences may not echo those of sexual minorities. For example, Boisvert (2000) adds further dimensionality, nuance, and complexity, contending that gay spirituality is inherently nonorthodox, eclectic, defiant, and intertwined with political activism, motivated by the marginalization, stigmatization, and rejection by traditional Western religious traditions. He contends that spirituality is intricately intertwined and inseparable from all aspects of identity development, including sexual minority identity. Prior and Cusack (2009) further summarize how secular spirituality underscored the transformative process of gay sexual exploration and how this helped to define the gay movement. In fact, this study revealed that the sexual exploration in bathhouses for certain sexual minorities served as spiritual experiences, and even religiouslike rituals for growth and self-transformation. Ritter and Terndrup (2002) illustrate the diversity of exploration of spirituality undertaken by sexual minority individuals, including alternative forms of worship such as Wicca, witchcraft, and other prepatriarchal spiritual routes; shamanism, which straddles the spiritual and natural realms; and spiritual healing and transformation, or working to transmute loss through spiritual development. Perhaps no movement captures the essence of this description better than the Radical Faeries: diverse ancient traditions were compiled and modernized, and gender norms challenged, to reconstruct spirituality from a uniquely gay perspective (Rodgers, 1995).

However, other LGB researchers have identified more universal conceptions of spirituality within this population. A number of individuals (28%) in a study by Halkitis and colleagues (2009) defined their spirituality as a connection with or belief in a higher power. Other prominent themes included a means to gain self-understanding and self-acceptance and a motivator of behavior.

Identity

Developing a positive identity is central to psychological well-being (Ghavami, Fingerhut, Peplau, Grant, & Wittig, 2011). Sexual minorities, however, regularly encounter obstacles which can hinder the identity development process. These broadly include heterosexist norms and pressures (Mock & Eibach, 2012), negative relationships, and a lack of social support (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2008). A further source of distress can arise from discord between multiple identities with disparate demands (Burke, 1991), such as the codevelopment of sexual and religious identities during adolescence (Yarhouse & Tan, 2005).

There is evidence to suggest that greater spirituality is associated with identity affirmation and less homonegativity (Moleiro et al., 2013), greater self-esteem and more openness about sexual orientation (Rodriguez, Lytle, & Vaughan, 2013). However, much of the scholarly literature on LGB identity and spirituality is from a clinical perspective, focused on ethical considerations and therapeutic goals of reconciliation of conflicting religious and sexual identities. It has been widely noted that involvement in accepting or affirming forms of worship can support the integration of sexual and religious identities (Beardsley, O'Brien, & Woolley, 2010; Daniels, 2010; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Smith & Horne, 2007); this may be accomplished through the development of strategies that counter and reframe stigmatizing antihomosexual doctrine (Johnson, 2000; Thumma, 1991; Yip, 1997), thereby reducing identity conflict. However, Smith and Horne (2007) found that participation in religious congregations that are more highly gay-affirming may not ultimately make a significant difference in resolution of identity conflict. Although those sexual minority individuals in more traditional Judeo-Christian faiths did report more conflict than those in "Earth-spirited" faiths (which they found to engage in many LGBT-affirming behaviors), there was no difference in the level of conflict or resolution of the conflict, related to internalized homonegativity and self-acceptance. Pargament (2002) contended that the association of religion with well-being occurs only when the religion is based on spirituality, while Carter (2013) reported that spirituality more than religiosity was seen as helping to buffer sexual identity conflict. Faith development theory, developed by Fowler (1981), organizes faith identity development into stages related to reasoning about spirituality and questioning reality, and Leak (2009) found that those who were actively exploring their own identity seemed to be more open to questions about faith and were higher in faith development, again showing the complexity of these intertwined identity constructs.

Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity broadly refers to sociocultural, political, and industrial standardization and expectations of gender normative attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Berlant & Warner, 1998). This includes the privileging of heterosexuality and the marginalization of those who exist outside of heteronormative expectations (Jackson, 2006); this stigmatization is a significant source of minority stress (Meyer, 2003). Among the general population, Habarth (2008) found positive associations between heteronormativity and social conservatism, and heteronormativity and right-wing authoritarianism in the general population; among sexual minorities specifically, a negative relationship was found between heteronormativity and life satisfaction. A high degree of concern about conforming to established heteronormative conventions, such as compliance with traditional gender roles, is particularly associated with negative LGB identity (Estrada, Rigali-Oiler, Arciniega, & Tracey, 2011; Gubrium & Torres, 2011; Hamilton & Mahalik, 2009; Sánchez & Vilain, 2012).

Current Study

Spirituality may influence positive psychological health outcomes among sexual minorities. Spirituality refers to an individual's inner relationship with a motivational or inspirational higher power: this higher power can take the form of a deity or can be

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purely conceptual. This relationship may or may not be expressed externally at the individual's discretion and is not necessarily bound to the confines of religiosity; that is, a spiritual individual may or may not belong to a particular religious community or even identify with any religious orientation. Spirituality is defined on an individual basis in a manner that is both personal and meaningful.

There is not a large body of research of the impact of spirituality in the LGB population. The current study seeks to examine how spirituality might impact concern for gender norms, and whether this has an effect on LGB identity development. It is hypothesized that a negative association will exist between spirituality and heteronormativity, and that heteronormativity would be positively related to negative identity. Because spirituality can exist outside of religiosity, more highly spiritual LGB individuals may be protected from religious stigma, which has been linked to higher levels of internalized homonegativity (Ross & Rosser, 1996; J. Walker, 2012) and negative identity (e.g., Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013): therefore, it is further hypothesized that for sexual minorities, less concern for heteronormativity will mediate the relationship between intrinsic spirituality and negative identity. Although not the major focus of this study, since identity development for sexual minorities can be influenced by considerations such as sexual orientation (specifically less developed identity for bisexual individuals; e.g., Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2006) and ethnicity (specifically less developed or delayed identity development for racial and ethnic minorities, as compared to white individuals; e.g., Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004), these demographics will be used as controls when evaluating these hypotheses.

Method

Participants

The present sample was comprised of adult individuals (N = 109) who self-identified as lesbian (22.0%), gay (40.4%), or bisexual (22.2%). Participants were nearly evenly split by gender (male, 45.9%), with the majority of bisexual participants (68%) being female. The mean age was 30 years old (SD = 7.8). Half of participants (51.4%) reported being "in a significant relationship." The sample included participants from urban, suburban, and rural areas across the United States, with the majority of participants self-identified as white (68.8%), followed by Asian & Pacific Islander (11.0%), Latino/a (10.1%), Black (8.3%), and Native American (1.8%). Table 1 presents demographic descriptors.

Design and Procedure

Participants were recruited via a Facebook group that was established to promote the study, as well as through messages posted on several LGB online message boards. Before beginning the survey, which was administered online using Surveymonkey (www.surveymonkey.com), all were informed that the study was approved by [masked for review] Institutional Review Board and agreed to informed consent online by clicking an "accept" button at the bottom of a standard consent form. The entire survey was comprised of 16 measures, of which the current study used three, plus demographics, and took approximately 1.5 hr to complete.

Table 1
Descriptive Data for Demographic and Study Variables (N = 109)

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	*SD*	Percentages
Age	18	62	30.38	7.78	
Racial/ethnic minority					31.2
In a relationship					51.4
Sexual orientation					
Gay					33.9
Lesbian					28.4
Bisexual					37.6
Spirituality	0	6.33	4.59	1.84	
Heteronormativity	2.38	5.56	3.33	.64	
Negative Identity	1.14	6.71	3.63	.64	

Note. Spirituality = Intrinsic Spirituality Scale; Heteronormativity = Heteronormative Attitudes and Beliefs Scale; Negative Identity = Negative Identity subscale from the Lesbian Gay and Bisexual Identity Scale.

Upon completion, the participants could choose to receive a $25 Amazon.com gift card.

Measures

Demographics. Participants were asked to indicate demographic characteristics including sexual orientation (collapsed into lesbian, gay, bisexual), relationship status (single or in a significant relationship, with more nuanced responses such as "married" and "partnered" collapsed into "in a significant relationship") and race/ethnicity (White, Black, Latino/a, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, Other). Because a small number of ethnic minorities were represented, participants were dichotomized into racial/ethnic minority versus nonminority. Participants also self-reported their age.

Intrinsic Spirituality Scale (ISS). The ISS (Hodge, 2003) is a 6-item measure that measures the degree to which nonreligious spirituality serves as a primary motivator, driving and guiding behaviors, thoughts, and growth. The scale is modified from the Intrinsic subscale of Allport and Ross' (1967) Religious Orientation Scale (ROS), which assesses this motivational power of one's connection to Transcendence within a religious context. The ISS addresses spirituality in a more general, nonreligious, and nontheistic framework by removing mention of God, church, or religion, and was designed to be administered to individuals who may not necessarily participate in organized religious worship or activities. The six items employ a phrase completion method measured along an 11-point continuum (e.g., responses for the item "My spiritual beliefs affect" range from 0 = "*no aspect of my life*" to 10 = "*absolutely every aspect of my life*"; responses for the item "Spirituality is" range from 0 = "*not part of my life*" to 10 = "*the master motive of my life, directing every other aspect of my life*"). A high score is representative of a high degree of spiritual motivation. Correlations were found between the ISS and the ROS Intrinsic subscale (r = .91). Items were found through factor analysis to load onto a single dimension of spirituality (Gough, Wilks, & Prattini, 2010). Reliability and validity for the ISS have been previous ascertained; alpha for the present sample on the ISS was 0.97.

Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Scale (LGBIS). Mohr and Fassinger's (2000) LGBIS is a 27-item measure developed to

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evaluate seven continuous dimensions of LGB identity that have been identified and discussed in the clinical and theoretical literature. The seven subscales include Internalized Homonegativity/Binegativity (e.g., "*If it were possible, I would choose to be straight*"), Concealment Motivation (e.g., "*I prefer to keep my same-sex romantic relationships rather private*"), Acceptance Concerns (e.g., "*I often wonder whether others judge me for my sexual orientation*"), Identity Uncertainty (e.g., "*I'm not totally sure what my sexual orientation is*"), Difficult Process (e.g., "*Admitting to myself that I'm an LGB person has been a very painful process*"), Identity Centrality (e.g., "*To understand who I am as a person, you have to know that I'm LGB*"), and Identity Superiority (e.g., "*I look down on heterosexuals*"). All subscales have demonstrated constancy in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations (de Oliveira, Lopes, Costa, & Nogueira, 2012). Items employ a 6-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from "*disagree strongly*" to "*agree strongly*" The Internalized Homonegativity/Binegativity, Concealment Motivation, Acceptance Concerns, and Difficult Process subscales were found through factor analysis to load onto a single, second-order factor and are combined to create a single factor reflecting the degree of Negative Identity (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). Although psychometrics on the Negative Identity factor are not published, the included subscales demonstrate good internal consistency. This study utilized the computed Negative Identity subscale, where higher scores are indicative of greater negative identity. Alpha for the present sample on the Negative Identity subscale was 0.93.

Heteronormative Attitudes and Beliefs Scale (HABS). The HABS (Habarth, 2008) is a 16-item measure designed to assess expectations of normative behavior and essentialized and binary beliefs regarding gender and sex. Two 8-item subscales include Gender as Binary and Normative Sexual Behavior: Gender as Binary addresses the extent to which gender is believed to be dichotomous, for example, "There are only two sexes: male and female," while Normative Sexual Behavior evaluates expectations of traditional gender roles, for example, "People should partner with whomever they choose, regardless of sex or gender." Items are rated on a 7-point scale from "*strongly disagree*" to "*strongly agree*," with higher scores reflecting a higher degree of heteronormativity. The HABS was found to be associated positively with a measure of right-wing authoritarianism, particularly among heterosexuals (Habarth, 2008). Separate analysis found the scale to have sufficient reliability and consistency (Els, 2012). This study used the entire scale. Alpha for the present sample on the HABS was 0.72.

Results

A hierarchy of regressions was used in accordance with Baron and Kenny's (1986) recommendations for testing for mediation in a linear regression framework. This four-regression approach entails that each of the first three analyses must exhibit significance, with the predictor predicting both outcome and proposed mediator, and proposed mediator predicting the outcome. If these analyses are indeed significant, a fourth and final regression can be run (with predictor and proposed mediator predict the outcome) to test for full mediation.

Each analysis was conducted using two steps. To control for demographic differences, the first step in all analyses included a number of demographic covariates; these included *age* as a continuous variable and *minority status*, *relationship status*, *lesbian*, and *bisexual*, each as dummy coded variables. These were included for conceptual reasons, though the intercorrelations (Pearson's *r*, point-biserial correlations, and chi-square statistics, where appropriate) between these variables and the study variables was minimal (Table 2). The four regressions run included Negative Identity (outcome) being regressed on Spirituality (predictor); Negative Identity (outcome) regressed on Heteronormativity (proposed mediator); Heteronormativity (proposed mediator) regressed on Spirituality (predictor); and finally, to test for mediation, Negative Identity regressed on both Heteronormativity and Spirituality in the same model.

Spirituality and Negative Identity

As seen in Table 3, when predicting Negative Identity, age and minority status significantly predicted negative identity. Specifically, higher ages had higher negative identity ($\beta = 0.222$, $p < .05$) and minorities had higher negative identity than nonminorities ($\beta = 0.215$, $p < .05$).

Table 3 also shows that Spirituality significantly predicts Negative Identity, controlling for demographics. Specifically, greater

Table 2
Intercorrelations Between Demographic and Study Variables (N = 109)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	1.00								
2. Minority	.001	1.00							
3. In a relationship	.225*	−.217*	1.00						
Sexual orientation									
4. Gay	.063	3.790*	.000	1.00					
5. Lesbian	−.120	.372	2.782	.00	1.00				
6. Bisexual	.050	6.101*	2.424	.00	.00	1.00			
7. Spirituality	−.168	.110	−.104	.116	.009	−.122	1.00		
8. Heteronormativity	.060	.110	−.067	.165	−.115	−.054	.382**	1.00	
9. Negative Identity	.193*	.227*	−.117	.001	.001	−.002	.288**	.543***	1.00

Note. Spirituality = Intrinsic Spirituality Scale; Heteronormativity = Heteronormative Attitudes and Beliefs Scale; Negative Identity = Negative Identity subscale from the Lesbian Gay and Bisexual Identity Scale. Correlations include Pearson's correlations (between continuous variables), point-biserial correlations (between dichotomous and continuous variables), and chi-squares (between dichotomous variables).
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

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Table 3
Hierarchical Regression Analysis Summary for Demographic Variables and Spirituality Predicting Negative Identity (N = 109)

Block	Predictor variable	*B*	*SE B*	β	R^2	ΔR^2
Block 1	Age	.033	.014	.222*	.106	
	Minority	.538	.246	.215*		
	Relationship	−.292	.230	−.126		
	Lesbian	.076	.278	.030		
	Bisexual	.169	.264	.070		
Block 2	Spirituality	.199	.058	.314***	.200	.093

Note. Spirituality = Intrinsic Spirituality Scale.
* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Spirituality was related to greater Negative Identity (β = 0. 314; $t(101) = 3.449$; $p < .001$). Spirituality accounted for 9.3% of the variance in Negative Identity (R^2 change = 0.093; $F(7, 101) = 4.238$; $p < .001$).

Heteronormativity and Negative Identity

Table 4 shows that Heteronormativity independently significantly predicts Negative Identity (β = 0.519; $t(101) = 6.426$; $p < .001$), such that greater Heteronormativity predicted higher Negative Identity (see also Figure 1). Heteronormativity accounted for 25.8% of the variance in Negative Identity (R^2 change = 0.258; $F(7, 101) = 9.720$; $p < .001$).

Spirituality and Heteronormativity

When predicting Heteronormativity, Table 5 shows that Spirituality significantly predicted Heteronormativity (β = 0.384; $t(101) = 4.176$; $p < .001$), accounting for 14% of the variance in Heteronormativity (R^2 change = 0.140; $F(7, 101) = 3.831$; $p < .01$), such that greater Spirituality predicted higher Heteronormativity (see also Figure 2).

Mediation Model

As presented in Table 6, when both Spirituality and Heteronormativity were included together in a single step as predictors of Negative Identity, only Heteronormativity remained a significant predictor (β = 0. 468; $t(100) = 5.390$; $p < .001$), and the effect of

Table 4
Hierarchical Regression Analysis Summary for Demographic Variables and Heteronormativity Predicting Negative Identity (N = 109)

Block	Predictor variable	*B*	*SE B*	β	R^2	ΔR^2
Block 1	Age	.033	.014	.222*	.106	
	Minority	.538	.246	.215*		
	Relationship	−.292	.230	−.126		
	Lesbian	.076	.278	.030		
	Bisexual	.169	.264	.070		
Block 2	Heteronormativity	.941	.146	.519***	.364	.258

Note. Heteronormativity = Heteronormative Attitudes and Beliefs Scale.
* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

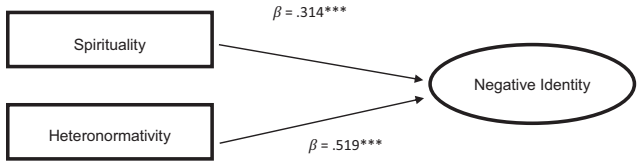


Figure 1. Summary of direct effects of spirituality and heteronormativity on negative identity. β = β regression coefficient. *** $p < .001$.

Spirituality was no longer significant (β = 0.134; $t(100) = 1.540$; $p > .05$). This indicates that the association between Spirituality and Negative Identity is fully mediated by Heteronormativity (see Figure 2).

Discussion

Contemporary research defines spirituality as an internal, personal, and motivating relationship with a higher power or belief (Hill et al., 2000; Hodge, 2003). Spirituality has widely been associated with numerous positive psychological and physical health outcomes in the general population. What limited research exists on spirituality's impact on sexual minority individuals indicates that it may be a protective factor and may lead to development of a more positive LGB identity. Since this community is at risk for negative physical and mental health outcomes, primarily as a result of factors such as minority stress and victimization, a greater understanding of how spirituality functions within this population is needed.

Because previous research suggests that spirituality is associated with well-being in the general population, and possibly also among sexual minorities, the present study hypothesized that spirituality would be associated with positive outcomes for LGB individuals. Contrary to this hypothesis, spirituality actually predicted greater negative identity, and this relationship was mediated by heteronormativity. That is, the reason spirituality was found to be related to negative identity was because it is associated with heightened heteronormativity.

While these results indicate that spirituality may not be a protective factor for sexual minority individuals, care should be taken to interpret these data in light of the ubiquitous conflation of spirituality and religion, both in the literature and in the larger Western culture. It is only in the past few decades that spirituality

Table 5
Hierarchical Regression Analysis Summary for Demographic Variables and Spirituality Predicting Heteronormativity (N = 109)

Block	Predictor variable	*B*	*SE B*	β	R^2	ΔR^2
Block 1	Age	.005	.008	.061	.044	
	Minority	.106	.140	.077		
	Relationship	−.097	.131	−.076		
	Lesbian	−.257	.159	−.181		
	Bisexual	−.154	.150	−.116		
Block 2	Spirituality	.134	.032	.384***	.184	.140

Note. Spirituality = Intrinsic Spirituality Scale; Heteronormativity = Heteronormative Attitudes and Beliefs Scale.
*** $p < .001$.

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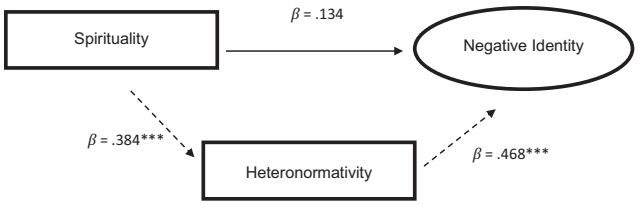


Figure 2. Summary of direct and indirect effects of spirituality and heteronormativity on negative identity. β = β regression coefficient. *** $p < .001$.

and religion have been recognized as independent constructs, with much of that time spent in an attempt at operationalization (Oman, 2013). While spirituality refers to one's subjective, inner relationship with some higher power, religion is the externalized involvement in a standardized organization of beliefs and practices (e.g., Tan, 2005). A quick review of the literature reveals that these constructs are often used interchangeably, despite the fact that spirituality is not predicted by measures of religiosity (Hodge & McGrew, 2004), such as affiliation, frequency of prayer, and attendance at services. Traditional, nonaffirming religious affiliation has been found to be associated with higher levels of internalized homophobia (Barnes & Meyer, 2012), which may have a great impact on identity development.

This overlap is particularly salient when looking at sexual minority populations. While religion, like spirituality, may be associated with positive outcomes in the general public, a significant number of studies have associated religious participation with adverse health outcomes in the LGB community, even among individuals involved with affirming congregations. For example, Smith and Horne (2007) reported that sexual minorities actively involved in Judeo-Christian-based worship maintained levels of internalized homonegativity consistent with individuals involved in gay-affirming alternative practices. Internalized homonegativity is a predictor of psychological distress (Szymanski & Kashubeck-West, 2008) and is correlated with increased anxiety and depression (Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010).

The more highly spiritual LGB individuals in the present sample may experience a personal relationship with a higher power that is irreconcilably connected to exposure to nonaffirming theological learning. Similarly, they may be currently affiliated with a religious community. In both cases, individuals may have associated spirituality directly with past or current religious practices and affiliations. It is also possible that more highly spiritual individuals may be members of religious communities where they actively encounter overt or veiled homonegative messages, thereby stalling development of a positive LGB identity.

Alternately, a lower spiritual score may represent a conscious rejection of the construct of religion and, as a byproduct, spirituality. Haldeman (2002) notes that one response of LGB individuals to homonegative doctrine and the distress it can engender is to adopt an antireligious stance. Since religion and spirituality are so often linked, when religion is rebuffed, spiritual beliefs may be as well.

The ubiquitous conflation of spirituality and religion may present further issues in regard to data collection. For example, associating spirituality with religiosity may color subjects' responses on measures of spirituality, such that the validity of the measures may be in question. In the current study, ISS defines spirituality as one's "relationship to God, or whatever you perceive to be Ultimate Transcendence," even though theistic references are omitted from the items themselves. It is therefore possible that the mention of "God" prompted some subjects to associate this measure of spirituality with religion. That is, some subjects may have associated this overt reference to a religious deity or to marginalizing religious traditions, and this may have primed them for higher homonegative and negative identity scores.

Yet another consideration is that the 6-item ISS may be too limited to evaluate spirituality within this population. The measure was designed to assess the degree to which one's relationship with a higher power functions as a motivational force that provides purpose, fuels personal growth, answers questions, and influences decisions. As previous research suggests (e.g., Halkitis et al., 2009), these themes of personal connection to a higher power, behavioral motivation, personal growth, and means by which understanding is increased are consistent with many LGB individual's conception of spirituality. However, this measure does not take into account specific aspects of gay spirituality such as transformation, defiance, and political activism, and as such, it may not be a valid measure of how spirituality is experienced by all sexual minority individuals.

These initial findings are important, as they not only challenge the belief of spirituality as a protective factor for sexual minorities but implicate spirituality as possibly contributing to negative psychological health outcomes. In a practical light, results indicate that within this at-risk population, there is a possibility that spiritually based therapeutic interventions may have undesirable or even harmful effects. It further illustrates the need for a greater understanding of how spirituality functions within this population.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study has a number of limitations. A cross-sectional/correlational design means that we cannot be confident in the directionality of associations. For example, although spirituality was found to predict negative identity, it is possible that negative identity influences individuals to become more spiritual; indeed, some aspects of gay spirituality have developed to counteract the stigma and victimization experienced by LGB individuals. With the majority of participants identifying as White, the sample did not reflect a great

Table 6
Hierarchical Regression Analysis Summary for Demographic Variables, Spirituality, and Heteronormativity Predicting Negative Identity (N = 109)

Block	Predictor variable	*B*	*SE B*	β	R^2	ΔR^2
Block 1	Age	.033	.014	.222*	.106	
	Minority	.538	.246	.215*		
	Relationship	−.292	.230	−.126		
	Lesbian	.076	.278	.030		
	Bisexual	.169	.264	.070		
Block 2	Heteronormativity	.849	.157	.468***	.378	.272
	Spirituality	.085	.055	.134		

Note. Spirituality = Intrinsic Spirituality Scale; Heteronormativity = Heteronormative Attitudes and Beliefs Scale.
* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

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deal of ethnic and cultural diversity. Perhaps most significantly, this study did not include any measures of religiosity, nor did subjects provide demographic information pertaining to past or current religious affiliation. Therefore, it is impossible to account for the effect of past or current religious beliefs, behaviors, affiliations, or experiences.

Additional research is necessary to more precisely evaluate the impact of spirituality on the LGB population. Further studies should include more robust measures of spirituality than the 6-item ISS. The ISS was used in this study because we believed it to succinctly capture the general essence of spirituality; however, a measure with more dimensionality may more accurately capture the LGB spiritual experience. Additionally, employing a measure of religiosity and collecting religious demographics will help to control for the effects of past or current involvement with a religious congregation. Oversampling ethnic minority individuals, as well as those individuals affiliated with nontraditional, non-Western, or affirming religious congregations, will ensure a more diverse evaluation of this population.

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