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### **Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adults' Experiences with Supportive Religious Groups**

Rachel Grossman

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Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adults' Experiences  
with Supportive Religious Groups

by

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B.A., Keene State College, 2010  
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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of  
Doctor of Psychology in the Department of Clinical Psychology  
at Antioch University New England, 2020

Keene, New Hampshire



Department of Clinical Psychology  
**DISSERTATION COMMITTEE PAGE**

The undersigned have examined the dissertation entitled:

**LESBIAN, GAY, AND BISEXUAL ADULTS' EXPERIENCES  
WITH SUPPORTIVE RELIGIOUS GROUPS**

presented on December 11, 2020

by

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### Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mom. Mom, your continued support, and love throughout this long journey has been immensely important to me. Your constant belief in me has been invaluable, and this dissertation would not have been completed without you. Your belief in me encouraged me to keep going even when my anxiety was extremely high. I will also forever appreciate your brilliant idea to use positive reinforcement with our weekly Scrabble nights to get me to keep moving forward. Lastly, your steadfast support of my sexuality and your advocacy work for the LGBT secular and religious community has been central to my growth and learning. This research study would not have been completed without you as my role model. I love you always and forever.

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## Abstract

This qualitative research study was designed to explore lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) young adults' views about how being a member of supportive and affirming religious places of worship and social groups influenced their self-acceptance, as well as their ability to integrate their religious and sexual minority identities. In this study, six in-person interviews were completed with participants who (a) were 18-24 years old; (b) identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual; (c) were members of supportive Jewish and Christian religious groups; and (d) identified as cisgender. The data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to tell cohesive stories about the perceptions of LGB young adults on the influence of supportive religious group membership. I found that all six participants reported that finding their religious supportive groups had a significant positive impact on their ability to integrate their religious and sexual identities. All six participants also reported that being a member of the affirming religious group allowed them to keep their identity, overall, as a unified whole. The results of my study have positive implications for clinicians working with the LGB population, parents of LGB people, friends of LGB people, LGB advocacy work within the religious community, and for religious groups and places of worship who want to increase membership of minority individuals.

This dissertation is available in open access at AURA: Antioch University Repository and Archive, <http://aura.antioch.edu/>, and OhioLINK ETD Center, <https://etd.ohiolink.edu>

*Keywords:* qualitative research, lesbian, gay, bisexual, LGB, young adults, supportive, affirming, religion, places of worship, Jewish, Christian, thematic analysis, integration

## Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adults' Experiences with Supportive Religious Groups

This study sought to explore lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) young adults' perceptions about the influence of supportive and accepting religious groups or organizations. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore, with a small sample of 18–28-year-old LGB young adults, their perceptions of how belonging to these supportive religious groups has influenced their feelings of self-acceptance and their ability to integrate their sexual minority and religious identities. Participants were recruited from supportive and affirming Jewish and Christian religious groups. This section demonstrates the rationale for having chosen this research topic.

There has recently been an increased amount of research with a focus on better understanding the stressors associated with identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. This research has generally focused on certain major areas, including the impact of homophobia and victimization, the positive impact of generalized social support, and the negative impact of religion on LGB individuals. Within the area of religion, research has generally focused on how the major monotheistic religions (Judaism and Christianity) have historically viewed homosexuality as sinful, and how that view has negatively affected sexual minority individuals.

However, one area that has been lacking within this research is how experiences with organized religion can have potentially positive impacts on LGB individuals. Even when past research has delved into the area of positive religious experience, the participants have generally been recruited from secular supportive groups such as gay–straight alliances or LGBT centers, or directly through religious places of worship that may or may not actively support and affirm LGB identities. There is very little research, to date, where participants have been recruited from religious organizations, groups, or places of worship where there is an active mission to support and accept LGB members. This dissertation aimed to further the research in this area by

interviewing LGB young adults who are members of supportive and accepting religious groups to better understand how participating in these groups has influenced these LGB young adults.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review explores the many challenges that LGB young adults face in their lives, with a focus at the end on how supportive religious experiences can have a positive influence. Each challenge may have an impact on whether LGB young adults choose to find religious groups or organizations that support and accept their sexual orientation. Each section describes the challenges that LGB people face and how each challenge is connected to religious views of LGB people. The final section discusses how supportive religious experiences can influence LGB individuals and their ability to integrate their LGB and religious identities.

### **Definition of Key Concepts**

Sexual orientation is the preferred term used to describe a person's sexual and emotional attraction to another person and the behavior that may result from this attraction. Sexual orientation occurs along a spectrum and refers to whom someone's sexual desires and romantic attractions are oriented. People who are attracted to someone of the opposite gender generally identify as heterosexual or "straight." Individuals who identify as gay or lesbian are those who are attracted to someone of the same gender. In addition, some individuals are attracted to both men and women; these people often identify as bisexual, pansexual, or omnisexual, while those who do not experience sexual attraction are referred to as asexual.

### **Coming Out of the Closet**

Before LGB individuals can turn to anyone for support, they must first go through the process of telling other people about their sexual orientation (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). This process of telling others about one's sexual orientation is known as "coming out of the closet," or

more commonly as “coming out” (Waldner & Magruder, 1999). Unlike certain other minorities, people who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual are considered a hidden or invisible minority; others will not know that these people identify as LGB until they reveal their sexual orientation. This need to come out is partly due to the United States’ heteronormative culture, where heterosexuality is assumed until people are told otherwise (Dahl & Galliher, 2012).

The decision about whether to come out is frequently very stressful, particularly when there is uncertainty about how friends, peers, and family will react (Nesmith et al., 1999). There have been many instances in which LGB individuals have been kicked out of their homes and disowned by their families due to their sexual orientation (Savin-Williams, 1994). LGB adolescents and young adults have sometimes lost close friends after coming out, due to bigotry and heterosexism. However, the stress of staying closeted can also magnify other relational and mental health difficulties and take energy away from addressing those issues (Bepko & Johnson, 2000).

### **Cass’s Model of Coming Out**

One model that is used to understand the process of coming out, self-acceptance, and sexual identity development is Cass’s model, which was developed in 1979 (Cass, 1979). This model is included here because it can expand the knowledge about how LGB young adults move from learning to accept themselves to exploring ways in which they can find acceptance and support through other people and within their religion.

Cass’s model is developmental in nature and includes six major stages of coming out (Kennedy & Oswalt, 2014). The two major assumptions of this model are that (a) identity acquisition is a developmental process, and (b) that the center for stability and change in behavior lies in the interaction between the individual and the environment (Jordan & Deluty,

1998). This model also follows an assumption that LGB young adults will likely cope with each stage of the model in different ways. Some young adults may never reach the last stage, where full acceptance is achieved. Others may have to alter their other identities, such as religious identities, in order to continue to pass through the stages.

Prior to the first stage of the model, sexual minority individuals hold a view of themselves as heterosexual, likely due to growing up in a society that is predominantly heterosexual in its outlook and assumptions (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). The first stage of Cass's model is *Identity Confusion*, when individuals recognize a difference in their own behavior and feelings from the heterosexual norm. Individuals begin to question whether these behaviors and feelings are more strongly associated with individuals who identify as lesbian or gay. This recognition causes a disconnect between previously held beliefs of being part of the heterosexual community and the new perception of themselves (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014).

In the second stage, *Identity Comparison*, individuals begin to consider that they may be lesbian or gay. This new consideration produces a feeling of alienation and of not belonging in the family and in society (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). As individuals begin to define themselves as probably lesbian or gay, they move into *Identity Tolerance*, the third stage (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). In this stage, individuals are freed from some of the confusion faced in the second stage. The individuals acknowledge their sexual minority identity but are not yet fully accepting of this identity.

The fourth stage of *Identity Acceptance* involves increasing interactions with others who identify as lesbian or gay. In this stage, individuals have a positive self-image as a lesbian or gay person and feel more secure in their identity (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). At this stage, individuals most likely have not come out yet to heterosexual friends or family but experience a

private acceptance and may acknowledge their identity to other sexual minority individuals (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). In *Identity Pride*, the fifth stage, individuals finally feel proud to be members of the lesbian and gay community. At this stage, disclosure becomes a viable option for coping with the new identity. In the final stage of *Identity Synthesis*, individuals are able to fully integrate their lesbian or gay identity into a fuller self-identity. Individuals view their sexual minority identity as being an important part of their identity (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014).

Multiple studies have used Cass's model to understand the experiences of sexual minorities as they begin going through the process of coming out (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). Kahn (1991) found that many lesbians could easily relate to Cass's model. The women in his study stated that they tended to come out after they had experienced the identity tolerance and identity acceptance phases.

Cass's model continues to be used today in safe space and ally trainings to familiarize participants with the developmental process for LGB people (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). It is important to note, however, that the social context and environment has changed since the 1970s, when Cass first developed her model. In the last few years there has been greater visibility and acceptance of sexual minority identities. One critique of Cass's model involves the recent acknowledgement that there are four main categories of sexual orientation: (a) asexual; (b) bisexual, omnisexual, or pansexual; (c) homosexual; and (d) heterosexual. Cass's model only emphasized the sexual identities of gay males and lesbian women. There has not been much research about how Cass's model may fit with other identities (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014).

Another critique involves the number of stages in Cass's model. Other researchers, such as Meerendonk and Probst (2004), found that sexual identity formation occurred in two phases rather than in multiple discrete linear stages. Many researchers have recently argued that a linear

model is too constricting, and that gay males and lesbian women may not progress through all stages or through a sequential order (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). Individuals may regress or simultaneously attend to more than one stage at a time. Cass's model also did not reflect on or consider ethnic or racial identities. Until recently, most of the research related to identity development focused specifically on white middle-class women and men (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). Thus, while Cass's model can be used to better understand sexual identity formation for gay men and lesbian woman, care should be taken to recognize the limitations of this identity formation model.

### **Victimization and Mental Health**

After identifying as LGB and then coming out, some LGB individuals then deal with issues including homophobia, bigotry, and victimization by others. Even after LGB people begin to accept themselves, they may find that the important people in their life—as well as complete strangers—may not accept, and may even be intolerant of LGB people. People may victimize LGB people for several reasons, including (a) fear of people who are different, (b) repulsion of the thought of having homosexual relations with another person, (c) unacknowledged internal feelings of being LGB, or (d) religious intolerance (Button et al., 2012).

In the last 40 years there has been an expansion in the amount of research related to lesbian, gay, and bisexual men and women, particularly in the areas of victimization and mental health. Victimization can come in the form of discrimination, bullying, teasing, physical assault, or sexual assault (Button et al., 2012). LGB victimization has historically occurred in school settings, at work, with peers, and in the home (Button et al., 2012). Research has found that young adults subjected to psychological, physical, or sexual anti-LGB victimization are at risk for depression, experience more symptoms of PTSD, are more likely to consider and attempt

suicide, and experience more social isolation than their straight peers (Button et al., 2012; Dürrbaum & Sattler, 2020; Waldner & Magruder, 1999; Wright & Perry, 2006). These young adults are also more likely to engage in substance abuse and prostitution (Muñoz-Plaza et al., 2002).

Victimization has also been documented to influence self-esteem. Young adults who have been victimized for many years have lower self-esteem than those who have not been victimized (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). LGB young adults who experience victimization are also more likely to develop internalized homophobia (Muñoz-Plaza et al., 2002). Internalized homophobia can involve experiencing self-hatred at having a homosexual or bisexual identity. This self-hatred can then lead young adults to avoid disclosure of their sexual orientation, which then further isolates them (Grossman & Kerner, 1998).

Some LGB young adults also avoid disclosing their identities due to the fear of losing the love of their friends or family, as well as fear of losing their homes due to being disowned. (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001). Homelessness in the LGB population continues to be a problem even as the United States has become more supportive of sexual minority youth overall (Schmitz & Woodell, 2018). Victimization puts a significant strain on LGB people and can impact whether they feel comfortable in continuing to come out to new people, limiting their access to social support (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001).

### **Legal Protections**

Another issue that LGB young adults face involves the differing legal benefits and protections they are given compared to their heterosexual counterparts. These protections vary among US states, with some US states offering more legal protections for LGB people than other states. While some states explicitly protect LGB people from discrimination, other states allow

people to use their sincere religious beliefs as a legitimate reason to discriminate against LGB people. LGB people are more likely to experience religious intolerance instead of acceptance in the states that allow religious discrimination (Barton, 2010).

Some states (e.g., Massachusetts) prohibit housing and employment discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and include crimes based on sexual orientation or gender identity within their hate crimes laws (Snapshot: LGBT Equality by State, 2020). However, other states, such as Tennessee and Georgia, have put in place religious protection laws that allow discrimination against LGB people in virtually all aspects of their lives (Snapshot: LGBT Equality by State, 2020).

One significant legal protection that has become more prevalent in recent years involves US states creating laws to outlaw the use of conversion therapy for LGB minors. Presently there are laws banning licensed therapeutic efforts to reduce or eliminate same-sex attractions in 20 states (Snapshot: LGBT Equality by State, 2020). Such legislation is based on arguments that conversion therapies for minors are ineffective, harmful, and abusive (Drescher, 2015).

### **The Importance of Social Support**

Recently, researchers have started to focus on the resiliency of LGB young adults. Social support has been found, throughout multiple studies, to enhance resilience and to be a protective factor against negative outcomes such as depression, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse for LGB young adults (Button et al., 2012; Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001; Muñoz-Plaza et al., 2002; Nesmith et al., 1999). Sexual minority individuals who view themselves positively and have strong social support networks are less likely to experience victimization and its associated negative effects (Jordan & Deluty, 1998; Mustanski et al., 2011; Nesmith et al., 1999).

Social support functions to minimize negative effects of stressful experiences, either directly through the supportive actions of others, or indirectly through the perception that support is available, if needed, even when not accessed (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). Social support acts both as a direct predictor of mental health and as a protective factor capable of abating the negative effects of stress (Doty et al., 2010). Much of the research related to social support has focused on parents, and how relationships with parents have affected LGB young adults. Social support from parents has been linked to increased self-esteem and overall better mental and physical health outcomes (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001; Rothman et al., 2012). However, parental support is only one social support source in the mental health of LGB young adults (Rothman et al., 2012).

The support of friends is also valuable to LGB youth. Research has found that the support of friends was especially beneficial and was correlated with internal self-acceptance (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001). LGB young adults have stated that the support from friends and nonfamily members was more valuable than that of parents (Button et al., 2012; Muñoz-Plaza et al., 2002). The increased reliance on friends for support may be explained by a developmental factor common to all young adults, where there is a normative shift toward increasing reliance on peers (Doty et al., 2010). While heterosexual friends provided higher levels of sexuality-related social support than family members, they were still viewed as providing less support for sexuality-related problems than for other types of problems (Doty et al., 2010).

While generalized social support has been found to be minimally to moderately helpful in negating the effects of stressors for LGB people, sexuality-related social support which specifically addresses a person's sexuality has been found to be moderately to highly beneficial in buffering a variety of stressors for LGB people (Doty et al., 2010). Research has found that

LGB young adults are more likely to disclose to those individuals whom they feel will be the most accepting (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). For this reason, if LGB young adults have any LGB friends, these friends are likely to be the first people to whom LGB young adults disclose their sexual orientation (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). Sexual minority friends have been found, overall, to provide the highest levels of sexuality-related social support (Doty et al., 2010).

There are several factors that contribute to why sexual minority friends are seen as more supportive than both heterosexual friends and family members. The first factor involves a firsthand knowledge and understanding of sexual minority issues. Sexual minority friends are more likely to be supportive because they have had similar experiences of coming out to others, looking toward others for sexuality-related social support, and understanding the unique stressors that come with identifying as a sexual minority (Muñoz-Plaza et al., 2002; Nesmith et al., 1999). In-group friendships also have been shown to be sources of solidarity in confronting stigmatization; this source of social support is particularly important when the identity is a concealable one (Doty et al., 2010).

Another area of social support involves the participation in organizations that are designed to promote supportive relationships among sexual minority individuals (Doty et al., 2010). Young adults may first come across these organizations or groups when they are enrolled in the education system (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). These groups are generally found in high schools and colleges and tend to be labeled as “gay-straight alliances” (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). Establishing gay-straight alliances in schools provides the perception that the school is safe and supportive of LGB individuals (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). LGB students at schools with gay-straight alliances are less likely to report feeling unsafe, more likely to report greater feelings of belonging, and have fewer overall absences from classes (Swanson & Gettinger,

2016). These organizations can also come in the form of religious groups whose purpose is to support and affirm sexual minority identities within a particular religion. Several of these religious groups exist in the greater Boston Massachusetts area, such as Keshet (LGBT Jews), Dignity USA (LGBT Catholics), More Light Presbyterians, Integrity USA (LGBT Episcopalians), Queer Muslims of Boston, and Pioneer Valley Progressive Muslims.

### **Religion and Intolerance**

Religion has often, historically, been associated with intolerance of others who are different, including lesbian, gay, and bisexual people (Davidson, 2000). Within the major monotheistic religions, Judaism and Christianity, homosexuality has historically been viewed as a sin and as an abomination. Religious leaders have used the Torah (what Christians consider the Old Testament) or New Testament to condemn same-sex attraction (Rodriguez, 2010; Siraj, 2012). Many young LGB Christian adults, who live in certain geographic regions of the US, have had to endure sitting in church listening to leaders advocating the end of homosexuality by any means, being told that they must “pray away the gay” in order to enter heaven after death (Barton, 2010). The family members of LGB young adults may then uphold these same ideas at home, telling their children that they must either find a way to become straight or they will be disowned. This leaves LGB young adults with the choice to either pretend to be straight in order to stay close to their families or to be genuine to themselves and others, with the possibility that they will be disowned (Dahl & Galliher, 2010).

Historically and currently, many of these religious sects endorse the belief that homosexuality is a choice, and even advise that LGB men and woman participate in conversion therapy to change their orientation (Barton, 2010). These beliefs are upheld even as national health and scientific organizations in the United States have firmly concluded that there has been

no scientific demonstration of conversion therapy's efficacy (Drescher, 2015). Further, organizations such as the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association hold that conversion or so-called reparative therapies may cause mental harm to LGB clients and therefore consider these therapies to be unethical (Drescher, 2015).

When sexual minority young adults are told by both society and by their religion that they are sinning for loving someone of the same sex, they may experience identity conflict (Rodriguez, 2010). Research has found that individuals react in different ways when trying to integrate two competing aspects of their identities—their religion and their LGB sexual orientation. After realizing that they identified as LGB, some individuals internalized the homophobia they were exposed to in their places of worship (Dahl & Galliher, 2012). This internalized homophobia has been correlated with increased guilt, depression, and suicidal ideation (Levy & Reeves, 2011).

Many LGB young adults try to deny their sexual orientation and become more religious, trying to *pray away the gay* (Halbertal & Koren, 2006). Others try to compartmentalize their sexual orientation while attending religious services. Compartmentalization however has been found to be difficult to hold for any length of time as this reaction fails to resolve the dissonance of having both a religious and a LGB identity (Rosario et al., 2006). Thus, many of these individuals realize that they are not able to deny their sexual orientation and live a happy life (Dahl & Galliher, 2010).

Some sexual minority young adults choose to abandon their childhood religion. However research has also found that when young adults who were raised in a religious household rejected religion altogether, that choice led to poorer health and protective factors including (a) increased suicidal ideation; (b) increased anxiety; (c) increased alcohol and drug use; (d) increased risky

sexual activity (e.g., having unprotected sex with a partner who has a sexually transmitted disease such as HIV, or AIDS); (e) decreased self-esteem; and (f) decreased social support from friends and family (Rosario et al., 2006). The reason for these negative consequences is twofold. First, there is the stress of abandoning a previously important identity. Until such a time that a satisfactory reconfiguration occurs, the person will experience increased psychological distress, lowered self-esteem, and decreased physical health (Rosario et al., 2006). Second, rejecting religion outright may also extend to rejecting the religion's teachings, including those that promote health, such as encouragement to avoid substance use and unprotected sexual activity (Rosario et al., 2006).

Throughout different areas of the United States (e.g., Northeast, Southeast, Southwest, West) there have been regional differences in views of homosexuality, even within the same religion. For example, a protestant church in the South may have more negative views toward homosexuality than a protestant church in the Northeast (Barton, 2010). There are also certain parts of the United States where religious practice and beliefs infiltrate more aspects of daily life than in other parts. One of these places is the "Bible Belt," a geographical area that includes many the southern states, where many LGB individuals learn from an early age that being gay is sinful (Barton, 2010). Barton's study of 47 lesbian women and gay men found that those individuals who grew up in the *Bible Belt*, experienced more homophobia within their religion than those living in other areas.

Within each religion, there are varying views on homosexuality. Some religious sects such as Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist Judaism within the Jewish religion are more accepting of LGB people than Orthodox Judaism (Barrow & Kovalanka, 2011). Other religious sects such as Catholicism have historically had negative views toward homosexuality

(Rodriguez, 2010). However, with Pope Francis in place, these views may slowly soften and become less negative, which demonstrates that even within one religious group, views evolve over time (Roth, 2015).

The extent to which religion plays a central role in the family can also impact an individual's experience of being lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Rosario et al., 2006). For example, some LGB young adults live in families where religion is very central to their lives, while others live in families where religion does not play a large role. Research has found that LGB young adults who live in families where religion plays a greater role must grapple with both their religion's view on homosexuality whether positive, neutral, or negative, and their own personal views (Rosario et al., 2006). When religion plays a less central role, historically, LGB young adults have had fewer worries about whether their families will use religion as a reason to be accepting or rejecting (Lease et al., 2005). In some families there is also less emphasis on organized religion, and more emphasis on spirituality, or the sense of meaning, purpose, and morality that individuals adopt in their lives (Tan, 2005). Tan's study found that spirituality has been increasingly found to be a source of empowerment for LGB young adults.

Recent research articles have focused on understanding how the different branches of Christianity and Judaism have differing impacts on LGB religious members. Evangelical Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox Jews tend to focus on biblical passages and rely heavily on interpretations of scripture to inform their views on LGB individuals (Itzhaky & Kissil, 2015; Paul, 2017; Priest, 2018). Evangelical protestants and Orthodox Jews are less likely than other groups to believe that same-sex orientations are determined at birth and are more likely to assert that orientations are the result of social processes and choices. Mainline protestant sects as well as Reform and Conservative Jewish sects have been increasingly likely in recent years to affirm

that sexual orientation may be innate (either genetically or hormonally determined; Itzhaky & Kissil, 2015; Priest, 2018). This belief undercuts the notion of choice and fault, and thus takes sexual orientation out of the arena for moral debate. This view asserts that those who believe that same-sex attraction is sinful are simply ignorant of the scientific truth (Priest, 2018).

### **Integrating LGB and Religious Identities**

While some LGB young adults have struggled to integrate their gay and religious identities, others have been more successful (Dahl & Galliher, 2009; Hamblin & Gross, 2014; Lease et al., 2005). Some positive outcomes of integrating these identities included increased acceptance by others, a greater commitment to service work and helping others who were struggling, and increased self-confidence (Dahl & Galliher, 2010). In Dahl and Galliher's 2012 study of 19 adolescents and young adults, some reported that coming out in a religious context facilitated their own self-acceptance. Other participants reported that after disclosing their sexual orientation they felt more open minded and accepting of others' worldviews and experiences compared to before they come out (Dahl & Galliher, 2012).

Some young adults also choose to begin the process of integration by leaving their current place of worship to find a new one that is more accepting and supportive of LGB individuals (Barton, 2010; Rodriguez, 2010; Rosario et al., 2006). Hamblin and Gross (2014) found that some Jews moved from identifying as Orthodox to identifying as Conservative or Reform and began attending synagogues where their sexual orientation was accepted. Davidson (2000) found that some of his Christian participants started to attend liberal leaning churches such as the Unitarian Universalist churches, which have been very accepting of LGB individuals. These participants found that by being part of a supportive religious environment, they could find the social support they needed, and were able to integrate their sexual and religious

identities. Thus, a nondiscriminatory religious community could possibly serve as a safe haven and buffer from some of the negative effects of a prejudiced environment (Hamblin & Gross, 2014).

Recent journal articles have focused on how views have changed toward LGB individuals as time has progressed and society overall has become more accepting. Paul (2017) reviewed how journal articles submitted to the *Pastoral Psychology* journal have changed over time when discussing same-sex sexual orientation and Christianity. He found that while American culture has shifted toward widespread acceptance of LGB people, the Christian religion has made the same change in its views overall, albeit at a slower pace.

Paul (2017) reviewed journal articles starting with those published in the 1950s moving toward those most recently published. As the years progressed, journal articles with a religious nature or background became more affirming; first moving toward a neutral/exploratory stance, and then finally moving toward an affirming stance toward LGB people (Paul, 2017). In particular after the 1970s when homosexuality was taken out of the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM; Paul, 2017), religious journal articles began to both have a more open stance regarding LGB issues and communicate a greater desire to better understand the lives of LGB people instead of simply condemning them (Paul, 2017). Since the 1980s there has been no rejecting journal articles published to *Pastoral Psychology*. There has instead been a steady shift in the last four to six decades toward religious acceptance and inclusion of LGB people among religious leaders (Paul, 2017).

## **Summary**

Previous research has found that there is likely a positive link between accepting religious environments and positive outcomes, including self-acceptance, for LGB young adults

(Dahl & Galliher, 2010). However, this previous research has failed to study LGB young adults who are already members of religious groups that accept and support their sexual orientation. Within the United States there are some religious groups and organizations that cultivate and promote a spirit of acceptance and inclusion for LGB Jews and Christians. These groups assert that they create safe spaces for religious LGB individuals to feel accepted in all parts of their identity, both religious and sexual.

Future research is needed to demonstrate the relationship between the social support offered by these religious groups/organizations and the influence they have on internal feelings of acceptance within religious LGB young adults. This dissertation study focused specifically on the experiences of those LGB young adults who were members of religious organizations that actively supported and accepted their sexual orientation, to learn about how supportive religious experiences influenced both feelings of self-acceptance within the individual and the ability to integrate both religious and sexual orientation identities. In this study, I interviewed six LGB young adults affiliated with Jewish and Christian religious groups or organizations that were accepting of all sexual orientations. The goal of this study was to illuminate how supportive religious experiences influenced sexual minority young adults.

## **Method**

### **Introduction and Overview**

The purpose of this study was to better understand the perceptions of LGB young adults on the influence of affirming and supportive religious groups. The research questions of this study were thus twofold: (a) To what extent do LGB young adults believe that belonging to an affirming and supportive religious group helps them to integrate their religious and sexual identities, if at all? and (b) How do LGB young adults believe that belonging to a supportive

religious group influences internal self-acceptance as a LGB individual, if at all?

This study used a qualitative research design to explore and understand the stories that LGB young adults told about their experiences in being members of accepting and affirming religious groups. The qualitative design was chosen for this study to get a rich understanding of how supportive religious experiences influence integration of identities as well as self-acceptance. By choosing a qualitative design, the participants in this study were able to tell stories about their experience with both religion and sexual identity development.

### **Participants**

I originally sought 8–10 young adult participants between the ages of 18–25 who identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual and who were members of religious places of worship or social groups that supported and accepted their sexual orientation. I sought to obtain participants who currently identified as being affiliated with one of the monotheistic religions: (a) Judaism, (b) Christianity, or (c) Islam. I sought to obtain participants from at least two of these religions. My exclusion criterion was that the *participants could not identify as transgender or gender diverse* due to the extraneous variable of gender identity.

I struggled to find more participants after finding five participants and completing interviews with them. This struggle may have been because young adults may not be as likely as older adults to participate in religious activities (Dahl & Galliher, 2010). After leaving their parent's homes, young adults may also wait until after starting a family to again become involved religiously (Bengtson et al., 2015). After more than four months of not obtaining any new participants, I changed my age criterion for participation by increasing the age range from 18–25 to 18–28 years old. I also added the stipulation that I would find at minimum six

participants (instead of the original 8–10), and of those six, I would obtain at least three participants each of two religions.

My final sample of participants included four women and two men. Of the total, three participants identified as Christian, and three identified as Jewish. I was unable to find any Muslim volunteers. Of the three Christian participants, one identified as Catholic, and two identified as Protestant. Of the three Jewish participants, one identified as Modern Orthodox, and two identified as Reform. Of the total participants, two participants identified as lesbian, two identified as gay, one identified as bisexual, and one identified as pansexual. All participants identified as cisgender. Five participants identified as white and one identified as mixed race, Latina and White. Two of the participants were currently in college, two held bachelor's degrees, one was in graduate school, and one had a high school diploma. Four participants reported their occupation as being a student in college or graduate school, one participant reported being an educator, and one reported being an outreach coordinator.

## **Measures**

Before each of the interviews began, I gained written informed consent (see Appendix A) and gathered demographic and background information including the participant's age, gender, sex assigned at birth, race, SES (participant occupation and education level), and sexual orientation. I collected information about the religion the young adults grew up in, which religious faith the participants currently followed, how often the participants attended religious services while growing up, and how often the participants currently attended religious services. This information was obtained by having participants fill out a Demographic Questionnaire sheet (see Appendix B) before each interview. The data were then charted onto a demographic matrix (see Appendix C). The completed demographic matrix is not included in this report in order to

protect each participant's confidentiality. The matrix was used to assist in organizing participants by religion, sexual orientation, gender, and educational level.

The interview itself was semi-structured. This method of interviewing was chosen to allow for certain themes and responses to be explored in depth as the interview progressed. The predetermined questions (see Appendix D) were used to foster exploration of the participants' views of whether and how participants viewed being a member of a supportive religious group had impacted the participants' self-acceptance and integration of their religious and sexual minority identities. Prompts and follow up questions were asked as needed to clarify participants' responses.

### **Procedure**

Participants were found using a purposeful criterion sampling method. In order to obtain participants, I contacted leaders of welcoming churches (Unitarian Universalist, United Church of Christ, Episcopal, and Methodist), synagogues (Reform and Conservative), and mosques. I also contacted leaders of gender and sexuality alliances (GSAs) at college campuses, town-wide sexuality alliances, and Facebook groups for people who identified as both religious and LGB. I used the script in Appendix E to contact these organizations by phone and email. After getting in contact with the leaders, I then sent them the recruitment flyer for my study (see Appendix F). I requested that the leaders send out my recruitment flyer to their members so that the members could volunteer for my study. I restricted my search of places of worship, colleges, and Facebook groups to the New England geographical area to facilitate completing face to face interviews within 60 miles of my residence.

Prospective participants contacted me through texts or email. After the prospective participant volunteered to take part in the study, I confirmed with them that they fit all the

criteria to participate. After confirming that the participants met the criteria, we agreed upon a public place to meet and carry out the interviews. Before each interview began, I explained to each participant what he or she would be asked to do during the interview. I then explained the study's purpose and the fact that the interview would be audio recorded. The participants then filled out the informed consent form.

After the informed consent was signed, I had each participant fill out the Demographic Questionnaire sheet. On each questionnaire, the participant was assigned a code number to keep track of each participant as well as to ensure confidentiality. After this form was completed, I began audiotaping each interview. Each audio recording contained the participant's code number, which was used instead of the participant's name to ensure confidentiality. I then proceeded with the interview questions and asked follow up questions as needed to further explore and understand the participant's answers during the interview. Interviews took approximately 30 minutes to one hour to complete. I completed all the interviews with participants in libraries and coffee houses. At the end of each interview, if the participant reported that distressing memories had surfaced, I offered them a list of supportive resources and therapy places in the greater New England area (see Appendix G). After the interviews were completed, I transcribed the tapes of the interviews and labeled each transcript with the assigned participant code to maintain confidentiality.

## **Results**

The data I gathered consisted of six transcribed individual interviews that I had conducted with my participants. I used Thematic Analysis to analyze these interview transcripts and break down my data into common themes that were found among the different interviews. Please see Table 1 for a breakdown of the different themes with illustrative quotes that

correspond with each theme. Filler words such as “like” and “um” were removed from direct quotes throughout this section (but not during data analysis) to decrease distraction and make the quotes easier to understand. A second reader was utilized to audit my themes. In this section I describe the different themes that emerged, as well as the participants’ unique experiences both while they were growing up and at the time of the interviews. To protect confidentiality, all participants were given pseudonyms.

When conducting my study, it was important to check for biases that I may have that could impact the how I analyzed my results. I was aware that as a Jewish gay woman, I may have had some biases when deciding to do a study involving religious acceptance of LGB people. I became interested in doing this study because of my own experiences of being accepted as a gay woman within my religious place of worship. I had heard and read literature about LGB people not being accepted by their religion after they came out of the closet. I wondered about the experiences of other LGB religious people and whether their experiences were different or similar to my own. I checked my bias by choosing a second reader whose identity was different from my own. My second reader identified as straight while I identify as gay. The second reader did identify as Jewish but due to being straight did not have to worry about being accepted or rejected by their religious place of worship.

### **Fluctuation in the Importance of Religious Practice**

One of the first themes that emerged was the fluctuation in the importance of religious practice and attendance over time within each participant as they were growing up. Four participants reported that while they were young, religion was important to them and their families; however, they began to move away from religious practice when they became teenagers. Emma, a 26-year-old Christian participant stated, “I mean, I definitely identified as a

Christian. You know when you ask what religion you are, I was definitely Christian, but it was not something my family really pushed. It wasn't something I was super into." Sara, a 24-year-old participant, discussed how she continued to feel spiritual but for a while stopped wanting to go to religious services at her synagogue. She discussed how she felt that religious services were not as meaningful to her as a teenager compared to how she felt in her early twenties.

Two participants, one Jewish and one Christian, reported that religious beliefs and practices continued to be important to them both while growing up and during their teenage years. These two participants discussed their feelings of closeness to their church or synagogue and their relationship with God. These two participants also talked about asking their parents if they could participate in even more religious activities than they had previously participated in and stated that they enjoyed their connection to their religion. One of these two participants talked about seeing a bat-mitzvah (a Jewish coming of age ceremony) and wanting to have one of her own:

When I was about seven, we went to my cousin's bat-mitzvah and I was like, hey, I want to do that. Y'all need to get it together and join a synagogue. This is, I'm seven mind you, so they joined a synagogue, and I went all the way through religious school and had my bat-mitzvah.

These two participants reported that religion played a constant role in their lives, and they continued to be very involved in their religious groups.

All six participants also discussed how religion came to be increasingly central in their lives in their late teens or early twenties. Leah, a 21-year-old participant described searching for meaning in her life during her college years and finding that becoming more involved in Judaism

helped her find some of that meaning. The six participants also discussed wanting to get closer to the spiritual aspects of their religion, as well as wanting to find ways to feel closer to God. Four of the participants searched for churches or synagogues during their college years so that they could start attending services again. The other two participants returned to the church and synagogue that they originally grew up attending.

### **Fear of Religious Rejection**

Another theme that emerged among all the participants in relation to finding religion again in later years involved the fear or worry about whether their religion would accept their sexual orientation. One Jewish female participant discussed how she felt a great deal of angst about whether her Orthodox rabbi and community would accept her lesbian identity. While thankful that the small Jewish community she was a part of was welcoming, the participant remained aware that the greater Orthodox community remained generally heterosexist. Another Christian participant talked about how she worried that God does not love gay people:

I do sometimes worry about well, even though there are Christian communities that I am a part of telling me that [being gay is ok] and I just am, I mean what if God really does want this, you know traditional marriage or whatever. I just seem to be a very fearful person, even though the denominations and churches that I'm a part of aren't saying you have to do this or you're going to hell.

These fears were reported to continue haunting the participants for a few years after they came out. One participant reported that as the years had passed, her worries slowly decreased.

### **Finding Support Through Family**

Before attempting to find support through religious groups or organizations, all six participants reported that they first attempted to find support through telling friends and family

that they identified on the LGB spectrum. All participants reported that at least one family member was immediately supportive and accepting, while other family members were at first either not accepting or were uncomfortable with discussing the participant's sexuality. Eventually most family members, including parents and siblings, shifted to being accepting of the six participants' sexuality.

David, an 18-year-old participant discussed how his mother did not react well to finding out that he was gay. "My mother didn't know what to do. She did not know what to do with me. She did not know how to respond." David talked about how his relationship with his mother was rocky for a while but, after a few months, things improved, and she began accepting his sexuality. Leah reported similar experiences. She discussed how after coming out in high school, her parents used their religion as a reason for not being able to accept her sexuality. Leah reported that she could not trust her parents for a long time after coming out. After moving away to college, however, Leah reported that her parents slowly moved toward accepting her sexuality. She stated that recently her parents had even defended her when extended family members engaged in homophobic discussions on sexuality. Leah said, "my parents in general are pretty good about calling people out when they do that. I think they care more than I do."

Emma discussed how her mother was also initially not very accepting and had not understood bisexuality, she thought that people could only be gay or straight. Emma said, "when I came out to my mom, she wasn't great about it at first. Before I came out to her, she had kind of made a couple disparaging comments about bisexual people specifically." Emma reported that her mother eventually became more accepting once she educated herself about LGB people. Emma reported that her father was immediately very accepting of her sexuality when she came out to him a few years later.

### **Searching for Affirming Religious Groups**

After coming out to family members and friends, all six participants began to search for affirming and welcoming religious places of worship and religious social groups. One participant fully came out after graduating high school, a second participant came out by the beginning of his freshman year of college, and the other four participants had fully come out by their sophomore or junior year of college. They all reported that they began searching for religious groups that might accept their sexual orientation around this time in their lives.

The participants each described how religion had become increasingly important to them during their college years. They felt that it was important to find religious groups that would be supportive of all aspects of their identity, including their sexual orientation. Emma discussed how she searched for a welcoming church community after she came out in college. She reported feeling excited when she found a religious community close to her college that was welcoming and affirming to all, “I think I just feel super excited to have found a place where I was welcomed, honestly because I didn’t think it existed, but obviously something did.”

Another participant, 27-year-old Chris, described how after he moved to an urban area, his new friends referred him to a Catholic community center and church that was affirming and welcoming of LGBT adults and families. Chris went on to describe how happy he was to find out that, in his new city, he could be out as gay and still be involved in religious ministry. He stated, “so yeah, I was very optimistic and joyful and really did not hesitate to disclose and talk about my life and get to know people in different ways.” Sarah reported that after coming out as a lesbian, she found out that the cantor at her synagogue was gay. She quickly became close to the cantor who then also recommended other religious organizations that she could join that were affirming and welcoming of LGB people.

Three of the participants discussed how being a member of a supportive religious group allowed them to reflect on their different identities, including their religious identity, in a safe space. Emma stated, “this group, I guess it helps me to really think about the ways in which God loves me.” Emma talked about how being a member of the group helped her think about the differences between what is written in the bible about homosexuality, and what God might actually feel for LGB people. She stated that after some serious self-reflection she came to the decision that God loved her, and that she did not have to step away from her gay identity to have a relationship with God. Kate, a 25-year-old participant discussed how she felt she had the opportunity to explore her sexuality in healthy ways because of the welcoming religious environment. She stated, “I think that there was space for that, there was space for it to be a healthy sexual environment and in a way that wasn’t imposing heteronormativity on us.” She went on to discuss how she felt that if she were part of a rejecting religious group, she would not have felt comfortable exploring her sexuality within that setting.

### **Positive Impact of Religious Advocacy Work**

Another theme that emerged was the positive impact of the advocacy work that the religious groups took part in for LGBT pride and equality. Five of the participants reported that their religious group focused not only on welcoming LGB people within the group, but also on advocating in the public sphere for sexual and gender minority rights. The participants reported that the advocacy they witnessed had a significant impact on how they saw themselves both individually as LGB individuals and as people within the larger LGB community. Chris stated, “the center partners with a couple other parishes in Boston to do a pride booth. So that’s really huge to see a Catholic presence at Pride.” He discussed how it was powerful for him to see his religious center publicly show so much support for the LGBT community. Chris reported that

seeing the center's advocacy continued to help him fully embrace his religious and gay identities. One participant belonged to a religious group that did not take part in advocacy work for the larger LGB community. The participant reported that he was happy being part of this group and had started doing some of his own advocacy work within his college environment.

### **Feeling Positive and Courageous About Intersecting Identities**

One theme that emerged consistently among all six participants was that the religious groups helped the participants feel positive and courageous about their religious and sexual identities. The participants all reported that given their involvement in supportive religious groups, there was no need to feel ashamed about either of their identities. David reported that his religious community gave him the strength to not back down in front of others and to stand up to any homophobic remarks he might hear. He said:

When I went to church, it was more of a sense of family and more a sense of togetherness and that's what happened to build a backbone. My pastor, she's a very tough woman and won't take lip from anybody. So, I kind of took after her.

Leah discussed how she felt positive about her two different identities. She stated, "I've been in a space where I used to feel I needed to hide something to be present with people and I don't feel that way anymore. I feel a lot more peace with that." She discussed how her identities used to be a source of angst for her, but after finding the religious group, she started to feel positive about both identities.

### **Integration of LGB and Religious Identities**

The last unifying theme among all six participants involved the belief that their LGB and religious identities were fully integrated. All of the participants discussed how they felt that belonging to the welcoming religious groups helped them to bring together both identities, so

that both were equally important in their lives. Sarah talked about how with the support of her religious group, she never felt that one of her identities had to be more important than the other. She stated, “so I was always Jewish and LGB and they never cancelled each other out. That was affirmed at the temple.” Sarah went on to discuss how she did not have to view her identities as separate, or as one being more important than the other. She reported that she liked the fact that people could have different identities but still feel like their inner self was a cohesive whole.

Kate reported that her identities were equal in her mind. She could not pick them apart, as they were so intertwined. She stated:

They’re so intertwined for me, I think. Which is fine. I think they’re super integrated for me and I don’t know if I could tell you which one came first. I think they’re definitely equal, I think they’re both equally as important in my life.

Kate went on to discuss how she felt that she took both her Jewish and pansexual identities with her no matter where she went, the identities were an integral part of her and she was happy that they were there. Emma discussed how, due to belonging to the religious group she was able to learn and grow in both of her identities at the same time. She stated:

I very strongly identify as a queer Christian person. I think that the intersection of both of those is a critical part of each of those identities. You know, my faith wouldn’t be the same without my sexuality and I think my sexuality, the way that I see myself as a queer person, I don’t think it would be the same without my faith. So, I think that the supportive religious group has really provided a safe environment for me to really embrace that intersection.

The aim of this study was to understand the ways in which young LGB adults view how belonging to affirmative and welcoming religious places of worship and social groups influenced

their self-acceptance and ability to integrate their sexual and religious identities. Based on my interviews with three Christian and three Jewish LGB young adults, themes emerged involving (a) the fluctuation of religious importance, (b) fear of religious rejection, (c) finding support through family, (d) searching for affirming religious groups, (e) the positive impact of religious advocacy work, (f) feeling positive and courageous about intersecting identities, and (g) the integration of LGB and religious identities. All the participants reported that they were appreciative of being a part of the affirming religious groups, and that overall, they felt that these groups had a positive impact in their lives.

### **Discussion**

This section begins with a discussion of the major findings of my study and includes the relevant literature that supports these findings. I discuss the implications that this study has for different groups that are involved with young adults who identify as LGB and belong to religious communities. These different groups include clinicians who have LGB people as clients, religious groups and places of worship, and parents of LGB teens and young adults. Lastly, I discuss the different limitations of my study and suggestions for future research.

### **Major Findings**

The major themes that I found involved fluctuation in the importance of religious practice, finding support through family, searching for affirming religious groups, the positive impact of religious advocacy work, feeling positive and courageous about intersecting identities, and the integration of LGB and religious identities. The six participants reported that specifically because of their involvement in supportive religious groups, they felt that they were able to see their identities as an integrated whole instead of as multiple separate parts that could not be intertwined.

Regarding my first research question, these young adults stated that belonging to an affirming and supportive religious group did in fact help them to integrate their religious and sexual identities. All six participants reported that finding their supportive religious groups had a significant impact on their ability to integrate their identities. The six participants reported that they did not have trouble trying to integrate their identities. The process was easy and natural for them once they joined a supportive religious group. This finding is important because previous research has found that people who are able to integrate their identities may be less likely to experience negative mental health issues such as depression and addiction than those who are not able to integrate their identities (Crocket et al., 2018).

My second research question asked about how LGB young adults believed that belonging to a supportive religious group influenced their internal self-acceptance as an LGB individual if at all. Again, all six of my participants reported that they fully accepted themselves as LGB individuals. The participants discussed how being a member of the affirming religious group allowed them to keep their identity overall as a unified whole. Thus, they did not need to choose between being their sexual and their religious identities.

The themes found within my research also align with the relevant literature on the topics of coming out and searching for social support. Cass's model has frequently been used to understand the process of coming out and self-acceptance for LGB individuals. As in Cass's model, the participants in this study first realized they identified as LGB and then began the process of searching for acceptance in their family, with their friends, and then within their larger religious environment. The participants in my study attributed their ability to integrate their different identities to the acceptance they found in their family, friends, and religious

communities. As described in Cass's model of identity development, my participants seemed to reach the final stage of Identity Synthesis (Cass, 1979).

The themes I found also align with literature that discusses the importance of positive religious experience for LGB young adults. My participants reported that after finding their accepting and affirming religious groups, they felt increased confidence in themselves, felt more positive about themselves, and were more easily able to accept both their religious and sexual identities, than before finding the religious supportive groups. These findings are supported by multiple researchers who have found similar results in their qualitative studies (Barrow & Kusalanka, 2011; Dahl & Galliher, 2012). Dahl and Galliher (2012) found that their participants reported an increased sense of self after coming out and finding religious support. Research has also found that positive religious experiences were associated with increased levels of self-esteem in LGB participants (Dahl & Galliher, 2010). Overall, research has found that having an accepting religious community can serve as a safe haven and buffer from some of the negative effects of a prejudiced environment (Hamblin & Gross, 2014).

### **Implications**

The findings of my study have implications for a few different groups and people who are involved with LGB people. Clinicians who work with LGB people might at first be skeptical about the role that religion plays in their LGB clients' lives, especially if the clinicians have had experience with, or have previously read research about religious places of worship that were not accepting. However, as my findings showed, there are religious places of worship and supportive groups that are accepting and welcoming to LGB people. The young adults in the present study reported that in their view, belonging to these groups had a positive impact on their religious and LGB identities. Clinicians would benefit from knowing about the range of acceptance across

different religious congregations, so that they can use supportive groups as resources for LGB clients who want to find a religious group or place of worship that is accepting of their sexual orientation. LGB clients in therapy who want to be involved religiously may benefit from joining these religious organizations and places of worship.

Another aspect that is a significant issue for clinicians involves their own religious beliefs and possible biases they may have regarding religion. If clinicians have negative views of religion, it will be important that they do not let their biases interfere with their clients' religious involvement. If clients feel that religion is important to them and they are interested in finding ways to integrate religion or spirituality into their lives, clinicians should not discourage the client from pursuing these interests even if the clinician has personally had negative experiences with religion or spirituality.

Research has found that clinicians participate in religious activities at a slightly lower frequency than the general population (Hodge, 2002; Larsen, 2011; Oxhandler et al., 2018). Oxhandler et al. found that clinicians tend to engage in more private religious or spiritual activities such as meditation or private prayer than public activities such as going to religious services. Hodge also found that clinicians are more likely to belong to a liberal rather than a socially conservative denomination. No matter what religious background the clinician has, it will be important for clinicians to support clients in pursuing affirming religious groups and places of worship if the client wishes.

There are also implications for religious groups and places of worship. Religious groups and places of worship that are affirming and supportive of LGB people would benefit from making their support clear both on their websites and to potential members when they visit the group or place of worship. Some religious places of worship that I contacted for this study had

information about LGB support only on certain pages within their website and not on the main page. By clearly stating on the home page of the website that these places are affirming of the wider LGBT community, LGB people who are looking to join can more easily see that they will be welcomed there. Places of worship might also consider using visuals such as pride flags or safe space stickers placed outside of their physical locations to show that they are welcoming of LGB individuals.

My participants reported that the religious support that they received helped them not only in their own sexual identity, but in their religious identity as well. The support of these groups helped the participants stay involved in their religious groups and places of worship. This is important information for places of worship that are looking to keep young adults involved in religious events and activities. By continuing to provide more support for young adults who identify as LGB, religious places of worship may be less likely to lose young adult involvement. In their 2010 study, Dahl and Galliher found that participants were less likely to stay involved within their religious place of worship if the place of worship was not supportive of the participant's LGB identity.

Another implication involves the impact of religious groups and places of worship participating in advocacy work in the greater community. My participants reported that they were very appreciative of the advocacy work that the religious places of worship were involved in. Some participants reported that their religious place of worship worked on being active in political campaigns that protected the rights of the entire LGBT community. Some participants also discussed the significant positive impact of seeing religious groups or places of worship at gay pride parades in their cities. The young adults in this study appreciated when various religious places of worship were involved in advocacy work to protect the LGBT community;

this demonstrated to participants that the leaders and congregations were not just passively accepting, but actively supportive of the sexual minority community.

Given that my participants reported that being members of supportive religious groups or places of worship were beneficial for their own self-acceptance and confidence, other LGB people may also find these groups to be beneficial as well. Young adults who identify as LGB can learn about these religious groups by searching the internet for “LGB supportive religious groups” along with their location in the United States. If the young adults are in college, or will be attending college, they can look at the campus list of clubs and organizations on campus, as many liberal arts colleges have religious groups that are supportive of LGB identities. It will be helpful for religious groups to put information about being affirming of LGB identities on their internet home pages so that LGB people can easily learn if a religious group or house of worship is accepting or not. It would also be helpful for secular LGB websites to include a list of welcoming religious organizations or places of worship, for LGB people who are interested becoming more involved religiously.

While some religious LGB adults have their supportive religious place of worship to lean on during times of need, other LGB adults are not members of churches or synagogues and are not religious. It can be immensely powerful to have one’s religious community providing support and acceptance. Nonreligious LGB people however also need support in their community settings (Muñoz-Plaza et al., 2002). Outside of school settings where there are LGB advocacy and support groups, developing community-wide groups that offer support for LGB people would also be particularly important as a resource. Some towns in Massachusetts and surrounding New England states have begun forming these groups. These groups could be an especially important resource for LGB people who are not religious.

There are also implications for parents of LGB teens and young adults. Based on my participants, there are young adults who do not want to reject their religion. Instead, they would like to stay involved in religious practices and worship. My participants reported that it was important that places of worship, family, and friends understand this and support both aspects (religious and sexual) of their identity. When places of worship, family, and friends do not accept both aspects of the person's identity, the person is forced to make an impossible decision, to reject or ignore their sexual orientation or to reject their religion. The person may end up rejecting their sexual orientation, which can cause many negative mental and physical health consequences.

Parents should know that their Jewish or Christian religion does not necessarily have to reject their LGB children, and their LGB children do not have to reject their religion. By choosing to be members of religious places of worship that actively support and affirm minority sexual identities parents allow and support their children's development of full self-acceptance. It is difficult for many to leave their religious congregation. However, by changing their religious place of worship to one that is supportive of LGB individuals, their children may develop greater self-acceptance and have more positive outcomes. Knowing that some LGB young adults report being able to integrate their sexual and religious identities may also be a relief to parents who worry that their children will abandon their religion after coming out.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations of this research study. My study did not involve randomized sampling of the LGB young adult population, and instead involved searching for volunteers who were willing to participate in the study. Those who respond to a call for volunteers may share certain characteristics such as being more trusting or cooperative which may not be

representative of the entire population. This study also included only six participants, three who identified as Jewish and three who identified as Christian. While I made efforts to recruit participants from Muslim groups, this was not successful. The limited sample size and the limited number of religions included may limit the applicability of my findings.

One of the limitations in this study involved not being able to find Muslim young adults for participants. I reached out to different mosques and LGB supportive Muslim groups in the New England area but did not receive any replies. It is not clear why I did not receive any interested Muslim participants for my study. There may possibly be more secrecy in the Muslim religion surrounding acceptance of sexual minority people, but I did not examine the reasons for not being able to recruit Muslim participants.

My study was also not experimental in design; thus, cause and effect cannot be assumed. I was unable to report that joining an affirming religious group causes greater self-acceptance and the ability to integrate religious and sexual identities. It is possible that those joining affirming groups may already be on their way to acceptance of multiple aspects of their identities. This study also relied on participants' own perceptions of their experiences, and all data were self-reported.

Due to only interviewing participants in the New England region of the United States, I cannot be certain that LGB young adults in other regions of the US have had similar experiences with supportive religious groups. People from geographical regions where sexual minority orientations are less accepted might have more trouble in being able to accept and integrate their religious and LGB identities than people in regions where minority sexual orientations are more accepted. In addition, my sample included only white and Latina participants; it is unknown if other racial or ethnic groups have different experiences with religion and sexuality.

## **Future Research**

Additional research on LGB people who belong to supportive religious groups and also have a minority racial or ethnic identity will be important in understanding how other minority identities have an impact on religious and sexual identities. More research is needed to understand how factors such as racial discrimination may have an impact on LGB young adults' internal feelings of self-acceptance or self-rejection in a religiously supportive environment. Future researchers may also benefit from exploring how homosexuality is accepted or rejected within the Muslim religion, and whether the experiences of Muslim young adults are similar or different from Christian and Jewish participants. Conversations with the leaders of Muslim mosques about the transparency of LGB acceptance within the religion may also be greatly beneficial to inform future research. Much of the research on religious acceptance or rejection, including this study, has focused on cisgender LGB people. Future research would benefit from studying how the added variable of gender identity influences the ability to integrate different identities in a supportive religious context.

I began this study with the intent to learn about the opinions of participants on how being a member of a supportive and affirming religious group or place of worship influenced their self-acceptance and ability to integrate their religious and LGB identities. I found that my participants had positive experiences with supportive religious groups and felt that belonging to these groups did help them to fully accept themselves as LGB religious individuals. These findings have many positive implications for parents, clinicians working with the LGB population, advocacy work within the religious community, and for religious groups and places of worship. The results of this study are hopeful; LGB young adults can be true to both their

sexual orientation and their religious affiliation. It is my hope that this study can add to the research and knowledge of how supportive religion can play a positive role for LGB individuals.

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**Table 1***Themes and Illustrative Data Extracts (Direct Quotes)*

Theme	Example quotes
Fluctuation in importance of religious practice	<p data-bbox="505 485 1382 554">“I was definitely Christian, but it wasn’t something my family really pushed. It wasn’t just something I was super into.” (Emma)</p> <p data-bbox="505 594 1333 663">“In terms of services, we really didn’t go that much after my bat-mitzvah. I just kind of stopped going to temple...” (Sarah)</p> <p data-bbox="505 703 1373 772">“I reconnected with my desire, my passion for Jewish education... I wanted to be more involved...” (Kate)</p>
Fear of religious rejection	<p data-bbox="505 814 1398 926">“I have a rabbi here and I also have two rabbis and LA who I’m close with and I came out to both of them via email and it was like the most terrifying thing I’ve ever done...” (Leah)</p> <p data-bbox="505 961 1422 1031">“I worry if maybe as well intentioned as I might be if I’m still doing the wrong... I do worry sometimes about going to hell.” (Emma)</p> <p data-bbox="505 1066 1422 1178">“The sin part is laying with that other person so when I was coming out, that was a big part of how I was thinking that I don’t want to be sinful.” (David)</p>
Finding support through family	<p data-bbox="505 1220 1414 1289">“My immediate family, my parents and sister know and have been very supportive lately, which is very helpful.” (Chris)</p> <p data-bbox="505 1325 1430 1436">“So, my mom has definitely came around she told me initially not to tell my dad, he wouldn’t be cool with it. I told my dad four years later. He was so cool that he didn’t even know what to say.” (Emma)</p> <p data-bbox="505 1472 1430 1612">“My family is super accepting and tolerant, my mom’s uncle was one of the first organizers of the Stonewall riots and was hugely involved and he was one of the longest surviving AIDS survivors when he passed away four years ago...” (Kate)</p>
Searching for affirming religious groups	<p data-bbox="505 1661 1357 1772">“I think I just feel super excited to have found a place where I was welcomed, honestly because I didn’t think it existed, but obviously something did.” (Emma)</p>

	<p>“I knew it was going to be affirming coming in because they [the religious center] put it on their website and have a lot of different events and things like that.” (Chris)</p> <p>“I’ve had positive experiences with my temple. They’ve done all the trans rights stuff and the cantor is lesbian. There are lesbian couples at the temple and gay people. They did a really cool pride potluck thing. So, I think it has been good overall.” (Sarah)</p>
<p>Positive impact of religious advocacy work</p>	<p>“The center partners with a couple other parishes in Boston to do a pride Booth. So that’s really huge to see a Catholic presence at Pride.” (Chris)</p> <p>“The cantor is a lesbian and my temple did like so much for yes on 3, the handed-out pins and did so much in their service, they had signs in front of our temple.” (Sarah)</p> <p>“There have been charitable efforts to support different LGBT charities and causes, and the sermons are always a positive experience.” (Emma)</p>
<p>Feeling Positive and Courageous about Intersecting Identities</p>	<p>“When I went to church, it was more of a sense of family and more a sense of togetherness and that’s what happened to build a backbone. My pastor, she’s a very tough woman and won’t take lip from anybody. So, I kind of took after her.” (David)</p> <p>“I’ve been in a space where like, I used to feel like I needed to hide something to be present with people and I don’t feel that way anymore. I feel a lot more peace with that.” (Leah)</p> <p>“I’ve just had positive experiences with my temple. They’ve done all the trans rights stuff and the cantor is lesbian. There are lesbian couples at the temple and gay people. They did a really cool pride potluck thing. So, I think it has been good overall” (Sarah)</p>
<p>Integration of LGB and religious identities</p>	<p>“They’re so intertwined for me, I think. Which is fine. I think they’re super integrated for me and I don’t know if I could tell you which one came first. I think they’re definitely equal, I think they’re both equally as important in my life.” (Kate)</p> <p>“I think that the intersection of both of those is a critical part of each of those identities. You know, my faith wouldn’t be the same without my sexuality and I think my sexuality the way that I see myself as like a queer person, I don’t think it’d be the same without my faith.” (Emma)</p> <p>“So, for me to like have that space to not have to give up one or the other is huge and it makes me want to create those spaces for others.” (Chris)</p>

## Appendix A

### Informed Consent Form

Researcher: Rachel Grossman

Organization: Antioch University New England Doctoral Clinical Psychology Program Project

Title: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adults' Experiences with Supportive Religious Groups

#### Introduction

I am asking you to be part of a research study that looks at the perceptions of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) young adults on the influence of supportive and accepting religious groups or organizations. The purpose of this study is to better understand how LGB young adults have found that belonging to a supportive religious group influences their sexual identity and self-acceptance.

#### What to Expect

You will be asked to complete an interview that will last 45 minutes to one hour. In the interview I will ask you questions about how you identify with your religion and sexual orientation. You can decline to answer any question you don't want to answer and you can choose to stop the interview at any time up until the time the data are analyzed if you feel uncomfortable. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to participate in the study. With your consent, the interview will be audiotaped. The recording will later be transcribed into a word document and then deleted. The word document will not contain your name or other identifying information. Your questionnaire interview and transcript will contain a participant number instead of your name to keep your identity private. Your name will not be used in any report of the findings, and your information will be kept confidential. This study will be completed by Rachel Grossman, a doctoral candidate at Antioch University New England. The interview will be done at a time and location that is agreeable to you.

#### Participant Selection

You are invited to take part in this research because you have told me that you identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or queer; grew up in a religious household; and currently belong to a religious group that is supportive of your sexual orientation and religious identity. You should not consider participation in this research if you identify as transgender, gender nonbinary, or gender queer.

#### Benefits and Risks

This research will add to the knowledge of how gay, lesbian, and bisexual young adults view how their religious membership has influenced their sexual identity and self-acceptance. As a participant, you may also benefit from increasing your awareness of how your gay and religious identities impact each other. One risk of this study is that it may bring up different memories related to sexual orientation and religious upbringing. If you let me know that the memories are distressing, you will be given information about how to find a therapist or support group that works with LGB individuals in the surrounding geographical locations.

### **Storing Data to Protect Confidentiality**

You will never be identified by name in any publication or report of this study. Although some of your quotes may be used, every effort will be made to keep information confidential. All data will be stored securely and will only be used for professional purposes.

### **Your rights as a volunteer**

This study is completely voluntary. There will not be any negative consequences if you decide to stop participating in the study.

### **Reimbursement**

You will be given the opportunity to win one of two \$25 Amazon gift cards for your participation in this study. If you choose to participate in this opportunity, your phone number will be entered into a raffle. After I have completed all interviews, two names will be drawn from the raffle and you will be contacted by me if you are a winner.

### **Future Publication**

The primary researcher, Rachel Grossman, reserves the right to include any results of this study in future scholarly presentations and/or publications. All information will be de-identified prior to publication or presentation.

### **Consent Statement**

I have read and understood the information above. The researcher has answered all the questions that I have. I was given a copy of this form. I agree to take part in the study of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adults' Experiences with Supportive Religious Groups

**If you have any questions about the study, you may ask them now or later. If you have questions later, you may contact Rachel Grossman.**

**If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact xxx (Institutional Review Board Chair at Antioch University New England).**

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B**  
**Demographic Questionnaire Sheet**

Today's Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Sex Assigned at Birth \_\_\_\_\_

Race: \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Education Level: \_\_\_\_\_

Sexual Orientation: \_\_\_\_\_

Which religious faith did you grow up with: \_\_\_\_\_

Did you attend religious services while growing up? \_\_\_\_\_ How often? \_\_\_\_\_

What religious faith do you now follow or identify with? \_\_\_\_\_

How often if ever do you now attend religious services? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you belong to a support or social group for LGB adults of your religion? \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix D

### Interview Questions

1. Could you tell me about your overall religious experiences growing up (e.g., family traditions and practices, participation in religious services or classes, personal religious beliefs)?
2. Could you tell me about your current religious experiences (e.g., current religious traditions and practices, participation in religious services or classes, personal religious beliefs)?
3. Could you tell me how your experiences being LGB have impacted your family relationships and personal relationships?
4. Could you tell me about how identifying as LGB has impacted your religious life?
5. How has your sexual orientation impacted how close you feel to the important people in your life?
6. How have your family and friends reacted to you disclosing your orientation to them (e.g., what were the positive or negative reactions)?
7. How have others in your religion reacted to your sexuality (e.g., basic tolerance, accepting, rejecting, or trying to change your sexual orientation)?
8. Do you have other LGB people in your life? If so, how have they reacted to your religious identity and religious involvement?
9. Tell me about your experiences in being part of a support/social religious group that is inclusive of LGB identities (e.g., did you have positive experiences within this group, if yes what were the positive experiences? Did you have negative experiences within this group, if yes, what were the negative experiences?).
10. What were your thoughts, feelings, and experiences when you first joined this religious support/social group?
11. How has being part of this religious support/social group influenced your sense of self as someone who identifies on the LGB spectrum?
12. How has belonging to the religious support/social group influenced your ability to integrate (bring together) your gay and religious identities?
13. What if any, have been the downsides to being a member of your religious support/social group?
14. What are your current thoughts and feelings about identifying on the LGB spectrum and being involved religiously?

## Appendix E

### Script for Directors or Leaders of Religious Groups

Hello,

My name is Rachel Grossman, and I am a doctoral student in psychology at Antioch University New England. I am completing a doctoral research study and I am looking for participants for my dissertation study. First, let me explain my study. The purpose of my study is to understand the perceptions and views of LGB young adults on how being a member of a supportive religious group or organization has influenced their self-acceptance and ability to integrate their religious and LGB minority identities. I will be conducting 45-minute to 1-hour interviews with each young adult participant. The participants will also have a chance to win one of two Amazon gift cards if they choose to participate. I am asking if you would be willing to hand out or email a flyer to your members so that they might choose to volunteer to participate in my study. I would greatly appreciate your help in conducting my research study. Do you have any questions? Thank you.

## Appendix F

### Flyer for Interested Participants

*Antioch University New England  
Department of Clinical Psychology*

I am a doctoral student at Antioch University New England, and I am completing my dissertation project on the perceptions and views of LGB young adults about the influence of supportive and accepting religious groups. I am interested in learning about how being a member of these religious groups influences how these young adults feel about their own self-acceptance and their ability integrate their religious and LGB identities.

Who is eligible?

- Young adults between the ages of 18-28 who meet the following three criteria
- People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer
- People who identify as cisgender
- People who belong to a religious group that is supportive of their sexual orientation

What will you be asked to do?

- I will ask you to complete a 45 minute to 1-hour face to face tape recorded interview in a quiet mutually agreed upon setting
- I will ask you to answer questions about how your religious involvement influences your thoughts and feelings about your sexual orientation
- Your participation is completely voluntary, and your information will be kept confidential
- You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer and can stop the interview at any time

Compensation:

- You will have the chance to win one of two \$25 Amazon gift cards.

If you have any questions or are interested in participating, please contact:

Rachel Grossman.

## Appendix G

### List of Supportive Resources and Therapy for LGB Young Adults

#### Fenway Health

- 617-927-6202
- Ansin Building, 1340 Boylston Street Boston MA 02215
- Fenway: South End, 142 Berkeley Street Boston MA 02116
- Sidney Borum, Jr. Health Center, 75 Kneeland Street 02111

#### The Trauma Center at JRI (Justice Resource Institute)

- General Telephone: 617-232-1303
- Clinical Intake: 617-232-0687
- 1269 Beacon St. Brookline MA 02446

#### LGBTQ+ Support, Safety, and Strength

- At Arbour Counseling Services
- 617-829-9567
- 14 Fordham Rd. Allston MA 02134

#### Boston Alliance of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Youth (BAGLY) Youth Center

- 617-227-8378
- 14 Beacon St Suite 301 Boston MA 02108