



The Impact of Minority Stress on the Mental Health of Sexual and Religious Minorities

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Abstract

This study is guided by the question, what is the impact of sexual identity, religious identity, and their intersection on mental health? Meyer's (2003) minority stress theory was used to guide hypotheses that sexual and religious minorities would experience increased psychological distress relative to majority members. 64,271 participants completed a demographic measure indicating sexual and religious identity as well the Counseling Center Assessment of Psychological Symptoms, which measured overall psychological distress. Individuals identifying as heterosexual reported the least amount of psychological distress, followed by individuals identifying as gay/lesbian, bisexual, questioning, and sexual minority-other. Individuals identifying as Judeo-Christian reported less psychological distress than individuals identifying with Eastern religions or not religiously affiliated. There was no interaction effect between sexual and religious identities in predicting distress. Results support the minority stress theory and indicate its applicability to the study of religious minorities.

Background

Sexual Identity

- Sexual minorities experience increased rates of mental distress as well as discrimination (Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2012; Lick, Durso, & Johnson, 2013).
- Increased marginalization is linked to increased psychological distress perhaps due to discrimination and stigmatization by both heterosexual and sexual minority groups (Russell & Joyner, 2001).

Religious Identity

- A meta-analysis found that 72% of studies reported a positive relationship between religiosity/spirituality and mental health (Bonelli & Koenig, 2013).
- Some studies report an adverse effect of religious affiliation (McConnell, Pargament, Ellison, & Flannelly, 2006).

Interaction of Sexual and Religious Identities

- Overwhelming number of studies suggest that religiousness is linked to negative outcomes for sexual minority individuals (e.g., Hamblin & Gross, 2013).
- Despite the negative relationship between religiosity and sexual minority status, many sexual minority individuals continue to affiliate religiously (Dahl & Galliher, 2009).

Minority Stress Theory

- Sexual minorities experience increased distress due to overt discrimination, prejudice, and stigmatization (Meyer, 2003).
- There is little evidence of extending the minority stress theory to religiosity/spirituality (R/S) or the interaction of R/S and sexuality.

Hypotheses

- H1: Minority sexual identity will be significantly related to psychological distress.
- H2: Minority religious identity will be significantly related to psychological distress.
- H3: Sexual identity and religious identity will interact such that individuals who identify as sexual minorities and Judeo-Christian will experience more distress than other pairings.

Methods

Participants

- Data collected from the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH) 2013-2014. The data set included data from 101,027 unique clients at 140 college counseling centers in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.
- Total of 64,271 participants met inclusion criteria.

Standardized Data Set (CCMH, 2011)

- A set of demographic questions administered upon intake at participating college counseling centers, including questions about gender, religion, sexual identity, etc.

CCAPS-62 and -34 (Locke et al., 2011; 2012)

- Multidimensional assessment of psychological symptoms.
- Both forms consist of seven subscales (Depression, Generalized Anxiety, Social Anxiety, Academic Distress, Eating Concerns, Hostility, and Alcohol Use) that comprise a general Distress Index.

Data Analysis

- Null-hypothesis significance testing and effect sizes.

Psychological Distress by Sexual Identity

Table 1. Psychological Distress by Sexual Identity.

	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Heterosexual	56,185	1.69	.84
Lesbian	1,038	1.90	.82
Gay	1,833	1.84	.81
Bisexual	2,912	2.05	.82
Questioning	1,354	2.10	.81
Other Sexual Minority	949	2.11	.78

Psychological Distress by Religion

Table 2. Psychological Distress by Religious Identity.

	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Unaffiliated	25,933	1.85	.83
Judeo-Christian	33,886	1.62	.84
Eastern	1,924	1.81	.85

ANOVA Analysis

Table 3. Psychological Distress by Sexual Identity and Religious Identity

Source	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>η</i> ²
Sexual Identity	99.64	1	99.64	143.90	.002
Religious Identity	228.09	2	114.05	164.70	.005
Interaction	.10	2	.05	.07	.000
Error	42749.32	61737	.69		
Total	43931.71	61742			

Interaction Effects

Table 4. Sexual Identity X Religious Identity Group Means

Sexual Identity	Religious Identity	<i>n</i>	%	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
Heterosexual	Unaffiliated	21,207	39.02%	1.81	.01
	Judeo-Christian	31,421	57.82%	1.61	.01
	Eastern	1,717	3.16%	1.78	.02
LGBQQ	Unaffiliated	4,726	63.88%	2.06	.01
	Judeo-Christian	2,465	33.32%	1.86	.02
	Eastern	207	2.80%	2.06	.06

Note that the percentage refers to the percentage of people in each sexual identity group identifying with various religious groups.

Conclusions

- **Hypothesis 1** was supported. Sexual minorities experienced greater psychological distress. Within sexual identity groups, psychological distress was significantly and linearly related to the degree of marginalization of sexual identity.
- **Hypothesis 2** was supported. Religious identity was significantly related to psychological distress with the members of Judeo-Christian affiliation experiencing less distress than those affiliated with Eastern religions or unaffiliated individuals.
- **Hypothesis 3** was not supported. Judeo-Christian religions was related to a decrease in distress in LGBQQ individuals, similar to that of the heterosexual samples.

Implications

- Minority stress theory may be applied to the experience of religious minorities to explain the mental health disparities experienced by unaffiliated individuals
- Psychological distress increased in proportion to the degree of marginalization of an individual's sexual identity. This supports the minority stress theory and advocates for increased attention understanding the experience of bisexual, queer, and questioning individuals
- LGBQQ individuals with majority religious affiliation experienced decreased level of distress. The benefit of Judeo-Christian affiliation may outweigh the cost for LGBQQ individuals. Religious affiliation may buffer the negative effects of religious minority stress.