

The Importance of Spirituality Among Gay and Lesbian Individuals

P. Philip Tan, PhD

California State University, Long Beach

ABSTRACT. Religion is a conduit for expressing spirituality. Since most mainstream religions condemn any form of homosexuality one would expect that gay men and lesbians would have little to do with spirituality. Experts, however, believe that gay and lesbian individuals would especially benefit from spiritual nourishment because of the oppression they face. Using an instrument that measures spiritual well-being, this study investigated the spirituality of 93 gay and lesbian individuals. The findings revealed that respondents espoused high levels of spiritual well-being: how one relates to God (religious well-being) and how one feels about life (existential well-being). Those who identified with a formal religion and who attended religious services frequently espoused higher religious well-being. Respondents with a diagnosis of depression, on the other hand, espoused lower existential well-being. Multiple regression analyses revealed that existential well-being was a significant predictor of adjustment: having high self-esteem, accepting one's homosexual orientation, and feeling less alienated. In contrast, religious well-being was not a significant predictor of any measure of adjustment. These findings point to the importance of the existential aspect of spirituality among gay and lesbian individuals in determining adjustment. They also suggest that being

P. Philip Tan is Assistant Professor of Social Work, California State University Long Beach. Correspondence may be addressed: Department of Social Work, California State University, Long Beach, 1250 Bellflower Boulevard, Long Beach, CA 90840-0902.

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well-adjusted does not entail being reconciled with a traditional religion or with a theistic belief. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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INTRODUCTION

Most traditional western religions have been intolerant of any form of homosexuality (Boswell, 1980; Fox, 1984; Haldeman, 1996). These religions have oppressed, denied full inclusion and, much less, celebrated the sexuality of gay and lesbian individuals (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Davidson, 2000). Friedman and Downey (1994) and Nungesser (1983) pointed out that individuals who held more firmly to religious tenets tended to be more homophobic. For many gay men and lesbians, the path toward accepting their sexual orientation forced them to question the dogmatism, exclusivity, and credibility of the homophobic religions in which they were raised (Brooke, 1993; Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001). Justifying homophobia by interpreting that this is prescribed by traditional orthodoxy is the cause of disillusionment for many gay and lesbian individuals. This is a reason why some reject traditional religions (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Davidson, 2000; Shallenberger, 1994).

Religion and spirituality often appear to be interrelated. Individuals who are religious may also be spiritual. Religion may engender a high level of spiritual well-being (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001; Canda & Furman, 1999; Davidson, 2000). Religion and spirituality, however, are not synonymous. Spirituality pertains to the sense of meaning, purpose, and morality that individuals espouse regarding their lives. Religion, on the other hand, pertains to a system of standardized beliefs, practices, and experiences relating to spirituality. These are shared among members of the religious group (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Canda & Furman, 1999; Davidson, 2000). Since spirituality is often linked to religion, one would expect that many gay men and lesbians would lack any penchant for spirituality. Given their generally stigmatized status, however, mental health experts feel that gay and lesbian in-

dividuals are in greater need of spiritual nourishment (Davidson, 2000; Haldeman, 1996). Spirituality is thought to promote authenticity, openness, and compassion for others as well as for oneself (O'Neill & Ritter, 1992).

To better understand the spirituality of gay and lesbian individuals and to examine its impact on their lives, this study examined the level of "religious well-being" (RWB), or how one relates to God, and the level of "existential well-being" (EWB), or the sense of life purpose and satisfaction, without religious reference, espoused by a sample of gay and lesbian individuals. Second, this study examined differences in RWB and EWB base on gender, age, education, religious membership, attendance at religious services, and diagnosis of depression. Third, RWB and EWB were examined as predictors of three aspects of adjustment: self-esteem, internalized homophobia, and alienation. Since the effects of demographics such as gender, age, education, and income, and the diagnosis of depression could affect adjustment, they were controlled.

METHOD

Instrumentation

The instrument contained two sections. The first section enquired about demographic and experiential variables such as gender, ethnicity, age, religion, employment status, relationship status, income, educational attainment, and diagnoses of various illnesses (e.g., depression). The second section consisted of four scales assessing respondent's spiritual well-being, self-esteem, internalized homophobia, and feelings of alienation.

Spiritual Well-Being Scale. Ellison (1983) and Paloutzian and Ellison (1982) operationalized spiritual well-being as a two-dimensional construct: (1) religious well-being (RWB) and (2) existential well-being (EWB). The scale consisted of 20 items evenly divided to comprise the RWB and the EWB subscales. Each item was rated on a six-point Likert type scale and weighted equally. After recoding, higher scores represented higher spiritual well-being. The reliability and validity of the scale were established by Ellison (1983). Coefficient alpha for the entire scale was .92. Coefficient alpha for the RWB and EWB sub-scales were .95 and .93, respectively, for the present sample.

Index of Self-Esteem. This 25-item index was conceptualized to be an evaluative component of self-concept. The index measured the magni-

tude of the respondent's problem with self-esteem (Hudson, 1982). Each item was scored on a seven-point Likert type scale and weighted equally. After recoding, higher scores represented higher self-esteem. The reliability and validity of the index were established by Hudson (1982). Coefficient alpha was .95 for this sample.

Internalized Homophobia Scale. This scale measured the extent to which gay and lesbian individuals incorporate negative attitudes that are projected onto them by society. These negative attitudes include those that consider the gay and lesbian lifestyle as deviant and immoral (Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994). Internalized homophobia is associated with guilt, depression, and feelings of worthlessness. Nine items were taken from the original Nungesser Homosexual Attitudes inventory (Nungesser, 1983) and the remaining 11 were constructed by Wagner et al. Two items were relevant to gay men but not to lesbians. They were omitted since the respondents of this study included both males and females. Each of the remaining 18 items was scored on a five-point Likert type scale. Final scores were coded so that higher scores represented lower internalized homophobia. The internal consistency reliability was established by Wagner et al. Coefficient alpha was .93 for this sample.

Social Provision Scale. This scale measured perceived social support (Cutrona & Russell, 1987; Russell, Cutrona, Rose, & Yurko, 1984) and was used as a proxy variable to measure feelings of alienation. The social provision scale was made up of 24-items. Each item was scored on a four-point Likert type scale. Scores were coded so that higher scores represented less alienation. The validity and reliability of the scale were established by Russell et al. (1984). Coefficient alpha was .86 for this sample.

Procedure

Data were obtained from respondents in the Midwest. Questionnaires were distributed in lesbian and gay organizations, support groups and churches and at lesbian and gay events. Those who expressed an interest were handed a questionnaire and a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Two hundred questionnaires were distributed during December 2000 through March 2001. A total of 93 completed questionnaires were received in the mail. The response rate was 47%.

T-tests were used to examine if RWB and EWB scores differed by demographic and experiential variables. Linear multiple regression analyses were performed to examine the influences of RWB, EWB,

gender, age, education, income, and a diagnosis of depression on self-esteem, internalized homophobia, and alienation, respectively.

RESULTS

Characteristics of Respondents

Of the 93 respondents, most were male (75.3%). Their ages ranged between 18 and 57 years. The mean age was 38.11 years (S.D. = 10.14). Nearly all (95.7%) were European Americans. The remainder were African Americans or Asians. Most were employed (89.2%) and over one-half were partnered (52.7%). A fourth (26.1%) had an annual income of \$20,000 or less, 43.5% more than \$20,000 but less than \$40,000, and 30.3% more than \$40,000. A third (33.3%) had completed school, 44.1% had a college degree, and 22.6% had a graduate degree. Over a fourth (28.0%) indicated that they suffered from depression. Nearly half (47.3%) identified themselves as Protestants and 21.5% as Catholics. The remainder (31.2%) did not identify with any religion. Almost a third (30.1%) indicated that they attended religious services once a week, 9.7% at least once a month, 20.4% a few times a year, and 25.8% once a year or less. Some (14.0%) indicated that they did not attend religious services. In general, respondents expressed high RWB (mean = 42.37; S.D. = 11.57; possible range from 10 to 60) and high EWB (mean = 44.73; S.D. = 10.55; possible range from 10 to 60). There was no significant difference between levels of RWB and EWB they espoused. The correlation between RWB and EWB was strong ($r = .53$; $p < .01$).

In general, the respondents' self-esteem was high (mean = 129.87; S.D. = 22.20; possible range from 25 to 175). They did not harbor much internalized homophobia (mean = 72.95; S.D. = 13.72, possible range from 18 to 90) and they felt low levels of alienation (mean = 80.62; S.D. = 12.71, possible range from 24 to 96).

Between Group Comparisons Concerning Religious Well-Being and Existential Well-Being

Bivariate analyses revealed that those who identified as Protestants or Catholics and who attended religious services more frequently espoused higher RWB than those who did not identify with any religion and who attended religious services less frequently or not at all (see Table 1). RWB did not differ by gender, age, educational attainment, or di-

TABLE 1. Religious Well-Being and Existential Well-Being by Demographics of Respondents

	Religious Well-Being		Existential Well-Being	
	Mean	(S.D.)	Mean	(S.D.)
Gender				
Male	41.41	(11.45)	43.91	(10.64)
Female	45.32	(11.74)	47.22	(10.08)
			$t_{(88)} = 1.38$	$t_{(91)} = 1.31$
Age				
18-34	39.65	(9.71)	43.24	(10.49)
35-64	43.60	(12.29)	45.46	(10.56)
			$t_{(86)} = 1.55$	$t_{(89)} = .07$
Education				
High school	39.97	(11.45)	42.13	(9.48)
College or more	43.51	(11.55)	46.03	(10.89)
			$t_{(88)} = 1.36$	$t_{(91)} = 1.70$
Depression				
Yes	39.24	(14.08)	37.88	(12.15)
No	43.57	(10.33)	47.39	(8.58)
			$t_{(88)} = 1.11$	$t_{(91)} = 4.24^{**}$
Religion				
Protestant or Catholic	44.98	(9.76)	45.05	(10.38)
None	35.56	(13.26)	43.96	(11.12)
			$t_{(89)} = 3.70^{**}$	$t_{(91)} = .45$
Attend Religious Services				
Once a month or more	46.00	(10.56)	45.71	(10.07)
Less than once a month	36.66	(10.90)	43.24	(11.22)
			$t_{(88)} = 4.04^{**}$	$t_{(91)} = 1.11$

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

agnosis of depression. The EWB of those who had a diagnosis of depression was lower than those who did not. EWB did not differ by gender, age, educational attainment, religion, or frequency of religious attendance.

Predictors of Adjustment

Multiple regression analyses revealed that EWB was a significant predictor of all the three aspects of adjustment: having higher self-esteem, espousing lower internalized homophobia, and feeling less alienated (see Table 2). RWB, on the other hand, was not a significant predictor of self-esteem, internalized homophobia, or alienation. The selected controlled variables (gender, age, educational attainment, in-

TABLE 2. Multiple Regression Analyses of Self-Esteem, Internalized Homophobia, and Alienation as Dependent Variables

Predictors	Self-Esteem		Homophobia		Alienation	
	r	Beta	r	Beta	r	Beta
Gender	.12	.02	.19	.16	.16	.06
Age	.01	.04	.07	-.10	.02	-.03
Education	.09	.06	.12	.14	.10	.02
Income	.12	-.01	-.03	-.09	.08	-.04
Depression	.40**	.18	.10	.05	.21	.06
EWB	.69**	.72**	.32**	.32*	.65**	.68**
RWB	.21	-.18	.18	.01	.36**	.01
R ²	.54		.16		.44	
df	7,74		7,70		7,79	
F	12.32**		1.88		8.94**	

* p < .05

** p < .01

come, and depression) also did not significantly influence self-esteem, internalized homophobia, or alienation. R² values indicated that 54% of the variances in self-esteem and 44% of the variance in alienation were explained by the seven independent variables. In contrast, the R² for internalized homophobia was only .16.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study found that the sample of gay and lesbian individuals espoused a high level of religious well-being (RWB), or how one relates to God, and a high level of existential well-being (EWB), or sense of life purpose and satisfaction. These findings are noteworthy in that they discount the notion that gay and lesbian individuals are spiritually impoverished. To the contrary, the gay and lesbian respondents in this study appear to have rich spiritual lives. The fact that gay and lesbian individuals have been discriminated against by society, particularly by traditional religions, may have challenged them to look beyond the tenets of organized religions and to seek more intensely for answers to the meaning of existence and of faith.

The findings that those who identified as Protestants or Catholics and those who attended religious services more frequently also espoused higher RWB can be linked to the fact that Protestantism and Catholicism are monotheistic religions. Adherence to these religions centers

around sustaining a faithful relationship with a personal God. It is likely that those who identify with such beliefs and who participate more frequently in these traditions' communal rituals would also feel more connected with a "personal" God. Consequently, these individuals would espouse higher levels of RWB compared to those who do not identify with these religions and who attend their services less frequently.

The finding that individuals with a diagnosis of depression espoused lower EWB supports the claims made by researchers that symptoms of depression and low EWB may be similar, e.g., feeling hopeless, helpless, and empty, and lacking motivation and self-confidence (May, 1982; O'Connor, 2002; Westgate, 1996). Experts, however, stress that the etiologies of depression and low EWB are different. The etiology of depression involves secular issues (e.g., difficulty with relationship, employment, finances, and other problems in adjustment) and abnormality in brain chemistry.

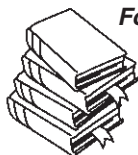
Although a preliminary test found that RWB and EWB were strongly correlated, multiple regression analyses revealed that only EWB was associated with adjustment. EWB was a significant predictor of all three aspects of adjustment: self-esteem, internalized homophobia, and feeling alienated. RWB, however, was not a significant predictor of any of these aspects of adjustment. These findings suggest that gay and lesbian individuals who have a good sense of life's purpose, who feel that their lives are meaningful, and who consider themselves to be moral are more likely to be well-adjusted. Finally, these findings also suggest that being well-adjusted does not entail being reconciled with a traditional religion or with a theistic belief.

While this study has limitations (non-probability sampling, small sample size, cross-sectional design, and over representation of individuals who were involved with church), the results of this study are important and contribute to our understanding of this topic, about which little research has been done. Increasingly, spirituality is being seen as a source of empowerment that positively impacts on the lives of individuals. This study provides evidence supporting this notion and that spirituality is relevant to gay and lesbian individuals as well. Since the existential aspect of spirituality has the potential to enhance self-esteem, authenticity, and openness, gay and lesbian individuals may be even more in need of existential spiritual nourishment, given that they must function in a repressive homophobic society. As the findings of this study suggest, they may, in fact, have nurtured their spirituality well in the face of oppression. It is perhaps through nurturing the existential aspect of their spirituality that they have been able to preserve both their integrity and their humanity.

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