

Research Proposal Examining Religious Engagement as a Coping Mechanism for LGB Individuals

Statement of Purpose

Religion confers numerous psychological benefits to believers who are enduring hardships. For example, when people receive a terminal cancer diagnosis, they often use relationships with religious community members, prayer, and tangible church-based resources to persevere (Pargament et al., 2011; Pérez & Smith, 2014). Yet, research on the benefits of religious engagement has not yet centered the experiences of LGB people. This exception is important, as nearly half of all lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) adults in the U.S. are religious, and many report that religion is very important in their lives (Conron et al., 2020). Despite religion playing a critical role in their lives, 93% of LGB adults view religious institutions as “unfriendly” to their identities (Pew Research Center, 2013). For these adults in the LGB community, it may be difficult to reconcile their faith with their perception of religious institutions as rejecting their identities. So, do LGB people enduring hardship receive the same benefits from religious engagement as heterosexual individuals? Might religious coping function differently for LGB populations? We propose a study examining these questions.

This research is particularly relevant to the Jesuit Foundation, as the idea that faith can be a practical tool to overcome hardship is critical to Jesuit practice and history. Saint Ignatius of Loyola began his spiritual journey in the midst of a hardship: While recovering from war-related surgery, his military career over, he looked to God for guidance. Along this spiritual path, Ignatius founded the Jesuit Order, and in the process helped many others overcome their hardships and build lasting relationships with God. Jesuits teach that out of hardship - be they war wounds, cancer, the loss of a loved one - stems introspection, spiritual connectedness, and a path to a more meaningful life. Yet, little is known about how members of the LGB population experience this journey. Our project seeks to explore the practical benefits of spirituality for believers of any faith, with a special focus on how LGB believers of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam use religion to cope with hardships.

Hypotheses

Our research builds off prior studies on prayer and its effects on religious well-being, anxiety, and general well-being. H1: People who engage in more positive religious coping strategies will experience greater well-being. H2: Individuals who identify as LGB across all three religions will engage in less positive and more negative religious coping mechanisms compared to heterosexual individuals. H3: Sexuality will moderate the relationship between religious coping and well-being such that LGB participants will have a weaker relationship between religious coping and well-being compared to heterosexual participants. We will investigate each of these hypotheses cross-sectionally (i.e., examining only the Time 1 data) and longitudinally (i.e., using the Time 1 data to predict the Time 2 data in cross-lag models).

Methodology

Our proposed study involves recruiting 300 individuals ($N = 300$) from the online recruitment site Prolific. People are eligible to participate if they are older than 18 years and identify as religious. We will pre-screen for participants who have experienced a major hardship within the last month. We will use quota sampling via Prolific panels to ensure that half of the participants identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and the other half of the participants identify as straight; moreover, to ensure that participants identify as either Christian, Muslim, or Jewish. Eligible participants will be asked to complete two surveys six months apart so that we can track long-term coping.

The prescreening survey entails a variety of measures related to the hardship they experienced. Specifically, participants will be presented with a list of hardships (e.g., death of a loved one; major illness) and asked to select one that best describes their experience as well as the severity and recency of the experience. Participants with relatively severe and recent hardships will be invited to complete the full survey.

In the full survey, participants will complete the Brief Religious Coping Scale (Pargament et al., 2011) which is a measure that examines positive and negative religious coping strategies. For instance, the Brief RCOPE examines the extent to which participants saw their situation as part of God's plan, prayed for miracles, and sought a stronger spiritual connection with other people (positive); as well as the extent to which participants wondered whether God abandoned them, felt punished by God for lack of devotion, and wondered whether the Church had abandoned them (negative). A unique benefit of the Brief RCOPE is that it has been validated across religious communities, making its use appropriate for Christian, Jewish, and Muslim participants.

After completing the Brief RCOPE, participants will proceed to complete measures that examine their level of religiosity and how often they pray. Then they will take a general well-being (Dupuy, 1977) and Spiritual Well-Being Measure (Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982). Participants will either take the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity measure to assess LGB identity centrality (Mohr & Kendra, 2011) or the Heterosexual Identity Measure (Martinez & Smith, 2019) based on how they sexually identify. Lastly, they will respond to demographic questions including gender, age, and religion.

Timetable

The proposed timeline for the study would be to start internal pilot testing for the survey in December 2024. This pilot testing would involve creating the survey and assessing its length and accessibility to participants to determine whether revisions to payment or the survey itself are necessary. We would begin recruiting participants in January 2025 and anticipate data collection will be complete within the month, as Prolific data collection is often complete within 1-2 days. Accordingly, we will be able to share preliminary cross-sectional results with the Jesuit Foundation in February 2025. Then, in July 2025, we will send the follow-up survey to participants through Prolific. The follow-up survey will require 1-2 weeks to collect data, as only the prior participants will be eligible. Thus, we hope to provide the foundation with a report of the results from the entire study in August 2025. We will spend the subsequent months preparing a manuscript for publication, such as in the journal *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, in which we will acknowledge funding support from the Jesuit Foundation.

Relationship to Past and Future Experience

This study is a collaboration between William Durrill (former USF undergraduate student) and Dr. Zachary Reese (faculty member in psychology) with consultation from Dr. John Pérez (faculty member in psychology). William has done previous research in the field of religiosity, conducting his honors thesis in psychology on the effects of freeform versus ritualistic prayer for Jewish individuals. William also co-authored an encyclopedia entry alongside Dr. Reese on prayer and well-being (Durrill et al., in print). Dr. Reese has extensive experience conducting quantitative research studies, including longitudinal studies on LGB populations – for instance, he currently has funding from the College of Arts and Sciences to examine daily conversations between people in diverse romantic relationships. Finally, we are grateful for the expert consultation of Dr. John Pérez who has extensive experience studying religiousness and health.

Dr. Pérez has published multiple first-author papers (e.g., Pérez & Smith, 2014) on the religious and spiritual coping among individuals facing difficult situations and has agreed to consult on our project to maximize our impact.

Social and Intellectual Goals

Religious zealotry has cost the lives and well-being of many LGB individuals. For instance, in 2016, the U.S. experienced the largest mass shooting at a gay nightclub in Orlando.

Nevertheless, many within the LGB population maintain a fervent belief in religion and are entitled to the benefits religion offers to anyone looking to overcome hardships. Our research can help those in the LGB community navigate their religious journey – to show them what has worked for others, and to shine a light on strategies that may be less effective for them.

Understanding these patterns can also help religious leaders and counselors offer more targeted, informed advice to LGB people seeking their guidance.

This study is also important for the field of psychology. The vast majority of research on religious coping on LGB individuals is cross-sectional - that is, it captures a snapshot of a person's life or well-being at a single point in time. Although cross-sectional methods are highly valuable, they do not enable researchers to examine change over time which is crucial to understanding coping. Our study seeks to advance research on religious coping by adding a longitudinal element. And, importantly, our proposed study is inclusive of three major U.S. religions, whereas the vast majority of research has focused exclusively on Christianity. In short, our study will not only yield insights for diverse believers and religious leaders, but also for other researchers studying religious coping.

References

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Jesuit Foundation Grant Proposal Budget

If a category is not applicable to your type of grant leave it blank.	Cost
A Personnel Costs (e.g., stipends or honoraria for staff, faculty, student assistants, invited speakers, and benefits where applicable (faculty 25%, students 12% fringe benefits, percentages may have changed since publishing). Call the Office of Student Employment at 422-6770 for the current student pay rate. Describe the responsibilities of each person listed, and justify costs:	
B Catering & Supplies. e.g., photocopying costs, refreshments, books; include justification for each item listed. <i>Any catering requests must include a separate itemized budget estimate from Bon Appétit/USF Catering.</i>	
C Hotel Accommodations & Per Diem. Include length of stay and calculate cost per day according to www.gsa.gov/perdiem	
D Airfare. (Printed estimate from <i>Expedia.com</i> or <i>Travelocity.com</i> must be attached)	
E Other expenses. Itemize and include a brief statement justifying each expense. The only cost associated with this study is paying participants for their time, and in particular incentivizing them to take the survey a second time six months later. We aim to recruit a minimum of 300 people, over-recruiting to account for likely attrition and quota-sampling for religion and sexual orientation. This number is to ensure we can make well-powered statistical comparisons both within and between groups. All participants will be recruited through the Prolific website. Each participant will be	\$3705

compensated \$3 if they complete the survey and an additional \$6.50 if they complete the second survey six months later (\$9.50 per person). This would cost \$2850 for participant payments. Prolific also charges fees for granting access to underrepresented populations and for using the platform. We estimate these fees will add 30% (\$855) to the participant payment costs, totaling \$3705 for the study.	
Total Cost of Project:	\$3705
Amount requested from Jesuit Foundation:	\$3705
Amount requested from other sources (if any, please list):	

Note, recommendation letter from College of Arts and Sciences emailed separately.