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Anderson, Joel R.; Koc, Yasin

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Identity Integration as a Protective Factor against Guilt and Shame for Religious Gay Men

Joel R. Anderson ^{a,b} and Yasin Koc ^c

^aSchool of Behavioural and Health Sciences, Australian Catholic University; ^bAustralian Research Centre in Sex, Health, & Society, La Trobe University; ^cDepartment of Social Psychology, University of Groningen

ABSTRACT

Belonging to multiple identities that are incompatible has been linked to poor psychological wellbeing outcomes, including feelings of guilt and shame. Individuals who experience such conflict can use a range of strategies to reconcile seemingly incompatible identities. The current study aimed to explore the strategy of identity integration as a protective factor against guilt and shame for individuals who identify as both religious and gay. A sample of 183 religious gay men ($M_{\text{age}} = 29.31$ years, $SD = 10.42$) completed an online survey comprising measures of religious identification, gay identification, guilt, shame, and identity integration. We found that religious identification predicted higher levels of religious-based guilt, and both gay identity-based guilt and shame. Conversely, gay identification was not associated with any feelings of guilt or shame. Identity integration predicted lower levels of all guilt and shame outcomes, and also moderated the relationship between religious identification and guilt and shame – that is, religious-gay identity integration attenuated the negative effects independently associated with religious identification. These findings suggest that identity integration may enable gay people to access the protective benefits of religious engagement and multiple group memberships while remaining connected to the gay community.

Social identity theory states that we are psychologically motivated to hold positive and complementary social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In part, this might be because group-based identification can provide a sense of belonging, comfort, meaning, and purpose, which are crucial determinants of psychological wellbeing (Greenaway et al., 2015). The capacity for group membership to positively impact wellbeing outcomes has been termed the “social cure” (Haslam et al., 2012). This framework – based in the tenets of social identity theory – suggests an additive effect, whereby identifying with multiple groups can be increasingly protective against negative wellbeing outcomes. The extent to which group membership impacts wellbeing varies not only as a function of group perceptions or treatment, but also the extent to which one identifies with the group. When group identification is internalized as meaningful and relevant to one’s self-concept, it is more consequential to wellbeing outcomes (Turner et al., 1987). A recent meta-analysis found identification was negatively associated with depression symptoms across a variety of groups, including sports teams, ethnic groups, and army units (Cruwys et al., 2014). Longitudinal studies conducted by Iyer et al. (2009) found that having multiple group memberships improved wellbeing, with the caveat that the identities must be perceived as positive, important to one’s self-concept, and, of particular relevance to this paper, as compatible.

Identifying with groups perceived as undesirable or incompatible can have harmful social and wellbeing outcomes (DeMarco & Newheiser, 2019). For example, Begeny and

Huo (2018) found in a sample of ethnic minority adults that those whose ethnic identity was more central to their self-concept were more likely to report discrimination. This suggests that stronger identification increases the likelihood of being impacted by the treatment a group receives. Therefore, the social benefits and costs of group membership depend on the perception of the group in a broader societal context.

Incompatible Identities

Certain combinations of identities are traditionally accepted as compatible, while others may be perceived as oppositional. Benet-Martinez and colleagues noted that bicultural individuals who view their dual ethnic identities as incompatible feel confused and “caught between” cultural identities, and have greater difficulty reconciling the two (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002). Holding dual identities that are seemingly incompatible can leave an individual feeling like an out-group member to both identities, and can make the perceived incompatibility of these identities particularly salient. This experience is known as identity conflict, and it can inhibit identification, social connection, and support from either or both groups (Hamblin & Gross, 2013). The resultant lack of belonging has been linked to increased depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Hagerty et al., 1996).

One combination traditionally perceived as incompatible, and associated with identity conflict, are religion identities

and identities pertaining to sexuality. In this paper, we focus on the combination of men identifying as both religious and as gay.¹ A meta-analysis by Anderton and colleagues found that many gay men raised with religion feel their sexual identity conflicts with their faith, and struggle to reconcile the two (Anderton et al., 2011). Identity conflict has been found to be greater for gay men from families with more religious involvement (Subhi & Geelan, 2012). Additionally, lesbians are less likely to report identity conflict than gay men (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000).

Outcomes of Identity Conflict for Men Who Have Sex with Men

On average, individuals who are both religious and gay experience poorer psychological wellbeing outcomes than the general population, including higher rates of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, substance use, self-harm, and social exclusion (Pietkiewicz et al., 2016). Many religious doctrines stridently oppose any deviation from heterosexuality, describing same-sex sexual relations as deviant, immoral, and sinful. Internalizing these beliefs often results in residual feelings of guilt, shame, or defectiveness (Ritter & O'Neill, 1989). Pitt has noted that for gay Christians, "Sunday morning always brought about a new dose of guilt and shame about their homosexual behaviors" (Pitt, 2009, p. 50).

The relationship of judgment and marginalization between religious and gay communities is oftentimes mutual. For some gay individuals, condemnation from religious communities can result in an animosity toward religion. Others feel they must hide or suppress their religious identities in gay communities, an experience referred to as "double stigma" (O'Brien, 2004), or a second form of closeting (Beagan & Hattie, 2015). Mark (2008) observed that the failure of gay Orthodox Jews to conform to norms prescribed by either group is linked to feelings of guilt and shame, two emotional experiences commonly associated with this conflict (Schuck & Liddle, 2001).

For religious gay individuals, guilt and shame may stem from either identity, or the interaction of the two. Lewis asserted that the self is the object of negative evaluation when experiencing shame, whereas a behavior is the focus when experiencing guilt (Lewis, 1971). Both can arise from an action or transgression, but shame is often viewed as a reflection of an underlying sense of worthlessness or defectiveness (Lewis, 1971). Another conception of this distinction is that shame arises from acts perceived as inappropriate or inadequate, while guilt follows behaviors that violate moral values, ethical norms, or religious codes (Wicker et al., 1983). The first major aim of this study was to explore the impact of

holding both religious and gay identities on guilt and shame outcomes.

Identity Conflict Resolution Strategies

Individuals employ various strategies to alleviate the perceived incompatibility of various identities. Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) identified four options for resolving conflicts between religious and gay identities. First, to reject the religious identity, perhaps by disaffiliating from a religious community, or altering beliefs (Yip, 1999). Second, to reject the gay identity, for example, by attempting to suppress desires, maintain celibacy, or "pray the gay away" (Barton, 2010). Third, to compartmentalize these identities by maintaining rigid barriers between them, denying each identity in the context of the other (Pitt, 2009). The final strategy is identity integration, in which religious and gay identities intersect and overlap.

The impact of identity conflict can be attenuated by synthesizing religious and gay identities into a new self-concept (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). This results in positive identification with each identity, which protects against the cost of holding conflicting identities. Koc and Vignoles (2016) conducted a study in a sample of Turkish gay men which explored global identification as a coping strategy for the conflict between gay and male identities. Their results revealed that identifying as a global citizen predicted the integration of gay and male identities, which was linked to increased life satisfaction and positive affect. This suggests that identities are more readily integrated when perceived as compatible, rather than oppositional. Identity integration can manifest as changing religious congregation, seeking alternative interpretations of ostensibly anti-gay religious texts, finding solace in religious passages invoking love between men (even if not explicitly romantic love), or strengthening a belief of being created, loved, and accepted by God (Pitt, 2009).

Identity integration was the focus of this study, as it has been linked to better psychological wellbeing outcomes than the remaining three strategies for coping with identity conflict. For example, Dehlin and colleagues observed that quality of life was higher for Mormon gay men who achieved identity integration than those who rejected either identity or compartmentalized the two (Dehlin et al., 2015). The second major aim of this study was to explore identity integration as a moderating factor of the relationships between religious and gay identities, and guilt and shame outcomes.

Aims and Hypotheses

The literature broadly exploring identities is vast; however, the literature exploring identity *integration* and its associated outcomes is limited. The literature exploring the integration of sexuality-based identities with other identities has only recently begun to emerge (e.g., Koc & Vignoles, 2016, 2018). In this paper, we explore one such combination of identities that are perceived as incompatible and examine relevant affect-based outcomes that result from non-integration of the identities. Specifically, the current study explored religious and gay identification and the levels of guilt and shame associated with each of these identities, and the potential for

¹In this study, we use the term *gay* to refer any male-identifying person who is physically attracted to men. In our sample, this is mostly gay or bisexual men, but also includes pansexual queer individuals. In the literature, there are also other terms such as *men who have sex with men* (MSM) that may capture this broad category, but MSM is mostly related to sexual behavior, rather than the whole aspects of the identity. Therefore, throughout the paper, we use the word *gay* to refer to same-sex attracted men.

identity integration to protect against them. Specifically, we aimed to determine whether religious-gay identity integration moderates the relationships between each identity and guilt and shame outcomes in men who both have sex with men and are religious. Based on the existing literature, the arguments presented above, and the assumption that these identities are indeed conflicting, we formulated the following hypotheses:

H1: Identification hypotheses – First, based on the notion that social costs are positively associated with conflicting group identification, we predicted that both religious identification (H1a) and gay identification (H1b) would be related to increases in guilt and shame outcomes (i.e., guilt and shame associated with each identity). This was tested with a series of bivariate correlation analyses, and in multiple regression analyses (MRA).

H2: Identity integration hypotheses – Based on the notion that identity integration may be a protective factor for individuals with incompatible identities, we predicted that the ability to integrate these identities would moderate the relationships in H1 – specifically, identity integration would moderate the relationships between religious identification and guilt and shame outcomes (H2a), and gay identification and guilt and shame outcomes (H2b). This was tested in MRAs, and with a series of moderation analyses.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants responded to an advertisement for a ‘Survey for men who are both gay and religious’, which was placed on the research platform Prolific, to complete an online survey created with Qualtrics (reviewed and approved by Australian Catholic University’s human research ethics committee). Participants were based in the United States and received 2 USD USD in exchange for survey completion. Those who consented to participate were redirected to the website hosting the survey (<http://www.qualtrics.com/>), where they provided non-identifying demographic information regarding their age, gender, sexual orientation, and religion, before being administered the questionnaire including the measures described below in a randomized fashion. Following completion, participants were thanked for their time and debriefed. Participants who did not identify as male, or who reported no sexual history or attraction toward men, were excluded prior to beginning the survey. In addition, any participants who finished the survey more than 2 standard deviations faster than the mean were automatically excluded (and removed from the sample without reimbursement, $n = 10$).

In total, 194 participants completed the survey, but 11 were excluded (9 for not identifying as male; 2 for not identifying as gay). We also embedded two attention check items into the survey to exclude individual participants who were not answering the items in a valid way, however, all participants passed these attention checks. The final sample was comprised of 183 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 29.31$ years, $SD = 10.42$). This

exceeds the 134 participants required to detect a low-to-moderate effect size ($f = .10$) for a design including three independent variables and two interaction terms with power of 80% and an error probability of .05 (Field, 2013). This indicates the study has adequate power, and risk of making a Type II error is low.

The majority ($n = 177$ [95.9%]) of participants identified as “gay or bisexual”; the remaining 6 identified as “other”, including demisexual, pansexual, or queer. The majority ($n = 140$ [72.2%]) were, or had been, sexually active with men. However, in line with the eligibility criteria, all participants were, or had been, attracted to men (unfortunately, we only asked if participants were “gay or bisexual” and they were not given the option to specify which, or to provide alternatives which would also be relevant to the aims of the study, but we can confirm that all participants were same-sex attracted). The majority ($n = 158$ [86.3%]) had been religious in their lifetime. More specifically, when questioned about their current religious affiliation, 41 (21.1%) remained religious, 131 (67.5%) had defected from their religion, and 22 reported being “unsure” (11.3%). The largest group was Christian ($n = 149$), followed by agnostic/no religion/atheist ($n = 24$), Jewish ($n = 5$), Muslim ($n = 2$), Hindu ($n = 2$), and one reported being “unsure”. In regard to relationship status, 108 (55.7%) were single, 48 (24.7%) in a relationship with one male, 31 (16%) in a relationship with one female, and 6 participants were in relationships with multiple partners (3%).

Measures

Religious and Gay Identification

Religious identification and gay identification were each measured using single-item identification measures (adapted from Postmes et al., 2013). The Single-Item Identification Scale has been established as a valid and reliable measure of identification by Postmes et al. (2013), who asserted that social identification is a sufficiently homogenous construct as to warrant a single-item measure. For the current study, items were phrased as “I identify with people from my religion”, and “I identify with gay people”.² Participants indicated their level of agreement with each statement on a seven-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*); thus, higher scores correspond with greater levels of identification.

Guilt and Shame

Single-item measures were also used to capture the extent to which participants experienced guilt and shame in association with each identity (single-item measures of both guilt and shame have previously been used, see Dorahy, 2010; Hosser et al., 2008, etc.). Each item was endorsed on a seven-point scale (1 = *not at all ashamed* [guilty], 7 = *extremely ashamed* [guilty]). Items were phrased as “To what extent do you feel shame [guilt] about being religious [gay]?”. Higher scores

²The term “gay” was used in the survey as a general category to capture all sexual minority men who are same-sex attracted (SSA). This decision was made in line with advertisements for participants who are “both gay and religious” (note: all men identified as SSA, although not all had previously experienced same-sex sexual relations).

correspond with greater degrees of guilt and shame. It is worth noting that no precise definitions of these affective experiences were provided; instead, we relied upon participants' intuitive understanding of each experience.

MSM-Religious Identity Integration

We used an adapted version of the Bicultural Identity Integration Scale (Huynh, 2009) to measure the extent to which participants find they can integrate their religious and gay identities. The original scale was developed to measure different approaches to biculturalism for immigrants and mixed-race individuals, although this is often adapted (e.g., this measure has previously been used to assess the integration of sexuality and gender identities; Koc & Vignoles, 2016). For the purposes of our study, the scale was re-appropriated so that its 14 items reflected religious and gay identification. Sample items include 'I feel torn between gay and religious identities', and "My gay and religious identities are complementary". Participants indicated their level of agreement using a five-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Appropriate items were reverse-scored and averaged, so that higher scores indicate greater levels of identity integration. While the original scale contained 19 items, we used only the 14 items previously used by Koc and Vignoles (2016). The scale yielded acceptable reliability estimates in the current sample ($\alpha = .84$).

Data Analyses

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 25. We explored bivariate correlations between continuous variables using Pearson product-moment correlations with bootstrapped confidence intervals (to establish preliminary evidence for H1). For multivariate analyses, we explored data using a series of four hierarchical multiple linear regression analyses based on the ordinary least squares model, one for each dependent variable (religious and gay guilt and shame). Strength of religious identification (RI) and gay identification (GI) were entered into Step 1 of the model (to test H1), identity integration (II) was entered into Step 2, and then the interaction terms (RI x II; GI x II) were entered into Step 3 to test for evidence of moderation effects (and thus to establish preliminary evidence for H2). H2 was fully tested with moderation analyses, which we unpacked using the PROCESS tool developed by Hayes (2017), with analyses set to 5000 bootstrap samples. As per Field's recommendation (Field, 2013), grand mean centering was used to increase interpretability of results, and limit issues of multicollinearity.

Results

Data Preparation and Screening

A Missing Value Analysis indicated that several variables had some missing data. No variables exceeded Tabachnick and Fidell's recommended threshold of 5% missing data, so no further inspection was warranted (Tabachnick et al., 2007). We used pairwise deletion so as to maximize data used in relevant analyses. No potential outliers were identified in any variables (i.e., all z -scores were within Field, 2013 recommended criterion of $-3.29 < z < 3.29$). We conducted several assumption tests for hierarchical MRAs prior to interpreting the results of these analyses. Visual inspection of histograms, scatterplots, and P - P plots revealed no violations of linearity, normality, or homoscedasticity. The assumption of independent errors was also met (Durbin-Watson value = 1.59).

Descriptive Findings and Univariate Analyses

Descriptive findings and univariate correlation analyses are presented in Table 1. Overall, self-reported gay identification was significantly higher than religious identification, $t(182) = -15.38, p < .001$ (two-tailed; Cohen's $d = 1.50$). Partially supporting H1a, religious identification was positively associated with most guilt and shame outcomes (religious guilt, and with both gay guilt and gay shame, but not religious shame). Unexpectedly, and against H1b, gay identification was not significantly associated with any other variables. In addition, and providing evidence for the protective nature of identity integration, negative associations were observed between identity integration and all guilt and shame outcomes. Finally, guilt and shame were strongly associated with each other.

Multivariate Analyses

To explore H2, four hierarchical linear regressions were conducted, using the guilt and shame outcomes as the respective dependent variables. Cook's distance fell within the acceptable range (0.19), and Mahalanobis' distance ($d = 15.36$) did not exceed the critical value $\chi^2(3) = 16.27, p < .001$, suggesting that multivariate outliers were not an issue. The mean Centered Leverage Value did not exceed the critical value (.09). Collinearity of univariate dependent variables was also assessed and found to be acceptable, (VIF = 1.14, Tolerance = 0.87).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations for continuous variables.

Variable (Measure)	<i>M(SD)</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Religious identification	2.94 (1.72)	–					
2. Gay identification	5.40 (1.43)	.02	–				
3. Religious guilt	1.73 (1.30)	.28**	.07	–			
4. Gay guilt	2.05 (1.59)	.18*	–.08	.41**	–		
5. Religious shame	1.78 (1.35)	.13	.07	.68**	.20**	–	
6. Gay shame	2.08 (1.59)	.15*	–.07	.39**	.91**	.27**	–
7. II scale average	3.98 (0.80)	.35**	.04	–.18*	–.24**	–.23**	–.22**

$N = 183$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$. II = Identity Integration.

Exploring Religion-Based Outcomes

For religious guilt, Step 1 included only religious identification and gay identification, and these variables accounted for a significant 8.1% of the variance in religious guilt scores, $F(2, 179) = 7.85, p = .001$. In Step 2, the inclusion of identity integration accounted for an additional significant 8.6% of variance, $\Delta F(1, 178) = 18.27, p < .001$. Interaction terms were entered in Step 3, accounting for an additional significant 4.5% of variance in religious guilt scores, $\Delta F(2, 176) = 5.01, p = .008$. Overall, these predictor variables accounted for 21.1% of variance in religious guilt, a medium effect (Cohen's $f^2 = .19$). In this final model, religious identification positively predicted religious guilt, while its interaction with identity integration negatively predicted religious guilt (see Table 2).

For religious shame, Step 1 included only religious identification and gay identification, and these variables accounted for a non-significant 2.1% of the variance in religious shame scores, $F(2, 179) = 1.89, p = .155$. In Step 2, the inclusion of identity integration accounted for a significant additional 8.6% of variance, $\Delta F(1, 178) = 17.06, p < .001$. Interaction terms were entered in Step 3, accounting for a non-significant additional 0.7% of variance in religious shame scores, $\Delta F(2, 176) = 0.72, p = .488$. Overall, these predictor variables accounted for 11.4% of variance in religious shame, a small effect (Cohen's $f^2 = .11$). In this final model, neither religious identification nor its interaction with identity integration significantly predicted religious shame (see Table 3).

Exploring Sexuality-Based Outcomes

For MSM guilt, Step 1 included only religious identification and gay identification, and these variables accounted for a significant 3.7% of the variance in gay guilt scores, $F(2,$

179) = 3.46, $p = .034$. In Step 2, the inclusion of identity integration accounted for an additional significant 10.3% of variance, $\Delta F(1, 178) = 21.39, p < .001$. Interaction terms were entered in Step 3, accounting for an additional significant 5.2% of variance in gay guilt scores, $\Delta F(2, 176) = 5.63, p = .004$. Overall, these predictor variables accounted for 19.2% of variance in gay guilt, a moderate effect (Cohen's $f^2 = .17$). In this final model, religious identification positively predicted MSM guilt, while its interaction with identity integration negatively predicted gay guilt (see Table 4).

For gay shame, Step 1 included only religious identification and gay identification, and these variables accounted for a non-significant 2.9% of the variance in gay shame scores, $F(2, 178) = 2.67, p = .072$. In Step 2, the inclusion of identity integration accounted for an additional significant 8% of variance, $\Delta F(1, 177) = 15.99, p < .001$. Interaction terms were entered in Step 3, accounting for an additional significant 5.3% of variance in gay shame scores, $\Delta F(2, 175) = 5.49, p = .005$. Overall, these predictor variables accounted for 11% of variance in gay shame, a small effect (Cohen's $f^2 = .15$). In this final model, religious identification positively predicted MSM shame, while its interaction with identity integration negatively predicted gay shame (see Table 5). Taken together, these findings provide partial support for H2a.

Moderation Analyses

The significant increase in variance accounted for by the interaction terms implies moderation effects. Specifically, the effect of religious identification on religious guilt, gay guilt and gay shame might depend on the level of identity integration. To further explore the association between religious identification and gay identification, and guilt and shame,

Table 2. Hierarchical regression analyses predicting religious guilt scores ($N = 181$).

Variables	Step 1					Step 2					Step 3				
	β	b	SE	t	r_p^2	β	b	SE	t	r_p^2	β	b	SE	t	r_p^2
Relig Ident	0.21	0.27	0.05	3.82**	.27	0.29	0.38	0.06	5.24**	.36	1.11	1.47	0.27	4.18**	.30
Gay Ident	0.06	0.07	0.07	0.95	.07	0.07	0.08	0.06	1.13	.08	0.11	0.12	0.32	0.35	.03
Ident Int						-0.51	-0.31	0.12	-4.27**	-.29	0.11	0.07	0.49	0.22	.02
RI x II											-0.2	-1.28	0.06	-3.16**	-.23
GI x II											0	0	0.08	-0.01	0
F	7.85*					11.82**					9.42**				
df	2					3					5				
$dferror$	179					178					176				
R^2	.08					.17					.21				
R^2 change	.08*					.09**					.05*				

Constants: Step 1 = 0.79 ($SE = 0.39$); Step 2 = 2.51 ($SE = 0.55$); Step 3 = -.08 ($SE = 2.00$). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Hierarchical regression analyses predicting religious shame scores ($N = 181$).

Variables	Step 1					Step 2					Step 3				
	β	b	SE	t	r_p^2	β	b	SE	t	r_p^2	β	b	SE	t	r_p^2
Relig Ident	0.10	0.12	0.06	1.67	.12	0.18	0.23	0.06	3.07*	.22	0.52	0.66	0.29	1.79	.13
Gay Ident	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.95	.07	0.08	0.08	0.07	1.12	.08	0.05	0.05	0.35	0.15	.01
Ident Int						-0.53	-0.31	0.13	-4.13**	-.29	-0.33	-0.2	0.54	-0.61	-.04
RI x II											-0.08	-0.51	0.07	-1.19	-.09
GI x II											0.01	0.06	0.09	0.12	.01
F	1.89					7.06**					4.51**				
df	2					3					5				
$dferror$	179					178					176				
R^2	.02					.11					.11				
R^2 change	.02					.09**					.01				

Constants: Step 1 = 1.14 ($SE = 0.42$); Step 2 = 2.94 ($SE = 0.60$); Step 3 = 2.09 ($SE = 2.21$). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Hierarchical regression analyses predicting gay guilt scores ($N = 181$).

Variables	Step 1					Step 2					Step 3				
	β	b	SE	t	r_p^2	β	b	SE	t	r_p^2	β	b	SE	t	r_p^2
Relig Ident	0.16	0.18	0.07	2.41*	.18	0.27	0.3	0.07	3.99**	.28	1.34	1.45	.33	4.10**	.28
Gay Ident	-0.09	-0.08	0.08	-1.11	-.08	-0.08	-0.07	0.08	-1.02	-.07	.20	.18	.39	.52	.04
Ident Int						-0.68	-0.34	0.15	-4.63**	-.32	.43	.22	.61	.72	.05
RI x II											-.26	-1.36	.08	-3.31**	-.22
GI x II											-.06	-.28	.10	-.61	-.04
F	3.46*					9.70**					8.37**				
df	2					3					5				
df_{error}	179					178					176				
R^2	.04					.14					.19				
R^2 change	.04					.10**					.05*				

Constants: Step 1 = 2.06 ($SE = 0.49$); Step 2 = 4.39 ($SE = 0.69$); Step 3 = -.25 ($SE = 2.48$). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

Table 5. Hierarchical regression analyses predicting gay shame scores ($N = 180$).

Variables	Step 1					Step 2					Step 3				
	β	b	SE	t	r_p^2	β	b	SE	t	r_p^2	β	b	SE	t	r_p^2
Relig Ident	0.14	0.16	0.07	2.10*	.16	0.24	0.26	0.07	3.44*	.24	1.32	1.42	0.33	3.93**	.27
Gay Ident	-0.08	-0.08	0.08	-1.02	-.08	-0.07	-0.07	0.08	-0.93	-.07	0.24	0.21	0.4	0.58	.04
Ident Int						-0.6	-0.3	0.15	-4.00**	-.28	0.55	0.28	0.62	0.89	.06
RI x II											-0.26	-1.37	0.08	-3.27**	-.23
GI x II											-0.07	-0.3	0.1	-0.65	-.05
F	2.67					7.26**					6.77**				
df	2					3					5				
df_{error}	178					177					175				
R^2	.03					.11					.16				
R^2 change	.03					.08**					.01*				

Constants: Step 1 = 2.11 ($SE = 0.50$); Step 2 = 4.17 ($SE = 0.70$); Step 3 = -.64 ($SE = 2.54$). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

simple slopes were tested at low ($M - 1SD$), moderate (M), and high ($M + 1SD$) levels of identity integration. Figures 1 to 3 depict the simple slopes for these interactions.

Religious Identification and Religious Guilt

The simple slopes tests revealed significant positive effects of religious identification on religious guilt that increase as levels of identity integration decrease (Figure 1). Specifically, the relationship was strongest when levels of identity integration were low ($b = .44, SE_b = .08, p < .001$), compared to both moderate ($b = .30, SE_b = .05, p < .001$), and high ($b = .16, SE_b = .07, p = .028$).

Religious Identification and Gay Guilt

The simple slopes tests revealed a conditional significant positive effect of religious identification on gay guilt that increases as

levels of identity integration decrease (see Figure 2). Specifically, the relationship was strongest when levels of identity integration were low ($b = .50, SE_b = .09, p < .001$), compared to moderate ($b = .29, SE_b = .07, p < .001$). The relationship did not exist when level of identity integration was high ($b = .08, SE_b = .09, p = .383$).

Religious Identification and Gay Shame

The simple slopes tests revealed a significant positive effect of religious identification on MSM shame that increases as levels of identity integration decrease (see Figure 3). Specifically, the relationship was strongest when levels of identity integration

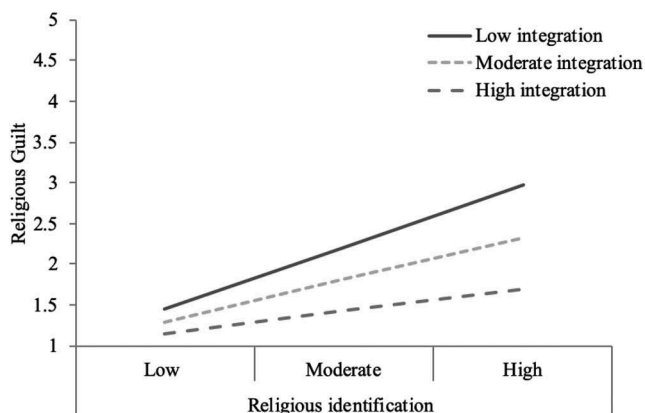


Figure 1. Moderating effects of identity integration on the relationship between religious identification and religious guilt. Low scores = $M - 1SD$, high scores = $M + 1SD$.

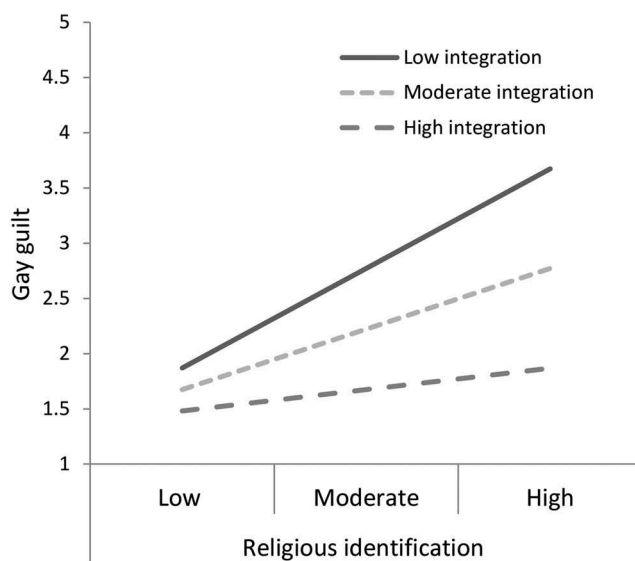


Figure 2. Moderating effects of identity integration on the relationship between religious identification and MSM guilt. Low scores = $M - 1SD$, high scores = $M + 1SD$.

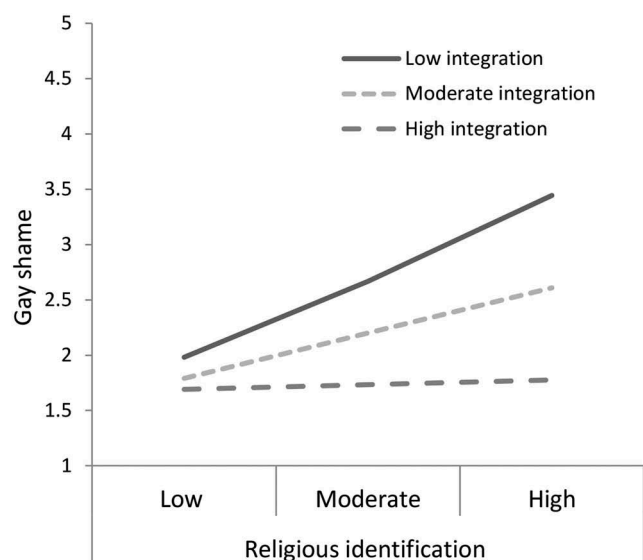


Figure 3. Moderating effects of identity integration on the relationship between religious identification and MSM shame. Low scores = $M - 1SD$, high scores = $M + 1SD$.

were low ($b = .47$, $SE_b = .10$, $p < .001$), compared to moderate ($b = .25$, $SE_b = .07$, $p < .001$). The relationship did not exist when level of identity integration was high ($b = .04$, $SE_b = .09$, $p = .675$).

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the relationships between religious and gay identification, identity integration, and guilt and shame in a sample of religious gay men. Specifically, we explored whether identity integration moderated the relationships between religious and gay identification and guilt and shame outcomes. The religious identification hypothesis (H1a) received substantial support, while the gay identification hypothesis (H1b) was not supported. The moderation hypothesis for religious identification (H2a) was also supported, revealing that identity integration is a protective factor against the relationship between religious identification, and guilt and shame outcomes among religious gay men. The moderation hypothesis for gay identification (H2b) was not supported – this moderation effect could not exist since it was contingent upon a relationship between gay identification and guilt and shame outcomes.

Discussion of Major Findings

The findings pertaining to religious identification were largely as anticipated. Specifically, religious identification was associated with higher levels of religious guilt, gay guilt, and gay shame, but not religious shame. This provides substantial evidence that religious identification is a risk factor for guilt and shame outcomes among gay men, supporting H1a and corroborating the findings of prior research (Pietkiewicz et al., 2016; Shilo & Savaya, 2012). This may be due to gay men having internalized religious messages about the reprehensibility of their desires and behaviors (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013).

Gay identification was not significantly associated with any guilt or shame variables, contrary to H1b, and against previous research (McDermott et al., 2008). Although it was previously noted that this is a bidirectional relationship of judgment and rejection, these findings suggest the religious side is driving this conflict. Perhaps this is because the religious side feels more disapproving of dual membership of these groups. For example, some religious denominations condone the use of sexual orientation change efforts ([SOCE such as conversion or sexual reorientation therapy; see Anderson & Holland, 2015; Tozer & Hayes, 2004). The Australian Psychological Society strongly opposes such practices, and argues there is no evidence to support their efficacy, while ample evidence demonstrates the negative impact of stigmatizing sexual identities (APS, 2015). Most other major psychological societies agree with this stance; however, there is no equivalent advocacy by gay groups for the abandonment of religious identification. Gay people may “counter-reject” religion because it generally disapproves of this essential and immutable identity (Yip, 1999). Any antipathy from gay people is perhaps a retaliatory response to religious condemnation.

Another potential explanation for religious identification being the primary predictor of guilt and shame is that maintaining this identity is usually voluntary. There is evidence that sexual orientation is a naturally occurring trait with a biological basis, as indicated by recent large-scale genome-wide association studies (Ganna et al., 2019). Although religious beliefs and practices are often inherited, they are not considered a matter of psychological essentialism; that is, an innate, biologically determined trait (Haslam & Levy, 2006). Given this, sexuality may feel like an unchangeable aspect of themselves, whereas their religious selves are more malleable, and therefore more easily modified to accommodate the gay identity.

These results also revealed that religious identification was associated with religious guilt, but not religious shame. According to Lewis’ definition, this may suggest that religious MSM view their behaviors negatively – as in guilt – but not believe they themselves are worthless or defective – as in shame (Lewis, 1971). Using Wicker’s conception, they may view same-sex behaviors as violating religious codes and ethical norms, but not propriety or adequacy, as in the case of shame (Wicker et al., 1983).

As anticipated, identity integration was a significant moderator of the relationship between religious identification and guilt and shame outcomes, supporting hypothesis 2a. When identity integration is sufficient, levels of guilt and shame remain low, regardless of the degree of religious identification. This may indicate that religious identification is a significant predictor of guilt and shame outcomes among gay people, but these negative effects can be attenuated through identity integration. This provides further evidence for the importance of integrating seemingly incompatible identities to protect against the negative wellbeing outcomes associated with identity conflict (Scroggs et al., 2018), as well as to experience the social benefits of multiple group membership (Haslam et al., 2012). These results support the notion that identity integration is the optimal strategy for resolving identity conflict with regard to psychological wellbeing outcomes (Dehlin et al., 2015).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study had several limitations. First, in the demographic questions gay and bisexual participants were asked, “Do you identify as gay or bisexual (or use another similar term)?” and were thus clustered into one group. This was to ensure the exclusion of heterosexual participants, but subsequently precluded the investigation of differences in effects between gay and bisexual participants. This might have also been problematic because non-gay same-sex attracted men (including bisexual men, pansexual men, etc) were responding to identity, shame, and guilt items that were specifically about being gay. These issues might impact the internal validity of the study, and the generalizability of the findings to same-sex attracted men who are not gay. Second, a definition of the distinction between guilt and shame was not provided to participants. We instead relied upon the participants’ intuitive sense of what these affective experiences mean to them. In addition, the generalizability of the findings might be somewhat limited, given that the sample was entirely based in the United States, and was largely Christian.

Finally, some participants in the sample reported having never been religious. Including them was still informative in regarding the relationship between strength of religious identification and guilt and shame, though their inclusion prevented the sample from being entirely comprised of religious gay men. On average, gay identification was higher in the sample than religious identification, which may also have influenced the findings. Perhaps those with higher religious than gay identification would associate great levels of guilt and shame with the latter. Such individuals may be less inclined to complete a survey exploring the interaction of these identities. Similarly, those who have managed to reconcile the two identities may be more willing to complete a survey on this topic, resulting in a self-selection bias whereby identity integration is over-represented in the sample.

A similar limitation pertains to the use of a religious identity item with participants who are either no longer religious or never were religious. That is, the item “I identify with people from my religion” would not be problematic for a religious person to answer, or for someone who was formerly religious and now no longer practices. However, this item would be problematic for a non-religious person to answer. To explore this confound, we looked at the individual responses, and less than 5% of the non-religious participants responded with an answer of more than 5 out of 7 (that is, “agree”, or “strongly agree”), which suggests that non-religious participants are responding to this items in a way that suggests they are not identifying with religious people. Given that small proportion of the sample in this situation ($n = 7$ out of 183), we are not overly concerned with this confounding the findings. We have further confidence in our results based on further exploration of the data in which we excluded “never been religious” participants from the data set, and the analyses produced a similar pattern of results.

Given the preliminary evidence that we have presented showing the beneficial and protective nature of identity integration for religious gay men, future research could continue

to investigate factors which facilitate integration. For example, research suggests that gay women are more likely than gay men to have achieved identity integration (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000); however, it is not understood why. In studies of bicultural identity integration, Benet-Martinez and colleagues observed that individuals’ ability to integrate dual identities is largely informed by the extent to which they view the two as compatible (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002). Research in this field moving forward should strive to identify the mechanisms that facilitate integration, and to explore their application to a variety of identities that are at risk if they are unable to integrate. Future research could also replicate the current study with adherents of more overtly condemnatory religions, such as Islam, for whom gay identity may be the stronger predictor of guilt and shame (Siraj, 2012). In less permissive denominations and societies, integration may be more difficult, and seldom achieved (Biçmen & Bekiroğulları, 2014). This is worth further exploration.

Implications

This study contributes toward understandings of religious guilt and shame among gay men and the protective moderating role played by identity integration. These results may have implications for clinicians working with clients who hold these, or other dual identities. Emerging practitioners training to work with this population may also benefit from an improved understanding of the ways in which these identities sometimes contribute to feelings or guilt of shame, which in turn negatively impact other psychological wellbeing outcomes. Drabble et al. (2018) recommended that clinicians acknowledge the potential of dual identification to cause conflict, but not assume this to be the case (Hinton et al., 2019).

These results have important implications for the relevant population. First, it could be relevant for gay individuals who wish to develop or maintain a religious self. Understanding that seemingly incompatible identities can successfully coexist may be especially pertinent for young people first coming out and struggling to reconcile their dual identities. Perhaps fewer individuals who hold these dual identities will feel compelled to reject one identity or compartmentalize the two, provided the knowledge that identity integration is not only possible, but beneficial to psychological wellbeing.

Second, it could be relevant for gay people who cannot resolve the identity conflicts around their sexuality and religion. For an individual who is affiliated with a religion that embraces their gay identity, integration will be easy. However, for an individual who affiliates with a religion that is less tolerant of non-heterosexuality, or affiliates with a less tolerant denomination or congregation within their religion, this will be more challenging. For these individuals, it might be beneficial for them to leave their religion (or find a more accepting faction of their religion) rather than try to integrate their religious identity that rejects their SSA identity. More precisely, perhaps the most parsimonious implication is that gay people who belong to a religion that condemns their gay identity might consider leaving this religion in order not to

feel guilt or shame, and other effects of prolonged periods of identity conflict. Of course, there might also be psychological consequences associated with identity loss if the individual chooses to leave their religion, and so this decision should not be made lightly. For example, this type of negative religious coping (i.e., giving up religious beliefs or being angry at God) has been found to trigger distress and impact well-being negatively for religious gay men (Shilo, Yossef, & Savaya, 2016). Therefore, it is worth highlighting that leaving their religion does not need to take the form of complete defection from religion, but could instead involve re-affiliating more a more tolerant version of their religion (e.g., Jamal, 2001). In this way, individuals who feel like an out-group member to both religious and gay identities may indeed create a new ingroup based on this integration including gay-religious people.

Finally, there are clinical implications of this research. A large body of evidence reveals the damaging effects of subjecting SSA individuals to SOCEs, or any form of therapy that attempts to change the clients' sexual orientation. Our research contributes to this evidence by indicating that any form of "treatment" that has the potential to increase the conflict between religious and sexuality-based identities is likely to increase guilt and shame, and in addition any negative consequences of these emotions. Indeed, our research can be interpreted to support the opposite – these findings suggest that integrating these identities would be a more productive approach to therapy for religious same-sex attracted individuals (please note: this does not support the relatively new SOCE called "reintegrative therapy", which does not attempt to integrate these identities, as the name might suggest).

Conclusion

In this sample of gay men, religious identification was associated with higher levels of religious guilt, gay guilt, and gay shame, but not religious shame. Gay identification was not significantly associated with any guilt or shame outcomes. Identity integration moderated the relationship between religious identification and guilt and shame outcomes. This relationship strengthens as religious identification increases, unless identity integration is present, in which case guilt and shame remain low. We have interpreted this finding as evidence that identity integration may enable gay men to access the protective benefits of religious engagement and multiple group memberships while remaining connected to the gay community.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Joel R. Anderson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3649-2003>

Yasin Koc  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6727-3842>

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