

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS  
AMONG FAMILY MEMBERS  
OF LESBIAN, GAY, AND BISEXUAL (LGB) INDIVIDUALS:  
EXAMINING THEIR STABILITY OVER TIME

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When discussing his coming out experience with news anchor Anderson Cooper, actor Ian McKellan said that doing so created more benefits for his personal and professional life than challenges (The Huffington Post, 2012). “I’ve never met a gay person who regrets coming out,” McKellan told Cooper, “You’re more at ease with your loved ones... honesty is the best policy” (The Huffington Post, 2012). While coming out can be a personally liberating experience for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals in that it enables them to be honest about their sexual identity with those around them (Cant, 2005), it can also be incredibly stressful because they do not know if their disclosure will result in acceptance or rejection by the people closest to them. In fact, family members, particularly parents, often prove to be the most difficult people to disclose to (Ben-Ari, 1995), in part because their reactions frequently include disappointment, anger, shock, or guilt (Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989). While these reactions are influenced by a number of factors, religion has been found to play a particularly important role in this process (Lease & Shulman, 2003).

For instance, families with highly traditional values react more negatively to disclosures of homosexuality (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993) and rates of disclosure are lower among gay men whose parents are highly religious (Schope, 2002). Likewise, Whitehead (2010) notes that individuals who belong to conservative denominations, attend church frequently, are biblical literalists, or embrace images of an angry God are highly likely to condemn same-sex behavior. These kinds of negative and ostracizing reactions are well documented within a number of religious traditions (McQueeney, 2009).

Thus, there appears to be a link between religiosity and negative reactions to disclosures of homosexuality, but this effect is not uniform. For instance, research conducted by Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), a family-based organization that is

committed to the civil rights of gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals, notes that upon discovering a family member identifies as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, individuals sometimes begin to question their faith and re-evaluate their religious beliefs (PFLAG, 1997). Rather than reject their LGB family member, some people ultimately end up altering, if not entirely abandoning, their own religious beliefs. This is important because research consistently finds that acceptance by one's family member can significantly impact the mental health and well-being of LGB individuals (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009; Savin-Williams, 1989). Understanding the processes that promote family acceptance, then, can have important and wide-reaching implications for lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals.

Although research has begun to examine the relationship between family acceptance and religious beliefs (Lease & Shulman, 2003), deeper understandings are still needed. For instance, we know little about the how the *process* of accepting one's LGB family member is both influenced by and influences one's religious beliefs. In short, the stability of one's religious beliefs and the acceptance of one's LGB family member are likely complex processes that interact with one another in distinct ways. Focusing on that interaction will contribute to scholarly understandings of the link between religion and acceptance of an LGB family member.

To that end, this study uses interview data from family members of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals in order to examine how accepting one's LGB family member influences one's religious beliefs and how one's religious beliefs influence the process of accepting one's family member. While many studies have examined religion, homosexuality, and accepting one's LGB family member, fewer studies have explored how these topics are interconnected, which is what this study investigates.

## **Literature Review**

## **The Coming Out Process**

The term *coming out* refers to the process of accepting oneself as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and integrating this sexual orientation into different spheres of one's life (Cass, 1996; D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1990). The process usually begins in adolescence or young adulthood and consists of becoming aware of same-sex romantic feelings; initial same-sex sexual encounters; involvement in the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community; self-labeling as lesbian, gay, or bisexual; and disclosing this identity to others (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000).

Ultimately, the decision to disclose this information to friends, family members, and coworkers is motivated by the desire to validate one's own lifestyle and to establish authentic interpersonal relationships, while always balancing the potential costs of such disclosures (Pelton-Sweet & Sherry, 2008).

While personal experiences with coming out vary, studies in the United States have shown that the coming out process generally begins with one's awareness of same-sex attractions at about 9-11 years of age, followed by first same-sex sexual contact around 13-15 years, first self-labeling of homosexuality between 14 and 16 years, and the first disclosure of homosexual orientation between 16 and 18 years (D'Augelli, 2002; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Rosario, Meyer-Bahlurg, Hunter, Exner, Gwadz, & Keller, 1996; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000).

Overall, the coming out process is a difficult one as many emotional and physical risk factors for LGB individuals are most prominent during this process (Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, & Visscher, 1996; Halpin & Allen, 2004; Vincke & Bolton, 1994). More specifically, levels of self-esteem, happiness, and life satisfaction decrease while levels of loneliness increase (Halpin & Allen, 2004). Conversely, as the process begins to resolve and individuals progress further

through their identity development, self-esteem, happiness, and life satisfaction grow and loneliness lessens (Pelton-Sweet & Sherry, 2008). Thus, coming out can be a very liberating experience for LGB individuals. However, an important factor in the coming out process that cannot be overlooked is how LGB individuals are received by their family members.

### **Familial Reactions to Coming Out**

One of the most difficult challenges that an LGB individual faces during the coming out process is disclosing their sexual orientation to their family (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). In fact, parents who have experienced a son or daughter coming out indicate that it resembles the grieving process after the death of a loved one, inducing shock, denial, anger, guilt, and sadness (Baptist & Allen, 2008; D'Augelli, 2006; Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989; Savin-Williams, 2001).

Familial reactions to the coming out of an LGB family member are extremely important, as their acceptance or rejection can have an adverse effect on the LGB individual. For instance, family rejection has been associated with an increased likelihood of the LGB individual experiencing depression, suicidal ideation, illicit substance abuse, and unprotected sex with casual partners (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). Negative parental attitudes toward homosexuality and a lack of family support for one's sexual identity have also been linked to more internalized oppression, such as having negative attitudes and feelings about one's sexual orientation, and less well-being among sexual minority persons (Beals & Peplau, 2005; Pedretti, 2004; Sheets & Mohr, 2009).

Familial reactions are not always negative, however. In some instances, families come to acknowledge and accept their LGB family member through reaching out for support (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011). Acceptance can be achieved through support groups, such as Parents,

Families and Friends of Lesbian and Gays (PFLAG), exposure to other LGB individuals, and gaining valuable information about LGB individuals, all of which allow family members to overcome their anxieties and fears and develop healthy coping strategies (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Phillips & Ancis, 2008; Saltzburg, 2004; Savin-Williams, 2001). In turn, this acceptance can increase the LGB individual's personal comfort with their sexual orientation, increase their self-esteem, and lessen self-critical behaviors (Savin-Williams, 1989). Positive or negative reactions to an LGB family member ultimately lead to accepting or rejecting them, but there are other mitigating factors that play a crucial role in this process with religion being one of the most influential.

### **Influences behind Familial Reactions**

Family members react positively to an LGB family member for a variety of reasons. One such influence is preexisting positive attitudes toward homosexuality, which have been shown to predict positive reactions to a family member's disclosure (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). Similarly, parents of LGB individuals who had at least some positive exposure to gay culture were more likely to react positively to disclosure (Ben-Ari, 1995). In addition, research also suggests that parents who suspected early on that their child might be LGB were able to work through their feelings of guilt, fear for the child's welfare, and anticipated losses (marriage, grandchildren) early, thus enabling a more positive reaction when their child did come out (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001). It is also important to note that other variables, such as the child's status in the home, age of disclosure, place of residence, involvement in a romantic relationship, and pride in same-sex attractions may affect parental reactions as well (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008).

One of the primary influences behind negative familial reactions to an LGB family member is religion. For instance, gay men from families with highly traditional values perceived their family's feelings toward homosexuality to be more negative than did those from less traditional families (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993). In addition, rates of disclosure have been found to be lower among gay men if their parents are very religious rather than very nonreligious (Schope, 2002). Relatedly, religion often influences parents' preexisting attitudes toward homosexuality, which in turn can influence how they respond to their child coming out. For example, in a study asking parents to imagine that their son was gay, those who believed that homosexuality was something that their child could control reported more negative reactions, less affections, and less willingness to help their hypothetical gay son (Armesto & Weisman, 2001). The apparent link between parental religious beliefs and negative reactions to disclosure is, perhaps, not surprising given the highly negative attitudes toward homosexuality reported by a number of religious denominations. For instance, many of the world's most prominent religions condemn homosexuality because people believe that it is controllable, changeable, or a matter of choice; that it violates and threatens important American values; and that right wing authoritarianism has strong support for traditional values, which homosexuality does not adhere to (Whitley, 2009). Similar studies have also revealed that religions often condemn homosexuality because it is seen as a sin and an abomination (Lease & Shulman, 2003; McQueeny, 2009; Sherkat, 2002), or they categorize behaviors associated with homosexuality as unnatural, ungodly, and impure (Yip, 2005).

Despite this rather extensive research on religion, homosexuality, and negative parental reactions to disclosure, few studies have examined the relationship between family acceptance and religious beliefs. The one prominent exception to this is a study by Lease and Shulman

(2003). Their research suggests that many individuals come to accept their LGB family member and, in turn, either seek out a religion that is accepting of homosexuality or remain in their current religion but choose to discount its negative views of homosexuality. For instance, 97 percent of their research participants were raised in Judeo-Christian religions, but only 72 percent reported their current religion as either Jewish or Christian. Relatedly, twice as many participants reported that their current religion was either somewhat or absolutely accepting of homosexuality compared to the number of participants who reported an accepting attitude from their religion at the time their family member came out. And while half of the participants did report staying in their congregation despite its negative attitudes toward homosexuality, the vast majority also reported being either somewhat or absolutely accepting of their family member's sexual orientation.

While these findings contribute valuable information to an understudied topic, further exploration is needed. Thus, this study examines the *process* that individuals go through when their LGB family member comes out, and *how* their religious beliefs both influence and are influenced by accepting their family member for who they are. By directly speaking with family members of LGB individuals, this research provides a more in-depth analysis of the journey that family members go through in order to accept their LGB loved one, and the impact that religion has on reaching this acceptance.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

This research is based on interviews with 14 participants – 12 parents of lesbian and gay individuals, 1 sibling, and 1 nephew. While this sample is small, the study targets a very specific population. Participants were located using personal contacts with individuals involved in the



LGB community and through e-mail recruitment within an LGB organization. Specifically, personal contacts were used to generate an initial list of interviewees and then additional interviewees were garnered via e-mail recruitment among members of the pro-LGB advocacy group Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). Participants recruited from PFLAG were ideal for this study because they held more open-minded, accepting religious beliefs and were also likely to have embraced their family member's LGB status. Therefore, their experiences enabled me to fully examine how the process of accepting one's LGB family member both influences and is influenced by one's religious beliefs. After speaking with these 14 participants, it was determined that every experience surrounding the process of acceptance was represented, thus a final sample size of 14 was reached.

### **Data Collection**

Respondents participated in semi structured interviews that lasted anywhere between 17 and 47 minutes, with an average interview lasting 29 minutes. Participants were initially contacted via e-mail to arrange an interview time and discuss any questions they had concerning confidentiality or their rights as human subjects. Interviews were conducted either in person, over the phone, or via Skype using an interview guide designed to elicit responses regarding the respondent's religious beliefs, whether their beliefs changed over time, and if so, whether this change was directly connected to having a family member in the LGB community. Interviewees were also asked about their reactions to their family member's coming out and whether or not their personal relationship had changed with their LGB family member. Open-ended questions were employed to give participants the freedom to structure their responses in a personally meaningful way. Thus, throughout the interview process I remained open to the topics initiated

by the participants and invited them to expand upon relevant discussions. Permission to record the interviews was received from each participant and recordings were transcribed verbatim.

### **Analytic Strategy**

Participants' responses were coded using qualitative, interpretive research techniques, which are particularly useful for uncovering patterns of meaning within interview data (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Morse, 1994). Through an iterative process of repeatedly consulting the data and relevant theory, I developed an understanding of the participants' religious beliefs in relation to having a lesbian, gay, or bisexual family member. Completed transcripts were read in an effort to derive an initial set of codes for the data. Although I approached these initial codes with attention to coming out, views of homosexuality, personal growth and change, religious growth and change, and religious views, those topics served primarily as a heuristic device, such that I allowed the voices of the participants to dictate the themes and nuances of meaning that emerged from the data.

To accomplish this, I closely analyzed the words and phrases used by interviewees (i.e., "accepting," "heartbroken," "inclusive," "sinful," etc.) and created detailed coding tables to document word/phrase counts. Second, words and phrases were grouped by themes (i.e., any reference to being "accepting," "relieved," "shocked," "heartbroken," etc., were grouped together in a theme called "initial reactions"). Coding tables were again created to document theme counts. Third, I used the coding tables to identify patterns in the data, wrote lengthy research memos in an effort to make sense of those patterns, and continuously consulted theory and prior research in order to contextualize the patterns that were emerging. I continued with this iterative process until I felt I could accurately tell the story that the participants' narratives revealed.

## Results

### Demographics

Among the 14 interviewees, 10 were female and 4 were male. Participants ranged in age from 27 to 80, with an average of 59 years. Educational attainment for participants ranged from a high school diploma to a doctorate degree. When describing their religious affiliation, 4 participants identified with a mainline Protestant denomination, 3 participants identified with an evangelical Protestant denomination, 3 participants did not identify with an organized religion at all, and 2 participants identified with a Liberal Nontraditional denomination. In addition, 1 respondent identified as Catholic and another identified as Jewish. These religious classifications are based on a study conducted by Steensland et al. (2002), which provides the standard used to classify religious groups today. Based upon this study, mainline Protestant denominations have typically emphasized an accommodating stance toward modernity, a proactive view on issues of social and economic justice, and pluralism in their tolerance of varied individual beliefs (Steensland et al., 2002). The Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church are examples of denominations in this category. Evangelical Protestant denominations, on the other hand, have typically sought more separation from the broader culture, emphasized missionary activity and individual conversion, and taught strict adherence to particular religious doctrines (Steensland et al., 2002). The Baptist Church and the Church of Christ are examples of denominations in this category. Additionally, the Liberal Nontraditional grouping serves as a classification for the remaining Western and non-Western religious traditions that do not fit with the two broader categories (Steensland et al., 2002). The Unitarian Universalist Church and the Christ Church Unity are examples of denominations in this category. Lastly, in accordance with

the General Social Survey (GSS), Catholic and Jewish traditions are their own separate categories (Steensland et al., 2002).

When describing the importance of their religion, 6 participants described it as being very important, 4 participants described it as being important, 1 participant described it as being somewhat important, and 3 participants described it as being unimportant. When discussing their current religious attendance, 7 participants reported attending worship services regularly (once a week or more), 1 participant reported attending worship services occasionally (only on major holidays), and 6 participants reported not attending worship services at all. In regards to current religious involvement, 7 participants reported being involved (i.e., serving on committees or singing in the choir) and 7 participants reported not being involved. Also, the participants currently reside in two regions of the United States – the Midwest and the South.

### **Initial Reactions to LGB Family Member and Influences**

Participants had both positive and negative reactions to their lesbian, gay, or bisexual family member when they disclosed their sexual orientation. Such a wide array of emotions is supported by the literature. Ten participants were immediately accepting of their family member and cited emotions such as relief to describe their initial reactions. According to one mother, “We were relieved that she was at the point of being able to come out. We were pleased for her that she was in a relationship and we were also pleased to finally be able to talk about it in concrete terms.” Another parent had similar feelings, “I was kind of relieved because he’d been pretty unhappy and I finally realized why.” Other participants recalled not being bothered or surprised by their family member’s revelation. As one mother put it, “It was not upsetting to me other than it was something that I was not familiar with, but there was no question that I was still

accepting of her.” Similarly, another parent commented, “I talked to him for a little while, and just told him we love him no matter what, and it didn’t surprise me.”

Importantly, these positive reactions seemed to stem primarily from participants’ long-held acceptance of homosexuality. For instance, when describing her views on homosexuality, one mother said, “I’ve never felt that way [viewing homosexuality as sinful] toward homosexuals in my entire life, even when I was young. I just feel like you should accept everyone for what they are, you know, no matter what, and a lot of people think it’s a choice, and I know it’s not a choice, you know, you’re born gay. It’s genetic, of course.” And a father, who was raised by “liberal” parents stated, “I had been taught tolerance and I believed that people were all, everybody had good points and so forth, and so it was easier for me, I think, than it would be for a lot of people to accept [having an LGB family member].” Another parent expressed similar feelings, “In my library career I read a book a long time ago called *The Best Little Boy in the World* . . . and that sort of made me realize that homosexuality was not a choice.”

Other participants who reacted positively established their accepting attitudes toward homosexuality by being exposed to the cultural debates around these issues. For instance, one participant said, “When I was younger there was a lot of debate happening about Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell and so I feel like I worked through my thinking about gay people then. They’re people! People are people.” Interestingly, however, existing cultural debates over gay rights did also appear to have some potentially negative impacts on participants’ perceptions of homosexuality. Specifically, participants who reported positive initial reactions to their LGB family member simultaneously expressed concerns over how society would treat their loved one. Of this, one father recalled, “There were a lot of tears from all of us for the realization of the fact

that she was going to have a more difficult life than what we had envisioned prior to that and the way society would see her and the challenges that she would have to deal with.” Another parent echoed these ideas and said, “The thing that upset me most wasn’t the fact that he was gay, it was the fact that, how he would be treated by other people because he was gay. I worried about him in that respect.” Despite these concerns, however, these parents were still immediately accepting of their child’s sexual orientation.

This kind of immediate acceptance was not uniform, however. In fact, four participants initially reacted negatively to their LGB family member coming out and expressed feelings of distress and devastation. According to one mother, she was “heartbroken,” “shocked,” and “didn’t know what to say, or think, or do” when her children came out. Similarly, one father described learning that two of his children are LGB as a “shock” and said that he felt “numb” when he was told this. Another parent described it as being “upsetting” because she was concerned over what her family and friends would think of her son. Also, one participant, a nephew of an LGB individual, described how his grandparents reacted to his uncle coming out. Of this, he said that they were “surprised” and that “they did not accept the news with joy or celebration.”

Contrary to participants who reacted positively, those who reacted negatively to their family member coming out also held negative attitudes toward homosexuality prior to their family member’s disclosure. When discussing her previous thoughts on homosexuality, one mother said, “Homosexuality was not as much known about as it is now. We hardly knew anything about it, except that we thought it was a sin from our religious upbringing.” Another parent had an even more concise opinion, “It’s a sickness. It’s a sin. There ought to be laws against it. We sure don’t want them teaching it in our schools.”

Interestingly, participants who reacted negatively also cited a lack of exposure to and knowledge of the LGB community. According to one participant, “I think there were a number of things that contributed to [his grandparents’ negative reaction to his uncle coming out], you know, lack of understanding of what [being gay] meant. I don’t think they [his grandparents] really knew that many other people who were out at the time. So I think we fear what we don’t know.” Similarly, one father commented, “I had never given [homosexuality] much thought. I only knew of a few gay people . . . so I hadn’t had much personal experience with [gay] people nor had I ever given [homosexuality] much study.” In addition, this participant also mentioned society’s attitudes toward homosexuality as an influential factor. Of this, he said, “Part of it was just the way society is. People just made these comments about people that were queer or whatever words they used.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, many of these negative reactions seemed to be firmly grounded in the person’s religious beliefs. Thus, rather than having socialization experiences or interactions with cultural debates that promoted acceptance and positive feelings toward LGB individuals, for these individuals, their religious upbringing initially hindered their acceptance of their family member’s sexual orientation. Moreover, those who reacted positively to their family member coming out were largely part of mainline Protestant denominations while those who reacted negatively were part of evangelical Protestant denominations.

### **Acceptance and Religious Change**

Once their family member disclosed their sexual orientation, several participants experienced conflict between having an LGB family member and their religious beliefs. Importantly, the level of conflict that was experienced – and the way that conflict was resolved – was related to the type of denomination individuals belonged to and the level of investment they

had with their church. For instance, participants who reacted positively to their LGB family member, were part of a progressive religion, and were heavily invested in their church generally did not alter their religious beliefs in any way to accommodate their LGB family member. Conversely, participants who initially reacted negatively to their LGB family member and were highly invested in a more conservative, traditional religion, experienced what I call *religious adjustment* – that is, they maintained their connection to their religion but opted to alter some of their specific beliefs on homosexuality in an effort to both sustain their connection to their church and accept their family member’s sexual orientation. Lastly, and perhaps most interestingly, participants who reacted positively to their LGB family member but were not heavily involved in their conservative, traditional religion experienced the most religious change. I refer to these individuals as *religious abandoners* because for them, accepting their LGB family member meant abandoning their existing denominations entirely and adopting something new because of their existing denominations negative views toward homosexuality.

Religious Stability. Participants in the first category, religious stability, did not experience conflict between having an LGB family member and their religious beliefs, and as such, they did not need to make any adjustments to these beliefs. The reason behind this is twofold. For one, these seven participants identified with a denomination in the mainline Protestant grouping, and their religious beliefs taught love and acceptance. When discussing her religious beliefs, one mother said, “The Episcopal perspective is rooted in the Gospel of . . . Jesus, of love not condemnation. It doesn’t come from the guilt perspective. It doesn’t come from the ‘you have to believe this, that, and the other thing,’ so it’s a much more inclusive, loving perspective and that obviously influenced our acceptance of our daughter.” Another participant expressed similar thoughts,



The religious beliefs that I was raised on were very supportive. That I was raised in a church where we were taught that, you know, God loved everyone, that Jesus did not weigh in on the issue of really homosexuality, of LGBT people, and that if anything the larger principles of *The Bible* taught us not to judge others, to love thy neighbor, to be supportive, and that, you know, even so far as to say perhaps that God is love and that, you know, that kind of thing should be celebrated.

Another key factor is that participants who experienced religious stability were heavily invested in their progressive religious beliefs. This measurement is based on how participants described the importance of religion in their lives, how often they attended worship services, and how actively involved they were in their church. Participants who experienced religious stability described their religion as being important to them. They also attended worship services regularly (once a week or more) and were actively involved in their church (served on committees). Thus, high religious investment in a faith with positive views toward homosexuality allowed for these participants' religious beliefs and LGB family member to coincide nicely with one another. Therefore, the process of accepting one's LGB family member was a simple one for these participants because they did not experience any religious conflict. In fact, their immediate acceptance of their LGB family member can be attributed to their progressive religious beliefs, and their progressive religious beliefs can be attributed to their accepting attitude of homosexuality.

Religious Adjustment. On the contrary, the three participants in the religious adjustment category did experience conflict between having an LGB family member and their religious beliefs and ultimately felt the need to reconcile segments of their beliefs so that having an LGB family member could peacefully coexist with their religion. Unlike those who experienced religious stability, religious adjusters identified with a denomination in the evangelical Protestant grouping, and their religious beliefs taught that homosexuality is sinful. Moreover, religious adjusters were heavily invested in their religion as they described their religion as being

important to them. They also attended worship services regularly (once a week or more) and were actively involved in their church (served on committees). Thus, high religious investment in a faith with negative views toward homosexuality is ultimately what caused these participants to experience conflict between their religious beliefs and having an LGB family member.

In order to resolve this conflict, religious adjusters elected to learn more about homosexuality through reading and advocacy. As one mother began to read more materials about homosexuality, she declared, “I think as I studied more and began to think it through more that my previous religious inclination, anyway, did not seem to be correct.” Another parent, who took to studying *The Bible* for answers found that, “I hadn’t studied very long before I realized that *The Bible* says very little about [homosexuality], really not enough, in my estimation, to take a strong theological position about it.” In addition, these two religious adjusters also joined the organization Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), which they both indicated was “the biggest help of all, just going there with other people that had the same situation.” For another religious adjuster, she did not have to look farther than her own son to inspire change. Of this, she recalled, “We would still go to church, and he told me that he didn’t want to go anymore.” When the participant asked her son why, he told her, “Because I don’t care if they say that I’m going to go to hell.” When further detailing this encounter, the participant said, “After that day, I could not get him to go to church ever again and that’s why, which upset me because all his life . . . he had to sit there and listen to [homosexuality being sinful] sometimes and that must have been terrible for him.”

Eventually, religious adjusters amended their religious beliefs on the point of no longer believing that homosexuality is sinful, but it was not a quick or easy process. When describing the difficulty in making this religious change, one mother said, “I just think that it’s harder

probably for people who have a religious upbringing to hear [that their family member is LGB] . . . If you have a religious background it just makes it extra hard because it's conflicting with, you know, the way you were raised and certain things, and it does make it very difficult . . . And it tests your beliefs, yes. It really does." Despite this conflict, religious adjusters did alter their beliefs toward homosexuality. When asked to describe this change in attitude, one mother said, "We accept them [family members] for what they are. We believe that this is a natural sexuality that they have." She went on to say, "I believe that homosexuality is a natural condition. It is not a sin unless the people involved make it a sin. I have said in some of our discussions in other panels that we've been on that I think it is a God given command." Another parent shared similar thoughts, "I'm not going to believe that my son is going to go to hell because of [homosexuality] like I was raised to believe my whole life."

Such a difference in attitude was required to resolve the dispute between having an LGB family member and holding religious beliefs that reject them. When considering how invested religious adjusters were in an evangelical Protestant religion with disapproving views of homosexuality, it becomes much easier to understand why they experienced conflict, and ultimately amended their beliefs only on the point of homosexuality rather than seek out a new religion altogether. Thus, the process of accepting one's LGB family member was difficult for religious adjusters because of their strong ties to their religious beliefs. The fact that these beliefs taught that homosexuality is sinful influenced their willingness to accept their family member. However, as religious adjusters learned more about homosexuality, their attitudes toward it shifted and they came to accept their LGB family member. Because of this acceptance, their religious beliefs also changed. The journey that religious adjusters went through, then,

demonstrates how the process of accepting one's LGB family member both influences and is influenced by one's religious beliefs.

Religious Abandonment. Lastly, there were four religious abandoners who either changed religions or stopped identifying with an organized religion altogether. Like religious adjusters, religious abandoners identified with denominations in the evangelical Protestant grouping, save for one participant whose denomination fell into the mainline Protestant grouping. Also like religious adjusters, religious abandoners encountered conflict between having an LGB family member and their religious beliefs. Unlike religious adjusters however, this conflict stemmed from the fact that religious abandoners were personally accepting of homosexuality while their denominations were not. Also unlike religious adjusters, these participants' religious beliefs did not influence their personal beliefs about homosexuality and that appears to be largely true because these individuals were not heavily invested in their churches. Specifically, in comparison to religious adjusters, religious abandoners described their religion as being less important to them. They also attended worship services less frequently (only on major holidays or not at all), and were not as actively involved in their church (did not serve on committees).

Interestingly, the fact that these individuals identified with conservative religions but were not heavily invested in their churches set the stage for their eventual departure from that religion. As would be expected, the leadership in their churches was not accepting of homosexuality. When discussing this, one father said that the senior pastor of his family's church "was offended by our questions about [homosexuality] and gave us the impression that we weren't really wanted in his community." Another participant and her family experienced more overt homophobia when the visiting priest at her family's church relayed to the

congregation that “homosexuals were a work of the devil.” And yet another felt condemnation not just from her own church but from Christianity as a whole. She noted that “Bush ran for his second term, and everything was if gay people marry the world’s going to fall apart. Everything became anti-gay. I had a huge issue with Christianity . . . I thought [the religious right] was attacking my kid, and there are still times that I feel that way, quite honestly.”

These kinds of negative attitudes toward homosexuality created conflict between participants’ religious beliefs and their desires to embrace their family member’s sexual orientation. Religious abandoners’ more tenuous connections to their churches, however, resulted in more radical resolutions to this conflict than was true for religious adjusters. For instance, rather than simply redefining their own beliefs and ignoring their church’s perspectives on homosexuality, many religious abandoners left their churches entirely and joined more liberal denominations. For instance, one mother decided to leave Catholicism to join a Liberal Nontraditional religion instead. When recounting this transition she said,

[Having an LGB child] got me out of the Catholic Church, which I didn’t realize was a good thing. I think it was a really good thing for me to become Unitarian, which is much more open. No guilt involved in things, no sin, no condemnation, you know what I mean? The bad things that came from that religion and that church are pretty much gone and I don’t know if I would still be there now or not if it wasn’t for my son, but I can say that it’s been a good thing for me not to be there, I think.

Others abandoned organized religion entirely. As one father noted, the process of exploring issues of homosexuality and religion caused him to question much of what he had been “taught traditionally.” In the end, he “chose to redefine God, which, of course, many people would find offensive, but we can define God as the spirit of goodness who resides within all of us and our path in life, our journey, our choice, is to try to embrace that goodness that all of us share together.” In redefining his religious beliefs, this parent ultimately decided that he aligns

more closely with Agnosticism than Christianity, and declared that he and his family have “abandoned Christianity, any conventional notion of Christianity.”

Likewise, one mother noted that “We’re all Atheists now. I became very anti-Christian during those first years when my kid was 12 and Bush was running for re-election and [the religious right] was so loud.” Thus, given their family members’ disclosure, their religious community’s reaction, and their own relatively low level of investment with their churches, “there wasn’t at that point a reason [for religious abandoners] to seek another [religious] community.”

Religious abandoners were immediately accepting of their LGB family member, and upon discovering that their religious beliefs were disapproving of homosexuality, they experienced conflict. However, amending this conflict was much easier for religious abandoners than religious adjusters because of the detachment from their evangelical Protestant religion. While religious abandoners’ religious beliefs did not influence the process of accepting their LGB family member, this acceptance did greatly influence their religious beliefs. Thus, the journey that religious abandoners when through partially demonstrates how the process of accepting one’s family member both influences and is influenced by one’s religious beliefs.

### **Conclusion**

Existing research on the relationship between family acceptance and religious beliefs (Lease & Shulman, 2003) suggests that individuals come to accept their LGB family member and, in turn, either seek out a religion that is accepting of homosexuality or remain in their current religion despite its negative views of homosexuality. While these findings are valuable, a more detailed examination was needed in order to gain a fuller understanding of acceptance, religious beliefs, and more importantly, how the two are interwoven. Thus, this study examined

the *process* that individuals go through when their LGB family member comes out, and *how* their religious beliefs both influence and are influenced by accepting their family member.

Participants' responses revealed that while many of them were immediately accepting of their LGB family member when they came out, others were not. Positive reactions to one's LGB family member were influenced by participants' long-held acceptance of homosexuality, and this acceptance was established through socialization and/or exposure to cultural debates on the subject. In addition, participants who reacted positively were largely part of a mainline Protestant denomination with more progressive views. Conversely, negative reactions to one's LGB family member were influenced by participants' disapproving attitudes toward homosexuality. These attitudes were largely developed through participants' religious beliefs, but also through a lack of exposure to and knowledge of the LGB community. Not surprisingly, participants who reacted negatively were part of an evangelical Protestant denomination with more conservative, traditional views.

After their family member's disclosure, several participants experienced conflict between having an LGB family member and their religious beliefs. The level of conflict these participants experienced – and the way in which they resolved this conflict – was related to the type of denomination they belonged to and the level of investment they had with their church. Consequently, three groups emerged. The first, *religious stability*, did not experience any conflict. In fact, they reacted positively to their LGB family member, were part of a progressive religion, and were heavily invested in their religion. As such, having an LGB family member coincided nicely with their belief system.

The second group, *religious adjustment*, experienced the highest level of conflict. Such conflict developed because religious adjusters' were heavily invested in a more conservative,

traditional religion that held negative views of homosexuality, and this made it difficult for them to simultaneously accept their LGB family member and maintain their previous religious beliefs. As they began to learn more about homosexuality, however, their personal attitudes toward it shifted. In an effort to both accept their family member and maintain their faith tradition, these individuals adjusted only their religious beliefs that pertained to homosexuality. In effect, they chose to reject only those religious teachings that were not accepting of homosexuality. Religious adjusters' experiences are particularly important because they best illustrate the process of acceptance, and how it is influenced by and influences one's religious beliefs.

The third group, *religious abandonment*, reacted positively to their LGB family member, yet these participants were also part of a more conservative, traditional religion. Importantly, however, they were not heavily invested in their religion. This disconnect made it much easier for religious abandoners to discard their existing denomination entirely and pursue something different when they became troubled by their churches' negative views of homosexuality. Thus, for religious abandoners, accepting their family member greatly influenced their religious beliefs.

The results of this study suggest that accepting one's LGB family member causes a change in religious beliefs *only* if these beliefs are not approving of homosexuality. For example, religious adjusters elected to alter their attitudes of homosexuality from negative to positive while religious abandoners discarded their previous religious beliefs entirely. The results of this study also suggest that accepting one's LGB family member is much easier if religious beliefs are *approving* of homosexuality. If not, conflict will ensue. For instance, participants involved with a religious denomination that was approving of homosexuality cited positive reactions to their family member coming out and did not experience conflict while



participants involved with a religious denomination that was disapproving of homosexuality cited negative reactions to their family member coming out and did experience conflict.

While the findings of this study contribute useful information to an understudied research topic, the results have the potential to be much farther reaching. First and foremost, these findings could prove to be valuable for LGB non-profit organizations, particularly those that provide services to family and friends of LGB individuals, such as PFLAG. More specifically, PFLAG could incorporate these findings into their *Welcoming Faith Communities* program, which provides resources to family members and friends of LGB individuals who are questioning their faith as a result of having an LGB loved one (PFLAG, 2014). Thus, including the experiences of family members who have already navigated their way through this conflict into the *Welcoming Faith Communities* program could be very beneficial for those who are currently struggling to find answers and searching for solace. As such, these findings could provide PFLAG members with new ideas on how to make their way through this conflict in order to reach a happy medium that includes both acceptance of their LGB family member and religious beliefs that they feel comfortable with.

Second, these findings could provide religious leaders with a better understanding of why individuals leave one congregation and join another after learning that their family member is LGB. With this knowledge, they would then have the tools to make their congregation a more accepting, inclusive place for current parishioners and a more welcoming place for those who are looking to resolve the conflict between having an LGB family member and religious beliefs that reject them. Also, these findings have laid the groundwork for other scholars to build upon this topic of study.

It is important to note that this study originally set out to examine those who both accepted and rejected their LGB family member. Though I repeatedly tried to recruit subjects who rejected their LGB family member by e-mailing dozens of denominations in the evangelical Protestant grouping, I only received responses from a handful of them. Of those who responded, only one denomination was willing to inform their parishioners about my study. Among the parishioners in that congregation, I interviewed one individual. While her perspective provided an interesting contrast to the experiences of the other participants, it became apparent that such a different experience did not fit within the scope of this study. Therefore, this study was reframed to focus only on acceptance. Thus, future research should focus on recruiting participants who ultimately rejected their LGB family member as their experiences can provide a striking comparison to those who accepted their family member.

In the United States, approximately 3.5 percent of Americans identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) (Gallup, 2013). Moreover, 69 percent of American adults describe themselves as either very or moderately religious (Gallup, 2012). The likelihood, then, that LGB individuals come out to a family member with some form of religious beliefs is quite high. Thus, research that examines the *process* that individuals go through when their family member comes out, and *how* their religious beliefs both influence and are influenced by either accepting or rejecting their family member has become increasingly important. In turn, gaining a fuller understanding of this complex process can benefit LGBT non-profit organizations, religious institutions, and most importantly, it can ease an often complex journey for LGBT individuals and their loved ones.

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