

Family Members' Uses of Religion in Post-Coming-Out Conflicts With Their Gay Relative

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Religion often creates cultural meaning for interpersonal relations as individuals and societies develop interactively (Etengoff & Daiute, 2013). Religious tools, such as God and texts, have reportedly been used in both relationally adaptive and maladaptive ways (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009; Brelsford, 2011). Extant research regarding relational uses of religion largely focuses on Christian dyads' general conflicts, as opposed to conflicts related to religious prohibitions. This study expands the current research regarding theistic triangulation (i.e., God/faith positioned as an ally against other party) and mediation (i.e., God/faith invoked constructively to mediate conflict), by focusing on gay men and their Jewish and Christian relatives' accounts of relational religious tool use (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009; Brelsford, 2011). 23 gay men (10 Jewish backgrounds, 13 Christian backgrounds) and 15 of their religious family allies (7 Jewish, 8 Christian) completed semistructured interviews focusing on the quality of their post-coming-out relationships and how they use religion to negotiate associated conflicts. Interviews were analyzed utilizing an applied cultural historical analysis (Etengoff & Daiute, 2013). 74% (17/23) of gay men reported that their religious relatives utilized theistic triangulation in post-coming-out conflicts. 65% (15/23) of gay participants reported that theistic triangulation negatively impacted their familial relationships. Alternatively, 69% (16/23) of gay participants also spoke highly of religious family allies that navigated post-coming-out issues and conflicts effectively. These findings illuminate the necessity of including socioreligious contexts in our study and treatment of gay men and their religious families.

Keywords: cultural historical activity theory, gay, religious families, theistic triangulation

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Religion is a major organizing tool of cultural practice, meaning-making, and development throughout human history (Etengoff & Daiute, 2013). Over history and in times of acute change, some religious structures and communities have evolved in response to the contexts of modernity. For others, religious change has been limited even as sexuality and love are redefined within contemporary societies. Moreover, researchers suggest that specific aspects of religiosity are inversely correlated with the acceptance of sexual minorities (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual and queer individuals), with religious parents of sexual minority youth reporting varying levels of difficulty (Adamczyk, & Pitt, 2009; Conley, 2011; Freedman, 2008; Hooghe, Claes, Harell, Quintelier, & Dejaeghere, 2010; Oldmixon, & Calfano, 2007). However, it is important to approach this intersection of family, religion, and sexuality as more than just a correlated set of variables. For

example, cultural historical activity theory (Vygotsky, 1978) suggests that individuals navigate and affect the mutually interactive systems of family, religion, and sexuality (Belzen, 1999). In this study, we present an applied sociocultural framework to the study of family systems' relational uses of Judaism and Christianity during the coming-out process.

Research Context

Cultural Historical Activity Theory and Religion

Cultural historical activity theory views individual and social development as being interdependently fostered via the cultural tools and systems that construct society (Vygotsky, 1978). Given this developmental lens, cultural tools are understood to be "the socially constructed, historically situated, and individually adapted physical, symbolic, or abstract means by which we accomplish specific sociorelational goals" (Etengoff & Daiute, 2013). As humans adopt and transform cultural tools and symbols to achieve goals and overcome obstacles, their interactive individual-societal relations lead to the creation of meaning in everyday activities (Daiute & Lucic, 2010). Individuals' deliberate cultural tool use is also often constructed to navigate sociorelational and sociocultural conflicts, a process referred to as mediation (Daiute, 2010, p. 48). For example, religious values such as brotherly love may be used by a parent to help them focus on fostering a loving relationship

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with their gay son instead of alienating them due to a fundamentalist reading of scripture (Etengoff, 2013).

Religious practices are understood to be mediated by individuals in response to variations of their everyday environments, social interactions, and sociopolitical contexts (Belzen, 1999). For example, Etengoff and Daiute (2013) found that their sample of Sunni-Muslim American emerging adults used religious activity systems and artifacts such as the *Qu'ran* to navigate ethno-religious questions proposed by non-Muslims in post 9/11 contexts, indicating that religious tools can be used to successfully mediate intercultural conflicts (Etengoff & Daiute, 2013). This study expands the current discussion of the sociorelational context of religious development by focusing on how gay men and their religious family members utilize religion to defend their positions, reconcile conflicts, and mediate familial relationships in post-coming-out contexts. In light of the fact that the coming-out process can often be staggered and selective (as reviewed in Green, 2000), this study focuses on the coming-out process as defined by the first immediate family disclosure.

Sexual Minorities, Religion, and Spirituality

Researchers studying the personal conflicts encountered by gay men from religious backgrounds discuss a number of different outcomes and resolutions. Some gay men reportedly react by rejecting their “religious identity” (Dahl & Galliher, 2009; Singer & Deschamps, 1994) whereas others reject their “sexual identity” (Piazza, 1994). Alternatively, some sexual minority participants discuss their effort to create a “spiritual identity” in the place of a “religious identity” (Dahl & Galliher, 2009, p. 102; Tan, 2005). Gay men have also reported isolating and compartmentalizing their multiple constructions of the self (Baumeister, Shapiro, Tice, 1985; Coyle & Rafalin, 2000; Dahl & Galliher, 2009; Schnoor, 2003) as well as attempting to create a version of the self which includes both sexual and religious aspects of the self (Fine & Gordon, 1992; Halbertal & Koren, 2006; Levy, 2008; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Thuhma, 1991). Moreover, recent research suggests that spirituality and a positive sense of existential well being (i.e., sense of life purpose and satisfaction) are significant predictors of sexual minorities’ self-esteem, self-acceptance of sexual orientation, and feelings of inclusion (Tan, 2005). This study aims to broaden the current scope of the above literature focusing on sexual minorities’ internal religious conflicts and resolutions by focusing on how religious cultural tools are relationally used by family systems during sexual orientation related conflicts.

Theistic Triangulation

Research suggests that although religious values and activities can successfully mediate cultural and familial conflicts, they are often used in relationally harmful ways (Brelsford, 2011; Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009; Etengoff & Daiute, in press; Etengoff & Daiute, 2013). For example, Brelsford and Mahoney (2009) define the maladaptive process by which “God/faith is positioned as an ally against [the] other party” as theistic triangulation (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009, p. 291). Theistic triangulation efforts to restructure familial power dynamics are often focused on assigning blame, guilt and sin through the invocation of God or claims of personal revelation (Butler & Harper, 1994). Theistic triangulation

differs from its adaptive, mediational counterpart in that dyads “spend their time inviting the divine alliance in order to shift the balance of power, rather than welcoming divine facilitation of problem resolution” (Butler & Harper, 1994, p. 282). Theistic triangulation can include relationally maladaptive invocations of God as well as the use of physical cultural tools such as ritual objects or structures. Religious Christians have reported incorporating God into their familial conflicts even at the cost of resolution failure (Butler & Harper, 1994). For example, a sample of Christian spouses reported arguing that God will punish their spouse for their standpoint (Butler & Harper, 1994). Similarly, Christian parents reported using God/faith in arguments even though this often led to an increase in verbal aggression and stonewalling (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009; Brelsford, 2011). Clinicians working with gay men have also reported the negative relational effects of “*religion being coopted by a parent or family member to serve an agenda* [emphasis in the original]” (Etengoff & Daiute, in press). This study expands the current body of research by exploring multiple familial perspectives of both the adaptive and maladaptive ways in which religion is used to navigate conflicts between gay men of various religious orientations and their Christian and Jewish relatives.

Family, Sexuality, and Religion

Religious and familial activity systems are often highly interrelated and as such religious orthodoxy is likely to play a significant role in familial responses to the coming-out process (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001; Walsh, 2009; for a full review see Etengoff, 2013). Given this cultural context, it has been suggested that “the family serves as one of the focal points for expressing and sustaining ethnic identity” for gay men from religious backgrounds (Schnoor, 2003, p. 113). In addition, the positive relation between religious and family values is supported by research indicating that more religious groups place a higher value on the importance of family than less religious groups (Jensen & Jensen, 1993; Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993). It is therefore likely that religious family systems’ conflict resolution strategies may be motivated by the importance placed on family cohesion and the perpetuation of familial religious activities (Schnoor, 2003).

Although a variety of family system models concerning gay individuals and their families have been suggested (e.g., DeVine, 1983; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Phillips, 2007; Phillips & Ancis, 2008), the extant models do not clearly focus on the mutual interactions between individuals, family units and sociocultural activity systems (Martin, Hutson, Kazyak, & Scherrer, 2010). Families are often presented as being unilaterally affected by contexts instead of dynamically interacting within and modifying contexts (e.g., Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). In addition, many family systems models have been applied to post-coming-out contexts without empirical evidence or family dyad perspectives (Savin-Williams, 2001). In this study we present a case study of how to apply family system frameworks that flexibly respond to the unique sociohistorical interactions of gay men from religious families.

A variety of dynamic sociocultural frameworks have already been developed, although they have yet to be applied to this population. For example, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979) outlines the many microsystem forces that affect and

are affected by human development, such as family, school, peers, religious affiliation, work place and neighborhood. Engestrom (2009) suggests an additional approach with his theory that society is a network of interacting activity systems such as family and religion. Similarly comprehensive approaches to family studies have been suggested by McGoldrick and Shibusawa (2012) as well as sociologists adapting symbolic interactionism theory (Reynolds & Lerman-Kinney, 2003). This study aims to apply sociocultural theory to the exploration of familial post-coming-out relationships by sampling the interactive development processes between individuals, their family, religion and culture. This study aims to address the following research questions from the perspective of both gay men and their relatives: 1) How do religious relatives of gay men use religious tools to mediate and triangulate post-coming-out conflicts? 2) How do these experiences impact familial relationships and gay men's perceptions of these relationships?

Method

Participants

Orthodox Jewish and religious Christian samples were specifically selected because of their shared traditions of homophobic texts. Ten gay men from Orthodox Jewish backgrounds and seven of their key family members participated in the study (4 sisters, 1 brother, 2 mothers). All gay men from Jewish backgrounds and 6/7 of their family members identified as currently living in the North Eastern region of the United States. In addition, 13 gay men from Christian backgrounds and eight of their key family members participated in the study (1 sister, 6 mothers, 1 father). Six of the 13 gay men from Christian backgrounds identified as currently living in the Western region of the United States and 4/8 of their Christian family members identified as currently living in the Midwestern region. All participants identified as white, although this was not a criteria for inclusion.

At the time of the study, 8/10 gay men from Jewish backgrounds and 10/13 men from Christian backgrounds had come out to all members of their immediate family. Of those participants that had not come out to all members of their immediate family, one Jewish participant had not come out to his parents, one Jewish and one Christian participant had not come out to their fathers, and two Christian participants had not come out to all of their siblings yet. Of the five gay men who had not come out to all of their immediate family, three did not have a family ally participate in the study. Gay men from Jewish backgrounds participated in the study on average five years since their first familial disclosure of their sexuality ($SD = 4$). This is similar to gay men from Christian backgrounds who participated in the study on average four years since their first familial disclosure of their sexuality ($SD = 2.5$).

The rate of family member participation in the present study was similar for the two groups at 7/10 for the Jewish sample and 8/13 for the Christian sample. Two of the three Jewish gay men that did not have a relative participate in the present study felt comfortable contacting their relative regarding their possible participation in the study. However, the participants did not respond to a follow-up email inquiry from the first author. Of the five Christian gay men who did not have a relative partic-

ipate, one of the participant's allied father was unavailable because of illness, one participant's parents forbade any other family members from participating, and three participants did not respond to follow-up emails regarding family participation from the first author.

One of the premises of this study is that participants are knowledgeable narrators of their own experience. Participants from a variety of religious subgroups (e.g., Mormon) were therefore included under the umbrella of Christian if that was their reported self-identification. The following Christian backgrounds are included in the sample of gay men: 7 Mormon, 2 Catholic, 2 Methodist, 1 Evangelical, and 1 Seventh-day Adventists. Religious family members from Christian backgrounds identified with the following subgroups: 4 Mormon, 1 Catholic, 1 Methodist, 1 Evangelical, and 1 Seventh-day Adventists. Original recruitment efforts focused on specifically recruiting Christian participants from the Catholic subgroup because of the Catholic Church's recent statements regarding homosexuality. However, as a result of recruitment difficulty, recruitment criteria expanded to include gay men from all Christian subgroups.

Three of the 10 gay participants from Jewish backgrounds identified as being currently Orthodox, 1/10 as agnostic, and 6/10 as nonpracticing although still believing in God and/or some major tenets of faith. Similarly to gay men from Jewish backgrounds, 5/13 of gay men from Christian backgrounds identified as practicing and observant. A greater number of gay men from Christian backgrounds identified as agnostic or atheist (5/13) and a lower number reported being nonpracticing believers (3/13). Six of the seven Jewish family allies and 6/8 of the Christian family allies reported being strictly observant. Four of the seven Jewish family allies attended services weekly, 2/7 monthly, and 1/7 for High Holidays and celebratory events. Seven of the eight Christian family allies reported that they attended services weekly and 1/8 participants did not attend services at all because of a lack of availability.

The minimum age for all participants during the time of recruitment was specified to be 18 years. In addition, because of the concern of possible cohort effects related to changing sociopolitical attitudes regarding homosexuality, gay male participants were required to be within the age range of 18–35 years of age. The average age for gay men from Jewish and Christian backgrounds is 25 (Jewish $SD = 5$, Christian $SD = 3$), 42 years of age for Jewish family members ($SD = 17$), and 52 for Christian family members ($SD = 12$). The majority of gay participants demonstrated demographic characteristics typical of emerging adulthood, with the majority of participants earning \$60,000 or below (9/13 Christian, 9/10 Jewish) and having some college experience or only a college degree (11/13 Christian, 6/10 Jewish).

Lesbian participants and their families were not recruited because previous research indicates that the processes of sexual orientation disclosure and identity conflict frequently differ between gay men and lesbians (see Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Rodriguez, 2010). In addition, men and women often occupy different roles from each other within Christian and Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities, religious institutions, and biblical prohibitions (Etengoff, 2011; Galssgold, 2008; Greenberg, 2004; Helminiak, 2000; Ozorak, 1996; Rapoport, 2004). Furthermore, a considerable amount of prior research focusing on sexual orienta-

tion and the Jewish population has concentrated on the lesbian experience exclusively (Schnoor, 2003).

Recruitment

After receiving approval from the university's Institutional Review Board, recruitment efforts initially focused upon gay individuals with the hopes that this would result in a snowball sampling of their allied family members. Gay participants were recruited either by participant referral or by being contacted directly based on organizational membership and blogs, or via organizations (e.g., Dignity, Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, Jewish Queer Youth, Gay and Lesbian Yeshiva Day School Alumni), list serves or clinicians' referrals. About 30 recruitment emails were sent out to targeted individuals and about 25 organizations were contacted. Thirteen gay men reported being recruited directly, 6 were recruited via snowball methods, and 4 contacted the researchers based on organizational emails and endorsements. Ninety-two percent (14/15) of all family unit dyads were recruited via snowball sampling based on their gay relatives' referral.

After informed consent was obtained, gay participants were interviewed separately from their allied relative and asked to discuss their family relationships (e.g., *Is there someone in your family who is your key ally? If so, can you describe your relationship with them? Is this the person in your family with whom you have most frequently confided in about family reactions and the tension between religion and sexual orientation? If not, then whom?*, see online supplementary material and Appendix A: Interview Questions for full listing). At the conclusion of the interview, gay participants were asked whether they felt comfortable either encouraging their key family member to participate or providing their family members' contact information. Unfortunately, because of sampling limitations, hostile or nonallied family members did not participate in the study and their behaviors are only addressed from the perspective of their gay and allied relatives.

Measures

In light of the complex socioreligious context of the gay participants and their family members, semistructured interviews were conducted to enable participants to fluidly and comfortably discuss their thoughts. Brelsford and Mahoney's (2009) theistic mediation and triangulation scales were not used as they were not developed for Jewish populations and we wanted to ensure cultural validity for both religious groups. However, Brelsford and Mahoney's (2009) mediation and triangulation items are referenced in the narrative analysis.

Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed ($M = 74$ minutes, $SD = 20$ minutes). Interviews were conducted over a period of eight months, and 82% (31/38) of total interviews were conducted over the phone. Gay men and family ally interviews were comprised of the same 21 questions that addressed the participants' demographic information, socioreligious activities and practices, family system dynamics, and related experiential history (e.g., *How would you describe your feelings and thoughts about religion?; How old were you at the time of your/his sexual orientation disclosure to the family?; How would you describe that event and time period in your life?; Do you believe that your*

*relationship with your family has changed over time? If so, how?; see Appendix A: Interview Questions for a complete listing). Family allies and gay men were asked directly about their own views of the coming-out process and were also encouraged to explore their family members' views as well (e.g., *Is there someone in your family who is experiencing "the most difficulty" in this process? If so, can you describe your relationship with them?; How do you think this person views your relationship?; see Appendix A: Interview Questions for a complete listing).**

Analyses

Narratives were transcribed by research associates and then checked and read again by the principal investigator before coding. Narrative analysis began with the following four process steps: (a) Identification of conflict(s) present within the narrative, (b) Identification of theistic triangulation, (c) Identification of theistic mediation, and (d) Compilation and quantification. This coding system was inductively derived from the narratives and informed by cultural historical activity theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and Brelsford and Mahoney's (2009) mediation and triangulation items.

Conflicts were identified based on participants' responses to specific questions focusing on possible familial tensions (e.g., *Is there someone in your family who is experiencing "the most difficulty" in this process? If so, can you describe your relationship with them?; Were there any activities or people that made the disclosure process more difficult for you?*) as well as questions asking participants to reflect upon their familial and religious experiences (e.g., *What are your thoughts about the text in Leviticus/ Corinthians that prohibits homosexual activity?; How would you describe your relationship with the gay community?; Do you believe that your relationship with religion has changed over time? If so, how? Why?*). In addition, the complete interview was read for conflicts and difficulties that participants labeled as being a "challenge," "hard," "difficult," "upsetting," "a fight/battle/argument," and "terrible" and so forth.

Conflict and theistic triangulation narratives were coded for intensity based upon Labov's (1984), Barbaresi's (1996), and Bazzanella's (2011) work. Given this framework, intensity is understood to be a component of linguistic repetition (Barbaresi, 1996). In this study, we focus on both the repetition of phrases (e.g., *he said, he said*) as well as the use of qualifiers (e.g., *the snow falls very slowly*).

The results presented below focus on the types of religious tools that participants relationally used as well as the specific and general triangulation or mediation goals for their use. In an effort to capture the depth of individual narratives as well as the breadth of possible trends across participant groups, both descriptive frequency analyses and individual narrative analysis are included. Individual narratives were selected for inclusion in the manuscript if they were able to concisely and comprehensively illustrate a type or goal of religious tool use highlighted in the frequency analysis.

Results

Theistic Triangulation

Nine of the 10 Jewish (90%) and 8/13 (62%) gay men from Christian backgrounds discussed their nonparticipating religious

relatives' use of theistic triangulation by highlighting how their relative used God/faith as an ally and tool to support their position or coerce their relative to change their sexual orientation (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009). Theistic triangulation was the primary source of familial conflict for 17 (73%) of the 23 men who reported experiencing familial conflict. Gay participants reported that theistic triangulation was used by four Jewish and five Christian fathers, one Jewish and six Christian mothers, five Jewish (4 brothers, 1 sister) and three Christian siblings (2 brothers, 1 sister), and one Jewish uncle. Of the eight gay men (3/10 Jewish, 5/13 Christian) that did not have a relative participating in the study, five (2/10 Jewish, 3/13 Christian) reported that at least one of their religious relatives utilized religion in a negative way and three did not report any such occurrences. It is therefore likely that one's religious family members' negative relational use of religion did not impact the likelihood of dyadic participation in the present study.

Gay men's narratives indicate that their religious relatives utilized a variety of religious tools to convey their disapproval. For example, a 29-year-old practicing Mormon reported that his parents reacted to his coming out by stating that "that the origins [of his sexual orientation] were in somehow insufficient spirituality." However, the majority of participants focused on their relatives utilizing theological tools directly based on concepts from religious doctrine and the bible. For example, a 24-year-old nonactive Mormon participant reported that his parents responded to his coming out by talking about the following:

homosexuality, and how important marriage is in the religion, given the highest level of heaven, and that *you* need to marry someone of the opposite sex . . . because homosexual relationships do not perpetuate, *they* do not reproduce, *they don't fit God's description of marriage and family.*

In the above narrative the participant distances himself from the emotionally laden theistic triangulation event by transitioning the subject of the sentence from himself (e.g., "you need to marry someone of the opposite sex") to the other (e.g., "*they* do not reproduce, *they* don't fit G-d's description of marriage and family"). This narrative distance is additionally reflected in both geographic and relational family distance as the participant currently lives in a different country than his parents. His parents have also refused to allow any family members to participate in this study. In addition, the participant has not been home or seen his mother in five years "because it got weird It [his sexuality] was always the elephant in the room that we didn't want to talk about. It was always an issue, but it was an issue that no one wanted to acknowledge." The participant further explained that he does not need to talk about his sexual orientation all the time but that he is frustrated by being unable to talk about it at all. This participant's negative perception of his relationship with relatives that used theistic triangulation strategies echoes prior literature as well as other participants in this study (e.g., Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009; Brelsford, 2011).

For example, a 23-year-old Orthodox Jewish participant recounted that although his father responded with unconditional love and acceptance of his sexual orientation, his father additionally referenced biblical texts when asking his son the following:

to um guarantee him that . . . Just not anal sex. Yeah, he said . . . something along the lines of there's no problem with two men living together, there's no problem with two men loving each other. There's one specific law [anal sex prohibition] of which goes back to um, the Oral Tradition . . . we don't interpret this to mean a whole lot more. This is what the messorah [tradition] is.

The participant later found this request to be "frustrating on like somewhat emotional, on my thought process, because it created this um, *halachic* [Jewish systems of laws and customs] like legal situation where if I did decide to have anal sex, I would not only be *over* [transgress] on that *laav* [prohibition] but be *over* [transgress] on *kibbud av vi'em*, the prohibition against um, violating parental will." This narrative is particularly illuminating as it clearly discusses the conflicting interrelation between religious and familial subsystems. The participant later responded to his father's religious tool use by utilizing religious tools as well. The participant's narrative suggests that he mediated his potential religious transgression of violating his father's will by making

use of like the legal loophole of Yom Kippur [Day of Atonement] . . . we go through the *Hataras Nidarim* [Annulment of Vows] . . . where you say like any promise which I made, any oath by any form . . . if I can't keep it, like, please take me out of uh, or release that bond. So I kind of hope that from that guarantee I'm kinda released that's just the one um, prohibition [of homosexual intercourse], if anything.

Although the participant attempted to mediate his potential violation of the commandment to respect one's parents via the cultural tool of vow annulment, the participant closed his narrative by continuing to elaborate upon the religious context of his familial conflicts by saying "I was kind of like frustrated with him, I was like ah look what you've done, now it's two! It's like there's two *halachas* [Jewish laws] that I have to deal with, not just one." This conclusion indicates that although attempts were made within the religious activity system to mediate potential family and religious conflicts, these attempts were still unsatisfying on some emotional level six years after the event.

Similarly, a 34-year-old, no longer religious, Jewish participant shared the hurtful impact of his parents' triangulating tool use of both religious theology as well as a rabbinic figure. Although 12 years had passed between the participant's coming out to his relatives and his participation in the interview, the coming out event was remembered in detail. The participant recounted that his father responded to his coming out by informing him "that there is no *tachlis* [purpose] in life as a gay person . . . my purpose in life is to dedicate myself to the Orthodox Jewish community and just do *Chessed* [acts of kindness] and be celibate." When the participant disagreed with his father, his father responded by saying "Well, you are not welcome in my house until you're straight." In addition, the father told his son to seek rabbinic council regarding whether the son needed to sit *shiva* (ritualized mourning usually observed upon death) as his family was essentially severing their relationship with him as if by death. The participant reported that his mother later explained that "the family *Rav* (Rabbi) said that we need to cut him [participant] off, that the whole family needs to cut him off. Because you need to show him tough love and then he'll come back." The participant reported that he responded to his mother by saying "That Rabbi doesn't fucking know what he is talking about," at which point his mother chastised him for his

verbal abuse and reconfirmed her allegiance with the Rabbi's position. Although the participant now interacts with his parents, his relationship is still very much strained by their history of theistic triangulation and he did not ask them to participate in the study. However, the above theistic triangulation narrative was supported by the participating allied sister's narrative of her brother's experience. In addition, the participating allied sister reported that their father was religiously hostile to her as well as a result of her support of her brother during his coming-out process. As she said, "My father . . . was yelling at me that I am going to burn in Hell for promoting his [brother's] abomination. He was so angry, he doesn't even remember saying that to me." Furthermore, this participant's relationship with her mother was additionally affected by her mother's "snide comments, sarcasm[s]" that would put her "in the middle."

In addition to gay men's reports that their relatives utilized religious theology and values in their theistic triangulation strategies, some participants reported their relatives' use of physical religious tools as well. For example, a 23-year-old nonactive Mormon participant without dyadic participation, spoke about how his parents confronted his sexuality in front of the Provo Temple with the hope that he would "feel the force of it." This use of a physical religious structure is particularly powerful as the broad base and narrow spire of the Temple was designed to represent the cloudy and fiery pillars that guided the Israelites through the wilderness (Larsen, 2011; <http://LDSChurchTemples.com>, Accessed, 11/4/2012). Although the participant was unclear as to what his parents specifically hoped to achieve by this use of the Mormon Temple, the religious overtones to their dissatisfaction was apparent. In his words, "we had a very long, very, very argumentative conversation that got nowhere, and it was honestly probably one of the worst experiences of my life." The participant's heightened emotional state during this portion of the narrative was demonstrated by his statement that this was the "worst experience of his life," repetition of words (e.g., "very, very"), use of qualifiers (e.g., "very long, very, very argumentative") as well as his repeated discussion of his confusion (e.g., "I don't know"). This heightened emotional state continued as the participant elaborated upon how his relationship with his parents was altered in the two years since his coming out. As he said,

the next couple months were really rough um, whenever we talk, yeah, I cringe whenever her [mother's] name came on my phone . . . [parents] they can't handle talking about it, so I've, I don't go home much, I don't call a lot, and they just, it, it's hard but they, they just don't know what my life's been like . . . my mom gets angry and upset when we talk about it . . . it's, it's just that they, they've, it's been shown to me that it's [home] not a safe place."

This narrative is particularly compelling as it highlights the interactive exchange process embedded within the participant's relationship with his family (e.g., "they can't handle talking about it, so I've, I don't go home much"). In addition, this dynamic is occurring within the context of the parents forbidding the participant from disclosing to his siblings, extended relatives, and community. The participant's narrative also indicates that his father is continuing to use theistic triangulation tools as the participant's father recently said "if it wasn't about it breaking the commandment of God, I would've dropped this long ago." It appears as though there is hope that this relationship may improve in the

future as the participant concluded his narrative by saying "I'd like to be able to work toward fixing that [that it's not a safe space]" and later elaborated that "it hurts that I don't have the close relationship that I hear about with some people, they come out and their parents are really, really good about it. So I wish it were better, because I really do love my parents, and I want a better relationship with them." Hopeful, reconciliatory sentiments were not uncommon among gay participants, indicating that it may be possible for them to eventually mediate conflicts with their religious relatives.

Gay Men's Reports of the Relational Impact of Theistic Triangulation

Sixty-five percent (9/10 Jewish, 6/13 Christian) of gay participants reported that their familial relationships had been negatively impacted at some point by their religious relatives' theistic triangulation and other negative post-coming-out reactions. Eight gay participants (3/10 Jewish, 5/13 Christian) described their current familial relationships as being negatively impacted, "strained" and "estranged," even after an average of 4 years ($SD = 2$) since their coming out. For example, a 25-year-old gay participant from an Evangelical background shared that although four years had passed since his coming out, his relationship with his brother "is not as strong as it used to be" because of his brother's "religious beliefs getting in the way" of accepting his sexuality. A similar sentiment was shared by a 22-year-old Jewish gay participant who said that he does not think that he ever had "an experience of unconditional love" as his parents don't support his sexuality due to their religious beliefs.

Alternatively, six gay participants from Jewish backgrounds and 2 practicing Mormon participants reported that their familial relationships had improved since pre-coming-out and immediate post-coming-out triangulation contexts. Participants described their current familial relationships as "improved since," "getting better," and "in a better place." Participants reporting improved relationships had disclosed on average 6 years prior ($SD = 5$), suggesting that posttriangulation relationship quality may be positively correlated with time since coming out. However, time since coming out is not related to the presence or absence of dyad participation, with the average number of years since coming out being 4.2 for gay men with ally participation and 5.3 for gay men without ally participation.

Family Allies' Perspectives of the Relational Impact of Theistic Triangulation

Participating family allies did not report that they used religion in relationally negative ways, although, some allies reported encountering religious difficulties within the family system. As explored above, one participating Jewish sister reported a religiously hostile interaction with her father due to her support of her brother's sexual orientation disclosure. In addition, one Mormon and three Jewish mothers shared the religious difficulty that they encountered disclosing their gay child's orientation to their religious and heterosexual children. In one case, the more religious Jewish siblings, although not rejecting of their gay sibling, "felt that uh we [parents] should be doing something with it. We shouldn't just be 'sitting there' . . . , watching this . . . 'happen.'"

The parents responded by stating that “there’s really not much we can do other than you know support him and love him and, and let him um, live his own life . . . hoping that . . . he will be happy uh that his well-being is not gonna be compromised by it and so it took, we don’t talk much about it now or to our kids.” Similarly, another Jewish mother discussed that after she shared her gay son’s sexual orientation with her heterosexual teenage son he “cried and was very upset.” The mother explained that he probably cried regarding his questions of faith (“how can God make someone like X and then say, make the prohibition in the, you know, in the Torah?”) as well as because of the fact that “he’s homophobic in some ways. He’s uncomfortable with gay people.” An additional concern regarding parent–child interactions post disclosure was brought up by a third Jewish mother who spoke of her other children feeling resentful that her parenting and moral values had changed. Similarly, a Mormon mother shared that her children were less accepting than she regarding their brother’s sexual orientation and often advocated changes in family policy concerning the acceptance of her son’s partner at family events. In the same vein, an allied Catholic mother reported encountering relational difficulty on religious grounds with her husband’s Christian fundamentalist brother and sister-in law because they “feel that, you know, really read every word in the Bible and that’s exactly the way it is.” The mother reported feeling so uncomfortable due to their antihomosexual religious rhetoric that she shared “that under no circumstances will [I] stay overnight in the house with them . . . It’s just my- my line in the sand and I deeply am hurt by their reaction.” It is possible that different narratives regarding the tension between religion and sexuality and its impact on family relationships would emerge in the nonallied relatives’ narratives, however due to sampling limitations only allied relatives participated in the study.

Theistic Mediation

Family relationships are complex, and all familial relationships do not conform to any one pattern. For example, although a Jewish participant reported that his brother was “angry” about his sexual orientation from a religious standpoint; the participant also reported that his Orthodox father responded to his communal concerns with the statement “Fuck the community.” Furthermore, of the 16/23 gay men that reported familial use of theistic triangulation, 11 additionally spoke highly of religious family ally’s efforts to support them (7 Jewish, 4 Christian) and 12 participants had a key family ally participate in the study. Similarly, all of the five gay men with no dyad report of theistic triangulation also identified a religious ally within the family. For example, a Mormon gay man reported that his mother successfully utilized religious precepts to inspire and give strength. The 22-year-old participant shared that his mother responded to his coming out by saying that “if it was something that the Lord wanted to change he could change it,” emphasizing that this was her son’s divinely allotted “test of faith” for this world. The participating son elaborated upon this statement by explaining that his mother provided him “with a lot of confidence so that even if it’s something I had to deal with for the rest of my life, was, that it was something that I could do.” The mother’s discussion of her own process of mediation cannot be reported because only the participant’s allied sister participated in the study.

Unlike previous research, gay men and religious relatives in this study did not report the use of theistic mediation in terms of imagining what God would do in the situation, practicing the religious value of patience, or joint prayer (Brelsford, 2011; Mahoney, 2005). However, religious tools were utilized by religious relatives in other adaptive ways to mediate theological difficulties and thereby avoid potential familial conflicts. For example, although religious allies did not report joint prayer sessions, 5/8 (63%) of Christian family allies reported individually praying to God during or regarding their post–coming-out concerns. For example, in response to the interview question “Were there any activities or people that were helpful in the postdisclosure process?” a Mormon mother shared that she “had a lot of prayer,” although she did not elaborate on that experience. However, another Mormon mother shared that she got over her initial anger at God regarding his creation of her son as a homosexual and then forbidding its enactment with “a lot of prayer . . . It was not so much a revelation, but just a softening.” Similarly, an Evangelical mother and a Mormon sister shared that they asked God to explain the religious pain and suffering of their gay relative. For example, the Evangelical mother shared, “why did you do this, God? Because this child didn’t ask for this and didn’t want it, and why couldn’t you answer his prayers?” Alternatively, a Catholic mother reported that she continues attending Church because she wants to “thank God that I didn’t take it that way [rejecting her son on religious grounds]” as well as because she wants “Him [God] to know I’m very thankful for all that he’s blessed me with.” This tremendous variation in the goals outlined in the above prayer narratives suggests that prayer is a flexible religious tool that can be used to successfully mediate diverse and complex faith experiences after a relative’s sexual disclosure. In addition, prayer was often coupled with seeking council from a religious leader for the Christian participants, with 4/8 Christian participants seeking religious council. Similarly to the differences in Christian and Jewish allies’ uses of prayer, a notably lower percentage of Jewish allies participating in the study (2/7) reported seeking religious council during the coming-out period.

In addition, four Christian family allies referenced religious cultural values as tools (e.g., Jesus, Christian values) in their discussions of unconditionally loving their gay relative. For example, a Catholic mother shared that she focuses on “the greatest commandment of all, which is, love.” In addition, a Methodist mother referenced Jesus in her discussion of loving her son, as she said “I look at Jesus’ message of love and forgiveness and that we’re friends by the blood, that I don’t feel that people are condemned by the actions they have done.” These religious values were similarly expressed by a Mormon father who shared the following during his discussion of the biblical prohibition against homosexuality, “your goal, your reason for being, should be to accept and to love and to lift up . . . those in need no matter who they are.” In addition to religious family members referencing general religious values regarding love, they also explicitly discussed their personal and loving relationship with their gay relative. Furthermore, gay men’s narratives predominately focused on the personal and loving relationship they had with their ally as opposed to a discussion of their allies’ theistic mediation strategies.

Religious family allies also utilized religious tools in their efforts to redefine power dynamics with their gay relatives. For

example, four participants (3 Christian, 1 Jewish) discussed that their relative's sexuality was "just between him and God." The participants also concluded, and in some cases repeatedly stated, that it was not their place to pass judgment. One Jewish mother gave voice to this sentiment by explaining "I would rather not deal with it [homosexual prohibitions in Leviticus], not grapple with it, cuz I don't think I'm gonna come up with a satisfactory answer that will help me uhm be a better parent or be more sensitive and understanding to my child." Within this narrative the mother clearly mediates a potential conflict with the homophobic religious texts by focusing on her relationship with her son. In addition, it is important to note that this mother's goal is to be "sensitive and understanding" as opposed to judgmental and authoritarian. A similar sentiment was expressed by a Mormon mother, as she shared "God is, I don't have to worry about it, God will. I just, I just love my son. You know, I don't worry about anything else. God can take care of everything on the other side. My job as his mother is just to love my son." In addition, it is of interest to note that although the above participant's response was in answer to a cognitive question (e.g., "What are your thoughts about the biblical text?"), the participant's answer utilized affective words instead (e.g., "worry," "love"). This word choice suggests that this mother's navigation of the religious texts was an emotional experience motivated by her love for her son, rather than a cognitive experience focusing on scriptural interpretation.

Discussion

The focus of the present study is to understand how religion may be used in relationally adaptive and maladaptive ways within diversely observant Jewish and Christian family systems navigating post-coming-out contexts. Utilizing an applied cultural-historical activity based analysis of both gay men's and their religious relatives' interview narratives, religion emerged as a cultural tool used to defend positions, reconcile conflicts, redefine power dynamics, and mediate familial relationships. Participants in the study reported that they or a family relative used religious objects (i.e., *Provo Temple*), values (e.g., "lift up . . . those in need no matter who they are"), activities (e.g., prayer, vow annulment) to negotiate post-coming-out conflicts in both relationally adaptive (i.e., theistic mediation), and maladaptive (i.e., theistic triangulation) ways. However, gay men were more likely to utilize religious tools to constructively mediate their relatives' theistic triangulation efforts than religious relatives were to initiate theistic mediation. Moreover, theistic triangulation was reported by gay participants to be the primary source of familial conflict and pain during the post-coming-out process, highlighting the interaction between religious and familial systems. In addition, theistic triangulation was utilized by parents, extended relatives, as well as siblings, emphasizing the need to include multiple familial relationships in studies of the interaction between sexuality, religion, and family. Religion was also used in relationally productive and reparative ways via mediational strategies such as using religious values and prayer to become a family ally. The use of religion as both a tool of theistic triangulation and mediation supports the sociocultural theory that although the affordances of cultural tools define their use, individuals decide how to make use of these affordances in their daily activities (Daiute, 2010; Heft, 2001).

The present study expands the scope of the current literature regarding theistic triangulation and mediation by exploring relational uses of religion within conflicts related to religious prohibitions. The results presented herein support prior research findings indicating that theistic triangulation can result in escalated and prolonged arguments, in contrast to the reparative and supportive outcomes of theistic mediation (Brelsford, 2011; Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009). In addition, although prior research has indicated that theistic triangulation is used less frequently than theistic mediation (Brelsford, 2011), this was not the case for the dyads included in this study. It is possible that this is because gay men were asked questions regarding both their allied and nonallied family members, whereas prior research efforts only focused on those relatives close enough to participate. Alternatively, theistic triangulation may be more likely to be used in conflict contexts that are inherently embedded within religious beliefs and texts. In either case, the majority of both religious and nonreligious gay men reported that their relatives' use of theistic triangulation was relationally detrimental. It is important for clinicians working with gay men from religious backgrounds to be aware of the relational impact of maladaptive religious tool use. In addition, clinicians may find it helpful to assist clients in envisioning mediational alternatives that could have been used such as the religious values of family and love. For example, a clinician participating in a related study suggested that religious leaders use the scriptural narrative that "God didn't let Abraham kill Isaac" to focus on creating more inclusive families and communities (Etengoff & Daiute, in press).

Unlike prior research regarding theistic triangulation and mediation that primarily focuses on how Christian groups use religion within conflict contexts (Brelsford, 2011; Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009), this study explores how non-Christian religious groups and dyads of different religious beliefs relationally use religious tools. In addition, by applying a sociocultural family system perspective, such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (1979), this study focuses on the interactive relations between religion and family within the microsystem of individual development. Moreover, by utilizing a narrative method of analysis as opposed to a structured quantitative measure, individual and group differences in the types and methods of religious tool use emerged. For example, a greater percentage of Christian family allies as compared with Jewish family allies used religious tools to mediate conflicts. This difference was most pronounced with regard to prayer, with 63% (5/8) of Christian family allies utilizing prayer as compared with 0% of Jewish family allies. It is possible that this is a result of Orthodox Jews believing that prohibitions written in the Bible cannot be changed and are less likely to engage any religious cultural tools to mediate difficulties (e.g., "it's a Torah prohibition and we have to uphold it"). Alternatively, it is possible that Orthodox Jewish family allies did not pursue the avenue of prayer as they were more likely to pursue secular forms of counseling. Contrastingly, a similar percentage of gay men from Christian and Jewish backgrounds reported their relatives' use of theistic triangulation, highlighting the importance of sampling multiple perspectives within the family system.

In light of this study's focus on the relational uses of religion during coming-out conflicts, the larger framework of how these relational experiences impacted personal religious development was largely beyond the scope of this study. However, it is impor-

tant to note that the majority of gay men and allies participating in this study reported that their religious attitudes and behaviors had changed over time, with some participants attributing these changes to their own or their relative's coming-out process. Given that religious participation usually occurs within a social and public context in addition to private and personal contexts, it is important to approach gay men's and their relative's religious development as both relational and performative (Etengoff, 2011; Day, 2002). In addition, many of the gay men participating in this study were religiously observant during their youth and redefined themselves as spiritual or nonpracticing believers in the years after disclosing their sexuality to their families. This post-coming-out change from a more public religious identification to a more private and individualistic spiritual identification suggests that there may be a relational component to gay men's spiritual development as well.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The results presented here provide the first multilayered analysis of how a sample of gay men and their family members relationally utilize religion to navigate coming-out conflicts. The purpose of this study was to highlight the diverse ways in which religious tools can be used both adaptively and maladaptively within Jewish and Christian family systems during the coming-out period, and as such the specific results of the present study cannot be generalized beyond this population. In addition, the results of the present study must be interpreted in light of the associated sampling and data collection limitations. First, future research should expand the general sample size as well as that of religious and regional subgroups. In addition, all participants included in this study identified as white, although that was not a criteria for inclusion. Extant literature suggests that this is a general difficulty when sampling individuals identifying as both sexual and ethnic minorities, as they are often less likely than nonethnic minority groups to come out to family because of a heightened fear of rejection (as reviewed in D'Augelli & Patterson, 2001). In addition, many racial and ethnic minority men who have sex with men do not identify as gay and therefore do not come-out (Savin-Williams, 2006). Second, the generalizability of this study is limited because the participants were already engaged in mediational strategies such as support groups and blogging. In addition, because this project was designed to be an exploratory narrative analysis study, a smaller sample size was viewed as acceptable. Researchers and clinicians should proceed with caution before applying these results to different religious and regional groups as well as those that are not already engaged in mediational strategies. This study also relied on gay men's reports of their nonallied relatives' uses of theistic triangulation because of sampling restrictions. It is possible that triangulating relatives may have different perspectives regarding their behavior. Future research would benefit from including both allied and nonallied family members.

Conclusion

Participants in this study shared experiences suggesting that religious relatives of gay men use religious tools to address

post-coming-out challenges and conflicts. Participants reported both adaptive (i.e., theistic mediation) and maladaptive (i.e., theistic triangulation) strategies of cultural tool use. Similarly to prior research, theistic mediation was associated with positive relational outcomes and theistic triangulation was associated with poor relationship quality. However, results indicate that familial relationships improved as time passed since the initial coming out period, even in cases of theistic triangulation. A number of gay participants also indicated that they were interested in rebuilding fractured familial relationships post their relatives' use of theistic triangulation. These results suggest that although there are negative relational consequences, the effects of theistic triangulation may not be permanent and can possibly be overcome. In addition, given the positive outcomes associated with theistic mediation it may be possible to develop programs focused on reorienting religious relatives to utilize their religious values and tools in relationally adaptive ways. This study also suggests a theoretical and methodological approach to studying relational development in a way that is sensitive to the religious diversities of gay men and their relatives during the current era of sociopolitical change.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for Allies and Gay Men

1. How old are you?
2. What is your educational background?
3. How would you describe your financial status or income level?
4. Tell me a bit about the religious community in which you grew up. Would you describe this community as highly religious, moderately religious, not really religious, or something else? Why?
5. How would you describe your feelings, beliefs, and thoughts about religion?
6. How would you describe your relationship with your family?
7. How old were you when you first “knew” of your/their sexual preference/orientation? Were there any activities or people that helped or hurt this process?
8. How old were you at the time of your/his sexual preference disclosure to the family? Friends? Class/work? Religious group?
9. How would you describe the family disclosure event and that time period in your life?
10. Do you believe that your relationship with your family has changed over time? If so, how?
11. Is there someone(s) in your family who is (are) your key ally? If so, can you describe your relationship with them?
12. How do you think this person views your relationship?
13. Is this the person in your family with whom you have most frequently confided in about family reactions and the tension between religion and sexual orientation? If not, than whom?
14. Is there someone in your family who is experiencing “the most difficulty” in this process? If so, can you describe your relationship with them?
15. Do you attend religious services? If so what type and how frequent?
16. Do you believe that your relationship with religion has changed over time? If so, how? Why?
17. How would you describe your relationship with the gay community?
18. Do you believe that your relationship with the gay community has changed over time? If so, how?
19. What are your thoughts about the text in Leviticus/ Corinthians that prohibits homosexual activity?
20. Have you ever attended a support group? If so, what was your experience like?
21. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me?

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