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**Establishing the Temporal Relationship Between Religious Commitment, Sexual Identity
Struggles, and Religious Struggles Among Sexual Minorities**

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Abstract

Objective: Conclusions about the temporal relationship between religiousness and both religious and sexual identity struggles are frequently made in the absence of longitudinal data. The present study examines the temporal relationship between religious identification, sexual identity struggles, and religious struggles.

Methods: Participants were 132 Latter-day Saint sexual minorities who provided data at two timepoints, two years apart. We employed two cross-lagged panel models, one focusing on religious struggles and religious commitment and the other focusing on sexual identity struggles and religious commitment, to understand the temporal relationships between these variables.

Results: Cross-lagged panel models suggested that interpersonal religious struggles and sexual identity uncertainty at time 1 were negatively related to religious commitment at time 2. Similarly, religious commitment at time 1 was related to decreased sexual identity affirmation and increased religious doubt at time 2.

Conclusions: Although there is some degree of reciprocity to the relationship between religious/sexual identity struggles and religious commitment, certain struggles (interpersonal religious struggles, identity uncertainty) predicted later decreases in religious commitment, and religious commitment predicted an increase in certain types of struggles (religious doubt, lack of sexual identity affirmation).

Keywords: LGBTQ+; religion/spirituality; religious commitment; longitudinal data analysis; religious struggles

Establishing the Temporal Relationship Between Religious Commitment, Sexual Identity Struggles, and Religious Struggles Among Sexual Minorities

Sexual minorities (SMs; individuals with some degree of same-sex sexual attraction, engage in a some degree of consistent same-sex sexual behavior, and/or who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer/questioning; Lefevor et al., 2022) often describe having a complicated relationship with religiousness (i.e., people's search for the sacred in the context of culturally sanctioned rituals, belief/value systems, and institutions; Harris et al., 2018; see also Benson et al., 2018; Lefevor, Davis et al., 2021). Although an overwhelming majority of U.S. SMs were raised religious, many diminish their commitment to the religious traditions and communities they were raised in over time, doing so at higher rates than heterosexual individuals (Lefevor et al., 2018; Lefevor, Bouton et al., 2023; Woodell & Schwadel, 2020). This diminishment may be particularly pronounced in younger cohorts of SMs, as younger people are particularly likely to diminish their religiousness (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Typically, a sense of commitment to religious traditions and communities is thought to precede the religious and sexual identity struggles that some SMs experience. SMs are conceptualized as "inheriting" religious traditions and connectedness to communities, in part because religiousness tends to be intergenerationally transmitted (Bengtson et al., 2009). Because many religious traditions and communities hold sexual standards that prohibit sexual contact outside of marriage between a cisgender man and a cisgender woman, SMs' religious commitment is thought to lead them to experience greater uncertainty about their sexual identity (Crowell et al., 2015; Lefevor, Skidmore et al., 2022) and more concerns about being accepted or affirmed as an SM in their religious community (Wood & Conley, 2014). Similarly, SMs' commitment to religious traditions and communities with these sexual standards is often thought

to lead SMs to experience higher degrees of doubt and interpersonal conflict in religious spaces because of the conflict between their desires and their religious community's standards (Galek et al., 2007; Pargament & Exline, 2020).

At the same time, religious and sexual identity struggles may lead SMs to decrease their commitment to religious traditions and communities. Religiously related struggles—such as interpersonal conflict with coreligionists and doubt brought on by heteronormative religious doctrines—may create disbelief and disengagement that may reduce SMs' sense of commitment to religious traditions and communities (Exline et al., 2021; Saraglou et al., 2020; Skidmore, Lefevor, Golightly et al., 2022; Wood & Conley, 2014). Similarly, sexual identity related struggles—such as concerns with acceptance, uncertainty about identity, and perceived lack of affirmation of SM identities in religious spaces—may create discontinuance and disaffiliation that may reduce SMs' sense of commitment to religious traditions and communities (Saraglou et al., 2020; Skidmore, Lefevor, & Perez-Figueiroa, 2022).

Although it is clear that religious commitment, religious struggles, and sexual identity struggles are interrelated, the direction of the relationship between these variables is much less clear. Understanding the directionality of this relationship is critical for therapists who work with SMs in religious contexts, particularly given their relative lack of power/privilege in the religious contexts they exist in. If religious commitment tends to predict later religious and sexual identity struggles, therapists may appropriately warn SMs of the high cost of involvement with their religious tradition and community. Conversely, if religious and sexual identity struggles predict later religious commitment, therapists may prioritize resolving these struggles with clients. The present study addresses these questions by using a cross-lagged panel design to temporally examine how religious commitment relates to religious (doubt struggles and interpersonal

religious struggles) and sexual identity struggles (identity uncertainty, acceptance concerns, and identity affirmation).

Religiousness and Religious Struggles

Religiousness is a multidimensional construct that typically involves some degree of believing in doctrine, bonding with a higher power, belonging with coreligionists, and behaving according to religious pre- and proscriptions (Davis et al., 2021; Saroglou, 2020). Generally, religiousness promotes health for religious people in a variety of ways including providing a framework for meaning-making, a sense of connectedness, and tools for coping with difficult emotions/experiences (Ano & Vasconcelos, 2005; Salsman et al., 2015). Although religiousness has been found to promote health in SMs in each of these ways, the relationship between religiousness and health among SMs is much more nuanced, as religiousness may also increase SMs' experience of stress and stigma (Lefevor, Davis et al., 2021; Lefevor, Skidmore et al., 2023). In particular, religiousness may compound SMs' sense of both religious/spiritual and sexual identity struggles, complicating the overall relationship between religiousness and health among SMs.

SMs who are committed to religious traditions and communities experience more religious doubt and struggle with coreligionists than SMs who are less religiously committed. Further, although SMs as a group are much less religious than heterosexual individuals (Woodell & Schwadel, 2020), SMs report much more religious struggles than heterosexual individuals (Exline et al., 2014), likely due to religiously embedded heteronormativity (Etengoff & Lefevor, 2020). Heteronormativity may be religiously embedded both doctrinally (e.g., differential expectations on same-sex vs. other-sex sexual activity, prizing childbearing, gendered religious services and roles; Lefevor, Huffman et al., 2021) and socially (e.g., religious individuals tend to

have less contact with SMs, have more conservative views about same-sex marriage, and experience more wariness around SMs; Etengoff & Lefevor, 2020). Consequently, this heteronormativity may not create greater struggles for heterosexual individuals but may cause both doctrinal friction (i.e., doubt) and social friction (i.e., interpersonal religious struggles) for SMs (Wood & Conley, 2014) that can stem from doctrine, statements from church leaders, and interactions with religious others. Indeed, SMs frequently report experiencing crises of faith (Dahl & Galliher, 2012), rejection from coreligionists (Janssen & Scheepers, 2019), and a sense of religious disbelonging (Skidmore, Lefevor, Golightly et al., 2022), with SMs who are more religiously committed reporting these struggles more commonly than those who are less religiously committed (Janssen & Scheepers, 2019; Skidmore, Lefevor, Golightly et al., 2022).

Reciprocally, these doubts and interpersonal struggles may lead SMs to be less committed to their religious traditions and communities. Doubt and interpersonal struggles lead other SMs to reconceptualize their faith and/or find congregations that are openly supportive of same-sex sexual relationships (Hartke, 2021). Although struggles may lead some SMs to recommit to their religious traditions and communities (Exline et al., 2014), many SMs who do so compartmentalize their sexual and religious identities (Dehlin et al., 2014; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). However, doubt and interpersonal struggles lead many SMs to disaffiliate religiously, with some studies finding SMs to be religiously disaffiliated at twice the rate of heterosexual individuals (Lefevor et al., 2018).

Religious Identification and Sexual Identity Struggles

Understanding one's pattern of sexual attraction, making meaning of how one's attractions relate to one's sexual behavior, and finding a consistent way to describe it to others (i.e., sexual identity development) is often a lengthy and challenging process for SMs (Skidmore

et al., 2023). The process may be particularly lengthy and challenging for religious SMs (Dehlin et al., 2014) as religious SMs often face additional difficulties in understanding their sexual attractions, finding the optimal way to express those attractions, and selecting appropriate labels for their sexual attractions and behavior (Lewis et al., 2003; Lefevor, Sorrell et al., 2020). Religious SMs who experience greater sexual identity struggles also tend to experience more religious and SM-related stress as well as worse mental health (Page et al., 2014).

SMs who are committed to religious traditions and communities experience more sexual identity struggles than SMs who are less religiously committed. Religiousness is clearly linked to increases in sexual identity struggles such as identity uncertainty, acceptance concerns, and internalized stigma (Brewster et al., 2016; Kubicek et al., 2009). Commitment to religious traditions and communities that discourage same-sex sexual behavior may particularly foment sexual identity struggles as religious teachings may suggest that all individuals are heterosexual, that same-sex sexual behavior is sinful, and/or that adopting an SM identity is dangerous (Lefevor, Huffman et al., 2021). Thus, religious commitment may lead SMs to be reticent to understand their pattern of sexual attraction, internalize stigma about what it means to be an SM (Barnes & Meyer, 2012), report fears of being accepted as an SM (Crowell et al., 2015), experience conflict between their SM and religious identities (Cole, 2017), and have difficulties establishing a positive sense of self (Sherry et al., 2010).

Simultaneously, sexual identity struggles may lead SMs to moderate their commitment to their religious traditions and communities. Concerns about whether others will reject SMs because of their identity may lead SMs to preemptively withdraw from religious traditions and communities (Schludermann et al., 2001). Similarly, when SMs perceive that their religious context will not affirm or has not affirmed SMs, SMs may moderate their religious commitment.

As SMs come to understand their same-sex attractions and experiences, they may also desire space from their religious traditions and communities to explore their identity with fewer constraints (Dehlin et al., 2015). Given that SMs tend to religiously deidentify over their lifetime (Lefevor, Bouton et al., 2023; Woodell & Schwadel, 2020), it may be that SMs ultimately choose to religiously deidentify due to the sexual identity struggles they experience in their respective religions.

Religious and Sexual Identity Struggles Among Latter-day Saint Sexual Minorities

SMs may be more likely to experience both religious and sexual identity struggles in religions that discourage same-sex sexual behaviors, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (CJCLDS; CJCLDS, 2016). The CJCLDS espouses clear beliefs regarding sexuality and marriage, teaching that marriage between a cisgender man and a cisgender woman is a precursor for salvation (CJCLDS, 2016). Considering this stance, Latter-day Saint (LDS) SMs may have difficulty fully participating in the religion or feeling that they belong, often reporting a conflict between their religious and sexual identities (Dehlin et al., 2014; Lefevor, Blaber et al., 2019; Skidmore, Lefevor, Larsen et al., 2022). LDS SMs often report both doubts (Dahl & Galliher, 2012a; Dehlin et al., 2014; Skidmore, Lefevor, Larsen et al., 2022) and interpersonal struggles with religious others (Dehlin et al., 2015; McGraw et al., 2020). Further, LDS SMs also report sexual identity struggles such as acceptance concerns and identity uncertainty (Crowell et al., 2015). Taken together, these struggles show the relatively disempowered position that LDS SMs hold within their religious community.

Like other conservative religions (e.g., Judaism, Islam), being part of the CJCLDS influences not only members' weekly service attendance but also the things members do/do not consume, members' sense of values, and members' sense of community/outgroup. Because

being part of the CJCLDS tends to entail both religious practice and worldview, individuals who were raised part of the CJCLDS may still consider themselves “Mormon” or “Ex-Mormon” long after their formal participation has ended (Jindra, 2022). Further, the process of de-identification is more complex than simply stopping attending services and may include a much more protracted process of moderating their commitment to their religious community and finding other ways to meet needs once met by religion such as embracing a sense of personal spirituality outside of religion or building other communities that provide meaning (Jindra, 2022).

Current Study

LDS SMs are an ideal population to examine the relationships between religious commitment and religious and sexual identity struggles because LDS SMs report high degrees of both religious and sexual identity struggles and because LDS SMs have been shown to moderate their religious commitment over time periods as short as two years (Lefevor, Skidmore et al., 2023). In the present study, we investigate the question, “what is the temporal relationship between religious identification, sexual identity struggles, and religious struggles?” In particular, we examine whether religious commitment tends to predict later religious and sexual identity struggles or whether religious and sexual identity struggles tend to predict later religious commitment. Although the process of sexual and religious identity navigation is a multi-year or even lifetime process (Dehlin et al., 2015), we focus our attention here on a two-year slice of that process in order to capture *part* of the process of sexual and religious identity navigation. Given that LDS SMs have shown meaningful changes in religiousness in this short of a period of time, we believe this window to be sufficient to be suggestive of the larger developmental process going on. Given our review of the literature, we offer two hypotheses

H1: There will be bivariate relationships at both T1 and T2 between religious commitment and both religious and sexual identity struggles

H2: There will be a temporal relationship between religious commitment and later religious and sexual identity struggles.

H3: There will be a temporal relationship between religious and sexual identity struggles and later religiousness

Method

Procedures

Data for the present study were taken from the Four Options Survey. This survey aims to investigate the developmental correlates of religiousness and sexuality. It is conducted by researchers at Utah State University (where it received IRB approval) and currently has baseline and 2-year follow-up data, though several additional waves of data collection are planned.

Participants for the Four Options Survey were recruited in 2020 using a comprehensive community sampling approach. This approach included posts in forums used by SM Mormons, social media posts from community influencers, articles published in news media, recruitment from therapeutic organizations in Utah, and snowball sampling. See Lefevor, McGraw et al. (2021) for a thorough description of the sampling methodology.

Participants

In 2020, 370 individuals completed the Four Options Survey and indicated their willingness to be part of a prospective, longitudinal study. These participants were all at least 18 years old, resided in the US, were baptized a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at some point in their lives, and reported some degree of same-sex sexual attraction,

behavior, or identity. These 370 participants were sent 3 email invitations to participate in the 2022 version of the survey and were paid \$10 for their participation.

A total of 132 participants completed the 2022 version of the survey. These individuals were largely cisgender men (55.3%), though many were cisgender women (24.2%), and some were transgender men (3.0%), transgender women (3.8%), and nonbinary/genderqueer (13.6%). Participants primarily identified as White (93.2%), with approximately half of participants residing in Utah (50.9%). Most participants reported having either a bachelor's (43.9%) or graduate degree (26.5%) though some reported having some college (29.5%) or a high school education (2.3%). Although all participants identified as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at some point in their lives, most were religiously unidentified at the time of the survey (51.5%) with many identifying as LDS (37.9%), some identifying as broadly Christian (7.4%), or with another religious tradition (3.0%). The majority of participants, however, indicated that they saw themselves as a spiritual person (70.5% at both timepoints). Participants primarily identified as gay/lesbian (57.5%) or bisexual/pansexual/queer (27.3%), though some identified as same-sex attracted (11.4%) or with another label (or lack thereof; 3.8%). Participants were 33.58 years old on average ($SD = 11.82$).

Measures

Religiousness

Religious Commitment. Religious Commitment was measured using the Religious Commitment Inventory (Worthington et al., 2003). Participants indicated their agreement with ten items such as “I spend time trying to grow in my understanding of my faith” and “Religious beliefs influence all my dealings in life” on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *Not at All True of Me* (1) to *Totally True of Me* (5). We also included the following caveat with this scale to

recognize the experiences of nonreligious participants: “We recognize that some questions imply that you belong to a religious organization. If this is not true for you, please answer the questions to the best of your ability”. This scale evidenced excellent internal consistency at both T1 ($\alpha = .95$) and T2 ($\alpha = .94$).

Religious Struggles

Religious Struggles. Both Interpersonal Religious Struggles and Doubt Struggles were measured using the Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale (Exline et al., 2014). Participants indicated how often in the past month they had struggled with several negative experiences including “Felt hurt, mistreated, or offended by religious/spiritual people” and “Felt confused about my religious/spiritual beliefs” ranging from *Not at All* (1) to *A Great Deal* (5). Both the Interpersonal Religious Struggles and Doubt Struggles scales contain four items and evidenced good or excellent reliability at T1 ($\alpha = .89$; $\alpha = .92$) and T2 ($\alpha = .81$; $\alpha = .95$).

Sexual Identity Concerns

Several sexual identity variables were assessed using the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Saliency Scale (Mohr & Kendra, 2011). Participants indicated their agreement with statements on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from *Disagree Strongly* (1) to *Agree Strongly* (6). We present below a sample item and the internal consistencies for each of the subscales used.

Acceptance Concerns. The Acceptance Concerns subscale contains three items, including, “I think a lot about how my sexual orientation affects the way people see me.” This subscale evidenced good internal consistency at T1 ($\alpha = .82$) and acceptable internal consistency at T2 ($\alpha = .77$).

Identity Uncertainty. The Identity Uncertainty subscale contains four items, including, “I get very confused when I try to figure out my sexual orientation.” This subscale evidenced acceptable internal consistency at T1 ($\alpha = .75$) and good internal consistency at T2 ($\alpha = .89$).

Identity Affirmation. The Identity Affirmation subscale contains three items, including, “I am proud to be LGB.” The subscale evidenced good internal consistency at T1 ($\alpha = .87$) and excellent internal consistency at T2 ($\alpha = .90$).

Missing Data and Attrition

Data linking participants’ responses at T1 and T2 were collected at the end of the survey at each timepoint. Consequently, there were no participants with partial responses at either timepoint. In total, 132 of 370 possible participants returned, yielding a 64% attrition rate. Participants who returned did not differ from participants who did not return in sexual identity ($\chi^2(3) = 6.14, p = .11$), education ($\chi^2(3) = 5.30, p = .15$), or age ($t(368) = -.82, p = .39$). However, the two groups differed in race/ethnicity ($\chi^2(6) = 9.97, p = .01$; more people of color at Wave I), gender ($\chi^2(5) = 11.71, p = .04$; more cisgender men at Wave I). This differential attrition is a limitation of the dataset.

Analysis Plan

We conducted two cross-lagged panel models to disentangle the temporal relationship between Religious Commitment, sexual identity concerns, and religious struggles. Because of our small sample size and concerns about overfitting models, we determined to conduct separate models for sexual identity concerns and religious struggles. Although we considered combining the various religious struggles and sexual identity concerns into two separate latent variables, intercorrelations were below $r = .5$ within the religious struggles and sexual identity concerns, suggesting that each religious struggle and sexual identity concern is empirically distinct. In the

3. T1 Identity Uncertainty	2.47	0.96	.27	.45									
4. T1 Identity Affirmation	4.70	1.27	-.31	-.13	-.26								
5. T1 Interpersonal Religious Struggles	2.57	1.03	-.10	.23	.06	.21							
6. T1 Doubt Struggles	2.28	1.36	.37	.27	.43	-.29	.29						
7. T2 Religious Commitment	2.27	1.08	.76	-.11	.04	-.22	-.17	.27					
8. T2 Acceptance Concerns	3.33	1.24	.14	.42	.45	-.27	.17	.37	-.04				
9. T2 Identity Uncertainty	2.41	0.97	.22	.32	.63	-.30	.07	.29	.13	.59			
10. T2 Identity Affirmation	4.80	1.20	-.37	-.05	-.21	.70	.27	-.16	-.34	-.30	-.26		
11. T2 Interpersonal Religious Struggles	2.39	1.06	< .01	.25	.17	.04	.56	.32	-.09	.31	.17	.09	
12. T2 Doubt Struggles	1.90	1.13	.38	.23	.36	-.28	.16	.58	.24	.41	.30	-.19	.37

Correlations Between Variables of Interest

Note: T1 = Time I; T2 = Time 2; bolded values significant at $p < .05$

Religious Commitment and Sexual Identity Development

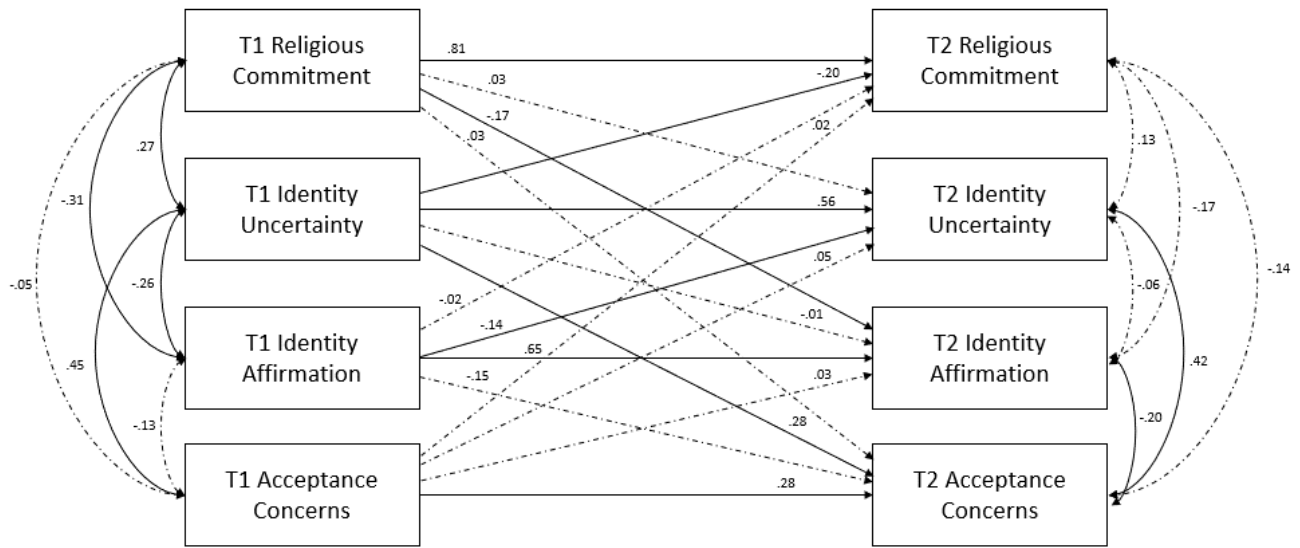
The cross-lagged panel model examining the relationships between Religious Commitment and indicators of sexual identity development explained a large portion of the variation in T2 Religious Commitment ($R^2 = .61$), T2 Identity Uncertainty ($R^2 = .42$), T2 Identity Affirmation ($R^2 = .51$), and T2 Acceptance Concerns ($R^2 = .29$). All autocorrelations were positive and significant with Religious Commitment evidencing greater stability over time than indicators of sexual identity development: Religious Commitment ($b = 0.76$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .01$), Identity Uncertainty ($b = 0.57$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .01$), Acceptance Concerns ($b = 0.61$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .01$), Identity Affirmation ($b = 0.28$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .01$).

There were four significant cross-lagged paths in the model, with each suggesting that the directionality of influence is from a T1 variable to a T2 variable and not the other way around: Religious Commitment at T1 was negatively related to Identity Affirmation at T2 ($b = -0.17$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .05$), Identity Affirmation at T1 was negatively related to Identity Uncertainty at T2 ($b = -0.11$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .05$), Identity Uncertainty at T1 was negatively related to Religious Commitment at T2 ($b = -0.22$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .01$), and Identity Uncertainty at T1 was positively related to Acceptance Concerns at T2 ($b = 0.36$, $SE = 0.11$, $p < .01$). All cross-lagged paths were

classified as “large” effects (Orth et al., 2022). See Figure 1 for a visual display of the cross-lagged panel model.

Figure 1

Cross-Lagged Panel Model of Religious Commitment and Sexual Identity Concerns



Note: Solid lines indicate significant relationships at $p < .05$; standardized values are presented

Religious Commitment and Religious Struggles

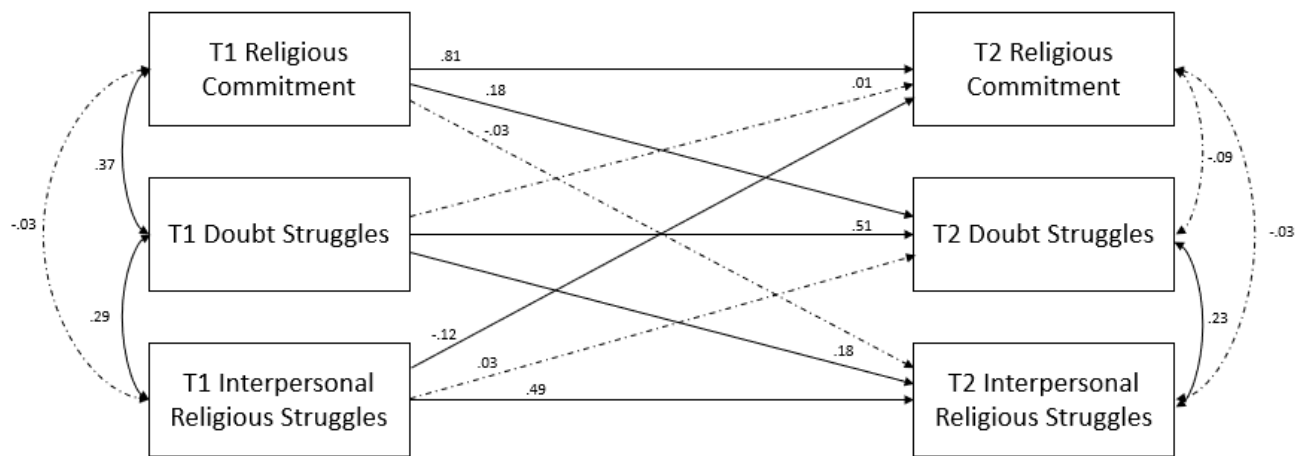
The cross-lagged panel model examining the relationships between Religious Commitment and religious struggles explained a large portion of the variation in T2 Religious Commitment ($R^2 = .68$), T2 Doubt Struggles ($R^2 = .37$), and T2 Interpersonal Religious Struggles ($R^2 = .33$). All autocorrelations were positive and significant with Religious Commitment evidencing greater stability over time than religious struggles: Religious Commitment ($b = 0.78$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .01$), Doubt Struggles ($b = 0.43$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .01$), Interpersonal Religious Struggles ($b = 0.52$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .01$).

There were three significant cross-lagged paths in the model, with each suggesting that the directionality of influence is from a T1 variable to a T2 variable and not the other way

around: T1 Interpersonal Religious Struggles were associated with T2 Religious Commitment ($b = -0.12, SE = 0.06, p < .05$), T1 Doubt Struggles were associated with T2 Interpersonal Religious Struggles ($b = 0.43, SE = 0.07, p < .01$), and T1 Religious Commitment was associated with T2 Doubt Struggles ($b = 0.19, SE = 0.08, p < .05$). All cross-lagged paths were classified as “large” effects (Orth et al., 2022). See Figure 2 for a visual display of the cross-lagged panel model.

Figure 2

Cross-Lagged Panel Model of Religious Commitment and Religious Struggles



Note: Solid lines indicate significant relationships at $p < .05$; standardized values are presented

Because

Discussion and Implications

Using a two-year, longitudinal sample of 132 LDS SMs, we found that religious commitment predicted an increase in religious doubts and a decrease in their identity affirmation over time. We further found that religious doubts predicted future interpersonal religious struggles, and that interpersonal religious struggles predicted a decrease in religious commitment. Finally, we found that LDS SMs who felt more affirmed about their sexual identity

were more likely to be certain regarding their identity, and thereby less likely to experience acceptance concerns over time.

How do Struggles Impact Later Religious Commitment?

Given that LDS SMs are more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to religiously deidentify (Woodell & Schwadel, 2020), we sought to understand if religious and sexual identity struggles predicted decreased religious commitment over time. Interpersonal religious struggles—understood as interpersonal conflicts with coreligionists that may also extend to interpersonal conflicts reflective of church leaders’ statements and church doctrine—emerged as the only religious struggle to predict a decrease in religious commitment. Interpersonal religious struggles may lead SMs to decrease commitment to religious traditions and communities due to a lack of community connectedness or belonging, which may make sense in light of the fact that many SMs report that they religiously identify due in part to the sense of belonging they experience (Saraglou et al., 2020; Skidmore, Lefevor, Larsen et al., 2022). When belongingness is threatened or does not exist due to interpersonal struggles (e.g., messages that SMs do not “fit in”, experiences of discrimination), SMs may respond by diminishing their religious commitment and seeking connection elsewhere. It may also be that interpersonal religious struggles threaten LDS SMs’ sense of safety, particularly when such struggles include experiences of discrimination, oppression, or violence (Sowe et al., 2017). In these cases, SMs may view religiously deidentifying as necessary in order to reestablish safety.

Identity uncertainty—understood as feeling unsure as to one’s sexual identity—emerged as the only sexual identity struggle to predict religious deidentification over time. It may be that when SMs experience greater identity uncertainty, they take space from their religious tradition and community to explore their identity with fewer constraints (Dehlin et al., 2015). Particularly

given the heteronormative messaging in the CJCLDS, decreasing commitment to the CJCLDS may be a cognitive mechanism employed by SMs to ultimately help resolve the identity uncertainty. Therefore, it may be that SMs become less religiously committed over time as they become more certain of their sexual identity, and not directly because of their initial identity uncertainty. Conversely, it may be that identity uncertainty is related to other experiences such as stigma or discrimination that ultimately are responsible for the decreases in religious commitment.

Taken together, our findings show that both interpersonal religious struggles and identity uncertainty predict a decrease in religious commitment, suggesting that some struggles impact religiousness over time and not vice versa. Although we present these struggles as if they are the “starting point” of religious deidentification, we also acknowledge that they likely simultaneously occur with other factors that promote deidentification such as (a) shifting values away from mysticism and toward rational thinking, empiricism, and curiosity, (b) increased engagement with LGBTQ+ communities, which are largely secular, and (c) general developmental changes (c.f., van Tongeren & DeWall, 2023).

How Does Religious Commitment Impact Later Struggles?

We expected that religious commitment would predict greater religious and sexual identity struggles for LDS SMs. We found partial support for this temporal relationship, with SMs who were religiously committed evidencing an increase in struggles with religious doubt and a decrease in sexual identity affirmation over time. LDS SMs are often faced with heteronormative messaging, which has been consistently linked with doubt and a reduced sense of sexual identity affirmation (Dahl & Galliher, 2012; Janssen & Scheepers, 2019; Wood & Conley, 2014). Engaging with a religious tradition that discourages same-sex sexual behavior

may create tension and self-invalidating thoughts for LDS SMs; one way to resolve this tension is to question religious teachings, particularly those regarding sexuality. It may also be that LDS SMs first struggle with affirming their experience of same-sex sexual attractions, and that these sexual identity struggles then lead to religious doubts, which then lead to a decrease in religious commitment. Indeed, others have found that SMs who report religious commitment to religious traditions that discourage same-sex sexuality report less affirmation of their sexual identity (Lefevor, Sorrell et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2003). Regardless of whether these struggles occur separately or simultaneously, SMs who have religious doubts and/or struggle with affirming their sexual identity tend to become less committed to their religion.

SMs who struggle with religious doubts may also ultimately choose to decrease their commitment to their religious traditions and communities because of the byproduct of doubts. We found that doubt predicted an increase in interpersonal religious struggles (c.f., Dollahite et al., 2019). Interpersonal struggles occur more frequently among LDS SMs than heterosexual members due to their SM identity (Lefevor, Skidmore et al., 2022); religious SMs who also doubt religious teachings may therefore have more struggles with coreligionists, thereby decreasing their sense of connection to their religious tradition and community. Given that a sense of disbelonging is connected to a decrease in religious commitment and identification (Lefevor, Skidmore et al., 2023; Saraglou et al., 2020; Skidmore, Lefevor, Golightly et al., 2022), it is unsurprising that LDS SMs who doubt religious teachings end up reporting a decrease in religious commitment.

The Temporal Relationship Between Sexual Identity Struggles

In addition to predicting a change in religious commitment, we noted that some sexual identity struggles predicted future struggles. LDS SMs who were more affirming of their identity

evidence a decrease in identity uncertainty, suggesting that those who can self-affirm their identity or receive affirming messages from others tend to become more certain of their sexual identity over time. Given that religious commitment predicted less identity affirmation, it may be particularly important for LDS SMs to affirm their identity, thereby maintaining a sense of uncertainty regarding their identities.

LDS SMs who become more certain of their sexual identity also reported decreased acceptance concerns over time. Acceptance concerns may be particularly harmful for religious SMs, given that SMs who engage with religious traditions and communities that discourage same-sex sexual behavior often report feeling disconnected from coreligionists (Skidmore, Lefevor, Golightly et al., 2022; Skidmore, Lefevor, Larsen et al., 2022), which is exacerbated when SMs fear that they will be rejected for their sexual identity and instead decide to conceal their identity (Lassiter et al., 2019). SMs who are concerned about being rejected tend to feel more disconnected from others and note a myriad of adverse outcomes (e.g., loneliness, depression, substance abuse; Pachankis et al., 2020; Shilo et al., 2016). However, LDS SMs appear to experience less acceptance concerns when they are more sure about their identity. Taken together, sexual identity struggles overall tend to predict one another, with SMs who are able to affirm their sexual identities ultimately becoming more certain of their sexual identity and less concerned about being accepted by others.

Implications and Limitations

This study has implications for clinical work. Understanding the directionality of the relationship between religious commitment and religious and sexual identity struggles is critical for therapists working with religious SMs. Given that religious commitment predicted religious doubts and sexual identity uncertainty, therapists may provide psychoeducation to clients

regarding the associated potential struggles and costs of religious involvement. Further, given that interpersonal religious struggles predicted a decrease in religious commitment, therapists may work with clients by prioritizing the resolution of these struggles to alleviate any associated mental health concerns and avoid further potential struggles and difficulties with future reduced religious commitment. Further, therapists working with SM clients who experience sexual identity struggles may benefit by first focusing on helping clients affirm their sexual identities, as identity affirmation predicts less identity uncertainty and less acceptance concerns. Given the sensitive nature of discussing difficulties associated with clients' identities, therapists have an ethical obligation not only to understand these identities but to help clients to navigate these harmful struggles. Therapists (and the clients they serve) may benefit from familiarizing themselves with other literature on working with LDS SM clients (Lefevor, 2023; Lefevor, Meter et al., 2023; Sorrell et al., 2023) as well as key support groups for LDS SMs such as Affirmation and North Star and podcasts for LDS SMs like *Listen, Learn, Love* and *Questions from the Closet*.

The current study is limited by several factors. Primarily, the current study uses longitudinal data that currently only has two waves of responses collected. As such, we were only able to examine change over two years and using two datapoints; however, the developmental processes that we are examining likely take place over much longer periods of time and should be examined in future work. We also did not examine specifically where participants were in a traditional coming out journey (i.e., how long it had been since participants first disclosed their sexual identity). Because of this lack of information, it is ambiguous whether to interpret our results as applying primarily to SMs who are just navigating coming out or if these trends are more applicable to SMs at various stages in their coming out journey.

Participants may have experienced some degree of confusion about how to answer our measure of religious commitment, as it often uses items that imply that the participant has a faith background. Although we included a preface to this question for participants, nonreligious participants' responses on these questions may not be entirely reflective of their experiences. The current study is also limited in its generalizability, as the sample collected all identified as current or former members of the CJCLDS. Although LDS SMs are an ideal population to study given their higher rate of religious and sexual identity struggles, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to religious SMs more generally without additional studies that assess SMs in a variety of religions.

Conclusion

The current study provides foundational knowledge regarding the temporal relationship between religious commitment, religious struggles, and sexual identity struggles. Using data from a 2-year, longitudinal sample of 132 LDS SMs, we found that although there is some degree of reciprocity to the relationship between religious/sexual identity struggles and religious commitment, certain struggles (interpersonal religious struggles, identity uncertainty) predicted later decreases in religious commitment. Similarly, religious commitment predicted an increase in certain types of struggles (religious doubt, lack of sexual identity affirmation).

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