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Experiences of Grace as Told by the LGBTQ Community

Nicholas A. Schollars

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by

Nicholas A. Schollars

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Nicholas Schollars

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Signatures:

Mark McMinn, Ph.D, Chair

Kathleen Gathercoal, Ph.D, Member

Nancy Thurston, Psy.D, Member

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Nicholas A. Schollars

Graduate School of Clinical Psychology

George Fox University

Newberg, Oregon

Abstract

Positive psychology has yielded rich insights about the nature of forgiveness and gratitude, but it is just beginning to broach the topic of grace. Theoretical evidence suggests grace is a crucial therapeutic factor in helping patients overcome shame, but empirical evidence is wanting. Because of the central role grace plays in Christianity, a qualitative exploration was conducted with a sample of participants identifying as either lesbian, gay, or bisexual, as well as Christian. Transcripts from 26 semi-structured interviews were coded and analyzed. Participants reported that their experiences of Divine Grace were related to their views about God's nature. They reported that their experiences of grace had a transforming impact on their lives, and that they still sometimes doubted themselves and their beliefs. They reported regular participation in spiritual disciplines and were able to integrate their present experiences of God with their faith development. Such findings have important implications for clinical work with LGBTQ Christian patients and provide material to create a theory of divine grace to be studied quantitatively.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In 2016, 79% of Americans identified themselves as religious (Newport, 2016). Despite the ubiquity of religious belief and experience, Schneider (2014) notes the existence of "enchanted agnosticism," which retains the spiritual mystery of religion without identifying with one (p. 71). In this way, it would be incorrect to assume that spirituality research does not apply to those 21% who choose not to identify with a religion. Abeyta (2018) suggests the need for meaning in life exists in human experience independently of whether or not a person feels that they have found meaning, or if that meaning is helpful to them. Thus, it would not be overstepping existing research to assert that research on religion and spirituality is relevant to most or all people. Yet some models of human functioning do not include the consideration of a person's religion or spirituality. Such a dearth is curious considering the prevalence of the human search for meaning, robust positive associations between health and religion (Bonelli & Koenig, 2013), and the potential therapeutic value of religious and spiritual experiences (e.g., forgiveness and gratitude).

Positive psychology has indirectly introduced religious and spiritual constructs into psychological research by considering character strengths and virtues traditionally associated with religious experience (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). One positive psychology construct, which has received perhaps the least attention, is the experience of grace and its psychological concomitants (Emmons et al., 2017).

Psychology, Religion, Spirituality, and the Advent of Positive Psychology

The tension among psychology, religion, and spirituality has a long history. Freud (1961) describes in his seminal work, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, an exchange between his friend and himself, where his friend reflects on the spiritual feeling of connection to the universe. Freud comments:

> The idea of men's [sic] receiving an intimation of their connection with the world around them through and immediate feeling which is from the outset directed to that purpose sounds so strange and fits in so badly with the fabric of our psychology that one is justified in to discover a psycho-analytic—that is, a genetic—explanation of such a feeling. (p. 12)

Here Freud denies the possibility of transcendent experience by assuming—without actual justification—that spirituality goes against the "fabric of our psychology."

In *Science and Human Behavior,* Skinner (1953) includes an entire chapter on religion. Cleverly, he begins by associating the terms "superstition" and "magic" with "aversive" control, which is used to oppress the less educated (p. 350). A few paragraphs later, he creates a spectrum ranging from "superstition" to "fact" (p. 351). For the rest of the chapter, he regularly uses the term "superstition" in relation to religion, and the term "fact" in relation to science. While he never explicitly disavows religion, his use of associative principles is barely subliminal, and an example of a different type of radical behaviorism. Similarly, Ellis (1991) openly critiques religion in his book, *The Case Against Religiosity*.

However, a change in attitudes amongst psychologists is evident in recent decades, in no small part because empirical evidence demonstrates the potentially helpful role of considering religion and spirituality in psychotherapy and psychological research. As a result, various

psychotherapies now integrate religion and spirituality with evidence-based treatment approaches (Hook et al., 2009), and increasing and compelling evidence demonstrates connections between religion, spirituality, and health – both mental and physical health (Bonelli & Koenig, 2013). For example, there is a replicated, longstanding negative relationship between religiosity and depression. The American Psychological Association's (APA) development of two journals, *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* and *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, exemplifies the increased commitment to the integration of religion and spirituality within the field of psychology.

Alongside this increasing interest in religion and spirituality, psychologists have also become more interested in positive psychology. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) note an excessive focus on pathology within the field of psychology and seek to balance the emphasis on what goes *wrong* with people by emphasizing what goes *right* with people. Given clinical psychology's origins in the medical field, such a bias is understandable. This may be why authors such as Freud, Skinner, and Ellis were incapable of speaking of religion except in terms of pathology. The emergence of positive psychology offers a new frame where the positive facets of religion and spirituality can be considered equally to the negative facets. This basic reframe easily coalesces with the clinician's commitment to beneficence when treating patients (American Psychological Association, 2017).

Though positive psychology itself is not a field explicitly tied to religion or spirituality, it is noteworthy that the constructs studied in positive psychology were first identified by considering the themes of the major world philosophies and religions (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Thus, many of the topics studied in positive psychology deeply root themselves in

religion and spirituality, including forgiveness, gratitude, humility, wisdom, and awe (McMinn, 2017).

One spiritual concept developing in the positive psychology field is gratitude, which has been linked to all sorts of mental and physical health benefits (Emmons & McCullough, 2003) as well as better psychotherapeutic outcomes (Wong et al., 2018). Some of the major researchers in the field of gratitude have recently turned their attention to the topic of grace – a construct receiving almost no empirical study to date. Emmons et al. (2017) define grace as "the gift of acceptance given unconditionally and voluntarily to an undeserving person by an unobligated giver" (p. 277). The authors note the great challenges this emergent area of research has in measuring and interpreting the interplay between grace and psychological well-being. Presently, most research on grace has been theoretical and in relation to such concepts as the self and therapeutic change. A small number of attempts make an effort to measure grace, and these have their own limitations. As a result, research on grace varies in its operational definitions and appears "scattered" in the absence of a unifying theory.

Measurement of Grace

Previous attempts to create a psychological construct of grace are few, and most attempt to qualify grace via quantitative methods. Basset (2013) was amongst the first to endeavor to create a quantitative measure of grace. College students filled out a prototypical scale known as The Amazing Grace Scale (TAGS). Factor analysis revealed two related to grace experiences. The first factor ($\alpha = .91$) included a new sense of agency to act in accordance with God's will as a result of God's grace. The second factor ($\alpha = .86$) included an awareness of personal gratitude and love toward God as a result of God's grace.

Bufford et al. (2017) expounded on quantitative grace measurement by combining previous grace scales, including the TAGs, in the creation of a scale with five dimensions: Experience of God's Grace (R = .517), Costly Grace (R = .615), Grace to Self (R = .242), Grace from Others (R = .347) , and Grace to Others (R = .530). Notably, TAGS loaded completely in the Experience of Grace dimension. A second study replicated these statistics and indicated "promising" convergent and divergent validity (p. 66). One major limitation, however, was the fact that the factors more accurately clustered around negative statements—statements of what Grace is *not*. In this way, it might be said the five-dimensional scale measures obstacles to grace rather than grace itself. Both studies used convenience samples involving college students. Particularly, Bufford et al. (2017) pointed out a caveat in their replication study when they noted that some of the replication could have been related to the similarity between the samples for each study. More broadly, both studies were generated using factor analysis without any previous qualitative research. Therefore, it might be said these scales are internally consistent at the cost of external validity, given the factors were created by a handful of people.

What is currently missing is a theory of grace, grounded in the actual experiences of a multitude of people. A helpful starting point then, rather than moving straight to quantitative measurement, would be to evaluate the current theoretical research and to explore the various ways people experience grace.

Emerging Views of Grace

Experiences of Divine Grace

Bronte and Wade (2012) note the presence of grace experiences in all world religions (also see Thomas & Rowland, 2014). Their qualitative research found four preceding circumstances interviewees associated with experiences of divine grace: logistical,

psychological, addiction, and illness. Logistical experiences of grace were regarded as divine intervention in either removing an obstacle from someone's life, or divine guidance in making an important life decision. Psychological experiences were defined as divine experiences of emotional healing. Addiction experiences regarded an unexpected divine release from an addiction with no perceived effort on the part of the individual. Finally, illness experiences regarded an unexpected remission or healing of a physical malady.

Interviewees noted these divine instances were experienced in the form of intuition, dreams, auditions, visions, synchronicities, and so on. Some interviewees noted they did not believe in a divine being at the time of their experiences. The authors conclude experiences of grace appear to be a part of a psychological growth process, and such experiences are possible for all people regardless of religion.

Grace and Narcissism

The heterogeneity of grace experiences is exemplified by research done by Safran (2016) as well. He reflects on Western emphases on personal responsibility as a possible obstacle to experiencing grace, and the idea of surrender as a possible remedy to this obstacle. Western culture traditionally equated surrender with submission, which is unlike the construct of surrender in the East. An example is Pure Land Buddhism, where Enlightenment is dependent on the free gift given by the Amadi Buddha. The worshipper pursues Enlightenment by increasingly coming to terms with their inability to attain Enlightenment by their own power. Enlightenment is considered a free gift from the Amadi Buddha for anyone who is willing to receive it.

Safran draws contrast between Pure Land Buddhism and Shin Buddhism, which is more individualistic in its definition of Enlightenment since it defines the attainment of Enlightenment as a result of self-discipline. Furthermore, he notes the uncanny similarities between Pure Land

Buddhism and Augustinian and Lutheran views of grace. Both Augustine and Luther articulated the greatest obstacle to grace as an inability to surrender or acknowledge an Other. This is traditionally known as narcissism in mainstream psychology today. Consequently, much of the clinical theory on grace presently stems from the psychoanalytic literature on narcissism.

Burijon (2001) examined grace in light of Heinz Kohut's self-psychology. From a self-psychological perspective, narcissism is a developmental delay in the personality resulting from a lack of emotional reflection early in life. Because the child never learns to rely on others to help regulate emotions, they develop a grandiose internal world for self-regulation. Thus, an adult who would normally have been interdependent (i.e., able to self-regulate and access others to regulate depending on circumstance) is now unable to acknowledge others as possible regulatory subjects. Instead, others are merely objects in a living phantasy whose origin lies in infancy.

Extrapolating on Kohut's theory, Burijon theorizes narcissism involves a spiritual delay in addition to the psychological delay Kohut proposed. The root of narcissistic pathology, which is the lack of the child's needs being seen by the caregiver and the subsequent internalization of the idea that these needs and desires are worthless in the eyes of the Other, leads the individual to be so fraught with fear of the outside world—of surrender to an Other—that the person is incapable of experiencing love and support. In fact, it is so threatening that the person actively defends against the terror of human connection in a characteristic fashion.

For Burijon, grace is a therapeutic factor where the therapist unconditionally accepts the client's narcissism. Instead of simply being a maternal figure as Kohut thought, Burijon also sees the therapist as a redemptive, Christ-like figure in being present with the client. This therapeutic modality applies to all people, not just those who meet the criteria for Narcissistic Personality

Disorder (NPD). Narcissism is considered a normal developmental stage in early life, and anyone can act narcissistically if provided the opportunity to regress far enough. This behavior is often seen as traditionally narcissistic since the individual over-compensates by valuing their needs over all others. After all, if nobody exists to value the person's needs and support self-esteem, who will if not oneself?

Grace and Shame in Christianity

Child and adolescent treatment involving grace also exists in the form of bibliotherapeutic interventions. These interventions explicitly target shame by using a story in groups. Maudlin, Lough, and Thurston (2003) utilize a story involving a toymaker who unconditionally accepts a toy who feels defective and redeems the toy. Experiences of shame are discussed and processed in the group. The authors theorize shame as being internalized via the child's early experiences of their caregiver. Given the change mechanism present in the story of the toy maker, a relationship between grace and shame suggests itself.

Shame presents early in the Hebrew Scriptures, partway through the Genesis narrative with Adam and Eve. In the second chapter, the author speaks of Adam and Eve being naked and unashamed (v. 25). Upon eating the forbidden fruit, they recognize their nakedness. Notably, their first reaction is to cover themselves. This points to a key component of shame, which is the desire to hide something the individual deems undesirable by others. Later in the Christian Bible, Christ is spoken of as a "second Adam" who comes to fulfill God's original purpose for humans before sin entered the world (1 Corinthians 15: 22 & 45). Humanity's shame is ripped away via his exposure to the dependency of childhood, the poverty of his ministry, leading to nakedness once again on the cross. Thus, the eternal purpose for which Adam and Eve were robbed is resurrected with Christ.

Christ's graceful existence counteracts shame, suggesting a negative correlation between the two. Like the toymaker's unconditional acceptance of the flaw his creation wished to be hidden, Christ's unconditional love is a therapeutic factor in healing humankind of shame and the painful defenses used to exile awareness of shame—what we might call sin.

The term sin has been used in a variety of ways, sometimes related to shame toward oneself or efforts to impose shame on others. More accurately, sin comes from the Greek word, *hamartia*, which is translated sin as "missing the mark," as an arrow might miss its target. That is, the purpose for which the arrow is created and loosed fails to be accomplished. In this way, sin is missing the telos (fully flourishing state) intended for a human person.

Following the premise that sin is a failure to accomplish an intended purpose, then the Fall (when sin entered the world) could be said to be the first instance where humankind did not accomplish its purpose in the eyes of God. In this way, sin is not the presence of *evil* within humans but the absence of a purpose, or at least an unawareness of this purpose—suggesting sin *entered* the world of its own accord when Adam and Eve internalized its shameful lie, rather than the moment they decided to eat the forbidden fruit. This idea of sin at once reduces the personal responsibility of humans, and increases the degree to which humans are forced into sin by evil (traditionally symbolized by the serpent) and unwillingly kept in that state. This creates a condition where humans are completely dependent on God's ability to bring human purpose back into awareness.

Bland (2009) presented case material concerning the use of grace as a therapeutic factor when dealing with clients who experience their behavior as being contrary to their values. Bland describes this phenomenon as "self-division" (p. 326), where a part of the self is unconsciously split off from the rest because it is intolerable for the rest of the self to observe. This manifests in

the exiled-self acting out its desires to the astonishment of the conscious self. Bland conceptualizes the phenomenon of the exiled self as having received the message to "*not be who you are*" (emphasis in the original, p. 334). This parallels the idea of shame being the feeling that one's true self must be hidden and suppressed.

Therefore, the therapist's job, according to Bland (2009), is to give up any expectation for the client to change their problem behavior, and instead approach the exiled self with a sense of inquiry and radical acceptance. The client internalizes this attitude and finds the freedom to alter behavior by becoming aware of the purpose and desires placed there by God, which have remained repressed by shameful lies all along.

What makes Bland's therapeutic approach so astute is his understanding that changes in behavior are not the result of willful acknowledgement of guilt, but the gradual recession of shame from the self, via the emotionally corrective experience, which comes about by the client internalizing the graceful therapist—something the client was presumably deprived of due to circumstances in early life. Just as humankind is dependent upon God to reintegrate oneself via relationship with the Other, the client is also dependent upon the therapist to reintegrate the exiled self. This is exactly the process that is disrupted in the arrested development of the narcissistic client as a result of the infant-caregiver relationship.

Hoffman (2011) articulates a similar process of incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection within therapy. The client experiences an understanding of their original purpose, which was latently present at birth. Simply due to the infant's biopsychosocial stage of development, they exist in a state of omnipotence where they are the only one who exists in the world as an object. This can be conceived of as a state of narcissism as Burijon (2001) and Safran (2016) observed. Assuming a healthy relationship, the natural surrender of the caregiver to the infant's needs is a

crucifixion on the part of the caregiver whereby the infant comes to see their needs and desires as "things that matter." This is then mirrored by the infant as they develop into a subject in their own right who can be aware of the caregiver's subjectivity as well. A mutual crucifixion comes to pass. The healthy growth and development proceeding from this mutual recognition and crucifixion, is the mutual resurrection where both infant and caregiver are able to freely live out the purpose God originally made them for. Note the need for surrender of both parties, intersecting with Safran's (2016) research.

Grace and Future Directions

These are important perspectives to consider as they point to several possibilities. First, grace may be a direct antidote to shame, for which an argument exists that shame is the root of all sin. Second, shame is internalized at birth via the infant-caregiver relationship (Bland, 2009; Burijon, 2001; Safran, 2016). Since shame is found in all cultures, it is safe to assume a certain amount of shame is always internalized by the infant depending on the degree to which shame exists in the caregiver (Keltner, 1995; Scheff, 1988; Tracy & Matsumoto, 2008). Third, internalized shame is the chief obstacle preventing the infant from developing past the narcissistic stage of development (Bland, 2009; Burijon, 2001; Maudlin et al., 2003; Safran, 2016; Shaw, 2010). Because there is a certain degree of shame present in the human condition as a result of the still-ongoing development of each person, a certain amount of narcissism is present in all people (Bland, 2009; Bronte & Wade, 2014; Burijon, 2001; Maudlin et al., 2003; Safran, 2016; Shaw, 2010). Finally, treatment of shame and narcissism, via grace, has been documented as effective in a handful of clinical cases (Bland, 2009; Burijon, 2001; Maudlin et al., 2003; Safran, 2016; Shaw, 2010).

Grace and the LGBTQ Community

Taken together the existing research is both promising and inadequate. It is promising because it points in the direction of a universal therapeutic factor. It is inadequate because it has not been fully explored in the context of diverse human experiences. A qualitative exploration of grace experiences, based on thorough inductive study, offers clinical researchers an opportunity to infer whether or not grace manifests itself in peoples' lives in a way similar or dissimilar to the theories and quantitative measures deduced by a handful of people. In an attempt to contribute to this need, this paper will explore the experiences of divine grace in the lives of LGBTQ individuals.

The LGBTQ population is intimately acquainted with shame, as evidenced by the common vernacular of "coming out of the closet." Such language explicitly mirrors the notion of shame as the desire to remain hidden. Given societal biases and heteronormativity, LGBTQ individuals have naturally been born into a society where their sexuality is labeled as shameful. Thus, even when direct caregiving relationships are positive, LGBTQ individuals still grow up in a world where they are implicitly encouraged by hegemonic power structures to remain hidden. This makes their risk for developing shame-based symptoms higher than most, as evidenced by LGBTQ individuals' three-fold risk of suffering from major depression, generalized anxiety, and suicidal ideation according to the National Alliance for Mental Illness. For example, LGBTQ youth are four times more likely to contemplate suicide, with an especially acute problem in the transgender population where as much as 65% of transgender youth contemplate killing themselves. Finally, according to the National Association on Mental Illness, LGBTQ individuals are between 20-30% more likely to abuse substances (National Alliance, 2019).

These statistics make sense in light of the shame incurred upon the LGBTQ population by heteronormative society. It may be the increased frequency of mood disorders arises as a result of the taxing burden of shame. Suicide may be the ultimate acting out of internalized shame dynamics, driving the LGBTQ individual to view their very existence as undesirable. Those individuals who do not, or have not yet, opted to attempt suicide, may self-medicate their stress by abusing substances.

The general research question then is to identify experiences of grace among LGBTQ individuals who identify as Christian. Because this is an exploratory qualitative study, no specific hypotheses are being offered.

Chapter 2

Method

Participants

The participants for this study were collected via the "snowball method." Participants were included in the study based on their self-identification of being both a Christian, as well as a sexual minority (i.e. lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual). The authors did not require the acceptance of any specific Christian doctrine for inclusion in the study. The initial recruits were selected via personal connections. At the end of the initial interviews, the authors asked the participants to refer their friends and make social media announcements, which included the contact information of the authors and a brief abstract of the study proposal.

Overall, the authors were able to conduct 25 interviews (17 male, 6 female, 1 transgender male, 1 person who chose not to specify). Twenty-four of the 25 participants identified as European, with the remaining participant identifying as European/Latino. A majority of the participants (20 participants) identified as gay or lesbian. Three people identified as bisexual. One person identified as pansexual, while one other person chose not to specify. Participants reported having been involved religiously and spiritually for an average of $M = 24$ years. Participants also reported that they received an average of $M = 15$ years of education (grade school, undergraduate, trade, and graduate schooling were all included). Finally, 16 participants were Protestant (progressive, mainline, or evangelical), with 1 person identifying as Catholic, 3 people who identified as Other, and 5 people who chose not to specify.

Measures

A semi-structured interview was created by several researchers collaborating on a project funded by the Templeton Foundation, providing a standardized inquiry into the experiences of divine grace (see Appendix A). This instrument was part of a larger grant funded project involving 8 grounded theory qualitative studies, each focusing on a unique population who identify as Christian.

Procedures

Interviews were conducted in person and via the Zoom audiovisual communication application. Interactions were recorded with an iPhone connected to lavalier microphones for the in-person interviews and with the built-in Zoom recording function for remote interviews. The interview's audio material was then uploaded to the transcription service, Temi. The resulting transcripts were then cleaned by reviewing the text in conjunction with the audio, and correcting any mistakes made by the software. Once transcripts were cleaned, they were uploaded to the qualitative research application, Dedoose.

Once the qualitative data was ready for analysis, the authors used the Google Doc application to participate in a process known as "bracketing" (Fischer, 2009). Bracketing is a practice arising from the phenomenology movement (Tufford & Newman, 2010). In the present study, collaborators recorded their own histories and experiences of Christianity, as well as the LGBTQ community. They then reflected on ways their biases might interfere with data analysis, and described ways in which might the authors might mitigate these confounding factors. This process was important because it allowed the collaborators to reflect more deeply on the topic of the study so that the pursuant codebook could portray a deeper, more nuanced reflection of the participants' reports.

Next, each collaborator reviewed the transcripts on their own. They noted potential themes and recorded memos that provided justification for the inclusion of their theme. After that, the authors reviewed each theme as a group and included those themes which seemed apparent to all authors. The transcripts were separated into blocks of five to eight interviews. Two collaborators reviewed the same block before meeting to compare their level of agreement, and discussed areas of difference and adjusting their ratings accordingly. While some qualitative research is based on establishing inter-rater reliability and then having one person rate the remaining interviews, in this study I opted for the more intensive approach of having two raters consider every interview and then meet to discuss coding similarities and disparities. Once all transcripts were coded and discussed, the authors moved on to the analysis of the resulting agreed-upon primary and secondary themes found in the data.

A written summary of results was then provided to participants for a process known as member-checking (Birt et al., 2016). This provides the participants to provide additional input or correct conclusions that may seem incorrect to them.

Chapter 3

Results

Five primary themes were gathered from the data. The five themes are (a) the nature of God, (b) transforming nature of grace, (c) tensions and struggles related to grace, (d) ongoing disciplines related to grace, and (e) developmental factors of grace.

The Nature of God

Throughout the interviews, participants made a number of observations regarding who they understand God to be. If God's grace is described as a gift, it seems only natural that participants would be observed pondering the nature of the giver. The primary theme regarding the nature of God was further divided into three secondary themes: God's essential character is love, God affirms me, and God is present during difficult times.

God's Essential Character is Love

This describes instances where participants described love and God as being one and the same or described love as God's primary character trait. For example, one participant described their image of God as being synonymous with love.

> And I think that my, my definition of God, my relationship with God comes from 1 John 4 where we talk about God is love. Let us love one another for God is love. And if you don't love, then you don't know God.

As shown in the quote above, God is not one who—amongst other things—loves. Instead, God is love in its highest form.

God Affirms Me

This refers to instances where the participant described God as having a primarily positive (e.g., liking, loving, affirming, taking pride in, etc.) view of the speaker. This differs from the former category in that the speaker is specifically naming God's view of them, rather than a general characteristic of God. For example, one participant described an experience with God's presence as follows:

> I can lean into that voice of truth and hear God's saying, [NAME], I've been in all of this. I've never abandoned you. All of this belongs. I'm still here. Like there's no hatred, there's no disappointment. There's just so much grace. Like where I want to be so hard on myself, which I often am for whatever it is. Who I sense God to be is like the kindest, most loving thing. So I think God is really proud of me.

Another participant described God's affirmation as being a quality of God's presence:

> I perceived it as being a sort of a manifestation of God's presence. And ultimately it was not, it wasn't uncomfortable or scary, but it was like, it was the most, the most comforting, or reassuring presence I had really ever felt.

This theme may be related to the aforementioned shame and guilt traditionally placed on the LGBTQ community, which has historically been present throughout most Western religions and secular society. It is easy to imagine how wonderful it might feel to have a newfound feeling of being worthy when previously one felt worthless.

God is Present in Difficult Times

Participants viewed God as one who does not abandon their people during times of hardship; nor is God a God who causes hardship. Rather, they describe God as a helpful support during hardship.

> And that was the period of time that I like to say that I really clung to God, that I did really turn to my faith to help me find answers. And, and I think my faith really got me through that. I miss that time in a lot of ways. Not the pain of that, but I miss how close I felt to God, during that time and you know, and I fully recognize that that was because I moved toward him.

Summary

Overall, participants described God as one who is loving in essence, one who loves them and takes pride in who they are, and one who remains by their side when they encounter life's evils and hardships. It is noteworthy that participants were able to name specific experiences where they encountered God's presence in ways that led them to conclude these things about God's character.

Transforming Nature of Grace

Participants also described God's grace as having had a transforming effect in their lives, sometimes in relation to the faith they experienced earlier in life and sometimes in relation to difficult experiences. This primary theme was further divided into four secondary themes: (a) grace as unearned, (b) grace as forgiveness, (c) grace as relational, (d) the ubiquity of grace.

Grace as Unearned

Many respondents noted they did not view God's grace is being transactional. One participant described this theme this way:

> I think growing up like what you, what, yeah, what do you do to become worthy? You have to prove your worth. You're having to prove your worth to God, to where now it's like kind of no matter what I do, I'm already acceptable and good. I don't have to like be,

> I don't have to be trying to be good for God. I don't have to be hustling myself in some way.

Such descriptions of grace are reminiscent of Emmons et al.'s description of grace as a "gift given unconditionally" (2017, p. 277).

Grace as Forgiveness

This theme included both forgiveness from God and interpersonal forgiveness inspired by God. For example, this participant noted that God does not count their imperfections against them:

> It's about walking in faith and that God has grace for every part of the journey. When you walk in faith, you get shit wrong because your main goal wasn't to be right. And I just realized my main goal was no longer to be right, but to be faithful, which means that there is so much grace extended over all the things that I did wrong in all the decisions that may not have been the best. And it just changed everything, truly changed everything.

Another participant demonstrated how forgiveness from God inspires interpersonal forgiveness:

> [My partner's family] kind of have become like an archetype to me of all of the things I don't like about stereotypical Christianity and which isn't super fair to just push all of that weight onto them. But dammit, I feel like they kind of do it to themselves. And so, I feel like every time I interact with them, I'm thinking about these things and I'm like, I want them to accept me and I also want to accept them. And I feel like grace has a big part to do in that kind of accepting nature or the degree to which one is able to understand grace. Like it doesn't make sense to receive a lot of grace and then not to give grace out. To me, it doesn't. And that's something that I'm constantly thinking about is like, I sometimes want to give them the middle finger and never have to speak to them again. But I also really love

> [my partner] and know that they, like that's his family. And for better, for worse, they play a huge part in [their] life.

Grace as Relational

This theme involved descriptions of God's presence manifesting in participants' relationships with other people, as well as the experience of God wanting a personal relationship with them. Some participants described God's grace as present in their loved ones' love for them, while others described God's grace as the personal experience of God's interaction with them.

> I think for me personally, I think that's become more a centerpiece of how my faith is and what I think about my own relationship with God it's something that on my own, I would just be incapable.

The Ubiquity of Grace

Often, participants narrated their initial encounters with the concept of grace in childhood as having been presented as a way to avoid damnation and attain union with God in the afterlife. In these narratives, grace was seen as a gift given on the condition of accepting a specific doctrinal belief or sacrament. Most of the participants in this study narrated a theological development in their grace narrative that culminated in a description of grace being ubiquitous regardless of doctrinal belief or religion. One participant discussed their experience with grace as being conditional as follows:

> Part of that is because I definitely have a strong, you know, lots of years believing that there's the sinner's prayer and that there has to be this moment of decision….But do I really see that God's saying, Oh, well too late? And I'm like, no, I mean that just rationally for me doesn't work out.

Alternatively, other participants described grace as being ubiquitously experienced in the everyday joys of life. Grace was viewed as being available to all people, or experienced by all people, in the present, as opposed to grace being primarily about eternal destiny. One participant described this aspect of God's grace as "even just things as simple as like beauty in the world." They continued:

> I can sort of experience God's grace in this moment here in terms of just the sort of freely given gift of life and the sense I have of the continuation of that as I like to become aware of it.

This was observed independent of any belief about a special grace being reserved for Christians.

Summary

Some participants saw themselves as being saved from their own feelings of shame or guilt. Others saw themselves as being saved from loneliness as the result of God's bestowing them with enriching social connections. Still others saw themselves as being saved from existential fear after having experienced a mystical connection with God, which provided reassurance that they were not alone in the universe, or that God was not disinterested or displeased with them.

Tensions and Struggles Related to Grace

It was not uncommon for participants to report that their beliefs about grace had also resulted in some negative feelings and struggles. This theme was further divided into three secondary themes: (a) difficulty accepting salvation by grace, (b) inclusive views of grace and salvation, and (c) reverberating doubts about more progressive views.

Difficulty Accepting Salvation by Grace

Some participants described feelings of being unworthy of God's grace or doubtful that God was gracious at all. One participant described their doubt this way: "I think I sometimes feel that I'm not worth it, that there ought to be worthy or candidates on the matter. But I don't think that makes me particularly unique." Note that the participant did not express a general belief in their unworthiness. They revealed periodic feelings of unworthiness.

Inclusive Views of Grace and Salvation

This was observed when participants described themselves as having changed in their perspective about who was eligible for God's grace and salvation. This secondary theme often overlapped with the previous secondary theme. One important difference warranted an independent subcategory. Some participants reported that they either reject the idea of a stereotypically Christian afterlife (e.g., heaven and hell) altogether, or at the very least reject hell and believe that all people will go to heaven when they die. One participant described this theme in the following way:

> I'm much more global and much more universal in terms of it's not just about Christians, it's about we're all creations of God and every one of us has that same and equal claim to his grace.

Note that this theme was identified when participants discussed the concept of salvation and the afterlife, often offered in relation to previous beliefs about grace that were closely tied to salvation and eternal consequences. Another described the concept of salvific grace as being related to in-group and out-group dynamics, rather than a doctrine:

> Some of the religious traditions, especially the more charismatic and extroverted ones that I've been part of, has these very divisionist approaches towards the human condition. That

> there are the people who are the followers and the people who aren't. Different people drew those boundaries in different places.

Elsewhere, this participant spoke more specifically and critically on the doctrine of grace being specifically related to salvation and the afterlife:

> Grace seems to imply that there is something that we don't deserve that God benevolently gives us anyway--that we're basically [filth], but God covers us with some kind of cleansing snow. Anyway, I find that really antithetical to the question of love. If there was an idea that God is the source of love, and that we are created by love and for love, then there needs to be a different economy rather than saying you're [filth], but God's nice to you anyway.

Reverberating Doubts about More Progressive Views

Participants sometimes described doubts and disbelief in their own views, even as they tended toward progressivism. One participant described this theme as follows:

> I think my only concerns with...kind of what I've just said is I don't always fully believe it in my heart. Where I wonder if it is a like, what if I'm wrong and it's a transactional belief and I didn't do that and then I'm [doomed]. I think that's a similar thing with all of these different theological concepts where I've reached a place that feels congruent, but there's still a lot of doubt because of the shadow of my upbringing in which, well, what if I am wrong and that was right, then I'm [in trouble].. So I think that's sometimes my concern...like it sounds really great. Like God does love us all and his grace covers us all. What if my conservative background is correct and this new thing is too good to be true?

Summary

Overall, participants described a range of difficulties in the way they experience grace. Some experienced fear and doubt that their eternal security might be compromised by their open acceptance of progressive ideals. Others believed in God's grace theologically, and yet experienced visceral feelings of unworthiness. Still, others, when asked if they had concerns about the idea of grace at all, expressed concerns about the idea.

Ongoing Disciplines of Grace

The final primary theme observed in the data was related to the different spiritual practices and habits that participants used to maintain their connection to God and God's grace. There were five secondary themes observed within this data category, including spiritual practices involving nature, community, learning, creative expression, and quietness or prayer.

Spiritual Practices Involving Nature

Some described nature as being a necessary or powerful contributor to their experiences of God's grace. For example: "And I would say, you know, hiking through nature, I definitely feel like I feel God more there than in a building."

Spiritual Practices of Community

Participants reported that gathering in groups of two or more contributed to their experience of God and God's grace. For example:

> I mean, I would say that I would say that there is a sense, the most palpable form of that comes when I feel like I'm in a community of truly loving people who are interested in trying the best they can to work out this we're that we're sort of trusting in. And being a part of a community of people who are interested in that as sort of where, where the identity would come in for me.

Often, participants described their communal grace experiences as being related to church attendance. However, since this category was coded anytime two or more were gathered, communal grace experiences were also observed when participants mentioned that they experience grace in their personal relationships with significant others and family.

Spiritual Practices of Learning

Other participants described efforts to experience God's grace through devotional study. For example, one participant reported, "I just value so much of just being like in the Bible, like, just like studying hardcore." Other times, participants reported that they enjoyed sermons at church, podcasts, books, or dialoguing with friends about theology.

Spiritual Practices of Creative Expression

Some reported that they experienced God through art and creativity. Most often, participants reported that music was a primary factor. For example, one participant reported, "So like going back to that first experience at that Pentecostal church when I was 10 years old and ... the vibration of the music pulled me in." Another participant described it this way:

> The spiritual pathway proposed by Ignatius of Loyola is one that says really straightforwardly, there'll be times, months, years when you go by, when you might when, the deepest question of your heart might be, "Does God exist?" And he would say, well, pray anyway. Because it might be that it can help you pay attention to that devastation. It might be that in the, uh, the emptiness of that, that you'll discover something creative or something about what it means to be human or something that is close to glory in terms of virtue and power, imagination and art.

Spiritual Practices of Prayer and Quiet

Some described prayer as a central practice of their spiritual life, often mentioning silence, solitude, or meditation as well. For example, one participant described that they get, "a lot from, like, journaling and... prayer journaling." Another participant reported:

> I see a lot of value in like the meditation kind of sitting and being still, I have found value in those as well. Meditation, contemplative kind of things. But the times when I felt like I really experienced God, it's walking the prayer labyrinth, walking in general can be a spiritual practice or yoga or anything where I'm moving any kind of movement, has been really been when I've experienced God.

Summary

Overall, participants reported a range of practices they use to maintain their relationship to God and God's grace. Some reported that walking in nature reminded them of God's beauty and blessing. Others reported that studying sacred texts and participating in theological discussion helped them know God more. Others reported that prayer, meditation, and silence aided them in maintaining an awareness of God's presence throughout the day.

Developmental Factors

Throughout the data a range of developmental factors were observed. Participants tended to report a history of conservative upbringing with regards to religion, politics, or both. As a result, participants tended to describe a developmental path that began with a sense of being different and even flawed. They also tended to report a period of questioning, beginning sometime in middle school or high school, where they began to differentiate and entertain the possibility that their sexuality and religion might not be incompatible. As a result, participants tended to describe their theology as having shifted during the process of coming out. In some

instances, participants reported ongoing strain with family members who disapproved of their sexuality. Other participants described that their family members changed their views after the participant came out, and that their family now maintains an affirming stance. Finally, a minority reported that there never was any conflict in their families regarding their sexuality.

Chapter 4

Discussion

Though qualitative data are coded by identifying distinct themes, categories do not do this data justice. Attention needs to be allocated to discussing the function of these themes in participants' lives, and how they align or inform current research. Developing these insights will prove useful as future studies move toward the destination of a structured theory, which can then be applied quantitatively.

Analyses of participants' views of God revealed a general belief that God is epitomized by love, and that God holds an affirming stance regarding their existence. Moving forward, it would be beneficial to know why participants tend toward this view, and how it is applicable.

First, participants' curiosity of God's nature makes logical sense given theological narratives of the Christian God in the United States. Given that the majority of the participants were American, it is only natural that participants would describe their contemplation of God's nature as being related to the popular conception of God as both loving and judging. This is because grace has traditionally been associated with "being saved," and that God rescues us by giving us the gift of grace. For example, one of the most famous biblical verses in modern society is John 3:16, which specifically describes God giving "his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life (NASB)." Volumes have been written on this passage, and many of them use grace to describe this gift, and why it was given.

Martin Luther, considered by many to be the first Protestant Reformer, believed that God's grace was equivalent to a human's recognition of their depravity. Luther also believed humans had no ability to recognize their sin on their own and that God's grace must be bestowed upon them in order to do this. In this way, salvation had nothing to do with a person's free will. Rather, God picked and chose who received salvation and who did not (Stolzfus, 2003). Furthermore, Jonathan Edwards, one of the most influential Christian theologians of the 18th century, wrote in his *Religious Affections,* that the more aware a person is of their need for grace, the more they will be aware that they are "infinitely deformed because of [their] sin" (Edwards, 1746, p.148). Likewise, the famous 20th century evangelist, Billy Graham, said this about grace: "We deserve to die for our sins—but in His grace, God sent His Son into the world to die in our place." While there are numerous theologies about grace within Christianity, many of which are not concerned with the concept of salvation or sin, it is evident that a penal theology of grace has been passed down to the present day; it is tied explicitly to the idea that people are not only undeserving of grace, but also deserving of judgment. In such theologies, grace attains a purifying function whereby the person is transformed into a more holy version of themselves. Thus, one often hears the recital of 2 Corinthians 5:17: "the old has gone and the new has come."

Participants did report a sense of transformation pursuant to a graceful experience with God. In some instances, these narratives seemed to fall in line with the conventional, penal views of grace. Yet, these similarities were usually only on the surface. For example, participants usually referenced the concept of forgiveness in their grace narratives. This calls back to the theology of grace passed down through American culture. However, participants tended not to narrate forgiveness as being saved from hell. Rather, they viewed God's forgiveness as a sudden awareness that they were already accepted, and that God loves them despite their imperfections.

Furthermore, participants also described a felt awareness that God never held anything against them in the first place, and that they did not earn God's favor, nor did they ever need to. Thus, in the eyes of the participants, the transformative nature of God's grace is similar to the Rogerian notion that unconditional positive regard will naturally lead to human flourishing (Emmons et al., 2017).

The felt awareness that they were accepted by God allowed participants to move forward with a new sense of self-worth, often remediating issues related to mood disorder, eating disorder, and suicidality. These narratives are conspicuously different from traditional narratives of grace, where grace is spoken of as a felt awareness of one's depravity that pushes one to accept God as sovereign so that they might be saved from hell.

Unsurprisingly, participants also narrated a felt sense of struggle related to grace and their acceptance by God. Many participants reported that they had difficulty coming to terms with this new notion that they are loved by God just the way they are. Even participants who reported profound mystical experiences, where they felt God's unconditional love for them, tended to report alternative experiences where they doubted in God's approval or worried that their experience was mistaken. Often, participants explicitly linked these feelings to their upbringing in more traditional church environments where it was not only common to contemplate one's depravity and inadequacy, but it was equated with God's gift of grace itself. In this way, participants narrated self-experiences and mystical experiences that directly contradicted the theological conventions in their upbringing. Feeling the need to reconcile these two theologies, and decide which one is right, is only natural to a reasonable mind.

One common way participants seemed to reconcile this contradiction was to alter the meaning of salvation and sin. Emmons et al. (2017) notes that Christianity explicitly ties grace to

the concept of sin and forgiveness. In the present study, grace was also mentioned in relation to sin, but more as a relational experience than a transactional one. Penal theologies describe grace as God trading eternal life in exchange for allegiance. In contrast, participants in this study tended toward a relational view where the function of Christ's life and death was not to save humankind from an angry God (sometimes referred to as God the Father), but instead to bring a message to all people that God loves them, is patient with them as they grow, and desires to be nothing but kind to them.

In this way, participants were not escaping an eternal hell. Rather, they were escaping a present hell—one experienced as feelings of inescapable shame, guilt, and existential precariousness. Theologies of grace that are explanatory of these experiences sit firmly within the bounds of Christian theological discourse, though they might be absent in some American Protestant churches. For example, the feminist Catholic theologian Catherine Mowry LaCugna (1991) described God's interaction with people in a way that is reflective of the participants' narratives:

> God does not have to be loved in order to love. This is not the situation of the creature who learns to love in response to being loved. God *is* Love itself and the origin of Love, that is to say, God is the origin of existence. (p. 303, Emphasis in the original)

Therefore, the narratives provided by participants in this study are not only personally meaningful to them, but representative of Christian theological discourses in the past.

Participants also reported fulfilling spiritual lives. Most participants reported regular church attendance and spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, theological study, and creative expression. These practices are thousands of years old and soundly represented in Christian history (Foster, 1978). In this study, the function of participants' spiritual practice

seemed to be the maintenance of their felt association with God in day to day life. They reported feelings of affirmation from God, awareness of God's presence through beauty, gratitude, and remembrance of God's support during difficult times. A characteristic of these common experiences is that they were not ecstatic and frenzied, but introduced a feeling of social, emotional, and cognitive stability. Such narratives allude to what Abraham Maslow (1964) termed "plateau experiences":

> This is serene and calm rather than a poignantly emotional, climactic, autonomic response to the miraculous, the awesome, the sacralized, the Unitive, the B-values. So far as I can now tell, the high plateau-experience *always* has a noetic and cognitive element, which is not always true for peak experiences, which can be purely and exclusively emotional. It is far more voluntary than peak experiences are. One can learn to see in this Unitive way almost at will. It then becomes a witnessing, an appreciating, what one might call a serene, cognitive blissfulness. (pp. 11-12)

From the perspective of Maslow, the spiritual habits and successive experiences of the participants in this study are not only "good," but mature and advanced.

Finally, participants narrated complex experiences during their spiritual practices. Many contemplated beauty, God's presence in other human beings, God's presence in nature, art, and science. Such processes are reminiscent of the individuative-reflective and conjunctive stages of faith development described by James Fowler (2001). The individuative-reflective stages were observed when participants reported a process differentiating from the beliefs and values passed down to them and creating a new set of values regarding gender, sexuality, and Christianity. In other narratives, the conjunctive stage of faith development was evidenced in narratives, for

example, where participants were able to experience feelings of forgiveness, affection, and retain fulfilling relationships with family members who continued to reject their sexuality.

Thus, it does not appear that the participants of this study were nominally Christian or misguided, but well within the bounds of Christian tradition. Furthermore, many appeared to be relatively advanced in their faith development, and they tended to report that their process of coming out was a catalyst for this transformation.

Clinical Implications

A key imperative for qualitative research is to observe a phenomenon and catalogue it for the purposes of developing a construct, which can then be studied quantitatively. The results of these quantitative analyses can then be used for the purposes of research, consultation, and clinical work. However, one need not wait for quantitative analysis to draw therapeutic implications from this data when contextualized in the present body of research. The data gathered by this study has important implications for clinical work.

First, while it may be necessary for some who identify as LGBTQ to leave their religious or spiritual practices, it is important for psychotherapists to recognize the loss inherent in such a decision. Participants reported that a loss of their ability to authentically practice their religion was similar to a loss of their ability to express their sexuality. Simply ceasing their practice of Christianity was not perceived as an option for the participants of this study. Many participants in the present study reported their faith communities to be important in their maintenance of awareness of God's love for them.

Second, religion and spirituality are distinct in various ways, and this distinction may be particularly important among those who identify as LGBTQ. Stern and Wright (2018) note the positive effects of spiritual practice and the negative effects of religiosity on the LGBTQ

community. Many participants in the present study spoke affirmingly of both religion and spirituality, though certainly their views of religion changed in the process of coming out. One possible explanation for this is a nuanced difference in terms. Lefevor et al. (2019) noted that the congregation-level affirmation of the LGBTQ identity predicted more positive attitudes amongst the individual congregants. This speaks to the possibility that religiosity itself is not inherently destructive to one's LGBTQ identity, but rather it is the social environment of religious meetings and rituals that may be destructive. Clinicians should be aware of the potential positive mental health effects of their patient's religious congregation, rather than assuming religious involvement is consistently positive or negative.

Third, therapists should include an assessment of the patient's religious and spiritual involvement during intake. Terepka and Hatfield (2020) reported that a large majority of people consider their religion to be an important aspect of their mental health, but therapists are less likely to mention it at intake. Further, patients who were asked about religion at intake perceived a stronger therapeutic relationship than those who were not asked. Thus, an assessment of one's religious affiliation is clinically indicated. Due to the complexity inherent to being part of both the LGBTQ and Christian communities, it may be even more important for therapists to explore this with their LGBTQ patients.

Fourth, congregational opposition to the LGBTQ identity carries a stronger message than simply requesting that congregants not fall in love with people of the same sex. Participants reported that as they came to realize the reality of their sexuality, they also became aware of feelings of deep shame. Bjork-James (2018) reported evidence that some Christian sects view sexuality as an expression of moral allegiance (or lack thereof), as opposed to a self-expression of one's humanity. This dynamic contributes to the alienation of LGBTQ individuals from some

Christian congregations because of their perceived disobedience of God's wishes. This disobedience then becomes grounds for exclusion. In Christianity, the church (in whatever form) is considered to be the Body of Christ. Therefore, exclusion from "the Church" is akin to damnation in this life and the next. The result of congregational exclusion is a person who feels like they have not only been deemed deviant, but one who also feels like they are essentially worthless and unlovable. Such hegemony not only affects one's view of their sexuality, but their basic sense of self-worth. Clinicians should be aware that religiously oriented strain between their LGBTQ patients and their congregations will likely be affecting multiple layers of their patient's identity development.

Finally, participants' description of grace as a sudden awareness of feeling unconditionally accepted is reminiscent of a former literature regarding the concept of acceptance in the therapeutic relationship. Sandor Ferenczi, a psychoanalytic contemporary of Sigmund Freud (who later ousted Ferenczi), rejected Freud's conception of analytic neutrality and compared the therapist's communication of love to "glue" that mended a broken psyche (Schneiderman, 1989). Otto Rank, likewise, named love as a key therapeutic factor (Rank, 1996). Finally, Carl Rogers, who was deeply influenced by an interaction and pursuant friendship with Rank, famously established unconditional positive regard as an evidenced based intervention (Kramer, 1995).

More recently, Bland (Bland, 2009, p. 334) described the impact of environments that insinuate that their members "not be who you are." He goes on to describe how partial disavowal of one's self leads to shame and guilt caused by the collision between accepted and unaccepted parts of self. The antidote to this malady is the therapist's acceptance of all the patient's parts of self. The impact of such a sensibility is that patients feel more comfortable processing their

shame in the presence of someone else whom they know will not add to their shame. Bland terms this sensibility, grace.

An important takeaway for clinicians is the importance of maintaining an accepting (i.e. graceful) sensibility within their therapeutic relationships. Clinical empathy is sometimes insinuated as a simple parroting of feelings, designed to fill the space between interventions. However, a powerful factor present in participants' grace experience was a visceral knowledge of their acceptance by God. It seems that feeling accepted may be more therapeutic than a simple cognitive understanding of one's acceptance by another. This necessitates that the therapist do their own personal work to shape a sensibility within themselves that communicates to their patients, on a level deeper than verbal, that the patient has inherent worth. Grace is not understood, it is felt.

Limitations

Several limitations to this study should be noted. A large majority of the participants in this study reported a high level of education, often in theology-related disciplines. It is unclear if education alters faith narratives within the LGBTQ population, but the sample is not particularly representative in this regard.

It should also be noted that the majority of participants were primarily claiming Protestant faith backgrounds and congregational membership. People from other denominations within Christianity might narrate grace differently. For example, not all sects of Christianity preach a doctrine of salvation by grace alone. So, it might be that salvation and grace are not as tied in other Christian bodies compared to those that are Protestant and located in the United States. A large portion of participants were also cisgender male, and so future research should include greater gender diversity as well.

While a quantitative study's goal is to generalize a theory, a qualitative study's goal is to describe. Therefore, while it is noted that certain portions of the LGBTQ community are not represented in this study, it is important to reiterate that these results allow for future research to be built upon it so that LGBTQ people with other religious and spiritual affiliations can also be studied.

Conclusion

The results of this study hold potential clinical implications for LGBTQ clients and therapists. While it might seem reasonable for psychotherapists to discourage religion and/or spirituality when working with a LGBTQ client who has felt damaged by religion, the narratives reported here suggest otherwise. Religious involvement in an affirming faith community can be a positive support structure for LGBTQ people. The results also point to the importance of a felt sense of acceptance by God in the lives of those who are practicing Christians. Finally, we see promising possibilities for how the Christian notion of grace might be generalizable to the psychotherapy room.

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Appendix A

Grace Project Semi-Structured Interview

1. CHRISTIANITY

Please tell me the story of how your experience as a Christian has played out in your life?

Potential Prompts: Have there been particular turning points or dramatic shifts along the way?

2. YOUR VIEW OF GOD

In your view, what is God like? Can you think of a particular story or example that has helped you understand God?

Potential Prompts: What events or relationships in your life have helped you understand God better? [Try to get a story or two.]

3. GOD'S VIEW OF YOU

We've talked a bit about how you view God. How does God feel about you? Again, a story or example would be very helpful.

Potential Prompts: What sort of experiences have shaped your understanding of how God feels about you? [Try to get a story or two.] Does God's view of you change? How or why?

4. SAVING GRACE

[I've heard you mention the word grace] OR [Christians often speak of grace]. Christian theologians often mention the concept of salvation by grace. What does it mean for you to be saved by grace? And not just what does it mean in your in terms of theological knowledge, but what does that mean to your own personal identity?

Potential Prompt: Was there a moment or experience during which you encountered God's grace in a life-altering way? Can you tell me how it happened? How did this encounter impact or change you? What role does God play in this saving grace? What role do you play? In your view, is this grace related to heaven or the afterlife?

5. ACCEPTING GRACE

Do you find it difficult to accept God's offer of salvation by grace? Are there concerns that the term raises in your thinking or in your experience?

Potential Prompt: Do you face certain obstacles that makes it hard for you to accept the notion of salvation by grace?

6. TELEOLOGY/SANCTIFYING GRACE

We've just discussed the idea of being saved by God's grace. Are there other ways you experience God's grace in an ongoing way in your life?

Potential Prompt: Can you give an example [or tell me a story] from the last few days or weeks where you have seen the sort of grace you are discussing?

7. SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE

What is the hardest thing you have ever gone through? Did it change your experience in being a Christian?

Potential Prompt: Did this create tensions in your faith? Where was God in all of this? Did it change your understanding of God?

8. COMMON GRACE

How does God feel about those are not Christian? Does this topic of grace apply to those outside the Christian faith?

Potential Prompt: Can you give an example or tell a story?

9. EXPLICIT/IMPLICIT VIEWS OF GOD

Sometimes what people believe in their head about God doesn't fully match what they experience in their experience of God. On the topic of grace, how does your head knowledge and your experience of God differ, and how are they the same?

Potential Prompt: Can you give an example or tell a story?

10. SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Are there particular spiritual practices that you find helpful in experiencing God's grace? If so, talk some about how you experience that practice.

Potential Prompt: How does this practice help you understand God? How does it help you understand yourself?

Appendix B

Curriculum Vitae

Nick Schollars

607 E. 3rd St.

Newberg, OR 97132

nschollars16@georgefox.edu

Education

MA, George Fox University, Clinical Psychology, 2018.

MS, Evangel University, Clinical Mental Health Counseling, 2016.

BS, Evangel University, Psychology, 2014.

Dissertation

Schollars, N., McMinn, M., Thurston, N., & Gathercoal, K. (2020). *Experiences of Grace as Told by the LGBTQ Community*. Completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Clinical Psychology at George Fox University.

Professional Associations

American Psychological Association

Member, 2014 to present.

Christian Association for Psychological Studies

Member, 2016 to present.

Grants

John Templeton Foundation, Project Amazing Grace, Funded Dissertation, 2020

Supervised Clinical Experience

Portland Mental Health, Psychology Extern, 2019 to 2020.

Washington State University—Vancouver Campus, Practicum Student, Counseling Services, 2018-2019.

Rural Child and Adolescent Psychological Services, Practicum Student, Gaston School District, 2017-2018.

Supplemental Practicum Experience

George Fox University, Behavioral Health Clinic, Provided periodic assessments.

George Fox University, Health and Counseling Center, Supplemental Practicum Student, 2016-2017.

Book Chapters

McMinn, M. R., Neff, M.A., Snow, K. N., & **Schollars, N.** (in press). Counseling within and across faith traditions. In L. Miller (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Psychology of Spirituality* (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford.

Academic Positions

George Fox University Social Work Department, Adjunct Professor

Classes Taught: *Death, Grief, and Loss* (Spring 2020)

George Fox University Graduate School of Professional Psychology, Teaching Assistant

Classes: *Psychodynamic Psychotherapy* (Spring 2019)

Bible Survey (Fall 2019)

Presentations

Thurston, N., Wade, L., King., A Shim, P., **Schollars, N.,** Neff, M.A., (2019) *Managing the issue of clinician religious disclosure with diverse clients in the current political climate from a psychodynamic frame*. Paper presented at the Christian Association of Psychological Studies annual conference, Dallas, TX.

McMinn, M., Webster, K., Wade, L., **Schollars, N.** (2018) *Countours of grace: An exploratory qualitative study*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Christian Association for Psychological Studies. Norfolk, VA.

Posters

Schollars, N., Webster, K., McMinn, M., & Sallee, C. (2020). *Encounters of Grace and Therapeutic Implications.* Poster presented at the Christian Association of Psychological Sciences Annual Conference.

Schollars, N. (2019). *Daoism and the happy fish: The transforming power of diversity in Christian integration*. Poster presented at the Christian Association of Psychological Sciences Annual Conference.

McMinn, M. R., Sallee, C., **Schollars, N.,** Wade, L., & Webster, K. T. (August, 2018). Experiences of divine and human grace. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association. San Francisco, CA.