



# Forgiveness: Moderating the Relationship Between Coming Out and Shame Due to Heterosexism

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## Introduction

Individuals who live openly as lesbian, gay and bisexual (lgb) may experience discrimination and be stigmatized, which may cause emotional distress (Szymanski, 2008). They quickly learn that homosexuality is a powerfully shameful condition that can lead to feelings of self-hatred that impact public health issues of suicide and substance use (Herek, 1991; Chow, 2010).

Those with high levels of shame are more likely to postpone coming out or avoid coming out at all (Brown and Trevethan, 2010). Individuals who are more out typically report less stress, and fewer symptoms of depression or anxiety (Jordan and Deluty 1998; Lewis et al. 2001; Mohr and Fassinger 2003). Other studies linked greater outness with psychological well-being and improved quality of life (Halpin and Allen 2004; LaSala 2000; Monroe 2001; Savin-Williams 2001).

Sexual identity development is highly stressful (Boon and Miller 1999; LaSala 2000) but may lead to growth-enhancement (Balsam 2003; Halpin and Allen 2004; Konik and Stewart 2004; Moradi et al. 2009; Riggle et al. 2008).

Recently, researchers suggest that forgiveness (the process of letting go of anger and resentment) can decrease depression, anxiety and anger (Thompson, Snyder, Hoffman et al., 2005), and promote wellbeing (McCarthy, 2008).

## Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 – Forgiveness has an inverse relationship with Shame Due to Heterosexism

Hypothesis 2 – Coming Out has an inverse relationship with Shame Due to Heterosexism

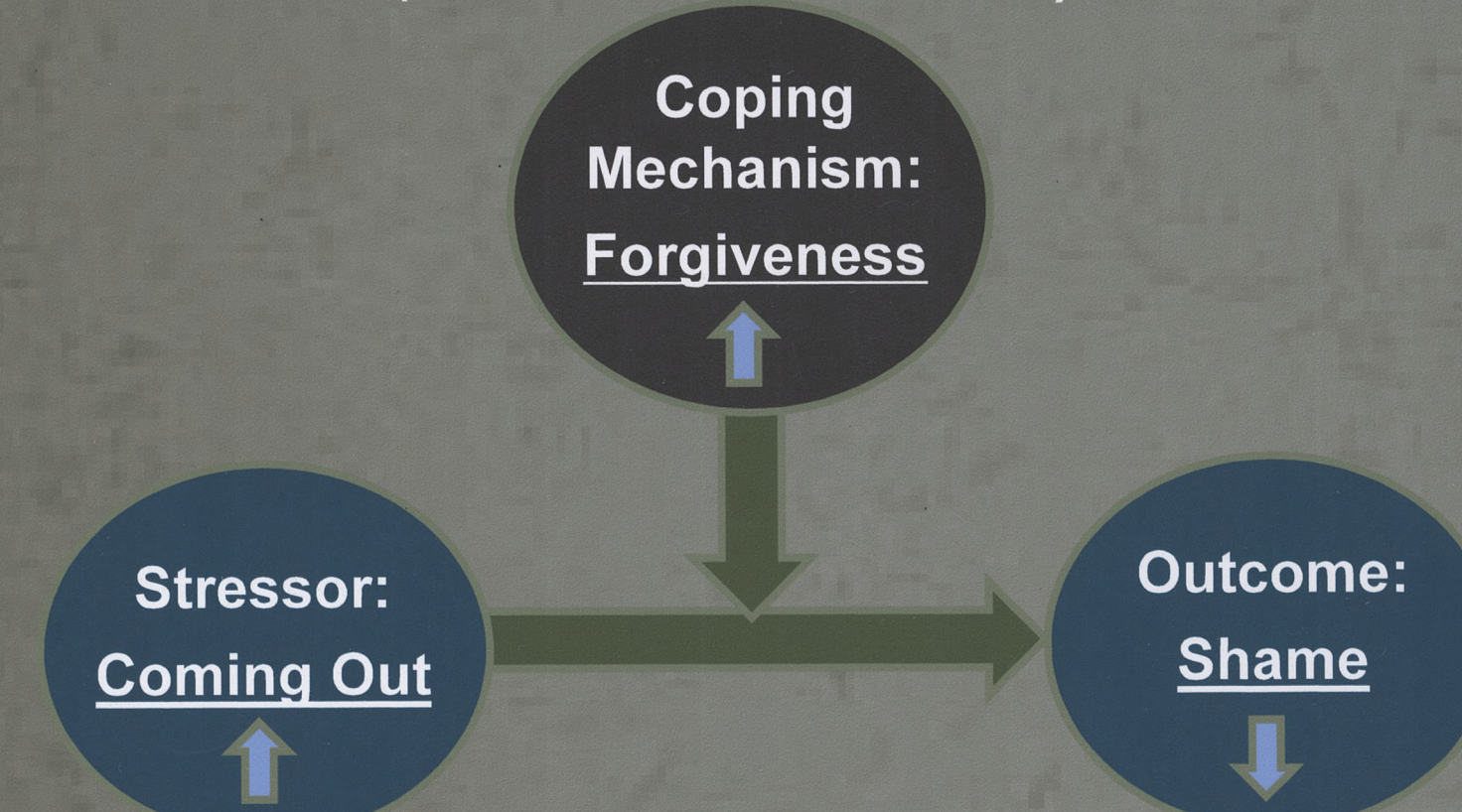
Hypothesis 3 – There is a positive relationship between Forgiveness and Coming Out

Hypothesis 4 – Forgiveness moderates the relationship between Coming Out as an openly lgb person and Shame Due to Heterosexism

Hypothesis 5 – Coming Out and Forgiveness account for a significant proportion of the variance in Shame Due to Heterosexism

## Model

Based on the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Cohen, 1977)



## Method

The study involved 125 participants who completed a survey-based research project that examined psychosocial and behavioral factors associated with wellness and health of lgb communities.

After IRB approval, Project HEALTH recruited from various lgb organizations within the Dallas/Fort-Worth metropolitan area. Participants provided signed informed consent and received a \$25 incentive to complete surveys.

## Measures

### The Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson et al., 2005, $\alpha = .92$ )

- Measures forgiveness of oneself, other people and uncontrollable situations
- 18 item scale
- 7 point likert-type scale (1 = almost always false of me, 7 = almost always true of me)
- Higher scores indicate greater levels of forgiveness
- Concurrent validity was established
- Example: "It's really hard for me to accept myself once I've messed up."

### Coming Out Questions (Demographic Measure)

- Participants reported whether or not they considered themselves as being out about their sexual orientation by a simple Yes or No answer
- Follow up questions were given to all participants to measure their degree of being out
- 1 = Out to No One, 10 = Out to Everyone

### Shame Due to Heterosexism Scale (Dickey-Chasins, 2001, $\alpha = .87$ )

- Measures the level of shame lesbians and gay men experience from heterosexism
- 11 item scale
- 5 point likert-type scale (1 = Never, 5 = Always)
- Higher scores indicate greater levels of shame
- Good construct validity
- Example: "I feel disappointed in myself for being gay/lesbian."

## Demographics

	n= 125
Gender:	
Female	64 (51.2%)
Orientation	
Lesbian	38 (30.4%)
Gay	50 (40.0%)
Bisexual	37 (29.6%)
Male	11 (29.7%)
Ethnicity:	
Black or African-American	15 (12.0%)
European-American	83 (66.4%)
Hispanic/Latino	15 (12.0%)
Asian or Asian-American	5 (4.0%)
Other	7 (5.6%)
Income:	
Over 10K	78 (62.4%)

	Mean (SD)	Range
Age (Years)	31 (13)	18-73
Income (Dollars)	35,523 (50,583)	0-390,000

## Results



### Univariate Statistics

	Mean (SD)	Possible Range	Actual Range	$\alpha$
1. Coming Out	7.81 (2.67)	1-10	1-10	-
2. Forgiveness	90.30 (15.22)	18-126	46-123	.86
3. Shame	21.94 (6.70)	11-55	11-45	.83

### Bivariate Statistics

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age	-										
2. Gender	-.22*	-									
3. European American	.06	.06	-								
4. Black or African American	-.02	-.01	-.52**	-							
5. Hispanic/Latino	-.03	.04	-.52**	-.14	-						
6. Over 10K	.35**	-.18*	-.03	-.02	.19*	-					
7. Bisexual	-.20*	.24**	.05	.03	-.13	-.26**	-				
8. Lesbian	-.03	.61**	.03	-.08	.13	-.20	-.43**	-			
9. Gay	.21*	-.79**	-.08	.05	.00	.33**	-.53**	-.54**	-		
10. Coming Out	-.16	-.21*	.20*	-.12	-.20*	-.05	-.24**	.05	.17	-	
11. Forgiveness	.15	.04	.14	-.21*	.06	.00	-.07	.10	-.03	.06	-
12. Shame	.16	.07	-.19*	.07	.10	.02	.21*	-.12	-.09	-.53**	-.23**

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

### Regression Analysis

	B	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
1. Age	.14	1.63	.11	.81	1.23
2. Black or African American	-.03	-.40	.69	.92	1.09
3. Hispanic/Latino	.02	.29	.77	.87	1.14
4. Other	.01	.15	.88	.93	1.07
5. Over 10K	-.06	-.67	.50	.81	1.23
6. Coming Out	-.49	-6.22	.00	.90	1.11
7. Forgiveness	-.23	-2.96	.00	.91	1.10

(adj.  $R^2 = .30$ ,  $F(7, 117) = 8.51$ ,  $p < .001$ )

### Moderation Analysis

	B	t	Sig.
1. Coming Out	.51	1.04	.30
2. Forgiveness	.29	1.10	.27
3. Coming Out x Forgiveness	-1.16	-2.09	.04

(adj.  $R^2 = .32$ ,  $F(8, 116) = 8.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2$  Change = .31)

## Discussion

Hypothesis 1 Supported- Forgiveness has an inverse relationship with Shame Due to Heterosexism

Hypothesis 2 Supported- Coming Out has an inverse relationship with Shame Due to Heterosexism

Hypothesis 3 Not Supported- No significant positive relationship exists between Forgiveness and Coming Out

Hypothesis 4 Supported- Forgiveness moderates the relationship between Coming Out as an openly lgb person and Shame Due to Heterosexism

Hypothesis 5 Supported- Coming Out and Forgiveness account for a significant proportion of the variance in Shame Due to Heterosexism

Overall, our results suggest that lgb individuals who report higher levels of Forgiveness and Coming Out also report lower levels of Shame; however, Forgiveness is not correlated with Coming Out. Forgiveness is the moderator and when combined with Coming Out, the level of Shame Due to Heterosexism decreases.

When adaptive coping skills, such as forgiveness, are not used during the coming out phase, shameful feelings about oneself may emerge. Therefore, the process of forgiveness may have promising implications for lgb who experience stress (McCarthy, 2010).

## Future Research

Future research should examine the fundamental reasons and other potential factors as to why an lgb individual chooses to come out. Also, investigation of specific forgiveness subscales (self, others, and situation) may lead to a better understanding of the relationship between Forgiveness and Shame.

Future research should compare individuals' levels of social support and loneliness with their forgiveness and shame in the coming out process. Furthermore, outcomes and coping mechanisms associated with Shame Due to Heterosexism and depression need further attention.



## Limitations

Bias response may result from the use of self-reported data. These results lack generalizability due to the limited geographical region involved in the participant recruitment process. Due to our cross-sectional correlational design, we cannot infer causality from our results.

## Acknowledgments

Thanks to all participants and members of The Center for their contribution to Project HEALTH. Also, I want to thank The Center members and faculty for their help with preparation of this poster.

## References

Please refer to handout



