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# Religious adolescents think negative of homosexuality but act supportive to lesbians and gays



All monotheist religions' Holy Scriptures include sections that can be interpreted as prohibiting (male) homosexual behavior. Thus, not surprisingly, **religious people** on average have more negative attitudes to lesbians and gays than non-religious people (Whitley, 2009). However, the phrase „Love the sinner, hate the sin.“ implies that religious people should be able to distinguish between homosexuality as a behavior and gays and lesbians as persons. And indeed, the negative effect of religiousness is more pronounced for the moral and legal evaluation of homosexuality (**cognitive attitudes**) than for affective reactions to (imagined contact with) gay and lesbian persons (**affective attitudes**; Bosetti, Voci, & Pagotto, 2011; Veenvliet, 2008).

The present study seeks to complement these results on attitudes by also analyzing effects on (peer reported) behavior to lesbians and gays. The commandment of love suggests to support people in need. Thus, religious people might not **behave more discriminatory against lesbians and gays** in interpersonal contact, but possibly even **more supportive of targets of discrimination**.

Given that religious people have more negative (cognitive) attitudes to lesbians and gays, (how) can this negative effect be deactivated? There is evidence that **personal contact to lesbians and gays** is more effective in reducing prejudice for religious fundamentalists (Cunningham, & Melton, 2013). The present study tested this moderating effect on different aspects of attitudes as well as on behavior to lesbians and gays.

## Methods

### Sample

- 513 ninth/tenth graders from 26 classes of 10 schools in Berlin (all school types except special schools)
  - assessment (mostly online) in class setting during school time
  - 32 excluded due to self-reported comprehension problems (19), insufficient effort responding (14, Huang, Curran, Keeney, Poposki & DeShon, 2011) and/or response patterns (3)
- Age:  $M = 15.2$  years old ( $SD = 1.0$  years)
- Sex: 49% male, 45% female, 6% no (serious) answer

### Measures

#### Religiousness (Religiositäts-Struktur-Test, Huber, 2008)

7 items, different approval and frequency scales, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$   
„How strongly do you believe that god or something divine exists?“  
„How often do you pray or meditate?“ „How often do you participate in services, shared prayers or temple rituals?“

Religious affiliation	N		Religiousness (z-scores)	
	N	%	M	SD
Christianity	172	36.1	0.3	0.8
Islam	86	18.1	1.2	0.7
Other	13	2.7	0.4	0.6
No affiliation	205	43.1	-0.8	0.6
Total	476	100	0.0	1.0

#### Contact to lesbians, gays, and bisexuals

8 items, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$

„Do you personally know women or girls (men or boys) of whom you know they are lesbian (gay / bisexual) ... How many do you know? ... How many hours have you talked to them within the last three months?“

#### Cognitive attitudes to lesbians and gays

7 items, approval scales: 0 to 4,  $M = 3.0$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .94$   
„Lesbian couples should be allowed to marry with the same rights as in marriages between man and woman.“ „Gay couples ...“

#### Affective attitudes to lesbians and female bisexuals

5 items, evaluation scales: -2 (very uncomfortable) to +2 (very comfortable),  $M = -0.3$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .81$

„How would you feel in the following situations? You learn that one of your friends is lesbian.“ „... is bisexual.“

#### Affective attitudes to gays and male bisexuals

5 items, evaluation scales: -2 (very uncomfortable) to +2 (very comfortable),  $M = -0.5$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$

„... You learn that one of your friends is gay.“ „... is bisexual.“

#### Implicit attitudes to lesbians (vs. heterosexuals)

Affective Misattribution Procedure (Payne et al., 2005) with romantic couples as primes: 21 lesbian couples (54% positive evaluations,  $\alpha = .88$ ) vs. 17 heterosexual couples (70% positive evaluations,  $\alpha = .84$ )

#### Implicit attitudes to gays (vs. heterosexuals)

... 25 gay couples (39% positive evaluations,  $\alpha = .93$ )

#### Discriminatory behavior to lesbians, gays & gender-nonconf. beh.

7 items, peer reports, different frequency scales, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$   
„Within the last 12 months, I have perceived classmate X to make fun of a boy who behaved as a girl.“ „... make jokes on gays or lesbians.“

#### Supportive behavior to lesbians and gays

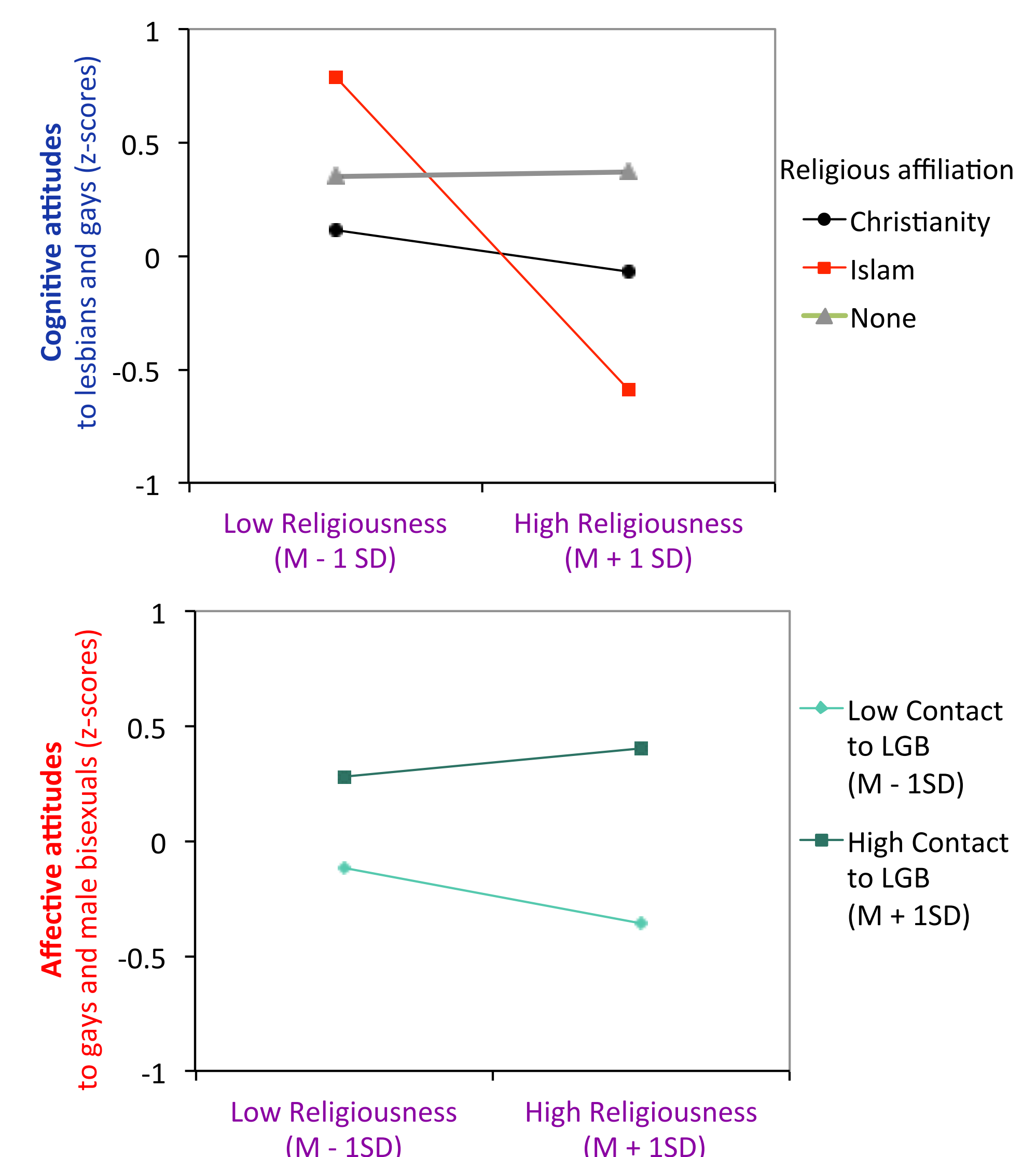
5 items, peer reports, different frequency scales, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .66$   
„... say s/he thinks that gays are okay.“ „... lesbians are okay.“ „... say s/he likes a person who was deemed to be gay.“ „... to be lesbian.“ „... show disapproval when somebody was teased for being lesbian or gay.“

## Results

### Multilevel analyses with students nested in classes

To enable a comparison between coefficients, all variables were z-standardized before analyses.

	Cognitive attitudes to lesbians and gays	Affective attitude to lesbians and female bisexuals	Affective attitude to gays and male bisexuals	Implicit attitude to lesbians (vs. heterosexuals)	Implicit attitude to gays (vs. heterosexuals)	Discriminatory behavior to LG & gender-nonconf. beh.	Supportive behavior to lesbians and gays
Male sex (vs. female)	*** -0.25	*** 0.25	*** -0.53	** 0.17	* -0.15	*** 0.26	-0.02
Age	-0.06	* 0.12	0.03	-0.02	-0.02	0.05	0.04
Educational level	** 0.14	-0.01	** 0.12	* 0.16	0.16	0.07	* 0.13
Economic situation	-0.05	0.02	0.01	-0.10	-0.08	0.06	-0.02
General hostile behavior						*** 0.50	0.06
General friendly behavior						0.08	*** 0.32
Christian affiliation	* -0.11	-0.02	0.00	0.02	0.06	-0.06	-0.06
Islamic affiliation	** -0.21	-0.15	-0.06	-0.22	-0.09	* 0.19	-0.09
Religiousness	* -0.15	-0.11	-0.03	-0.04	-0.05	0.06	* 0.15
Contact to lesbians, gays, and bisexuals	*** 0.16	*** 0.23	*** 0.29	0.05	0.01	-0.01	*** 0.18
Religiousness x Christian affiliation	-0.03	-0.01	0.08	-0.07	0.05	-0.03	0.04
Religiousness x Islamic affiliation	** -0.17	-0.11	-0.07	-0.03	-0.04	-0.11	0.01
Religiousness x contact to LGB	0.05	-0.02	** 0.09	-0.05	0.01	0.00	0.08



## Summary and Discussion

The results show that religiously inspired opposition to equal rights of gays and lesbians does not imply more hostile and less friendly reactions in direct encounters with them: More religious Muslim adolescents think more negative of homosexuality in terms of a moral devaluation, requests to change sexual orientation and rejection of equal rights (**cognitive attitudes**). However, religious adolescents did not express more discomfort when they imagine to have personal contact with a lesbian, gay or bisexual person (**affective attitudes**) and also their automatic affective reactions were not more negative (implicit attitudes). Their classmates described them as not more hostile (**discriminatory behavior**) but, to

the contrary, as even more supportive to lesbians, gays, and gender non-conforming people (**supportive behavior**).

The negative effect of religiousness on cognitive attitudes only occurred for Muslim but not for Christian adolescents. This fits to an earlier study with adolescents in Berlin showing that the negative effect of religiousness on attitudes to lesbians and gays was stronger when they had a migration background from Turkey (Simon, 2008). Probably, the negative effect only occurs above a certain level of religiousness. In secular Berlin, this level is exceeded only by Muslim adolescents, whereas in more religious countries (e.g. in the USA), it is also exceeded by Christians.

Finally religious adolescents were more responsive to personal contact with lesbian, gay and bisexual persons at least in its effect on affective attitudes to gays and male bisexuals. Possibly, personal contact prevents that gay and bisexual men were devalued on the basis of the religiously inspired moral devaluation of homosexual behavior.

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