

13. Multiple layers of influence



Religion

Some days the whole issue of homosexuality makes me feel depressed, alone and confused. I've been to the point where I've felt like it needs to end, that I shouldn't have to suffer like this. But there are two things that always have gotten me through the tough times. These are: 1 I would cause a lot of harm in my family. And 2 that God does not give a man more than he can handle. Therefore what ever comes my way, God will get me through it. (Daniel, 20 years)

Key Findings

Those who mentioned religion (n=267) were:

- More likely to feel bad about their same sex attraction.
- More likely to have experienced social exclusion or had to tolerate homophobic language from friends.
- More likely to report homophobic abuse in the home.
- More likely to report feeling unsafe at home.
- More likely to not be supported by their mother, father, brother, teacher or student welfare coordinator/counsellor, when disclosing their SSA.
- More likely to report thoughts of self harm and suicide or to carry out self harm.

Despite the gradual liberalization of some religious denominations and increasing social change within Australian society, religion is still correlating negatively with the health and wellbeing of SSAGQ young people. Although we did not ask any question regarding religion, a significant number of young people mentioned religious discourse within their qualitative responses. For the purpose of analysis, those who used religious discourse of any sort were classified as 'religious' and the rest as 'not religious', although we appreciate that many young people so classified may indeed be religious. The critical element for us was whether or not they used religion in their discourses to describe their journey, or to tell their story, as we reasoned that those who did, saw religion as an important issue. While Christianity was the major religion specifically mentioned in these data, many participants just referred to religion which may not have always been Christianity. Young people most frequently mentioned religion when responding to the questions on self harm and feelings about their sexuality. A conflict between same sex attraction and religion occurred frequently in regard to family, friends, school, and an internal conflict with their own personal faith.

While some churches in Australia have shed themselves of homophobic beliefs and now include LGBT people in all aspects of church life, others remain steadfast to their traditions and are increasingly out

of step with both science and Australian law. Homosexuality has not been considered a mental illness for some time, nor has it been a crime anywhere in Australia for thirteen years. Recent changes to Australia federal law saw same sex partners recognized as de-facto spouses, and same sex marriage has increasingly become legal around the world. Nevertheless, some SSAGQ young people who are involved in religion in Australia are often forced to negotiate their sexuality within the confines of a belief system that threatens an eternity in 'hell' for the feelings they experience as unavoidable. SSAGQ young people who accept their sexuality often face condemnation from their family and friends as well as from their religious community and may experience increased isolation and shame in the very places that are supposed to be supportive and safe: their school, church and home.

Feelings about sexuality

Our study showed that compared to those who did not mention religion, those who did, were less likely to feel good (67% v 80%), and more likely to feel bad (8% v 3%) about their same sex attraction. Like many SSAGQ young people who mentioned religion, Oscar tried desperately to change his sexuality but found himself in an impossible situation, becoming depressed and alienated, leaving him with no other option but to renounce his faith, all before the age of 14:

I kept on telling myself that homosexuality was immoral and wrong, and I prayed and told myself that I liked people of the opposite sex. This caused me a great deal of depression and alienation from my peers... Being a Christian made me hate myself and who I was, and I really believed that God could change me. By the time I hit puberty I had renounced my faith and accepted myself for who I was. (Oscar, 14 years)

Joshua had a similar response when asked how he felt about his same sex attraction:

When I was a religious person I thought it was horrible and spent two years trying to 'cure' myself to no avail, which led me into deep depression. (Joshua, 16 years)

Isolation and support

The stories of SSAGQ young people who experience religion are those of young people on a difficult journey. Some have only experienced life within the church, where their friends, family, education and social life are all a part of their religion. When they begin to question their sexuality these young people often discover that they are alone and begin to fear their religious world as much as they have been brought up to fear the wider secular one. SSAGQ young people who experience religion are often left to understand their sexuality alone with little, if any, information to help them.

Our study discovered that SSAGQ young people who mentioned religion were more likely to report having never told significant people in their lives about their sexuality including their mothers, brothers, teachers, and student welfare coordinators/counsellors.

Tomlin grew up Jehovah's Witness and found himself alone with his struggle:

Same sex is morally wrong in [the churches] eyes and they did make several references about it is wrong – using the bible of course. So my crisis of who I was and why I was feeling this was left to me to figure out. I could not ask my friends – especially my family – due to them all been in the religion. (Tomlin, 21 years)

Similarly Bethany felt that she was unable to talk about her sexuality with her three older brothers and father, whom she shared a home with:

They are all very homophobic and Christian. I fear I would be rejected and outcast. I hate it...I'm a bit stuck, a bit confused. I don't know whether or not to act on [my sexuality]...Whether I should go against what I've been brought up to believe...What's worse is that being in a Christian family I have no one to talk with about it. (Bethany, 19 years)

Unlike Tomlin and Bethany, Isaiah had told his mother of his same sex attraction but was too scared to tell his father:

My mum has been extremely supportive. My dad doesn't fully know yet but is extremely homophobic and I fear that he will divorce my mum when he finds out because he won't want anything to do with me. (Isaiah, 18 years)

Isaiah's fear of disclosure was not just for him, but also for his parent's marriage.

These young people experienced isolation and fear due to their family's religious affiliation. Their fear was fuelled by a potential negative reaction rising from their parent's homophobic beliefs. An individual does not need to experience a negative social reaction directly for them to feel fear or isolation; sometimes fear of an imagined negative sanction is more powerful than an actual assault (Savin-Williams, 1990). Disclosing one's same sex attraction to family can be traumatic, especially if they are known to reject non-heterosexuality (Weeks et al., 2001).

The data reveal that young people from the religious group who disclosed their sexuality were less likely to receive support from their mothers, fathers, teachers and student welfare coordinators. Ruth explained what happened to her:

I was raised in a Christian family so I was constantly embarrassed and disgusted with myself for feeling the way I did. I was constantly told it wasn't natural and that it was just a phase that I was going through. I got depressed and became suicidal. After I told my parents my mum freaked out. I decided a year and a half ago that I couldn't stay living with my parents and moved out. (Ruth, 18 years)

When Brianna told her school counsellor, she was condemned and abandoned. Her counsellor told her she was *under the influence of the Devil* and had to *convert to the true God to rid of the sin* from herself. In her own words:

That made me feel like I was evil and there was something wrong, so I started cutting myself, pulling out large quantities of my own hair, forcing myself to vomit, bingeing on food until I felt physically ill and alternately starving myself...I also started mentally abusing myself and turning to drugs and alcohol to solve my problems. (Brianna, 17 years)

For Minika the problem was more extreme and understandably created some anxiety about disclosure:

Well, my secondary high school was located in an Islamic country, where homosexuality was punishable by maximum sentence death, and most common sentence was 20 years. So there was no support at any stage of schooling. (Minika, 17 years)

Homophobic abuse and safety at home

SSAGQ young people who mentioned religion were more likely to experience homophobic abuse in the home than the non-religious group. Roman grew up in rural Queensland and explained that he became 'severely depressed' from experiencing homophobia. He described what he called homophobia from his mother when he disclosed his sexuality to her:

Her reaction was not good...I got a tirade of homophobic abuse from her, was told I'd die of AIDS, told that God thinks it's wrong, told that marriage is between a man and a woman and that I was unnatural and disgusting. This didn't help with my confidence...I met my boyfriend...then told my mum about our relationship. She flipped out even worse than before and carried on about HIV, AIDS [and] religion for weeks. (Roman, 21 years)

Abuse within the home may make young people feel unsafe and isolated within the very place where they should feel loved, empowered, and safe.

Self harm and suicide

Our study found that SSAGQ young people who mentioned religion were more likely to report having thoughts of self harm and suicide. Those who mentioned religion were also more likely to have harmed themselves. However, there was no difference between the groups in the percentage of young people who had attempted suicide.

Sebastian was not out to his parents because in his words they were *particularly religious and homophobic* and *very strict Catholic*. Sebastian explained where this fear and isolation led him:

I would generally conduct myself in an unsafe manner as well doing dangerous things such as drugs and sleeping with people without a condom. I have to commute a lot for work and study and on numerous occasions I considered veering off the highway into a tree or taking lots different drugs and trying to overdose. (Sebastian, 20 years)

A new direction

Compared to WTIA in 2004, an increasing number of young people in this study have managed to live happily, reconciling being both gay and religious. Many young people wrote of their positive religious experiences growing up; others have actively resisted homophobic religious discourse and reframed narratives of hate and fear to those of love. Andrea was an out and proud catholic lesbian who believed that she was being called to help other young people reconcile their sexuality and faith. She explained that she is a 'Catholic Lesbian' and is open about her sexuality to all but her grandparents:

God taught about love. So how is being gay against God...I believe in my lifetime I will be someone who brings (LGBT) Children back to the Church and lets them know there is a place for them. I will study Theology and see if I can do anything for gay marriage, if I can't I will still help all the LGBT people [and] let them know there's a place for them in the Church and Gods Kingdom. (Andrea, 19 years)

Stories from SSAGQ young people of growing up in a homopositive religious environment were more common than before. Dee told us of her supportive Christian family and community:

I've grown up with a supportive, loving Uniting Church family, and a wider UC Church community, both of which never went out of their way to mention homosexuality was bad or wrong. (Dee, 20 years)

At a church camp Joseph shared a cabin with two other guys, as well as his boyfriend:

They both kept an eye and ear out for anybody that was coming towards the cabin if my boyfriend was laying on me or I was hugging him. (Joseph, 18 years)

This changing narrative from a religious homonegative environment towards a homopositive one, is beginning to have immediate positive impact on SSAGQ young people's lives, and is evident in the growing number of positive religious stories we received.

Marriage and children

Getting married and raising children is often the bedrock of religious belief. The growing debate around same sex marriage and gay parenting appears to have a special meaning for the SSAGQ young people who mentioned religion. It provides religious SSAGQ young people with a future of connectivity with the once out of reach religious institutions of family and marriage. Lindsay showed a tenacious spirit, and wrote of one day being married in the eyes of her god:

I don't know what the future holds, but I am going to keep on going, love myself, and love my God...I will be married in the eyes of God, no matter what the government or the Church try to say. (Lindsay, 18 years)

Likewise, getting married and having children was so important to Mary that she planned to leave Australia to achieve her dream:

At the moment I am engaged to my long-time friend of 5 years who I began dating last year. We plan to live in Canada in the future to marry and raise a family through IVF. (Mary, 18 years)

SSAGQ young people are increasingly seeing marriage and children as possibilities in their lives, and this is providing those who mention religion with the ability to live closer to the religious ideals they grew up with. The recent discourse of same sex marriage and gay parenting is helping some young people to resist homophobic religious messages, and is ultimately helping some to maintain their faith.

There is no doubt that, for the majority of those who mentioned religion, it has been a negative and damaging influence from which they feel the need to escape in order to preserve their health and wellbeing. For many who make this shift it is literally depicted as a choice between life and death when there appears to be no way forward for them within the church. It is a distressing thing to see young people who are committed to a religious faith and who have much to give to that community of religion being driven away by homonegativity. Churches are certainly the poorer for the loss of these young people.

Nevertheless, it is clear that a small social shift is occurring within this layer of influence. Some young people are searching out homopositive religious organizations, reframing and ignoring homonegative messages, while others have been fortunate to grow up within religions that are now fully accepting of LGBT people. While young people are continually describing religion as out of step with their personal beliefs, they are increasingly willing to remain within it and advocate for change. Just like the movement against prohibition of female clergy in the past, or the churches support for slavery, some young religious SSAGQ youth in Australia today, appear to be heading towards a new era of LGBTI affirming religion.

Rurality

In March I am moving to Brisbane, from my regional town. I don't know what is going to happen, but in a few months time I will have something other than a few books, two mates, a gay ex-teacher and the internet, in order to be a part of the 'gay community'. In an earlier question I answered that the gay community did not supply me with any useful information. That's because I have never being A PART of the gay community! Longreach just doesn't have one. (Jackie, 18 years)

Key findings

- 20% of young people came from rural and remote areas.
- Young people living in rural, regional and remote areas were less likely to have access to the internet compared to their urban counterparts.
- Rural young people were felt less safe on the internet.
- Young people expressed concern about their lives as SSAGQ young people living in rural and remote towns due to the isolation, discrimination and lack of appropriate services and support.
- Self harm, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts were higher in rural areas.
- There were higher rates of use of some drugs in remote areas.