A Better Understanding of the Potential Conflict Between Christianity and Homosexuality

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Abstract: Most organized religions including Christianity still regard homosexuality as being against their teachings, as sinful and contrary to scripture. Thus the matter of reconciling sexual orientation with religious and spiritual beliefs can be a very challenging and complicated process for those homosexual persons who uphold Christianity as their religion. This paper seeks to explore the potential conflict between Christianity and homosexuality faced by the respondents. A qualitative study was conducted via in-depth semi-structured interviews with purposively selected homosexual persons. The result found that a small percentage of respondents were unaffected by the potential conflict between Christianity and homosexuality. Nevertheless, the majority, eighty percent, were affected by the conflict, implying that both Christianity and homosexuality were important components of their lives. The most common personal effects of conflict between Christianity and homosexuality indentified include depression, self-blame/guilt, anxiety, suicidal ideation and alienation. Some implications for practice are presented at two few different levels: (1) mental health professionals and (2) church leaders and clergymen.

Key words: Homosexuality · Sexual identity · Christianity · Intrapersonal conflict

INTRODUCTION

The struggle that homosexual people have to undergo can be overwhelming due to the general position of Christianity with respect to homosexuality. This struggle often begins in adolescence, the time when most religious traditions try to nurture (and control) emerging sexuality within the context of religious beliefs [1]. Unfortunately for homosexual young people, support and nurturance may not be available, thus, making them feel distressed and, therefore, perhaps less able to embrace their sexuality [2]. At the same time, in seeking to understand gay men and lesbians more fully their religious and spiritual lives cannot be denied. Attaining a fulfilled religious and spiritual life can, however, be especially difficult for those homosexual people engaging in traditional Christian organizations.

Intrapersonal conflict between Christianity and homosexuality is not a new phenomenon; nevertheless, little literature has attempted to address this issue [3]. This might be due to the fact that most traditional western religions, including Christianity, still uphold their intolerance towards homosexuality. It may also be related to the fact that many homosexual people have felt that they had to completely renounce their Christian identity when they identified as a homosexual. More recent studies, however, have begun to deal with the potential conflicts that arise between Christianity and homosexuality [4-7]. Several different approaches have been identified in trying to highlight the issue of conflict that occurs between Christianity and homosexuality.

Schuck and Liddle [3] found that nearly two-thirds of 66 gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLB) individuals had experienced conflict between their religiosity and homosexuality. Furthermore, they concluded that the main sources of conflict for these GLB individuals included denominational teachings, scriptural passages and congregational prejudices that resulted in shame,

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depression and suicidal ideation. Many respondents mentioned that their religious denomination considered homosexuality sinful and that GLB people were viewed as bad. They stated that a few biblical passages were highlighted to condemn homosexuality and reported being instructed to pray for forgiveness, making them feel alienated in their own congregations. The conflicts mentioned above have been found to affect GLB people's cognitive and emotional well-being. Schuck and Liddle [3] suggested that the most damaging consequence of anti-gay teaching was that many GLB people expressed the feeling that they had been rejected by God and negatively judged by their religious communities. Schuck and Liddle [3] also suggested that the cost of feeling rejected by God and negatively judged by surrounding religious communities are considered to be more profound if this happens to adolescents, who are often left with long-term feelings of negative emotions such as anger, frustration and mistrust towards God [6, 8].

It has been suggested that GLB individuals' experiences are bound to encompass a continuum of strategies to achieve reconciliation of their conflict between religiosity and homosexuality [3]. If the homosexual individual happens to come from a close-knit family with strict and conservative religious beliefs, the possibility of losing their family, belief system and community are so great it could result in the person attempting to alter his or her sexual orientation by undergoing Conversion Therapy [4], although the success of these therapies is still debatable [9, 10]. Those who have had an unsuccessful experience with Conversion Therapy may feel that they are left with the choice of having to change, challenge or even abandon their religious or spiritual beliefs altogether to fit their current inner self needs along with their homosexuality. If none of the actions taken are able to produce an acceptable (to the individual) outcome, resulting in extreme circumstances of high pressures and stress, a GLB individual may contemplate or even attempt suicide. There has been evidence linking suicide and homosexual people reporting depression [11, 12]. At the same time, studies by D'Augelli *et al.* [13] and Remafedi *et al.* [14] both found greater suicidal ideation and action in gay men as compared to lesbians, which may reflect the more negative attitude and greater victimization directed towards gay men as compared to lesbians [15]. From a more personal perspective, Ford [16] openly shared his own experience when he was faced with the possibility of committing suicide after he was unable to accept the possibility of integrating Christianity and homosexuality,

which led him to believe that "living my life as a gay man and going to hell seemed much worse than taking my own life while I was still in grace" (p. 79). This issue suggests that religion can play both protective and damaging roles in the lives of GLB individuals [17].

Australia provides a logical setting for this study to be conducted because in Australia, Christianity still holds the largest number of affiliates. Christianity is nominated by 69.7% of Australians as their religion when compared to other religions as recorded in the 2001 census [18]. Despite changing trends, we may assume from these figures that many gay men and lesbians were raised within some form of Christian tradition. The struggle for those individuals who identify as same-sex attracted are potentially very difficult, especially if the person belongs to one of the mainstream Christian denominations [7] or comes from a family that upholds the teachings of these denominations [19, 20]. It is plausible that a gay or lesbian person growing up in a family with strict and conservative religious beliefs may find him/herself in a different situation to another homosexual person who is raised in a more religiously liberal family. The aim of this paper is to explore the experiences of gay men and lesbians with respect to potential conflicts between their Christianity and their homosexuality. In exploring the experiences experienced, two specific research questions are addressed: (1) how have the respondents experienced and attempted to make sense of the potential conflict between their religious/spiritual understandings and their homosexuality? (2) what have been the personal effects on respondents of the conflict between their religious/spiritual understandings and their homosexuality?.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Respondents: This research study involved 20 homosexual respondents comprising 10 male and 10 female respondents living in the Brisbane City area and surrounding suburbs. At the time of interview the respondents' ages ranged from 20 to 51 years (mean age 36.5 years old). The mean ages for male and female respondents were 35.4 and 37.5 years old, respectively. The majority of respondents had a high level of education with 18 respondents having tertiary education (8 males and 10 females). Of the remaining 2 respondents, both male, one possessed secondary education background while the other possessed primary education background. Respondents belonged to various Christian

denominations and were requested to indicate whether they had moved away from their original denomination at the time of interview. Of the respondents, 11 maintained their original denomination (5 males and 6 females) and 9 respondents (5 males and 4 females) had moved away from their original denomination. Furthermore, 8 respondents identified as single (5 males and 3 females), while the other 12 (5 males and 7 females) had partners. Of those with partners, 7 (1 male and 6 females) were living together with their partner.

Procedures and Analysis: This research study was based on voluntary participation. All respondents participated in two in-depth interviews. At the start of the first interview session respondents were briefed about the purpose of the study as well as their rights to confidentiality, anonymity and to withdraw from the research at any point prior to or during the study. Respondents were informed that if they did decide to withdraw after commencing interviews, any information that had already been collected would be destroyed. Respondents were also given the opportunity to ask questions to clarify any uncertainty concerning the study. Written informed consent was obtained from each respondent upon agreement to participate.

Each interview session lasted approximately one hour, with a one-week interval between the two sessions. This structure was chosen due to the sensitivity of the issues being discussed. The first interview focused on the respondents' backgrounds and their perception of their sexual identity. The second interview focused on the respondents' religious/spiritual development while at the same time exploring the conflict they faced between the interweaving issues of religiosity and sexual orientation. The interviews were audio recorded using a digital recorder.

The interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke [21] and Boyatzis [22]. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting themes within findings. Thematic analysis is essentially independent of theory and epistemology and can be applied across various theoretical and epistemological approaches [21]. For the purpose of this research paper the analysis used is inductive. This means that by using open-ended interview questions, themes are allowed to emerge without pre-supposing in advance what the important themes will be. In this way, patterns are formed and investigated thus assisting the inquirer to understand and make meaning of the data [23]. The process of data analysis in this study adhered to the strategy outlined by Creswell [24].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research study found a small percentage (20%), of which all female did not experience any conflict between Christianity and homosexuality. The two reasons that accounted for respondents not experiencing conflict were either because they had already abandoned Christianity before they came out as a lesbian or they had continued identifying as Christian but were not practicing and, therefore, not in contact with particular faith communities.

Three of four respondents, abandoned Christianity before coming out as lesbians. For example, Ellen came from family backgrounds that were not religious and both started to have sexual feelings towards the same gender while they were in their teens. They both had left Christianity before fully coming out as lesbians (i.e. they came out to others after they reached adulthood). Ellen explained, "I don't think they overlap because I think I had left that [Christianity] behind before I recognized my [homo] sexuality. So there never was a conflict." To her Christianity was always associated with social involvement and not religious or spiritual purposes. Since Ellen comes from a non-religious family, Christianity was never reinforced at home. When the friendship with her close friend finally came to an end so did her Christianity. Therefore, when Ellen finally came out as a lesbian the process was easy for her because by then Christianity was no longer part of her belief system as it had left several years before.

Unlike the 20 percent that were unaffected by the conflict, most of the respondents (80%) faced conflict between Christianity and homosexuality. This findings relating to the experiences that the respondents shared regarding the conflict that they have faced or are still facing are divided into two: (1) intrapersonal conflict and (2) interpersonal conflict.

Although each of the respondents who experienced conflict have their own unique journey, most of them identified the same underlying reasons for the intrapersonal conflicts they experienced, that is, they believed that Christianity condemns homosexuality and considers it to be sinful. Jules stated that his religious beliefs were ingrained from a young age and that he viewed homosexuality as something sinful:

It was very challenging aahh... because all my life I have been brought up to actually believe that to be gay was abomination to God, to be gay is not right aahh... that God loves all people but God doesn't want you to be gay and if you are gay you need to do everything in your power to get out of that.

For some respondents their conflict between Christianity and homosexuality escalated when it involved significant others around them (e.g., family, friends or church community). In Wynona's case her conflict between Christianity and homosexuality amplified when she wanted to start building a relationship with someone of the same gender. After a powerful encounter with God she began a journey of active membership in the church, "I guess God knows how he can touch your heart and get hold of you when he wants to". For the next 6 years she devoted herself to doing God's work. Like others who have had experience of being active in a church, Wynona tried to suppress her homosexuality by prayer and participating in "deliverance ministry". When she later wanted to build a relationship with a woman the conflict was exacerbated because her intention was against the teachings of the Christian church that she belonged to at the time:

"I think that is when the conflict really started to manifest because in those 6 years I wasn't in a relationship in Perth, you see... I wasn't really confronted with it. I was so involved with church and being busy with that, that I didn't get involved in relationship.'

For the majority of respondents they experienced conflict prior to or during their coming out process, however, for Shawna she only experienced the conflict after she identified herself as a lesbian, while at the same time still wanting to incorporate Christianity in her life:

"I would say that the only conflict that I have had is when I am a lesbian and I wanted to then identify as a Catholic. I would have to say that I got more conflict from the gay community or more questions from the gay community about why I would want to be a lesbian and a Catholic."

All respondents, who indicated that they have experienced or are still experiencing conflict, shared their experiences of personal effect of conflict between Christianity and homosexuality. The five most common personal effects of conflict between Christianity and homosexuality found in this research were depression (68.8%), self-blame/guilt (37.5%), anxiety (31.3%), suicidal ideation (25%) and alienation (25%). The five most common personal effects are highlighted in Figure 1. It is important to note that when terms such as 'depression' and 'anxiety' are used; they represent the words chosen by respondents themselves to describe their experiences. They are not used in the sense of psychological definitions and diagnosis. Further elaboration of the respondents' personal experiences is presented below. It is also important to note that sometimes it is difficult to highlight a personal effect in isolation because, generally, it is intermingled with other personal effects.
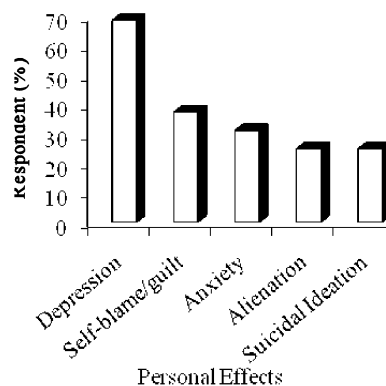

Fig. 1: Most commonly reported personal effects of conflict between Christianity and homosexuality as stated by respondents (n=16)

From the findings of this research study, in general, two possible outcomes were observed when discussing the intersection between Christianity and homosexuality: (1) no occurrence of potential conflict between Christianity and homosexuality and (2) occurrence of potential conflict between Christianity and homosexuality. There were two reasons why female respondents did not experience conflict between Christianity and homosexuality: (1) Christianity had already been abandoned before coming out as a lesbian or (2) respondents were identifying as Christian although not practicing. However, the majority of respondents did experience conflict between Christianity and homosexuality. The 80% percentage in this research study was much higher than the findings of Schuck and Liddle [3] who reported 66.7% of their respondents were affected by the conflict between Christianity and homosexuality. This high figure may suggest that more homosexual people experience conflict between Christianity and homosexuality than initially anticipated and warrants further investigation.

Generally the conflict happened as soon as the respondents wanted to assimilate both Christianity and homosexuality because they are considered not compatible [5] and that most mainstream Christian denominations still view homosexuality as immoral and opposed to scripture [25]. The conflict increases if the person comes from a close-knit fairly religious background [19].

Parents' religiosity is an important factor in assisting the transmission of religiosity, along with the quality of the family relationship and traditional family structure [26]. Myers [26] further argued that parent's religiosity would constantly influence their children's religiosity regardless of age and life course effects. In the present research study, those who remain somewhere in between

the continuum of either rejecting Christianity or homosexuality are the ones who wanted to maintain their religiosity. For these respondents, they generally came from families with either parent having a moderate to very religious background. These respondents intention to maintain their Christianity suggestively might be from a direct or indirect influence of their parents' religiosity. For example, when Shawna came out in her 20s she had problems identifying as a Christian homosexual person. Her mum was the one responsible for giving her the religious guidance and understanding. Her mum said, "Catholic with a small 'C' just mean like universal like that's what Catholicism is".

A few respondents came from fairly religious family backgrounds. Therefore, their experience of conflict between Christianity and homosexuality was more arduous in comparison with others who came from a slightly more lenient Christian background [19]. For the few respondents such as Jules and Wynona who have religious parents the process of coming out to them as a homosexual was very difficult. There was a lot of anger and resentment from the parents at the time of them coming out. Due to this hostility these respondents had to limit contact or even temporarily sever their relationship with their parents. Basically, for these respondents their parents' religiosity was seen to be influencing their lives well into their adulthood.

The majority of respondents (80%) wanted to maintain both their Christianity and homosexuality. This percentage reflects the findings of Mahaffy [27] on lesbians who found 81.91% of the respondents insisted on maintaining their identification as Christians. These findings suggest that both Christianity and homosexuality were important components of the respondents' lives. Thus, for most respondents it is worth the challenge of struggling through the conflict to harmonize both Christianity and homosexuality.

This research study also found depression (as described by the respondents themselves) to be the most common individual effect (68.75%) of the conflict between Christianity and homosexuality. Apart from depression, other individual effects described by respondents included self-blame/guilt, anxiety, suicidal ideation and alienation. The experience of conflict was difficult and demanding and might also leave emotional scars even though it had long been resolved. In extreme circumstances, "when all hope is removed" as narrated by Clark, it could trigger the possibility of gay and lesbian individuals attempting suicide. In the present research study, 25% of respondents experienced signs of suicidal ideation and all also felt depression. The link between

suicide and depression supports previous studies e.g., [11, 12]. Interestingly, only male respondents in this study reported suicidal ideation which supported findings from D'Augelli *et al.* [13] and Remafedi *et al.* [14] who found suicidality to be more prominent in gay men as compared to lesbians.

Even though at the time of interviews all of the respondents seemed to have passed the most excruciating stage of the conflict, some of them have taken more time with the struggle than others. Coming out is not the end of religious-based conflict but more the beginning until respondents finally find a set of religious or spiritual beliefs that are congruent with their sexual identity [3]. Some respondents who were in their 40s and early 50s at the time of interviews came out at an early age (10-19 years old) as gay men or lesbians. This means that compared to the younger respondents who were still in their 20s these older respondents might have had a longer experience struggling with the conflict due to the fact that the surrounding environment was much more homophobic than in the last one to two decades [28, 29].

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, majority of the respondents faced conflict between Christianity and homosexuality. Some negative emotions expressed by respondents as they experienced intrapersonal conflicts. The findings of this study should able to help mental health professionals and church leaders as well as clergyman to deal with this group of people.

This research study has some implications for practice that are discussed at two different levels. For mental health professionals – knowledge on the majority of respondents were affected by the conflict between Christianity and homosexuality which resulted in various personal effects such as depression, self-blame/guilt, anxiety, suicidal ideation and alienation will hopefully be of great benefit so that they are better equipped to deal with such conflict.

For church leaders, this research study conveys the struggle for Christian homosexual people between their Christianity and homosexuality particularly through the various personal effects experienced. It would be an advantage if church leaders were able to provide a tolerant and safe environment within their congregation for homosexual people who wish to continue having Christianity as a significant part of their lives. By providing such an environment, respondents might feel less alienated within the denomination that they were brought up in. This research study also intends to

support opportunities within the church for Christian homosexual people to continue worshipping within their congregation while simultaneously finding means to strengthen their sense of religiosity and spirituality.

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