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THE CHURCH AND THE COMMUNITY

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DON’T ASK, DON’T TELL: HOW THE CODE OF SILENCE PERVADES SDA FAMILIES OF LGBT+ MILLENNIALS

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BACKGROUND

- Part of a larger online survey on coming out experiences among Millennial LGBT+ individuals from SDA families
METHODS - SAMPLING

Criteria for involvement:

• SDA childhood background
• Identify as LGBT+
• Ages 18 – 35
• 287 answered at least one of the qualitative questions.
METHODS - INSTRUMENT

Two open-ended qualitative questions:

• “Thinking back on when you first came out to a parent, how would you compare your life then with how it is now?”

• “In regard to your relationships with your parents, what has changed and what factors contributed to that change?”
METHODS - ANALYSIS

• One member of analysis team, mother of gay son
• Open coding on all of the qualitative data
• Constant comparative method
• Peer debriefing
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>47%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trans (Female &gt;)</td>
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<td>0.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intersex</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (specify)</td>
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Who initiates the code of silence?

What topics are subject to the DADT policy?

How long is the ‘no talk’ rule in place?

How is the DADT approach useful to SDA families?

How does the code of silence negatively impact families?
FINDINGS

Who initiates the code of silence?

* Parents
* Young adults themselves
* Through mutual agreement
FINDINGS

Most often participants recalled that parents actively chose not to speak about sexual identity or orientation after coming out. 25 respondents described parent’s initiation.

RQ1: WHO INITIATES THE CODE OF SILENCE?
Who Initiates the Code of Silence?

Parents
WHO INITIATES THE CODE OF SILENCE?

• **They [parents]** seem to take the strategy of: If we avoid talking about this maybe it will go away. (#33)

• **Parents** • The way they [parents] deal with it is by ignoring it, kinda pretending it's not there. (#351)

• **My parents are still in denial and refusing to accept or even talk about it.** (#396)
WHO INITIATES THE CODE OF SILENCE?

- **Parents**
  - She doesn't ask questions about my personal life anymore, though. We just don't talk about it. (#55)
  - As for my parents, they know that I'm gay but don't want to talk about it. (#277)
  - I came out as asexual, and my mom doesn't like me to mention it around anyone even though it's a big part of me. (#390)
WHO INITIATES THE CODE OF SILENCE?

Child
WHO INITIATES THE CODE OF SILENCE?

- **Child**
- **Only a few participants indicated that it was their choice to not talk about sexual orientation**

- I'm assuming they know but I haven't talked to them about it, and I won't. (#44)
- Since then I have been able to adopt a DADT relationship with my family. (#303)
- My parents and I don't talk about my sexual orientation. We don't argue about it because I don't bring it up. I'm tired of hearing the same horrible stuff that makes me feel worthless and unloved. (400)
WHO INITIATES THE CODE OF SILENCE?

Mutual
WHO INITIATES THE CODE OF SILENCE?

- **Mutual**

  Compared to the participants who recalled that their parents instituted a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, about half as many participants mentioned that the code of silence was mutually agreed upon.
WHO INITIATES THE CODE OF SILENCE?

• Though I did come out to my parents, mostly this event was/is ignored as if it never happened by both me and my parents. **We don't talk about it. (#61)**

• But after I have come out, we don't talk about the subject and we pretend it's not happening. **(#67)**

• They prefer not to talk about my sexual orientation, and it's easier not to engage them in details about my life. **(#319)**
FINDINGS

• **RQ2**: What topics are subject to the DADT policy?
• **Personal life, Relationships & Partners**
• **Sexual orientation & Sexuality**
WHAT TOPICS ARE SUBJECT TO THE DADT POLICY?

PERSONAL LIFE, RELATIONSHIPS & PARTNERS
WHAT TOPICS ARE SUBJECT TO THE DADT POLICY?

- **Personal Life, Relationships & Partners**

  - Since coming out, I have been unable to let anyone in my family know of my goals for the future in regards to me getting married to a woman. (#22)
  - She doesn't ask questions about my personal life anymore, though. We just don't talk about it. (#55)
  - They avoid the subject altogether and pretend my girlfriends didn't exist. (#336)
  - We don't discuss my relationships. (#428)
WHAT TOPICS ARE SUBJECT TO THE DADT POLICY?

Sexual Orientation & Sexuality
WHAT TOPICS ARE SUBJECT TO THE DADT POLICY?

**Sexual Orientation & Sexuality**

- We do not talk about my being gay ... it is still difficult and awkward, because it feels like we are not talking about the elephant in the living room. (#45)
- Neither of my parents mention my attraction to women. (#207)
- I'm not sure how my parents feel because they never talk about it. They are silent on my sexuality and on all things LGBT. (#281)
- Our father has always avoided even being present for any discussion of the gay issue- that way he doesn't even really have to acknowledge it or talk about it at all. As soon as he even gets a hint that the topic may arise, he has already disappeared. (#472)
• Timelines for Code of Silence was not a dominant theme
• 19 made some reference to timeframe
• Code of silence existed for majority of participants
• 7 mentioned they returned to talking after a period of time
• Certain subjects still remained off the table

FINDINGS
RQ3: How long is the ‘no talk’ rule in place?
HOW LONG IS THE ‘NO TALK’ RULE IN PLACE?

Continuously Since Coming Out
How long is the ‘No Talk’ rule in place?

Continuously since coming out

- My sexuality has never again been discussed. (#164)
- I'm still very much a part of a "don't ask, don't tell" family - after 17 years. (#354)
- My family and I don't discuss my sexuality at all. (#419)
- She later made it clear that she was not accepting of my orientation. We have not discussed the topic in more than seven years. (#415)
HOW LONG IS THE ‘NO TALK’ RULE IN PLACE?

• **As for my mom, we almost never discussed it after she found out. (#317)**

• **My grandmother sent me a letter full of Bible verses. My grandmother does not speak to me now. I am dead to her. (401)**

• **Almost 3 years since coming out, my mother still chooses to hide my sexuality from the extended family and refrains from talking about it. (#438)**
HOW LONG IS THE ‘NO TALK’ RULE IN PLACE?

For a time, but now talking
HOW LONG IS THE ‘NO TALK’ RULE IN PLACE?

• After a few years of total alienation from my parents, we now connect on a need-to-basis, and my orientation is not discussed. (#106)

• I feel that my parents have come to terms with who I am, yet they still feel uncomfortable when I talk about being queer. Before they avoided talking about it altogether. (#169)

• We didn't talk about it again for several years. (#135)

For a time, but now talking
FINDINGS

RQ 4: How is the DADT approach useful to SDA families?

• Helps family achieve equilibrium following the crisis the coming out event initiated
• It allows the families breathing room to
  • Stabilize
  • Think
  • Absorb the new family reality
How is the DADT approach useful to SDA families?

To bring a sense of family equilibrium

- So as long as we stay away from topics of my ever being in a relationship or marriage, everything stays calm. For my own sanity and desire to keep my relationship with my mother, I don't mind being silent. (293)

- We do not share things that are too deep or personal, but that makes for better relationships for us. (443)

- I've only come out to my mother, and we've always had a very close relationship. As long as we never talk about it and pretend I'm straight, and as long as I don't bring anyone home, everything is fine, there is no perceivable tension in our relationship. (486)
FINDINGS

RQ 5: How does the code of silence negatively impact families?
HOW DOES THE CODE OF SILENCE NEGATIVELY IMPACT FAMILIES?

DISTANT AND SUPERFICIAL RELATIONSHIPS
How does the code of silence negatively impact families?

- My parents have refused to have contact with any partners I have had and attempt to avoid any discussion about them or my sexuality. I have had multiple long term partners with the longest lasting eight years. My relationship with my parents remains distant. (198)

- My parents and I talk but our relationship isn't really personal and deep anymore. We don't discuss my relationships. (428)

- I don't think she has still fully accepted who I am so our relationship is still very superficial. She hasn't wanted to talk about it and try and move forward and I try to not push her. (474)
HOW DOES THE CODE OF SILENCE NEGATIVELY IMPACT FAMILIES?

Distant and Superficial Relationships

- My parents don't bring it up. They still call my girlfriend my friend, it seems it's easier for them to pretend than to grow. I'm 25 years old now, and they still don't understand how to talk to me about my relationship with another woman. I've never experienced what it would be like to bring home the person you're dating and be excited for your family to meet them because I know my parents will be cold and distant. (378)
HOW DOES THE CODE OF SILENCE NEGATIVELY IMPACT FAMILIES?

- I never confided in my parents when it came to emotional issues where I think a non-LGBT teen might have. They never knew who I dated, they never saw the emotional struggle of a failed relationship. In many ways, I isolated and compartmentalized my life from them because I know how strongly they held their beliefs and that ideology would surpass acceptance.... As a teen I felt very isolated and lived in fear of rejection. In many ways this has not changed. I still don't confide in my mother and have adapted a way of living that does not involve a family community and do not seek approval. Nothing has changed over the years. I remain a reserved and sometimes very isolated person just as I was when I was younger. (415)
CONCLUSIONS

The fear and discomfort related to SDA LGBT+ millennials coming out to their parents results in marked Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell codes of silence including:

• Largely unspoken rules about who initiates the code of silence.
• The topics are subject to the DADT policy.
• How long the ‘no talk’ rule remains in place.
• How the DADT approach is useful to SDA families.
• How the code of silence negatively impacts families.
CONCLUSIONS

• This is an important story of coping through avoidance and pretending.

• Since 20% said they have never come out, in some cases there is just a simple ‘Don’t ever tell’ rule.

• In other cases, DADT is clearly the standard, but could also be expanded to include ‘don’t ask, don’t discuss’ (DADD!) since in many cases there is a knowledge of the orientation but an unspoken agreement that we just don’t talk about it.
RECOMMENDATIONS

• Since not having open, honest conversations about the reality of a child’s LGBT+ orientation/identity is harmful to the biblical principle of loving relationality, we recommend that the SDA Church initiate ongoing dialogues for entire congregations.

• We also recommend that safe places be created in churches or homes for parents and LGBT+ children to have such dialogues.

• We suggest that educational efforts in SDA churches and schools be ongoing in order to understand sexuality in all of its manifestations.

• Important future research should include a parents' study on DADT
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