

Don't Ask, Don't Tell: How the Code of Silence Pervades Christian Families of LGBT+ Millennials

Abstract (50 words)

This presentation highlights findings on the coming out experiences of SDA LGBTQ+ Millennials (n=310). An analysis of the qualitative data reveal a pervasive theme of “Don’t ask, don’t tell” as a way to re-establish equilibrium in family dynamics post-coming out. We conclude with implications for SDA family functioning.

Summary (250 – 500 words)

Background

Coming out is a complex phenomena for LGBTQ+ individuals, often putting a strain on parent/child relationships (Feinstein et al., 2017). This may be especially true for LGBT+ individuals raised in Christian homes. Studies indicate that LGBTQ+ individuals who have the highest levels of support are found in non-Christian families (Hendrickson, 2007). Individuals from low-support families have increased risk of depression, drug use, and suicide (Dirkes, et al., = 2016; Silenzio et al., 2007; Ryan et al., 2009; VanderWaal, Sedlacek, & Lane, 2017).

Methods

The qualitative data for this presentation come from a mixed methods study that investigated family acceptance and rejection among 310 SDA LGBT+ Millennials. In addition to a large number of quantitative questions relating to family acceptance and rejection, mental health, substance use, high risk sexual behaviors, self-esteem and social support, the survey provided two open-ended questions regarding their coming out process:

- 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?

Analysis

Written answers to the open-ended survey questions were analyzed using the constant-comparative method for coding. Separately, and again as a team, researchers coded individual responses using a standardized codebook. To ensure consistency and trustworthiness, researchers used member checking and peer debriefing.

Sample

About half (N=151) of the total respondents answered the qualitative questions. Less than half (46%) were male, with 43.8% female, 2.6% transgender (F-M), .3% transgender (M-F), 1% intersex and 6.3% other. The sample was predominantly White/Euro-American (56%), with 13% Hispanic/Latino, 9% Asian or Pacific Islander, 9% Multi-racial, and 4% other. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 35.

Virtually all (98%) were raised in SDA homes and over 75% of the respondents said that they had very religious/spiritual homes. Nearly 42% still consider themselves SDA. One-third (32%) consider themselves religious while 73% consider themselves spiritual.

Findings

Nearly one-third of the participants mentioned that their families observed some type of code of silence regarding sexual orientation and/or coming out. Several subthemes described the ways in which this code of silence occurred in these families. Predominantly, parents made it clear to their LGBTQ+ child that they would not engage in discussions about sexuality. In some families, participants reported that the topic was never discussed again, while other participants noted that it took years before the topic was safe to discuss. A smaller number of participants noted that a silent mutual agreement prohibited family members from discussing sexual identity or orientation. One participant summed up their perspective by writing: "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)

Conclusions

Codes of silence may help families with LGBT members maintain some form of relational equilibrium. It is important to identify and understand these dynamics in order to provide better support for family members, church members, and clergy.

References

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