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The Ties that Bind? *Exploring the Impact of SDA Family Response to LGBT+ Children* | BY CURTIS VANDERWAAL, DAVID SEDLACEK, NANCY CARBONELL,

AND SHANNON TRECARTIN

Based on the findings of eleven recent national and international studies, researchers estimate that approximately nine million people, or about 3.8% of the U.S. population, self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT+)¹. More recently, a large 2014 Pew Research Center report found that 4.7% self-identified as LGB². The experience of LGBT+ persons in the general population of the United States has been described and studied for several decades. Among other things, these studies have examined the experience of LGBT+ youth when they come out to their families. Facing many of the developmental challenges common in adolescence, they now find themselves also dealing with a stigmatized identity. Many young people dread sharing their sexual orientation or gender identity with their families for fear of rejection, discrimination, and bullying. They have heard the gay jokes and have experienced the hostile tone of conversations directed at LGBT+ individuals. Often, the last thing many would choose to be is LGBT+, and yet, to be real, they find themselves attracted to persons of the same sex or feel that their body does not correspond with their assigned gender. For many, their greatest fear is that they will be rejected by their family if they come out to them. The strain on family relationships and the parent-child conflicts that pursue such an event are often overwhelming and traumatic. Studies demonstrate that LGBT+ youth who are not supported by their families experience poorer outcomes later in life, including depression, suicide attempts, substance abuse, and poor self-esteem. These harmful health consequences tend to be even worse for ethnic minority LGBT+ populations, who face the intersecting stressors of racism plus their sexual minority status.

Christian youth who identify as LGBT+ can have even greater challenges. The Pew Research Center report found that almost half (48%) of those who self-identified as LGBT

also considered themselves to be Christian. While many of these individuals have been raised to love God and do so to the best of their ability, they may have heard sermons condemning gay persons as sinners. In their reading of Scripture, they may have read the texts that call homosexuals an abomination. They may have heard church members conflate homosexuality with pedophilia and mental illness. They often have no one to talk to about this and are left to figure it out alone and on their own. In their efforts to *not* be gay they may have prayed that God would make them straight. They may have dated opposite-sex acquaintances and even married heterosexual partners. They may have attended change ministries and gone to counseling to try to alter their orientation. Yet, they almost always find themselves unchanged. Many feel rejected by their community of faith. Some are angry with God for not changing them. Others reject God. Still others find ways to reconcile both their faith and their orientation.

Seventh-day Adventist LGBT+ youth are no exception. If anything, our youth and young adults have even greater difficulty navigating these issues because of the very high behavioral standards of our church. LGBT+ issues have prompted recent discussions in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, including the 2015 Summit on Sexuality held in Cape Town, South Africa.

The idea for our research emerged through multiple conversations with LGBT+ students across several venues: the Teen Homelessness Taskforce at Andrews University, AULL4One (the informal support group for Andrews LGBT+ students), classroom settings, and personal conversations. Although LGBT+ family research has been done using national samples, the researchers were not able to find any studies that were specific to any church denomination. Many well-meaning church members talk *about* LGBT+ individuals, but few actually talk directly *to* LGBT+ individu-

Many young people dread sharing their sexual orientation or gender identity with their families for fear of rejection, discrimination, and bullying.

als to better understand their experiences and perspectives. For all of these reasons, we believed that the time was right to study the experience of Seventh-day Adventist LGBT+ youth related to coming out to their families.

Target Population

The target population for the survey was adults who identified as LGBT+, were between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five years old, and who were raised in the Seventh-day Adventist church. Survey participants did not need to be current members of the Adventist church. We chose this age range to stay broadly within the Millennial Generation and also to create time boundaries for more recent memory of family relationships.

Survey Development

Following a review of the literature, researchers developed an initial list of questions related to family acceptance and rejection, with a primary focus on teenage years. Some of the questions were adapted from a study conducted by Ryan and colleagues at the Family Acceptance Project³, although their study did not specifically target church-affiliated LGBT+ individuals. Other family-acceptance questions were developed based on general themes developed by the researchers. Primary themes included Coming out to Parents; Family Rejection; Parents' Responses/Consequences; and Impact of Religion. These questions were also reviewed and edited for sensitive language, question clarity, and comprehensiveness (face validity) by selected key Seventh-day Adventist LGBT+ individuals and family members, as well as by selected LGBT+ researchers and allies. Researchers have not yet conducted factor analyses on these variables to determine reliability of the questions and factor structure.

In addition, researchers identified possible outcomes that might result from family rejection. Outcome variables were selected from a variety of standardized scales previously demonstrated to have strong reliability and va-

lidity. They included the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale; the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support; the Patient Health Questionnaire Depression Screen; selected substance abuse questions from the national Monitoring the Future survey; high-risk sexual behavior and suicidal thoughts/behaviors questions from the Family Acceptance Project Study; questions about religious background and involvement; and various demographic questions. We also included two qualitative questions asking participants to compare their current lives with their teen years, as well as to describe or clarify responses that were not adequately captured in the survey.

Data Collection

Following Institutional Review Board approval through Andrews University, we used purposive snowball sampling to generate responses within current and former Seventh-day Adventist LGBT+ networks. Anonymous data was collected from July–October, 2016, using SurveyMonkey. A SurveyMonkey link was sent to the following Adventist LGBT+ networks: (1) Intercollegiate Adventist GSA Coalition (IAGC) (iagcadventist.com); (2) SDA Kinship International (sdakinship.org); and, 3) various Adventist LGBT+-friendly support networks. We requested that these groups send out the invitation to complete the survey through various forms of social media (personal blogs, Facebook, email, website announcements, etc.), while at the same time asking those distribution groups and individuals to forward the SurveyMonkey link to other Adventist LGBT+ friends or related networks. Subjects self-screened by reading the email or social media introduction and then proceeding to the link to complete the survey.

While it is impossible to know how many current or former Seventh-day Adventists self-identify as LGBT+, if we were to extrapolate from national statistics (between 3.8% and 4.7% of the U.S. population), it is possible that in the North American Division population of

1.2 million members, approximately 45,000–50,000 members could self-identify as LGBT+.

Sample

A total of 505 individuals began the survey, with 332 individuals completing substantial portions of the survey, and 314 individuals completing the entire survey. Table 1 shows gender at virtually

equal responses for Male (45.8%) and Female (44.1%) respondents, with an additional nine individuals (2.9%) identifying as Transgender, three individuals (1.0%) selecting Intersex, and thirty persons (9.8%) selecting Other, which included self-selected categories of “gender-queer”, “agender”, “gender fluid”, “non-binary”, and several other similar variations. When asked about sexual orientation, over one-third (37.9%) identified as Gay, over one-fourth (28.8%) selected Bisexual, one-fifth (20.3%) selected Lesbian, with the remaining 13.1% selecting Other, which included “Pansexual”, “Queer”, “Asexual”, and several other orientation categories.

Table 1 also shows that almost one-fifth (18.7%) of respondents were college-aged (18–22 years), almost half were early young adult (23–29 years), and one-third (33.8%) were 30–35 years old. While over half (55.7%) the respondents identified their ethnic background as White/Euro-American, the remainder were a diverse mixture of backgrounds, with 12.7% Hispanic/Latino, 9.4% Black/African American, 9.1% Multi-racial, 8.8% Asian or Pacific Island, and 4.2% Other. Almost one-fourth (23.9%) of respondents were not born in the U.S., but almost half of this sub-group (46.2%) had lived in the U.S. for more than ten years.

Table 1

Gender	% (N)	Ethnicity	% (N)
Male (M)	45.8% (142)	Hispanic/Latino	12.6% (40)
Female (F)	44.2% (136)	Black/African American	9.4% (29)
Transgender (F -> M)	2.6% (8)	White/Euro-American	55.7% (172)
Transgender (M -> F)	0.3% (1)	Asian or Pacific Island	9.1% (28)
Intersex	1.0% (3)	Multi-Racial	9.1% (28)
Other	9.7% (30)	Other	4.2% (13)

Age	% (N)	Sexual Orientation	% (N)
18–22 Yrs	18.6% (57)	Gay	38.2% (116)
23–29 Yrs	44.6% (137)	Lesbian	20.4% (63)
30–35 Yrs	33.9% (104)	Bisexual	28.5% (88)
Other	2.9% (10)	Other	12.9% (40)

Findings

Religious Background and Involvement

Virtually all respondents (97.4%) grew up as Seventh-day Adventists. Respondents said that religion was an important feature their homes, with more than three-fourths (76.8%) describing their family as Very Religious or Spiritual and less than one-fourth (22.8%) saying their home was Somewhat Religious or Spiritual. Currently, only 41.6% identify as Seventh-day Adventist, with almost a third (32.8%) claiming no religious affiliation and another fourth (23.4%) selecting Other (including common responses such as Christian, atheist, agnostic, Buddhist, “badventist”, and an eclectic variety of religious denominations). Despite having grown up in strongly religious families, only a third (32.1%) of respondents Agreed or Strongly Agreed that they considered themselves to be *religious*. However, three-fourths (73.4%) Agreed or Strongly Agreed that they considered themselves to be *spiritual*. As evidence for this claim, almost a third (30.8%) said they pray daily, with another one-fourth (23.4%) praying at least weekly. In addition, one-fourth study the Bible or other sacred text (24.0%) or read religious books or journals (23.4%) at least weekly. Finally, almost a third (29.6%) participate in religious services on a weekly basis.

We believed that the time was right to study the experience of Seventh-day Adventist LGBT+ youth related to coming out to their families.

Table 2

Coming out to Parents/Caregivers	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Not Sure	Strongly Agree + Agree
I felt comfortable coming out to my parents.	85.2%	3.8%	11.0%
I was scared to come out because I knew my family would think I was sinful and/or disgusting.	9.9%	9.6%	80.5%
I knew of my parents' prejudice against LGBT+ persons, so it was hard for me to come out to them.	16.4%	7.7%	75.8%
I knew that I would be rejected if I revealed my sexual orientation and/or gender identity to my family.	26.2%	25.9%	47.9%
I was afraid that my parents would disown me if I came out to them as LGBT+.	31.8%	11.0%	57.2%
My family listened attentively as I shared my sexual orientation and/or gender identity journey with them.	51.2%	7.4%	41.4%
My parents were disappointed when I came out to them.	14.4%	16.1%	69.5%
Immediately or very soon after coming out, my parents communicated that they loved me no matter what.	67.1%	7.0%	25.9%
I was forbidden to tell anyone else of my sexual orientation and/or gender identity.	45.9%	11.4%	42.8%
When I came out to my parents, I was kicked out of my house.	89.0%	2.1%	8.9%

that they felt comfortable coming out to their parents, with four-fifths (80.5%) saying that they were scared to come out because they knew their family would think they were sinful and/or disgusting. Three-fourths (75.8%) knew of their parents' prejudice toward LGBT+ individuals, making it hard to come out to

Independent Variables: Family Acceptance and Rejection

Coming Out to Parents/Caregivers

Respondents were asked how old they were when they first came out as LGBT+ to a parent or caregiver. A third (33.1%) came out during their teen years, with most coming out between ages 16–19 years. The largest group (40.2%) came out between ages 20–29 years, presumably after leaving home, with an additional 6.3% coming out when they were thirty years or older. One-fifth (20.5%) have *never* come out to their parents.

Table 2 shows the results to questions about coming out as LGBT+ to parents or caregivers. Only 11.0% Agreed or Strongly Agreed

them. Further, around half were afraid their parents would disown them (57.2%) or knew they would be rejected (47.9%) if they came out as LGBT+.

When respondents did come out as LGBT+, less than half (41.4%) said their family listened attentively as they shared their sexual orientation and/or gender identity journey with them. Over two-thirds (69.5%) said their parents/caregivers were disappointed and 42.8% said their

Table 3

Family Rejection	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Not Sure	Strongly Agree + Agree
My parents struggled to accept my sexual orientation and/or gender identity.	8.1%	10.1%	81.9%
One or more of my parents responded as if my sexual orientation and/or gender identity was a poor reflection on them.	21.4%	12.8%	65.8%
I was ridiculed by my family for the way I dressed or fixed my hair to express my sexual orientation and/or gender identity.	47.1%	10.8%	42.1%
My family used demeaning language about my sexual orientation and/or gender identity after I came out to them.	53.8%	8.8%	37.5%
I was called names such as “fag” or “sissy” by my family.	71.9%	7.5%	20.6%
My parents' financial support was dependent on my complying with their wishes about my sexuality and/or gender.	55.4%	15.6%	29.0%
My family blamed me for any anti-LGBT+ mistreatment I received.	55.4%	16.2%	28.4%

Table 4

Parents Responses/Consequences	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Not Sure	Strongly Agree + Agree
I was not permitted to associate with any LGBT+ friends.	59.1%	13.3%	27.7%
My parents took me to counseling to try to change my sexual orientation and/or gender identity.	69.0%	5.0%	26.0%
My parents took me to counseling to help me understand and accept my sexual orientation and/or gender identity.	85.4%	2.8%	11.8%
My parents searched for organizations that would help them understand, support, and accept my sexual orientation and/or gender identity.	64.4%	18.9%	16.5%
My parents were open to exploring ways of supporting me as an LGBT+ person.	60.8%	11.4%	27.8%
My parents would defend me if anyone else demeaned or attacked my sexual orientation or gender identity.	39.2%	34.1%	26.7%

parents forbade them to tell anyone else about their orientation. Only one-fourth (25.0%) of parents communicated that they “loved me no matter what.” Finally, seventeen people (8.9%) said they were kicked out of their house when they came out to their parents.

Family Rejection

Table 3 shows generally high levels of family rejection. Respondents believed that most of their parents (81.9%) struggled to accept their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, with two-thirds (65.8%) saying that one or both of their parents responded as if their orientation or identity were a poor reflection on them. Rejection was often manifested in humiliating ways within some families, with 42.1% of respondents saying they were ridiculed by their family for the way they dressed or fixed their hair to express their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. In addition, over a third (37.5%) said their family used demeaning language about their orientation or identity, with 20.6% saying their family called them names such as “fag” or “sissy.” Almost a third (29.0%) said their parents’ financial support was dependent on them complying with their parents’ wishes about their sexuality or gender. Finally, almost a third (28.4%) said their family blamed them for any anti-LGBT+ mistreatment they received.

Parent Responses/Consequences

Table 4 describes the kinds of responses or consequences that parents or caregivers gave to their LGBT+ children. About one-fourth (27.7%) of respondents were not permitted to associate with any LGBT+ friends. In addition, one-fourth (26.0%) of parents/caregivers took their LGBT+ child to counseling to try to change their orientation or identity. On the other hand, a minority of parents tried to help their child better understand their orientation and/or identity, with over one-fourth (27.8%) of parents expressing their openness to exploring ways to support their LGBT+ child. Further, 11.8% of parents took their child to counseling to help them understand and accept their identity and/or orientation. Similarly, 16.5% of parents searched for organizations that would help them understand, support and accept their child’s orientation and/or identity. Finally, around one-fourth of respondents felt that their parents would defend them if anyone else demeaned or attacked their orientation or identity.

Impact of Religion

Religion played an extremely important role in how respondents and their families interpreted and responded to issues of orientation and

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Subjects
self-screened
by reading
the email or
social media
introduction
and then
proceeding to
the link
to complete
the survey.