

Rethinking GLBTQ Adolescent Spirituality: Implications for Social Workers in the Twenty-First Century

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Historically, research about gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (GLBTQ) persons indicates that issues such as cultural attitudes, politics, family values, and religion and spirituality often have negatively impacted the lives of this population. An emerging theory is that much of the research regarding the GLBTQ population does not apply to today's gay adolescents, who are growing up in a world very different from previous generations of same-sex youths. This article discusses new meanings of spirituality for GLBTQ youths and the potential of these views for use in evidence-based practice through a secondary analysis of the Spirituality Data Set, collected through the OutProud/Oasis Internet Survey of Queer and Questioning Youth—a survey with more than 6,800 respondents. A discussion of this data will help social workers and educators begin to think differently about GLBTQ youths. Such reconsiderations will help future practitioners become prepared to intervene in a much more relevant manner with this population.

KEYWORDS *gay, adolescents, spirituality, religion*

INTRODUCTION

In his book *The New Gay Teenager*, Savin-Williams (2005) proposes a different perspective related to what it means to be a gay adolescent today. Past notions must be shed. The experiences of previous generations of gay men

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and lesbians only act as suggestions for understanding, rather than firm milestones or expectations of the development of a gay or lesbian identity. This outlook encompasses almost all systems of an adolescent, including spirituality. Savin-Williams (2005) states, "At best, the lives of previous cohorts are merely guideposts, not authoritative texts about the life-course trajectories of today's young people" (p. 14).

Much contemporary research indicates gay and lesbian persons experience rejection from organized religion, with one outcome being the belief that a person cannot be religious/spiritual and embrace their identity as a queer person. At times this conflict is paradoxical in that gay and lesbian persons may reject their past religious traditions while seeking comfort and support from spiritual practices. It is this framework of research that may not be helpful as a means of understanding today's gay adolescents and their view of spirituality.

The research that is the focus of this article describes a study of secondary analysis of the Spirituality Data Set, collected through the Out-Proud/Oasis Internet Survey of Queer and Questioning Youth. An analysis of the data tends to support Savin-Williams' proposal that today's queer adolescents must be understood in new ways rather than focusing on experiences of older gay generations. Social workers must use a new lens in order to understand contemporary perspectives of who gay adolescents are. While the data being discussed focus on spirituality, other available data likewise support new outlooks in areas such as education, family, mental health, identity, and peers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before the 1990s, articles focusing on sexual minorities were limited in number. Even fewer articles specifically addressed gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) adolescents. A search of the literature indicates increased interest over the past decade in adolescent sexual minorities as a research population, and thus, a rise in the number of journal articles published. It appears this increase has been uneven. Several issues of importance to GLBT youths have received the most attention: family issues, heterosexist attitudes, social work practice, research methods, and suicide and mental health.

However, very little literature provides specific information regarding sexual-minority adolescents and issues of spirituality. Reparative therapy and beliefs of fundamentalist religious traditions have most often been the focus of the literature that can be found related to GLBT adolescent spirituality (Bright, 2004; Drescher, 1998; Dennis, 2002; Rosik, Griffith, & Cruz, 2007; Rowatt, 2009). Thus, the research described in this article will hopefully fill a void in the literature, encourage social workers to look at the connection between GLBT adolescents and spirituality in a new way, and provide an opportunity to hone intervention skills.

As far as other issues, family concerns, such as coming out and implications for family development, have been the focus of several publications (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998; Litzenberger & Bутtenheim, 1998; Saltzburg, 2004). It is important to note that articles related to family issues and social work practice often overlap, making it difficult to place these publications in one distinct category. Heterosexist attitudes and actions, including violence and harassment, are also topics often discussed, especially within the context of groups such as high school and college students and the military (Barkin, Kreiter, & DuRant, 2001; Charles, Thomas, & Thornton, 2005; Cotton-Huston & Waite, 2000; Elze, 2003b; Estrada & Weiss, 1999; Flowers & Buston, 2001; Plummer, 2001; Thurlow, 2001). While practice with GLBT adolescents often intersects other issues, several practice-specific articles can be identified (Coenen, 1998; Crisp & McCave, 2007; Evans, Bullerdick, & Ireland, 2002; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002; Morrow, 2004; Willis, 2007; Yarhouse & Tan, 2005; Yip, 2004). In recent years research concerns, such as sampling, validity of survey instruments, and interpretation of research conclusions, have received considerable attention (Austin, Conron, Patel, & Freedner, 2006; Elze, 2003a, 2007; Lasser & Tharinger, 2003; Martin & Knox, 2000; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001; Savin-Williams, 2001; Swann & Anastas, 2003).

Adolescent suicide, mental health, and other risk factors may be the category that is most often found in the literature. Articles have focused on depression, stigma of receiving mental health services, causes of suicide attempts and other self-destructive behaviors, and literature reviews (Ciro et al., 2005; Crawford, Geraghty, Street, & Simonoff, 2003; Lebson, 2002; Morrison & L'Heureux, 2001; Rohde, Noell, Ochs, & Seeley, 2001; Saewy, 2007; Thompson & Johnston, 2004).

METHOD

In 2000, three organizations, OutProud, the National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth, and *Oasis Magazine*, surveyed queer and questioning youths via the Internet. The survey contained more than 260 questions divided into sections and covered topics ranging from school life, experiences in the military, sexual history, and behavioral characteristics. This secondary analysis utilized questions from Spirituality, About Me, About Being Queer, and Behavior. The specific items for each section included in this analysis are delineated in Table 1.

Measurement

Several scales were created from the analyzed items in order to increase reliability and validity of the measured concepts. Spirituality was created with

TABLE 1 Items Utilized in Secondary Analysis

Spirituality	About Being Queer	About Me	Behavior
1. Do you consider yourself to be spiritual?	1. At what age were you first aware that you might be queer?	1. Do you believe that you can change your sexual orientation?	1. During the past year, have you ever attempted to hurt yourself?
2. Has your sexuality affected your views on religion?	2. At what age did you first accept your sexual orientation?	2. If you could change your sexual orientation, would you?	2. During the past year, did you ever feel so sad or hopeless almost every day, for two weeks or more in a row, that you stopped doing some usual activities?
3. Have your religious beliefs affected your acceptance of your sexual orientation?	3. How comfortable do you feel about being queer?	3. I take a positive attitude toward myself.	3. Have you thought about hurting or killing yourself in the past 30 days?
4. Have you at any time left or changed your religious affiliation because of your views toward sexuality?		4. At times, I think I am no good at all.	4. Have you EVER seriously thought about taking your own life?
5. Do you question your spirituality because of your sexuality?		5. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	5. Within the past year, how often have you thought about taking your own life?
			6. How much were these thoughts related to being queer?
			7. Have you ever tried to kill yourself?

items 2 to 4 in the Spirituality section, Self-Esteem was created with items 3 to 5 in the About Me category, and Risk Scale, measuring hopelessness and feelings of harming themselves, utilized items 2 to 5 in the behavior category. These scales demonstrated good reliability with Cronbach's alpha scores of .88, .80, and .87, respectively. In addition, the remaining items were used singly.

Sample

The entire sample was comprised of 6,872 respondents between the ages of 10 and 25 years old. The mean age of the respondents was 18.3 years old. Seventy-seven percent of respondents were male. Of these men, 64% self-identified as gay, 23% as bisexual, and 12% as other. Females comprised 21% of respondents, with 45% self-reporting as lesbian, 40% as bisexual, 14% as questioning, and 1% as other. Transgender individuals represented 2% of respondents.

The racial/ethnic composition of respondents was dominated by those of European descent (81.2%). Other groups included Asian descent (5.5%), Latin Americans (4.4%), African descent (2.7%), Native Americans or American Indians (0.9%), Native Australian descent or Aboriginal (0.2%), and others (5.0%). Almost 80% of the respondents were in school, with 4.0% in elementary school, 50% in high school, and 46% in college.

RESULTS

The sample supported being mostly spiritual, with 58% stating that they were spiritual and 61% claiming that they differentiated between religion and spirituality. The respondents also claimed (76%) that religious views do not impact their view of their own spirituality. The greatest affiliation was Other Protestant (48%) with Catholic (15%) being the next largest category. Interestingly, while 56% claimed that their sexuality has affected their views of religion, very few (25%) respondents reported leaving or changing their religious affiliation because of religious views toward their sexuality. Further, only 13% of respondents changed their religious views or practices because of anti-gay religious teachings.

These respondents also tended to claim strong self-esteem, with 68% feeling strongly positive about themselves, and 59% claiming to feel very satisfied with themselves. Similarly, most of the respondents feel either very good or good about being queer (69%) and would not change their orientation (76%) if they could. In terms of the origination of their sexuality, 46% have no idea how they came to be queer while 47% believe that it is either biological or genetic.

Given the previous responses it is not surprising that the majority of the respondents (79%) reported not thinking about hurting themselves within the

TABLE 2 Correlation Matrix for Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4
Spirituality Scale	—	-.56**	.60**	-.189**
Self-Esteem Scale		—	-.361**	.284**
Risk Scale			—	-.75**
How comfortable do you feel about being queer?				—

** $p = .01$. (2-tailed).

past year. In addition, 75% have either never or rarely considered suicide. Furthermore, of those that have considered harming themselves or related suicidal ideations, only 20% report that these feelings had to do with their sexual orientation.

While the vast majority of those adolescents surveyed do not seem to have trouble integrating religion, spirituality, and their orientation, it may be that, for those in the minority, religion and religious dogma may still be problematic. Statistical analyses were performed to answer the following question: Is there any relationship between difficulty with religious views, comfort with sexual orientation, and risk of self-harming behavior?

The first step was to determine bivariate correlations (Table 2). Next, significant correlations were entered into a regression model to test the predictive characteristics of the variables (Table 3). Because of the wide range of ages and to help control for the possible effects of developmental stages, age was entered as a control variable. The overall model was significant as well as all the predictor variables. Indirect relationships were tested to determine if perhaps problems with religiosity may mediate or moderate the relationship between being comfortable with one's sexuality or high self-esteem and risk of harmful/suicidal feelings. The tested interaction produced insignificant results.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

According to the results of this research, it appears that many GLBTQ youths differentiate between the concepts of spirituality and religion. Social workers

TABLE 3 Hierarchical Regression Model Predicting Risk of Harmful or Suicidal Feelings

	β	t	p
Model: $R^2 = .163$, $F = 204.11$, $p = .001$			
Age	.034	2.87	.104
Spirituality Scale	.200	4.96	.001
Self-Esteem Scale	-.345	-28.09	.000
How comfortable do you feel about being queer?	-.047	-8.02	.000

must develop an understanding of this distinction if they are to intervene effectively with this population. As with many issues in a person's life, the impact of prior events can influence the means a person selects to cope. Such may be the case with the relationship between a youth's previous religious affiliation(s) and his or her ability to come to terms with his or her sexuality. Social workers must be willing to help adolescents explore this relationship. A closely related concept is that a young person's sexual orientation may cause him or her to question his or her own spirituality. Some adolescents have received oft repeated messages that it is impossible to be GLBTQ and a spiritual person; they may have come to believe spirituality and being queer or questioning is impossible.

As with almost all research conducted with the GLBTQ population, results cannot be generalized to the population as a whole. Information obtained from the survey relied upon self-identification as being a queer or questioning youth. The use of the Internet as the tool for obtaining data prevented corroboration of the identities of the participants.

The results obtained from this survey need to be critically analyzed before intervening with any GLBTQ youth. One must use care not to overlook the reality that, for some adolescents, religious issues may still be a risk factor even in today's more open and accepting environment. Despite the results discussed above, some religions represent an institutional bias against the queer and questioning population, making it difficult for some youths to cope with their identities. In other words, it may be just "like the old days" for some adolescents.

It is probable that an indirect effect occurs between today's youths and spirituality. More constructs may need to be examined than those that were available through this survey. Identifying these constructs would aid in the development of future surveys focusing on adolescents and spirituality. Furthermore, it may be possible to develop an additive model for the data that includes issues with religion as a risk factor.

Another issue that GLBTQ youths may bring to practitioners centers around their parents' current religion. It is important to explore whether this affiliation hinders an adolescent's ability to be open and honest about his or her sexual orientation with parental figures. If youths are unable to be themselves, the price of keeping this secret may cause psychosocial problems that must be addressed.

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