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INTRODUCTION:

-Keywords: Religion, Identity, LGBT, Emerging Adulthood

According to Minority stress theory, members of the LGBT community experience recurring stressors specific to their minority status. 6.4% of emerging adults (EAs) identify as either lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). This population is at a greater risk compared to heterosexual peers for multiple challenges, including suicidal thoughts and actions, anxiety and mood disorders. This poses an issue because of the lack of social support in their homes growing up and conversations about identity. They turn to media for the primary production for social knowledge regarding LGBT identities. Media is informative for people's knowledge of LGBT people, and is normally the first place that EAs come across LGBT identities. Hammack's framework of GLB identity development suggests that media, a cultural factor, influences important psychological domains such as self-perceptions and identity. LGBT EAs frequently place fictional media narratives as the main source of education for forming their identity, especially when they are a part of stigmatized populations. One study found that exposure to homosexual television characters can facilitate diminishing prejudice against and expansion of acceptance towards homosexuals. However, 60% of EAs report religion and religious activities as being an important factor in their lives. Another study found that 92% of LGBT EAs were raised in families that identified with a particular religious denomination, indicating exposure to and identification with religion. Two-thirds of EAs in the LGBT community acknowledge conflict between their sexual and religious identities.

PURPOSE:

To describe the bidirectional impact of religious identity and sexual identity in LGBT EAs, with the hope of gaining a greater understanding of the process of identity integration and related factors.

METHODS:

Data for this study was collected via face-to-face semi-structured interviews with university students and EAs from the surrounding region in the Midwest (N= 7). Interviews were semi-structured, such that as questions and topics arose that interviewers found enlightening and informative, exploration was allowed.

ANALYSIS:

Qualitative analysis was employed, as identity integration is seen as non-linear and context-sensitive. Gathering qualitative data allowed for developing an in-depth understanding of dynamic factors related to sexual and religious identity development. Face-to-face interviews allow for the exploration and elaboration on responses from participants.

| Table 1. Demographics | | | |
|-----------------------|---|----|-------|
| | | % | Mean |
| Age | | | 21.14 |
| Sex | female | 57 | |
| | male | 43 | |
| Sexual identity | Pan-romantic | 14 | |
| | Demisexual | | |
| | Bisexual | 14 | |
| | Gay | 14 | |
| | Gay/Trans | 14 | |
| Race | Pan-sexual | 14 | |
| | Lesbian | 29 | |
| Denomination | White/Non-Hispanic | 71 | |
| | Mixed Asian/White | 14 | |
| Race | Hispanic/Latino | 14 | |
| | Agnostic | 29 | |
| | Atheist/Agnostic | 14 | |
| | Belief in High Power | 14 | |
| | Non-denominational/Exploring | 14 | |
| Denomination | Questioning/Taking what is good/Building Own Approach | 14 | |
| | Paganistic Wiccan | 14 | |

Note: some percentages do not sum to 100 due to rounding error.

RESULTS:

Study results indicate that the media was a substantial influence on one's sexual identity, while parents were the greatest influence on their religious identity. We also found that conversations about sexuality were largely absent in the home growing up, which could factor into why EAs turned to media to learn about their sexuality. On the other hand, religion was spoken about often in the home growing

CONCLUSION/IMPLICATIONS:

This research can be used to help family practices to inform parents of the importance of open conversations within families, especially during adolescence and emerging adulthood. This emphasis can also be used in programs in regards to parent-child relationships and in family therapy. These applications prompt conversations about identity development within families, making it a normal topic heard within a household. Parents need to know that if they are not talking about sexual identities with their child, they are going to find that information elsewhere. It's very easy to talk about religious identity and varying views so parents should use the same practices to talk about sexual identities with their children. Negative implications of our study may include parents limiting their children's access to media that include the LGBT community so children will not have the resources to explore their sexual identity.

Theme 1: Media Influence

Five out of seven participants in this study cited the media as a key factor in the development of their sexual identity. A representative quote of the theme influence of media on sexual identity from our interviews: *"Um yeah and I know that when I was around 15, I started seeking out lesbian media like movies and stuff, and I would watch those uh (laugh) in the living room at 3 o'clock in the morning so my parents wouldn't know um yeah and I feel like the rest is kind of history"* (Lesbian, mixed-Asian, agnostic).

Theme 2: Parental Influence

Seven out of seven acknowledged their own parents as the main influence in their religious development. *"Um, we definitely had a lot of conversations about like um just like what being religious means, who god is, um the influence he plays on our lives, um definitely had talked about more social issues like god's views on like sex before marriage, homosexuality, tattoos, piercings, stuff like that."* (Gay/trans, white, non-denominational/exploring).

Theme 3: Lack of Conversation

There was also a consistent lack of conversation surrounding gender identity and sexual orientation in the household growing up. For example, participants shared *"It was really really awkward at first with my dad, it's really never happened."* (Gay, Hispanic/Latino, belief in higher power) and *"Um not many. Honestly. The only conversation we ever did have is when I did come out to my mom um and that was mostly just based on me like educating her and her asking questions."* (Lesbian, White, Agnostic)

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