



Psychosocial Factors Influencing Commitment to and Challenges of Celibacy in Gay Christians

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Literature Review

Celibate gay Christians represent a unique population of sexual minorities faced with the task of integrating their sexual and faith identity. Some integrate their sexual identity with their faith by adhering to traditional teachings on same-sex relationships, which may imply celibacy (Lefevor et al., 2021).

Those who are religious tend to have more conservative views about sexuality (Hardy & Brian, 2017). LGB survey respondents reported high levels of spiritual well-being in how they related to God (religious well-being) and how they felt about life (existential well-being), a significant predictor of self-esteem, acceptance of one's sexual orientation, and lower feelings of alienation (Tan, 2005). However, the effects of religion are not always positive. Those hurt by the church often experienced closed-mindedness, condemnation, fear, shame, guilt, isolation, abandonment, and self-loathing. Yet, from the church also came relational benefits, relational connectedness with God, a sense of hope, love, grace, forgiveness, support, comfort, strength, and acceptance (Yarhouse et al., 2009). In terms of experiences outside of church, religion, and spirituality, disclosure to friends tends to be a satisfactory and shame-reducing experience characterized by acceptance, understanding, and a sense of connection, compared to family disclosures (Yarhouse et al., 2009). Most families were described as talking about homosexuality negatively or not at all (Kansiewicz et al., 2022).

Those who choose celibacy often experience less sexual attraction to any gender, have less interest in sex, and have more sexual aversion to same-sex others. Yet, they also have increased homonegativity, likely reflecting convictions about the moral impermissibility of same-sex sexual behavior, which may reinforce celibacy (Lefevor et al., 2021). For many, celibacy is a transitional stage where they may accept their gay identity while still denying same-sex sexuality or relational intimacy. Still, others find congruence in remaining celibate amidst their sexual identity. Freeman-Coppadage and Horne (2019) stress the importance of not pushing celibate gay Christians into an affirming stance but rather focusing on the alleviation of loneliness through spiritual community, celibate LGB support groups, or celibate partnerships.

This study aims to explore other factors that lead to commitments to celibacy, especially through the lens of social support due to lack of research on how social support impacts decisions to remain celibate in a heteronormative world.

Methods

Participants were recruited via purposeful sampling, through groups advocating for celibate gay Christians (organizations with international internet access, in-person groups, and internet forums). Inclusion criteria included being at least 18 years old, practicing within a home church, self-identifying as a celibate gay Christian with enduring same-sex attraction, having personal same-sex orientation, and being committed to a sexually celibate life due to faith in the traditional sexual ethic. A snowball technique was then employed to recruit others. Interview included a wide range of questions such as disclosure experiences, sexual identity development process, faith and sexuality reconciliation, social support related to disclosure and decisions, and exploration of celibacy. Sixteen interviews were used analyzed through the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) method.

Results

Friends Support	Family Support	Church Support	Celibacy Factors	Negative Social Influences
Positive Reactions to Disclosure: 81% "I came out to two of my closest friends when I was in college, and their responses were like, 'Thanks for sharing that with me'"	Positive Reactions to Disclosure: 38% "And so we just had the conversation with him and my stepmom-the three of us, and he's been incredible. He's been extremely supportive."	Positive Reactions to Disclosure: 31% "Any my youth pastor, was very understanding as well. He wants to help me figure out solutions."	Celibacy as a Second Choice: 38% "And then in counseling was when I decided to start exploring celibacy. I think that was one thing that contributed to a lot of my struggle was feeling like I had to get married."	Rejection/Discrimination From Church: 56% "And so they immediately voted to fire me, and they told me you're probably one of the best youth pastors we've had, but parts of your story are too broken for you to minister to the healthy families here."
Friends as Chosen Family: 56% "They invite me to things. They invite me to vacation with them, be a part of their family, or they'll just ask me to come over and hang out."	Having Other LGBTQ+ Family Members: 19% "And then my brother, started at a university, and when he came back he was 21 and he was saying he was gay, and I handled it super well."	Diverse and Inclusive Churches who Practice What They Preach: 44% "They do a really excellent job already with including people and not just saying 'We include people.'"	Religious Views of Celibacy Helpful: 25% "So getting more into theological stuff of like, 'Okay, what does God say about sexuality?'"	Heteronormative Expectations/Family Focus: 44% "You know, they send out something for Christmas Eve, and they say, 'come with you family and blah blah.' You know it's a ridiculous thing to send out to single people you know."
Regular Casual Social Events: 44% "I think something that is helpful is trying to create certain times where we can hang out as friends, like trying to create those settings. Let's just hang out or let's watch a movie together."	Questions and Curiosity: 13% "And she [participant's mother] wondered if I desired a relationship one day like she's just like kind of just wanting to know more instead of just expressing what she thinks."	Listening and Discipleship: 38% "They gave me time to heal, but they also included me. In fact, I preached there actually a couple of week ago and this is the place to practice moving toward just being seen."	Celibacy Reconciling Faith and Sexuality: 25% "Celibacy is the only place where I have been able to find peace and a sense of feeling those two things reconciled."	Difficulties in Same-Sex Friendships: 50% "And I actually got confused more because there was like one time where I thought I was attracted to this one guy, and then I was confused."
People With Whom They Can Confide In: 81% "Also, I have friends that I can talk with about these kinds of personal things."	Love: 25% "And then my brother in law emailed me this most amazing email about what a great uncle I am to his children and what a good brother-in-law I am and it was just so encouraging."	Affirming Love and Support: 50% "Then later, he realized he [pastor] has to be an advocate for me like I couldn't always advocate for myself, and I remember when that kind of hit him. And it's been incredible."	Low Expectations for Other-Sex Relationships: 19% "I have been processing this the last couple of years, I feel like I have thought deeply like what if I pursue a relationship with a woman? And I don't think that is what God is opening up for me."	Isolation Due to Lack of Stability From Marriage: 50% "And she told me it's like honestly the thing that helped her the most is being married and having like a spouse and kids who are constant community and I was just like: Okay, what do I do with that?"

Discussion

In line with previous research, our results suggest part of the reason why the disclosure is more satisfying with friends is due to higher accounts of positive reactions to disclosure stemming from friends. Furthermore, our results reveal low levels of active support stemming from family interactions. While high amount of negative social influences from family members were not necessarily recorded, the deficits in active support noted from family members aligns with previous work indicating homosexuality either not being talked about or only being talked about in negative ways (Yarhouse et al., 2009).

Our findings also align with previous research looking at how CGG Christian are met with varying experiences at religious institutions, such as at church (Yarhouse et al., 2009). Participants had more positive views of the church when the church reacted positively to their sexuality disclosure, had diverse members, actively practiced inclusivity, listened to the stories of sexual minorities, and were loving and affirming. Unhelpful interactions included rejection, discrimination, and heteronormative expectations from the church. Participants found it most unhelpful when churches had too high of a family focus and failed to care for single people, especially single sexual minorities. Rejection and discrimination included actions such as firing sexual minorities from ministry positions, showing discomfort towards sexual minorities, blaming their sexuality on lack of faith, and creating an environment where they felt like they could not be open.

Participants recounted seeing their friends as "chosen family members" as very helpful in maintaining their commitments to celibacy. Participants mentioned instances in which they had open door policies to other people's homes, were their honorary "uncles and aunts," and were invited on vacations and holidays with the families. Participants also found it helpful to have other people with whom they could be open, confide in, and have deep conversations with. Finally, they appreciated regular and consistent casual social events such as being active with others, having game nights with friends, and eating meals together.

These findings highlight the importance of continually aiding celibate gay Christians in their pursuit of strong social connections outside of the heteronormative nuclear family. Clinicians can appreciate the nuance of how celibate gay Christian can have both helpful and harmful interactions with religious institutions.

References



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