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“Pray That God Will Change You”: The Religious Social Ecology of Bias-Based Bullying Targeting Sexual and Gender Minority Youth—A Qualitative Study of Service Providers and Educators

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Abstract

The bullying of sexual and gender minority youth (SGMY) is pervasive, with documented negative impacts on health. We explored the social ecology of bullying of SGMY, with a focus on religion as a source or context of bullying. Semi-structured interviews with service providers, educators, and administrators in Toronto, Canada, who work with SGMY explored perspectives on the bullying of SGMY, focusing on religiously based bullying and strategies for intervention. Interviews (45-60 minutes) were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic content analysis. The data revealed religiously based homophobic discourse that permeates religious (places of worship, faith-based schools) and secular microsystems (public schools, families) across SGMY's social ecology. The language and ideology of “sin” and “conversion” were evidenced in direct religiously based bullying of SGMY in schools, and victimization in places of worship and family microsystems, as well as serving as a rationale for bullying and nonintervention by teachers, school staff, administrators, and family members. Multi-sectoral and multilevel influences of religiously based sexual prejudice on the bullying of SGMY suggest that existing individual-level and microsystem-level responses in schools should be augmented with institutional, policy, and legal interventions in SGMY's more distal social ecology in order to effectively prevent religiously based homophobic bullying.

Keywords

bullying, LGBT youth, antigay attitudes, sexual prejudice, religious beliefs, religious messages, conversion therapy, sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE)

Harassment and victimization targeting sexual and gender minority youth (SGMY; that is, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, genderqueer, and other non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender identities) is pervasive and destructive (Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013). The prevalence (Kosciw et al., 2013) and negative impacts of bullying of SGMY have been extensively documented (Russell & Fish, 2016). Victimized SGMY exhibit greater levels of negative psychosocial and health outcomes than their non-SGMY peers (Collier, van Beusekom, Bos, & Sandfort, 2013), including depression, suicidality (la Roi, Kretschmer, Dijkstra, Veenstra, & Oldehinkel, 2016), and alcohol and drug use (Collier et al., 2013), as well as more negative academic outcomes (e.g., truancy, discipline problems), than SGMY who were not bullied (Collier et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2013). Furthermore, SGMY victimization may exert a negative impact on psychosocial health (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2010) and physical well-being into adulthood (Andersen, Zou, & Blosnich, 2015).

Fostering the health and academic engagement of SGMY should be a priority for school administrators, principals, teachers, and guidance counselors throughout the United States and Canada (Kosciw et al., 2013; Taylor & Peter, 2011). Religion, specifically discourses and teachings that marginalize and oppress sexual and gender minorities (SGM), can play a role in SGMY bullying (Higa et al., 2014; Ream & Rodriguez, 2014). Despite increasing research focused on the bullying victimization of SGMY, the role of religion in bullying has received little empirical attention. In this study, we examined the social ecology of bullying of SGMY, focusing on religion as a source or underlying context of bullying.

Religion and SGM

Religious doctrine has historically condemned SGM identities (Ream & Rodriguez, 2014), with dominant and consistent messages that same-sex attractions and behaviors are wrong and immoral (Longo, Walls, & Wisneski, 2013). Non-inclusive SGM denominations, such as the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of the Latter Day Saints, have publicly advocated against legal rights for sexual minorities. The Roman Catholic Church in Canada denounced the inclusion of same-sex marriage in the definition of civil marriage, which nonetheless became federal law in 2005. In 2012, Catholic Church leaders unsuccessfully advocated against provincial legislation in Ontario requiring publicly funded (including Catholic) schools to allow students to establish gay-straight-alliances in their schools. Nevertheless, specific denominational doctrines may not necessarily be congruent with particular congregations' teachings (Woodford, Levy, & Walls, 2013).

Alongside religious denominations, religiously based organizations can play a role in influencing social policy and shaping public attitudes. Notably, the American Family Association and Focus on the Family oppose SGM protections in the United States (Ream & Rodriguez, 2014). These organizations are specific religious-right conservative Christian factions that hold considerable power in their attempts to hinder institutional protections for SGMY, including in schools. The U.S. Focus on the Family also provides resources for parents and families to demonstrate “a loving, redemptive response to homosexual-themed events and discussions; that God cares about our lives, our relationships and our sexuality” (Day of Dialogue, 2016). These organizations utilize religious teachings, spirituality, and God to condemn same-sex attractions, and to isolate and silence discourse on sexual and gender diversity in secular educational institutions. Such teachings and messages may foster internalized homophobia, and, for many religious SGMY, yield internal conflict (Gattis, Woodford, & Han, 2014; Longo et al., 2013).

Not all religious denominations adopt a noninclusive SGM stance. Some, such as the Metropolitan Community Church and the United Church of Canada, are affirming and have been involved in advocacy efforts in support of SGM rights. Other denominations, for example, the Anglican Church of Canada, adopt an overall affirming stance, such as recognizing the inherent value of same-sex marriages, but leave it up to individual parishes if they will bless such unions. Affirming religions can benefit SGM individuals (Gattis et al., 2014; Sherry, Adelman, Whilde, & Quick, 2010), but such denominations and communities represent a small proportion of religious organizations (Ream & Rodriguez, 2014).

Among youth, generally, religion can act as a protective factor against negative health outcomes (Cole-Lewis, Gipson, Opperman, Arango, & King, 2016). For SGMY, select religious denominations also may exert a positive influence in their lives (Gattis et al., 2014): SGMY engaged in theologically liberal places of worship reported less internalized homophobia and greater integration of SGM identity than those affiliated with more conservative ones (Sherry et al., 2010). However, the role of religion for SGMY is often complex given historically based (Ream & Rodriguez, 2014) and ongoing messages that endorse intolerance or condemnation of SGM (Longo et al., 2013).

Religion and SGMY Bullying

In addition to psychosocial risks and benefits of religion for SGMY, religion exerts an important socializing influence among youth, particularly those who are religiously affiliated (Fowler, 1981). Religious affiliation and religious beliefs influence heterosexual adolescents’ negative

judgments about same-sex sexuality and the treatment of SGMY ([Horn, Szalacha, & Drill, 2008](#)). Religious teachings (e.g., “homosexuality is a sin”) have been described as a barrier to the acceptance of SGM students in schools and as contributing to fewer resources for these students ([Varjas et al., 2007](#)). Religiously based homophobic attitudes among students’ parents also can contribute to students’ bullying behaviors in schools ([Varjas et al., 2007](#)). Importantly, religiously based rhetoric endorsing prejudice or condemnation of SGM, in both religious and secular institutions, is often framed as a right to freedom of religious expression ([Meyer, 2010; Taylor, 2008](#)). Schools, in turn, struggle with balancing protections against SGMY discrimination with claims that discrimination against SGM is protected as a religious liberty ([Varjas et al., 2007](#)).

Religious denominations and groups that promote hostile SGM messaging can be sources of both direct (e.g., ostracism from religious leaders, harassment in places of worship) and indirect victimization (e.g., invocation of religion in negative messaging by youth and adults at schools; [Higa et al., 2014; Varjas et al., 2007](#)). Limited empirical investigations have examined the influence of social ecological contexts beyond schools in bullying victimization of SGMY. Higa and colleagues (2014) explored multiple domains of SGMY’s social ecology, identifying families and religious institutions, as well as schools, as predominant domains of harassment.

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which religion may function as a source or context for bullying of SGMY. We explored manifestations of religious discourse expressed through places of worship, educational institutions, families, and individual SGMY.

Conceptual Framework

This study was informed by ecological systems theory (EST; Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and critical discourse analysis ([van Dijk, 1989](#)). EST posits that although bullying is often defined by actions and interactions at the individual level, it can best be understood and prevented by studying the multiple contexts in which it is embedded ([Hong, Woodford, Long, & Renn, 2016; Newman & Fantus, 2015](#)). Microsystems, concrete settings in youths’ immediate environment, include school, home, and places of worship ([Bronfenbrenner, 1979](#)), essential settings through which to understand bullying ([Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Newman & Fantus, 2015](#)). The mesosystem, interrelations among settings, includes church-school, church-home, and home-school interactions that affect bullying ([Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hong & Garbarino, 2012](#)). The exosystem, contexts that affect the immediate environment, encompasses communities, mass media, and public attitudes ([Hong & Garbarino, 2012](#)). At the superordinate level is the

macrosystem: “overarching patterns of ideology and organization of the social institutions common to a particular culture or subculture” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 8).

Consistent with EST, the focus of quantitative research on bullying of SGMY has begun to shift upstream, from a focus on individual victims and perpetrators to schools and communities as the units of analysis (Hatzenbuehler, Birkett, Van Wagenen, & Mayer, 2014; [Hatzenbuehler & Keyes, 2013](#)). Qualitative investigations provide in-depth insights into SGMY bullying and the mechanisms and dynamics that may influence bullying ([Patton, Hong, Patel, & Kral, 2017](#)). Given extensive evidence of bullying targeting SGMY and limited exploration of the possible impact of contexts beyond schools, we aimed to expand understanding of the social ecology of SGMY bullying. Based on empirical research demonstrating that religion and religiosity are significantly associated with sexual prejudice ([Cragun & Sumerau, 2015](#); [Woodford et al., 2013](#)) and used as rationales for exclusion and victimization of SGM ([Horn et al., 2008](#)), we focused on the religious social ecology of homophobic bullying ([Newman & Fantus, 2015](#)).

Our approach was also guided by van Dijk’s (1989) seminal work on discourse as a mechanism of power, social control, and transmission of ideology (e.g., racism in discourse). Based on van Dijk, we conceptualized religious discourse as manifested in everyday talk (e.g., verbal slurs and harassment), texts (e.g., invocation of scripture), religious expertise (e.g., pastoral counseling), ideology (e.g., teachings that homosexuality is “unnatural”), and institutional cultures and climates (e.g., dominant norms in places of worship, schools). This framework enabled us to consider the power-laden nature of religious messages and positions that constitute religion broadly (not only religious sites) as a context of SGMY bullying. Our conceptualization of religion as a context, thus, built on EST and critical discourse theory to understand how religion and religiosity exert an influence on both religious and secular systems. The religious context of SGMY bullying victimization encompasses religious sites (e.g., faith-based schools, places of worship, pastoral counseling; that is, microsystems) and discursive practices (e.g., narratives within and among schools, families, media, policies, and laws; that is, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem).

Purpose

We explored religiously based SGMY bullying from the perspective of professionals, specifically frontline service providers, agency coordinators, educators, and school administrators who work with SGMY in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. We engaged these stakeholders given their depth and breadth of knowledge and experience derived from their work with SGMY, and their perspectives as either outsiders working with school systems (i.e., frontline service providers

and agency coordinators) or insiders within school systems (i.e., educators and administrators). We judged these stakeholders as being well positioned to speak from a broad perspective to bullying experiences, and to explore possible linkages between bullying practices and larger macrosystemic issues, thus helping to advance understanding of the social ecology of religiously based bullying victimization of SGMY.

The following research questions guided our investigation:

Research Question 1: (How) is religiously based sexual prejudice manifested in bullying victimization of SGMY?

Research Question 2: (How) does religiously based sexual prejudice in the social ecology of SGMY influence bullying victimization?

Research Question 3: What strategies might be effective in intervening in religiously based sexual prejudice and/or mitigate its impact on bullying victimization of SGMY?

Method

We used an interpretivist perspective (Lincoln & Guba, 2000) guided by EST and critical discourse theory. We assumed that different perspectives may exist on the phenomenon of bullying victimization of SGMY and religious contexts of bullying, and thus, we were interested in exploring key informants' (KIs) perceptions and experiences based on their work with SGMY. To integrate existing theory with an interpretivist perspective, we used qualitative content analysis with a directive approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). We used EST and critical discourse theory to guide and focus the research questions—beginning with more open-ended questions on bullying of SGMY, and continuing to more targeted questions on religious contexts of bullying—as well as to inform coding schemas, while remaining open to KIs' perspectives and experience. The University of Toronto Research Ethics Board approved the study, and all participants provided written informed consent.

Study Context

Toronto is Canada's largest and most diverse city (~2.6 million), with almost 50% foreign-born residents. Toronto is also religiously diverse, including Roman Catholic (28%), no religious affiliation (24%), "Other Christian" (10%), Muslim (8%), Hindu (6%), Anglican (4%), Christian Orthodox (4%), Jewish (4%), and United Church (3%; Statistics Canada, 2013). Toronto is often considered Canada's SGM mecca, with community groups and services for SGMY, as well as

openly affirming religious denominations. However, hate crimes and other forms of SGM discrimination have been documented, including among SGMY (Allen, 2015; [Janoff, 2005](#)).

Sampling and Recruitment

We used purposive and snowball sampling to identify professionally and ethnically diverse KIs, including frontline service providers, agency coordinators, administrators, and educators with three or more years' experience working with SGMY. Purposive sampling involved selecting participants who could provide insights about SGMY bullying, including sources of messages that endorse intolerance or condemnation of SGMY, based on their professional experiences with SGMY across community and school contexts. KIs were recruited from community centers, youth programming services, and educational settings in the Greater Toronto Area. Participants also offered names of additional individuals who met inclusion criteria and who could further explicate SGMY bullying (i.e., snowball sampling).

Data Collection

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured 45- to 60-minute interviews. The interview guide elicited KIs' general perspectives on victimization of SGMY and on religious discourses of bullying, based on their engagement with SGMY. Initial questions explored KIs' general perspectives of SGMY victimization (e.g., "Please tell me about your knowledge or professional experiences with bullying of SGMY"), followed by probing questions asking KIs to reflect on specific insults or acts of harassment or violence. To explore religious discourses, KIs were then asked to recall specific aspects of bullying: "What are the different ways people have justified homophobia?" and "To what extent is there bullying based on the language of religious institutions or incidents of bullying that refer to religious texts and doctrines?" In asking about general experiences of SGMY bullying, the research team was able to distinguish between secular (e.g., general heteronormative language that privileges heterosexuality as the taken-for-granted norm; [Kitzinger, 2005](#)) and religiously based discourse. We concluded by asking KIs to speak about the impact religiously based bullying may have on SGMY and any interventions, including prevention strategies that could address religiously based bullying.

Data Analysis

Interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed, with identifying information redacted. After (re)reading the transcripts, we analyzed the data using thematic content analysis ([Pope & Mays, 1999](#)). We focused on examples and manifestations of religion and religiously based

sexual prejudice in the social ecology of bullying victimization of SGMY. As per our conceptual framework, we closely examined religious discourse apparent in and underpinning victimization across everyday talk, texts, religious expertise, ideology, and institutional cultures and climates. We then applied EST as a framework to organize and interpret the data.

Two members of the research team independently conducted multiple readings of the transcripts and initial coding of three transcripts, with coding discrepancies resolved by consensus with the first author. We developed a codebook based on initial codes and applied it to subsequent transcripts with openness to emerging codes. We then conducted focused coding to develop and synthesize the data and categories, and create analytic themes ([Pope & Mays, 1999](#)).

Analytic Rigor

We fostered trustworthiness by triangulating data sources (teachers, community-based service providers, administrators), theories (EST and critical discourse theory), and utilizing multiple coders. In addition, we used member checking, in that KIs were provided with the opportunity to review and respond to the identified themes and subthemes. We also used peer debriefing by presenting and discussing the emerging themes with other researchers with expertise in bullying.

Guided by an interpretivist approach, we identify our subject position in the research ([Creswell & Miller, 2000](#)). The research team consisted of academic researchers and doctoral students with experience studying SGMY discrimination and prejudice. Each team member identifies as a sexual minority, with various religious backgrounds represented (Catholic, Jewish, Jehovah's Witness). We have directly heard religiously based comments expressing intolerance toward SGMY among students in our classes and other educational contexts, and have had students, clients, and colleagues share experiences with religiously based sexual prejudice. Our professional and personal expertise helped to increase our theoretical sensitivity to SGMY bullying.

To exercise reflexivity in the research process, interviewers (trained Master of Social Work graduates) conducted memo writing and journaling after each interview, and throughout data analysis, to bracket preconceptions that might influence data interpretation ([Tufford & Newman, 2012](#)). We also held ongoing team debriefing sessions to discuss interviews, any challenges in data collection, and emerging findings. Dual coding of the first three transcripts and team discussion of any differences in coding supported analytic rigor. Finally, we searched for disconfirming evidence in the data during the coding and data analytic process (Miles,

Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014); for example, we identified constructive examples of religious engagement with SGMY and suggestions for inclusive religious practices.

Results

Among 16 KIs, seven were cisgender women, eight cisgender men, and one transgender man, ranging in age from 25 to 62 years. Ten KIs identified as White, three as Black/Black Caribbean, two as Asian, and one as Middle Eastern. In terms of sexual orientation, seven identified as gay, four lesbian, two queer, and three did not self-identify. KIs' experience working with SGMY ranged from 3 to 15 years (see Table 1).

Table 1. Key Informant Demographics From In-Depth Interviews With Service Providers Working With SGMY in Toronto, Canada.

ID	Gender	Sexual orientation	Ethnicity	Role
KI-1	Cisgender man	Queer	White	Program coordinator
KI-2	Cisgender woman	Queer	Black/Mixed Race	Program coordinator
KI-3	Cisgender man	Gay	Black/Caribbean	Program facilitator
KI-4	Cisgender woman	—	White	Program coordinator
KI-5	Cisgender woman	Lesbian	White	Educator
KI-6	Cisgender man	Gay	White	Teacher
KI-7	Cisgender man	Gay	White	Professor
KI-8	Cisgender man	Gay	Black/Caribbean	Program coordinator
KI-9	Cisgender man	Gay	Arab/Middle Eastern	Program facilitator
KI-10	Cisgender woman	Lesbian	White	Program coordinator
KI-11	Cisgender man	Gay	South Asian	Program coordinator
KI-12	Cisgender woman	—	South Asian	Direct service provider
KI-13	Cisgender woman	Lesbian	White	Agency director
KI-14	Transgender man	—	White	Program coordinator
KI-15	Cisgender man	Gay	White	Program coordinator
KI-16	Cisgender woman	Lesbian	White	Agency coordinator

Note. KI = key informant; SGMY = sexual and gender minority youth.

We identified themes that characterize different dimensions of religiously based sexual prejudice in the social ecology of bias-based bullying of SGMY, perceived impacts of religiously based bullying on SGMY, and bystander intervention, including by teachers and administrators.

Homophobic Religious Discourse

Condemnation of SGM underlies bullying: “. . . you're bad, you're sinful.” KIs articulated specific

religious rhetoric (e.g., “God doesn’t love you” [KI-2], “Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve” [KI-4]), and referenced scriptural passages (e.g., “man should not lay down with man” [KI-8]) and biblical teachings used to invoke the power of religion in homophobic bullying. KIs specifically described the use of scripture to equate SGM identities with something immoral and unnatural: “you’re bad, you’re sinful, you’re doing what’s wrong; that’s not right, that’s not natural” (KI-9); “Whether it’s based on tradition, or . . . gospel . . . there is no room for any different interpretation. And anything that deviates is seen as amoral and corrupt and threatening” (KI-1). Such religious condemnation of SGM was seen to emerge across various microsystem contexts, including peer relations, public and faith-based educational institutions, home, and family, as well as churches and other places of worship. Social institutions played an enabling function: “there are organizations, schools, churches, all kinds of institutions that play a role in making bullying possible and perpetuating bullying” (KI-2). Religiously conservative biblical teachings (particularly found in Evangelical Christian and Catholic denominations) were considered to intersect with educational institutions, including secular ones, and family systems.

Justifying and enabling bullying: “Well, the Bible says . . . ” Religious rhetoric and texts were described as being used as “proof” of wrongdoing or immorality, and as justification for verbal and physical harassment, and exclusion of SGM. A KI described religion as

a place where homosexuality is clearly a sin . . . so people have the right to beat you up . . . sometimes they feel they have the right to kill you and to completely abuse you and do horrible things to you. (KI-9)

Another KI illustrated the use of religion, including the invocation of God and the Bible, to disavow personal responsibility and justify bullying:

Acting out towards people who identify or whom we assume to be gay, it’s not me being homophobic; it’s a natural repulsion and revulsion for something that is horrendous and horrific . . . And then throw that in with some faith stuff, okay, the bible says that this is the case too. So if God is against it, then we’re good to go. I think that’s oftentimes the ways I’ve seen it being justified. (KI-8)

KIs spoke about the power of religious discourse underpinning and manifested in SGMY bullying, characterized by its pervasiveness across school, family, and broader social systems, and its being beyond reproach. A service provider explained that religious discourse is invoked tautologically, making it problematic when she tries to engage in reasoned dialogue to challenge homophobic rhetoric: “‘It’s because it’s not right.’ And I go, ‘Well, who says it’s not right?’; ‘Well the Bible says or God says or the Koran says, or all the religious books’” (KI-12).

Religion, specifically religious rights and freedoms, was considered a major obstacle to disputing or refuting SGMY bullying, both on individual and organizational levels. A KI recounted that individuals often “use other people’s presumed biases against homosexuals or homosexuality . . . as in, it [religion] was used as an excuse or a rationale” (KI-5). In turn, within schools, the power and tautological nature of religiously based sexual prejudice hindered efforts to counter bias-based bullying because religion permeated school climate. As explained by a KI: SGM inclusivity is an issue “that they just don’t want to hear about . . . to participate in . . . they feel there is something immoral . . . about equal rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender folks” (KI-1); therefore, the conversation never happens. Educators, who are often afraid of religious “pushback,” identified that religious ideologies of parents and communities that are intolerant of SGMY affect the school climate, limiting intervention: “I don’t think teachers are comfortable talking about it [SGMY discrimination] and dealing with it. There is an awareness of it, but I don’t think they’re going to do anything about it” (KI-7). KIs invoked the media exosystem as shaping the bounds of public debate and influencing school policy: “There’s a very vocal media presence around this idea of parental and religious rights trumping human rights education” (KI-1).

Domains of Religiously Based Homophobic Discourse

Places of worship: “SGMY don’t typically belong.” KIs described youth experiencing a range of discrimination in places of worship—“because everyone’s jumped on board with this anti-gay mantra, churches, and even mosques” (KI-8)—from invisibility of SGM people and issues, to direct victimization, and its impact on self-acceptance and exclusion from religious spaces. A teacher recounted experiences of SGM students, “Hearing things at church around queer identities and, of course, they would say gay and lesbian, and how they are abominations; and sort of how that destructs your soul as a young queer person” (KI-6). Other KIs described the impact of discourse in churches and other worship spaces and its pernicious effects, particularly

on SGMY who are religiously affiliated: “It really impacted how they saw themselves; it was like, ‘okay, I’m angry at myself for being gay’” (KI-16). As a result,

A lot of youth feel that they have to make a choice between their religion and their sexuality . . . They can be religious in one place and queer in one place, but they haven’t found spaces where they can be both those things and that’s a struggle. (KI-4)

Religiously affiliated SGMY’s exclusion from places of worship was also described as driving a wedge between youth and their families: “her home was fairly religious and church was something that they were involved in a lot, and . . . she stopped attending [church], because she didn’t feel supported” (KI-8).

Educational institutions: “Multiple situations where they’re discriminated.” Religiously based bullying of SGMY is perpetuated at many levels within schools, both secular and religious. This includes teachers making homophobic comments in and outside of class (KI-15), curricula that “normalize heterosexuality and marginalize homosexuality, and really has nothing to do with gender non-conformity” (KI-5), and a hostile school climate. In secular schools, religious ideology was described as militating against and otherwise excusing schools from teaching and engaging in conversations about sexual and gender identity, contributing to feelings of isolation and rejection (“a sense of just nobody cares” [KI-10]), truancy, and dropping out: “Youth . . . have been pushed out of school because of homophobia” (KI-10).

Faith-based educational institutions, publicly funded Catholic schools in particular, were seen as toxic environments for SGMY. KIs described pervasive religious messages that permeate school culture, and ultimately control student learning in terms of what is included in syllabi. One KI reported that, concerning discussions related to sexual orientation and “non-traditional” family structures, “conservative administrators . . . kind of put it on the back burner, or enable them [teachers] to just kind of make it less of a priority” (KI-10). Another KI described that “appropriate” academic work is shaped by non-inclusive religious ideology: “They got zeroes on assignments because . . . they did an assignment about wanting to get married to a same-sex partner; and the teacher saying you can’t do that in our school, it’s against school policy” (KI-6). Such controls centered on religious-based notions of what is permissible (and right) can result in a lack of acceptance, invisibility, and even penalization of SGMY’s work,

thereby undermining SGMY's academic success and contributing to social exclusion in these institutions.

Families: "God does not like gays, which means my parents don't like me." KIs described multiple ways in which religiously based homophobic attitudes are expressed in families and the ensuing rejection SGMY face. Service providers explained that families utilize religion to validate rejection, and described instances of families engaging in verbal or physical abuse, ostracism, and exclusion of their own SGM children: "the actual experience of bullying . . . their stories, revolved around the experience of homophobic violence that came from the family" (KI-16). Speaking about a youth with whom he had worked, a KI stated, "The family used to incorporate religion in . . . talking about her 'deviancy' and . . . relating it to her sexual orientation—that her bad behavior was a result of her sexual orientation" (KI-8). In addition to outward expressions of religiously based homophobia in families, a KI described how SGMY internalize these messages and their effects in alienating SGMY from their own parents:

Like for some of the Muslim gays and even the Black gays, the Islanders [Caribbean] that are gay, they don't talk about religion because religion means I'm doing something bad. God does not like gays, which means my parents don't like me, which means I shouldn't be gay, which means I should not be here right now. (KI-3)

Informants who worked with newcomer youth and youth from diverse ethno-racial backgrounds (i.e., youth of color) highlighted the salience of intersectionality between culture and religion: "There's a kind of cultural and familial homophobia that's a little bit different than it is for the average white person in Toronto" (KI-15). Another KI explained, "For some queer youth of color, it's also true that if they're coming from another country where there are certain attitudes towards queerness, then those attitudes might be held by their families . . . their church, their religion, spirituality" (KI-14). KIs recounted stories of families from particular cultural communities using religious ideologies and discourses to castigate SGMY and justify the mistreatment:

It's believed that homosexuality is a spirit and if it's in you then it can be taken out of you. So, whether it be through fasting and prayer or tarrying, or all these other things

and rituals, whatever the case is . . . one day you can be gay and the next day you won't be gay. (KI-3)

A teacher reported specific discourse with religious roots manifested from ethno-racial rhetoric: "They get called 'batty man' [a slur derived from a conservative Christian Caribbean background] and they get told they're going to hell . . . that this is a mental illness, that isn't something Black people do" (KI-6). Such familial religiously/culturally based rejection can lead to internalized stigma and other stressors. Referring to transgender youth and their parents' religious beliefs, a KI reported, "Some of the youth are practically homeless because their parents have kicked them out or their families won't speak to them." (KI-3). Thus, the family microsystem emerged as another site of religiously based sexual prejudice and marginalization.

Sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE): "Pray that God will change you." Within some religious families and communities, specific religious teachings and beliefs (e.g., being gay is "a spirit that can be taken away" or a "lifestyle choice" that can be altered) undergird and encourage SOCE. SOCE involve coercing or otherwise attempting to persuade SGMY to change, alter, or suppress their sexual or gender identity. Families, guided by their specific religious beliefs, attitudes, and biblical interpretations, were described as having a key role in enacting religiously based sexual prejudice through directing or forcing SGMY to engage in SOCE, including "praying the gay away" and religious and spiritual "counseling." Even absent explicit force, parents' implicit threats of withholding love and approval served as a powerful mechanism to coerce SGMY into SOCE involvement.

KIs described SOCE that occur in formal therapy and, largely, informal counseling meted out by religious institutions to prevent youths' "non-normative behavior." These included incidents of parents placing their children in a "home to make them straight" (KI-2) and of children being told by ministers that "you can change if you want to change; all you have to do . . . is pray that God will change you" (KI-3). Direct service providers reported various experiences of working with youth who had attended informal counseling sessions with religious authorities, such as "Christian counsellors" (KI-8) or "Elder[s] in the church" (KI-4). Both informal and formal SOCE purportedly aim to "cure" SGMY, often utilizing fear tactics that invoke the religious macrosystem through scripture and religious rhetoric to compel SGMY to suppress their same-sex attractions or gender nonconforming behaviors and adhere to heterosexual cisgender norms.

Individual SGMY: “You cannot be both; you have to choose.” Religiously based homophobic discourse was described as exacting particularly negative consequences on SGMY who are religious or who come from religious backgrounds. A KI explained,

Those [religiously based homophobic] attitudes might be held by their families, so they might be—or their church, their religion, spirituality—so they might be facing kind of multiple situations where they’re discriminated . . . or made to feel unwelcome at home. So they may have multiple layers of oppression. (KI-14)

Religious SGMY’s experience of hostile discourses in their families, places of worship, and schools can precipitate or exacerbate internal conflict. These youth are often faced with trying to integrate what they are made to feel are incompatible identities due to various proscriptions in religious discourse: “You can’t be religious and you can’t be gay and from a particular faith—because people are really adamant about that; you cannot be both, you have to choose” (KI-11). An agency coordinator discussed internalized narratives among religious SGMY dominated by religious values that condemn SGM and fundamentally dispute their very right to exist; this led some SGMY to “internalize homophobia, self-hatred . . . self-harm and negative thinking” (KI-10).

Promoting Change: Resistance, Reconciliation, and Healing

Recommended interventions to address religiously based bullying included faith-based and secular community programs, training for teachers, and policy change. For one, KIs discussed the importance of changing religious discourse by working with the source—religious denominations: “religiously based homophobia requires religiously based interventions” (KI-8). KIs advocated the importance of religious institutions participating in a reconciliation process, including acknowledgment of how they have perpetuated homophobic bullying, as an integral part of efforts to foster identity integration among SGMY, and reduce SGMY bullying in schools and families in the longer term. The themes of resistance, reconciliation, and healing emerged in an appeal for religious institutions to challenge, reinterpret, and reframe non-inclusive and condemnatory SGM religious discourse, and for places of worship to create spaces inclusive of SGMY.

An educator suggested the need for critical reflection among religious communities that promote homophobic discourse: “What is it [about] your religion that says that people are hateful because of their sexuality?” (KI-7). Acts of resistance were described as “interrupt[ing] some of

the cultural narratives that say that LGBT and other populations are not welcome in houses of worship” (KI-8). KIs also invoked places of worship and community organizations that serve as sites of resistance and affirmation (“some churches and some synagogues . . . that marry same-sex couples” [KI-12]), and the need to create new organizations that embrace religious faith and sexuality. Community organizations that provide services to ethnic minority SGMY were noted as important sites for facilitating identity integration and healing, and as practice models for religious communities.

Discussion

This qualitative study exploring the perspectives of ethnically and professionally diverse service providers experienced in working with SGMY identifies religiously based homophobic discourse across SGMY’s social ecology. The impact of religion is evidenced in the invocation of religious doctrine and texts, moralistic and punitive language, and religious expertise to support and rationalize harassment, ostracism, and discrimination against SGMY. Previous qualitative (Higa et al., 2014; [Varjas et al., 2007](#)) and quantitative ([Horn et al., 2008](#); [Taylor & Peter, 2011](#)) investigations conclude that negative religious beliefs and teachings about SGM can contribute to SGMY bullying. The present study elucidates the complex, multifaceted role of religion as a source, medium, and rationale for SGMY bullying across religious and secular contexts.

Religiously based bullying of SGMY was described in school microsystems, including both secular and religious institutions. Participants explained that homophobic religious rhetoric was an often permissible and acceptable form of harassment in schools, sometimes motivating physical abuse and violence. Religiously based discourse imbued with sexual prejudice also permeated the broader school climate, in turn, impeding teachers and school staff from intervening decisively and effectively in instances of SGMY victimization. Several studies corroborate the impact of school climate on school personnel. Heterosexism is manifested in the “implicit curriculum”—in the ways in which teachers deliver (or censor) course content ([Carpenter & Lee, 2010](#)), silence positive SGMY messages in the classroom ([Castro & Sujak, 2014](#)), and ignore homophobic peer victimization ([Kosciw et al., 2013](#); [Mishna, Newman, Daley, & Solomon, 2009](#)). School policy also influences SGMY bullying victimization and staff intervention: A systematic review of 21 studies found that SGMY in schools with anti-bullying policies specific to sexual orientation and gender identity, versus those without these policies, reported less harassment and more consistent and effective intervention by school personnel ([Hall, 2017](#)). Often school-based policies and curricula discount SGM issues, leading to a sense of invisibility, isolation, and marginalization among SGMY (Snapp, Watson, Russell, Diaz, &

Ryan, 2015). Our study indicates that religiously based homophobic discourse can contribute to harassment, marginalization, and a negative school climate for SGMY, including the suppression of intervention by teachers and staff when SGMY report bullying.

Parents, who might otherwise serve as sources of unwavering support for their children victimized by bullying, sometimes engaged in transmitting religiously based sexual prejudice and rejection, as documented elsewhere (Higa et al., 2014; Ryan & Rees, 2012; Varjas et al., 2007). In some cases, non-inclusive or intolerant religious discourses toward SGM may be employed by parents (even unwittingly) to justify sexual prejudice, thereby locating blame for peer victimization with the child rather than the perpetrators and a hostile social ecology. For some families, religiously based prejudice and beliefs can involve attempts to “change” their children’s sexual orientation or gender identity. Previous research has identified a process of “theistic triangulation,” in which religious families invoke their faith in God to inject homophobic messages and ideologies in conversations with their SGM children, generally resulting in verbal aggression and conflict (Brelsford, 2011); this further illuminates the experiences of SGMY victimized by their own families. Because youth, beginning from an early age, most often follow their parents’ religious beliefs (Fowler, 1981), there is limited choice for SGMY to attend open and affirming places of worship. As a result, some SGMY may experience contemporaneous victimization and isolation across school, family, and religious microsystems.

We identify a particular manifestation of religious discourse in “conversion” language (Newman & Fantus, 2015) and SOCE (Anastas, 2015). Increasing evidence documents that SOCE are ineffective and damaging, even more so private and religious change methods than therapist-led efforts; in fact, SOCE constitute professional malpractice when conducted by a member of a regulated profession (Cyphers, 2014; Dehlin, Galliher, Bradshaw, Hyde, & Crowell, 2015; Flentje, Heck, & Cochran, 2014; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). Numerous professional bodies (e.g., American Psychiatric Association, 1998; National Association of Social Workers, 2000; World Health Organization [PAHO, 2012]) explicitly condemn purported “therapies” to change sexual orientation. In recognition of the substantial harms caused by SOCE, they are increasingly prohibited by law in the United States (Human Rights Campaign, 2015), with emerging legal prohibitions in Canada (anecdotally, some Canadian families send their SGMY to the United States for SOCE). SOCE programs exist across religions and denominations, such as Evangelicalism (e.g., Exodus), Judaism (e.g., JONAH), Mormonism (e.g., Evergreen International), and Catholicism (e.g., Courage for Catholics; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016).

Our study indicates that beyond various religious SOCE programs, and pastoral counseling, a discourse of “conversion” and rejection pervades SGMY’s broader social ecology; this, in turn, is often expressed in direct victimization of SGMY in school, family, and religious microsystems. Conversion discourse invoked in bullying can cause considerable emotional and psychological pain for SGMY, and may impede school attendance and performance, family and peer support, and negatively affect well-being.

Importantly, our findings also identify specific forms of religious discourse targeting ethno-racial and newcomer SGMY. This builds on past research that indicates particular manifestations of homophobic bullying (Daley, Solomon, Newman, & Mishna, 2008) and religiously based sexual prejudice ([Walker & Longmire-Avital, 2013](#)) among youth facing multiple and co-occurring forms of stigma (e.g., based on sexual orientation and race/ethnicity). Another form of intersectionality emerged among religiously affiliated SGMY, who receive messages that their religious and sexual identities are irreconcilable; this may lead to rejection of their sexual minority or religious identity, and internalized shame and guilt ([Barnes & Meyers, 2012](#); [Gattis et al., 2014](#)). However, affirming religious messages and policies can contribute to positive outcomes among SGM individuals ([Gattis et al., 2014](#); [Sherry et al., 2010](#)).

Strategies for Change

Based on EST, our findings suggest strategies for intervention across the social ecology of bias-based bullying of SGMY (see Figure 1). Interventions that specifically address religious microsystems include the creation of safe, inviting, and inclusive spaces for ethnically diverse SGMY within religious institutions ([Liboro, 2015](#); [Ryan & Rees, 2012](#)). Inclusive places of worship, such as the Metropolitan Community Church and el-Tawhid Unity Mosque in Toronto, synagogues such as Beit Simchat Torah in New York City and Beth Chayim Chadashim in Los Angeles, and organizations such as Soulforce, promote consistent messages supporting inclusion, social justice, and human rights. Opportunities for positive engagement with religious institutions and spirituality—such as entreaties to SGMY to participate and serve in supportive faith-based programs ([Ryan & Rees, 2012](#)) and intergroup dialogue ([Dessel, 2010](#))—may promote identity integration, with salutary implications for SGMY health ([Dessel, Woodford, & Warren, 2011](#); [Liboro, 2015](#)).

Importantly, places of worship and religious leaders also can play a role in fostering and modeling family acceptance of their SGM children ([Ryan & Rees, 2012](#)). At the religious exosystem level, cultivating SGM-affirming religious denominations ([Gattis et al., 2014](#)) and

engaging with SGM-affirmative religious leaders ([Kubicek et al., 2009](#)) may help to mitigate the dissonance SGMY experience between religious and SGMY identities.

Mounting empirical evidence documents the impact of macrosystem- and exosystem-level phenomena, including religious climate, on the individual health of SGMY. A large population-based study identified an association between a less supportive religious climate for SGM at the community level and greater individual health risk behaviors among SGMY ([Hatzenbuehler, Pachankis, & Wolff, 2012](#)). At the state level, implementation of policies supporting same-sex marriage (vigorously opposed by national religious organizations) was associated with reductions in SGMY suicide attempts ([Raifman, Moscoe, Austin, & McConnell, 2017](#)). Our findings suggest that prevention of bias-based bullying of SGMY may be an important mechanism through which macrosystem and exosystem phenomena impact on SGMY health. Positive religious climate at the community level may contribute to SGMY health through improving the school climate for SGMY and reducing religiously based homophobic discourse in schools. Our findings further suggest that legislation banning SOCE—for youth and adults—and school system-wide “zero-tolerance” policies toward religiously based and other forms of homophobic bullying may contribute to a positive school climate for SGMY and prevention of SGMY victimization.

Overall, our application of EST and critical discourse theory elucidate the power of religiously based sexual prejudice at more distal levels of SGMY’s social ecology in exerting a broad influence on their individual and collective experience. The manifestation of religiously based sexual prejudice across multiple, simultaneous, and mutually reinforcing microsystems that feature centrally in SGMY’s lives—schools, families and, for some, places of worship, and SOCE—may exert a formidable negative synergistic effect on their health and well-being.

Figure 1. The religious social ecology of bias-based bullying of SGMY and select multisystem intervention strategies.

Note. SGMY = sexual and gender minority youth; SGM = sexual and gender minorities; SOCE = sexual orientation change efforts.

Limitations

As a qualitative study, our aim was to explore, in depth, manifestations of religion and religious discourse in the social ecology of bullying victimization of SGMY. Our study has many methodological strengths (e.g., multiple strategies to foster rigor), but there are also limitations. We cannot identify the role of specific religions or existing SGM anti-bullying policies in schools in the reported cases of bullying. Based on their experiences working with SGMY, KIs provided rich information about religiously based bullying; however, interviewing SGMY themselves may offer other important insights. Moreover, in accordance with our research aims, we examined the role of religion and religious discourse in perpetuating SGMY bullying; our primary focus was not the role of supportive religious organizations in preventing bullying. However, we describe positive roles for religious organizations in the lives of some SGMY. Finally, many KIs identified as SGM, which may reflect that SGMY feel comfortable sharing their experiences with adults they perceive to be similar to them and likely to be accepting and understanding. This

may have led to increased theoretical sensitivity about religiously based bullying among KIs relative to non-SGM service providers ([Meyer, Taylor, & Peter, 2015](#)).

Future Research

Future investigations should expand on this study by exploring the emic perspectives and experiences of SGMY ([Patton et al., 2017](#)), and by engaging SGM and non-SGM service providers. Research examining the discourses of particular religions, including supportive religious organizations, may help to inform strategies to prevent religiously based homophobic bullying, and promote positive SGMY development. Progressive religious organizations may play a strategic role in fostering interfaith dialogue and guiding inclusive practices, with the power to influence other religious organizations. Finally, quantitative studies that differentiate religiously based from other forms of discourse in the bullying of SGMY may help to identify the overall prevalence of religiously based bullying and its prevalence relative to other forms of bullying victimization of SGMY.

Conclusion

Religious discourse imbued with sexual prejudice and “conversion” rhetoric is evident in the language, practices, and justifications for peer victimization of SGMY. Our data indicate the occurrence of religiously based sexual prejudice across SGMY’s social ecology, thereby suggesting the necessity of approaches that address both direct (microsystem) and indirect (meso-, exo-, and macrosystem) contexts of homophobic bullying. The identification of a manifestation of religious discourse unique to SGMY in SOCE and the language of “conversion” may be an important step in raising awareness, honing assessments of bullying victimization specific to SGMY, and developing evidence-informed interventions to prevent bias-based bullying on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

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