

Growing Up Queer with a Disability in Canada's Bible Belt: 2SLGBTQ+ People with Disabilities Perspectives on Religion

Summary

Introduction

This paper looks at how religion, especially Christianity, affects the romantic and sexual lives of 2SLGBTQ+ (Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and others) people with developmental and intellectual disabilities in Alberta, Canada. Through interviews with 13 people, the study explores how religious beliefs shape their feelings about themselves, their relationships, and how accepted they feel. It shows both the struggles they face and the need for more welcoming religious communities and better sex education.

Research, Methodology, Theories, and Approach

The research is based on interviews with 2SLGBTQ+ people who have developmental and intellectual disabilities. It is part of a larger study that included 31 participants, but this paper focuses on the 13 who talked about how religion shaped their lives. The research used open and thematic coding to find common themes about religion, stigma, family ties, and education. It shows how participants' identities are affected by religion, gender, and sexuality, and what it means to live at the intersection of all three.

Main Findings

Participants shared how religious beliefs from their families, communities, and schools influenced how they saw themselves and their sexuality. Many grew up thinking that being queer was wrong because that's what they were taught by their families and religious communities. This led to feelings of shame, guilt, and trying to hide their true selves. Some people shared stories from childhood where they were punished for expressing romantic feelings toward the same sex, reinforcing the belief that these feelings were not okay. However, as they got older, some participants began to question these teachings and found support from friends or partners, which helped them accept themselves.

For those who went to faith-based schools, sex education was often lacking, especially around topics like gender identity and sexual orientation. The focus was on abstinence (not having sex) and purity, which left many without the information they needed. This made it harder for participants to understand their own identities and find the support they needed. Being excluded from these conversations added to their sense of being different and isolated.

Family acceptance was a big worry for many participants. They feared that coming out as queer could lead to rejection by their loved ones. This fear often led them to hide their true identities to maintain their family connections, especially when their families held strong religious beliefs against being queer. Some participants were pleasantly surprised when their families became more accepting over time, offering much-needed support.

Despite the difficulties, many participants expressed a wish for more inclusive religious communities where they could be themselves without fear of rejection. They felt these spaces could help bring together their faith and their identities as 2SLGBTQ+ people. Some also noted positive changes in certain churches, showing that attitudes can change, and more acceptance is possible. Overall, the study shows that there is a need for religious communities to be more open and for schools to provide better, more inclusive sex education.

Main Implications

This study shows that service providers and educators should avoid forcing their own religious beliefs on others, especially when these beliefs lead to discrimination. There's a need for better sex education across Canada that includes information on gender and sexual identities so that all students, including those with disabilities, get the support they need. Religious communities can become more welcoming by being more inclusive and accepting of different identities.

Further research should continue to explore how religion, disability, and sexuality intersect, and how to improve support for 2SLGBTQ+ disabled individuals. This research can guide changes to policies, making them fairer and reducing discrimination.

Finding Out More

For more information, visit resources from Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights, the Canadian Centre for Gender & Sexual Diversity, and Inclusion Canada. The study was supported by Dr. Martino's Startup Funds, and ethics approval was obtained from Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board at the University of Calgary. We thank the participants for their valuable insights. For further questions or interest in collaboration, please contact the first author at www.disabilitysexualitylab.com.