

**THE EFFECTS OF SEXUAL MINORITY STIGMA IN CATHOLIC SOCIAL
CONTEXTS ON YOUNG GAY MEN**

by

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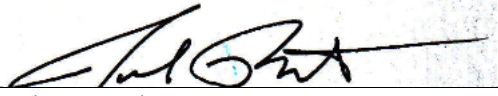
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ABSTRACT

Past work suggests that sexual minorities experience stigma in religious environments, which in turn leads to adverse mental health outcomes. However, the experiences of young sexual minority men in Catholic environments remains understudied. To explore these experiences, ten participants who identified as gay men between the ages of 18 and 25 in the United States were interviewed about their experience with the Catholic Church, experience coming out, and any suggestions they have for the Church or other young gay men with a similar Catholic background. Interviews were coded following standard qualitative methods. When it came to the family unit, some family members, especially grandparents, were more stigmatizing and hateful than others. Participants' experience in primary and secondary school was highly stigmatizing. Instructors sent a variety of stigmatizing messages and peers bullied many of the participants. Participants encountered stigma in college but to a lesser extent, citing friends as a source of belonging. Every participant leaned away from Catholicism as a result of their experience with the Church, and the majority of participants currently identify as atheist or agnostic. Advice to the Church centered around equity and inclusivity and advice towards young gay men centered around seeking safe spaces free of homophobia and hate. Future studies should be directed towards behavioral health interventions that target young gay men with a Catholic background and ultimately, wide-scale changes are needed to remove stigma from the Catholic Church entirely.

INTRODUCTION

Stigma towards sexual minorities is pervasive in the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church (Newman et. al, 2018). Research suggests that this stigma harms the well-being of sexual minorities, including young gay men (Hatzenbuehler, 2009). Yet, the current research on the stigmatizing effects of Catholicism on young gay men glosses over the individual stigmatizing messages that are exchanged in social contexts such as family, education, and peer groups, as well as how those messages affect young gay men's sense of self, both religiously and emotionally. Research that fills this gap can contribute to stronger understanding of the stigmatizing features of Catholicism as well as intervention strategies to alleviate sexual minority stigma that manifests in specific Catholic social contexts. The current study therefore addresses this gap by interviewing young gay men between the ages of 18 and 25 about their experience with the Church, being out among Catholic people and within Catholic environments, and what suggestions they have for the Church as well as other young gay men with a similar Catholic background.

Young gay men often undergo a turbulent stage of development once they reach emerging adulthood. Much research has emerged on the importance of this stage of development that takes place between the ages of approximately 18 and 25. The Theory of Emerging Adulthood explains how and why individuals of industrialized nations experience certain challenges during this time period (Arnett 2007). It is during emerging adulthood when opportunities for identity exploration are at their highest (Arnett 2000). Therefore, many young gay men explore their sexual identity

between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. That is why this current study focuses on young gay men between the ages of 18 and 25 who live in the United States, an industrialized nation.

The Catholic Church and Sexual Minorities

Catholic religious texts effectively illustrate the Church's view on sexual minority orientations¹. For example, a letter approved by Pope John Paul II stated that the homosexual inclination must be "seen as an objective disorder" (Melina, 1998). There are also a number of biblical references to sexual minorities. For instance, there is the well-known story of Sodom and Gomorrah in which god destroys the cities because of their sin of homosexuality (Olanisebe et. al, 2013). Although some scholars have argued that the story cannot be used as proof of god's condemnation of sexual minorities (Buxbaum, 1967), it influences people's views towards sexual minorities in social contexts where Catholicism is present. Furthermore, social contexts influenced by Catholicism allow for stories like that of Sodom and Gomorrah to affect the members of that social context.

Another way to interpret the Church's view on sexual minorities is by viewing it from the framework of Weiner's attribution theory of controllability. The Attribution Theory of Controllability posits that people view an individual's behaviors or characteristics as something that is within the individual's control (Haider-Markel

¹ In order to use language that promotes the inclusion of people who are LGBTQ, this thesis uses language derived from GLAAD's script for LGBTQ acceptance (*GLAAD Media Reference Guide - LGBTQ terms* 2022). We have retained the use of the word "homosexuality" in several places to represent religious texts and/or participants' quotes.

et. al, 2008). In a Catholic context, the Church takes the stance that young gay men choose to be gay (Whitehead, 2010). In other words, the Catholic Church attributes a sexual orientation to an internal choice made by a young gay man. These attributions made by the Catholic Church shape young gay men's experience in various social contexts.

Stigma and Catholic Social Contexts

The vast array of literature on stigma provides a useful way of understanding the Catholic Church's position on sexual minorities. Stigma is defined as a social process that involves labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss and discrimination in a power context (Link & Phelan, 2001). The Catholic Church supports this stigma process by stereotyping young gay men based on their sexual identity. One of the ways in which stigma is created is through communication: both verbal and nonverbal (Smith, 2007). Communication within the aforementioned social contexts (family, education, peer group) has the potential to be stigmatizing.

The stigmatizing beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church are communicated to young gay men in places of Catholic instruction. The current literature suggests that the Church uses places of education to communicate stigma. For example, Ogland (2014) found that since Catholicism is woven into primarily private schools, educators often restrict sexual education curricula to include only that of heteronormative topics. The lack of representation of young gay men in sexual education is inherently stigmatizing (Ho et. al, 2016). By leaving them out of the narrative of what sex is and how it should occur, they are both othered (or made to

deviate from the norm) and left with a large gap of necessary knowledge about how to express themselves.

The stigmatizing beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church are also communicated within the family unit. Research suggests that religious principles inform the kind of dialogue that gets exchanged within Catholic families (Pietkiewicz et. al, 2016). Since some Catholic religious principles are inherently stigmatizing, sexual minority stigma can be created in the context of the family. A stigmatizing family unit can be harmful, especially since minority status individuals like young gay men rely on the family dynamic for support and guidance (Liboro, 2020). Families vary in their degree of support for and stigma towards young gay men.

In addition to places of Catholic religious instruction and the family unit, stigma is also communicated in peer groups. For example, evidence suggests that sexual minority youth are very likely to encounter victimization from peers throughout their time in school (Poteat et. al, 2014). On the other hand, peer groups can also act as a prominent source of support and belonging for individuals with minoritized sexual orientations (Malley et. al, 2007). To date, the majority of research on stigma experienced from peers by sexual minority youth has focused on public school settings. Sexual minority youth's experiences of stigma from peers in Catholic school settings, where sexual minority stigma may be more pronounced than in public school settings, has been under examined.

Outcomes of Sexual Minority Stigma in Catholic Social Contexts

Sexual minority stigma compounded with minority stress imposes a large detriment to young gay men. Minority Stress Theory hypothesizes that members of stigmatized minority groups are at greater risk of stress and therefore, have a greater chance of experiencing adverse mental health outcomes (Poteat et. al, 2014). Thus, young gay men, regardless of religious interaction, are at greater risk of adverse mental health outcomes. The stigma-related stress induces greater emotional dysregulation (Hatzenbuehler, 2009) and in extreme cases, suicide (Gibbs et. al, 2015). Although there is a vast array of literature confirming the detrimental effects of stigma associated with young gay men, few studies explore how religious interaction might add to the effects of stigma.

Religiosity, the quality associated with being religious, plays an important role in mental health. Some literature qualifies religion generally as a protective factor against adverse mental health outcomes (Gibbs et. al, 2015). Researchers theorize that religion reduces the severity of outcomes like suicidal ideation because it coincides with moral obligation and social support (Kralovec et. al, 2014). On the other hand, more recent literature suggests that religion is shaming (Downie, 2022). Shame leads to adverse mental health outcomes (Yakeley, 2018). Evidently, the research on religiosity and its corresponding effect on mental health is inconsistent. Research that focuses on a specific religion (e.g., Catholicism) and evaluates its effect on a specific population (e.g., young gay men) can help to clarify associations between religiosity and mental health outcomes for key groups at risk of mental health problems.

The manner in which Catholicism affects young gay men is under-studied. The current literature suggests that being gay and Catholic involves substantial identity conflict (Gibbs et. al, 2015). Social Identity Theory suggests that people with stigmatized identities may respond to stigmatizing contexts in several ways, including individual mobility which includes a person's decision to leave the stigmatizing context, social creativity which involves adjusting one's perception of their social context to be less stigmatizing, and social competition where the individual challenges other members of the social context's views on the individual's identity (Masson et. al, 2017). This research was conducted with "bible-believing" Christians. The extent to which these reactions reflect the experiences of young gay men with Catholic backgrounds specifically is unknown.

Ways in which Catholic social contexts can become less stigmatizing are also under-studied. Research supports the extent to which sexual minorities yearn for inclusive, non-stigmatizing, social contexts (Seidman, 2014). A source of insight for how Catholic social contexts can become less stigmatizing are young gay men. The current study elucidates young gay men's advice: first, for how the Catholic Church can become more inclusive of sexual minorities and second, how young gay men can cope with a similar stigmatizing Catholic social context.

Current Study

The current study seeks to fill several gaps within the current literature and contribute understanding about young gay men's experiences with Catholicism. After reviewing the current literature, three primary research questions emerged: (1) To

what extent does Catholicism stigmatize young gay men?, (2), How do young gay men respond to the Catholic view of sexual minorities?, and (3) What advice do young gay men have for the Catholic Church or other young gay men with a similar Catholic experience? The current study draws on qualitative methods in order to answer these three questions.

METHODS

Participants

The study was conducted between December 2022 and January 2023. Participants were eligible to participate if they (1) identified as a gay man, (2) were between and including the ages of 18 and 25 years old, and (3) self-identified as having received Catholic religious instruction or grew up in a family that frequently attended Catholic religious services. Religious instruction could include Catholic schooling (primary, secondary, or post-secondary) or another form of instruction such as Sunday school, Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD), or Catechism. Frequent attendance at Catholic religious services could include mass or any other Catholic-focused rituals such as the sacraments (Baptism, Communion, etc.). Notably, all participants received Catholic religious instruction and frequently attended Catholic religious services for some period of time.

In order to reach participants virtually, emails and direct messages over Instagram were sent. Most emails were sent to faculty and fellows at other universities who specialize in fields related to the study (e.g. human development and family science, women and gender studies). Instagram searches were made for university-affiliated LGBTQ registered student organization accounts. The followers of those respective accounts received a direct message with the truncated version of the IRB-approved recruitment email, accompanied by the IRB-approved recruitment graphic. Perhaps because of this outreach method, all participants attended college and many were affiliated with LGBTQ registered student organizations. Participants were also

recruited by the principal investigator via word of mouth. Given these recruitment methods, most participants were relatively out about their sexual orientation. Consent procedures and interviews took place over zoom. The participants were encouraged to be in private spaces during the length of the zoom call. On average, interviews lasted about fifty minutes. Study procedures received IRB approval from the University of Delaware and participants were not compensated for their time. In total, ten young gay men participated in this study.

Interview Protocol

A semi-structured protocol was developed to explore participants' experiences with Catholicism as well as their sexual identity formation. Participants were asked seven main questions about: (1) their experience with Catholicism (2) how the Church made them feel about their sexuality, (3) what messages made them feel that way, (4) where they feel comfortable identifying as a gay man, (5) whether or not the Church has affected the way they express themselves as a gay man, (6) whether or not they see themselves involved with Catholicism in the future, and (7) what they would say to a younger gay man who had a similar Catholic experience. The participants were also asked follow-up questions that probed for further disclosure. See Appendix B for the full interview protocol.

Analyses

Analyses followed recommendations for qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2011). First, digital recordings of interviews were transcribed. Next, the principal investigator read each transcript, identified recurring

themes, and created a codebook. The codebook listed each theme accompanied by a description, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and example quotes. Themes included: messages from the Catholic family, peers, instructors, and mentors regarding sexual minority orientations; participants' responses to those messages; and suggestions for the church and young gay men with a similar Catholic experience. Due to the focus of the study, only interactions with Catholic family members and/or at Catholic institutions were noted. Experiences with non-Catholic family members or institutions (e.g., public schools) are not reported in this thesis.

RESULTS

Being Out among Family

Participants' households consisted of family members with wide ranging attitudes towards sexual minorities. On one hand, one participant reported growing up in a supportive, Methodist family where he always felt like he could express himself. His more stigmatized experience came later when he went to a Catholic high school. Another participant reported supportive parents who would confront their local pastor and express their frustrations with homophobic remarks made by the pastor. The participant reported feeling very assured by his parents as a result of these encounters. On the other hand, another participant reported not being able to wear certain articles of clothing around the house in fear of being judged by his family. He reported the adoption of the mindset, "I am going to code-switch to the son that you think I am." The participant reported feeling very on-edge as a result. In another stigmatizing case, one participant reported his father calling his partner a homophobic slur. In response to such hostility, the participant explained that he was going to "take him [his partner] and leave." Negative, stigmatizing household environments were more commonly described by participants than positive, supportive environments.

When it came to identifying around family members outside of the household, primarily grandparents, the experiences varied as well. Several participants expressed initial concern of coming out to their grandparents. For example, one participant explained that "the concern for me was my grandparents," but after an adjustment period, "they were perfect and still are." They reported that their grandparents'

willingness to acknowledge their own ignorance and seek education was helpful. The participant reported being told by his grandparents, “tell us what we need to know.” The opportunity for growth and understanding was what made the participant feel more affirmed in his quest of being out around those family members outside of his household.

In contrast, other participants reported grandparents who were more closed off or cold when it came to the topic of minoritized sexualities. For example, one participant expressed feeling unsupported by his grandmother. The participant reminded his grandmother that even though she loves him and verbally shows her support, she has to “show it in your[her] voting.” The participant reported having many conversations with her about this, saying that while “she grew up very Catholic...she is coming around.” Another participant emphasized that although he is out to his immediate family, he has completely avoided coming out to his grandparents. Participants frequently described grandparents as a difficult group to be out to.

Being Out in Primary/Secondary School

Participants reported some adversity in their primary and secondary school years with respect to their peer groups. For example, one participant reported an instance of cyber-bullying between themselves and a classmate. The classmate called the participant “gay” in an online public forum. The participant explained how he was not frustrated with the term being used in association with him. Rather, he was frustrated that the classmate utilized a public forum to voice their perception of his sexuality.

The participant's school administration focused their discipline on the former—consoling the participant for being called gay—saying “no one should ever have to be called that.” However, the participant emphasized that he was looking for the administration to address the main problem which was publicly declaring a perception of somebody else's sexuality. Another participant explained how his peers would “ask him lewd sorts of questions” like “which one of us[group of boys] is the most attractive?” The participant reported these scenarios occurring as early as middle school. Although he reported frequently switching schools due to family reasons which comes with its own set of challenges, the participant actually looked forward to moving from time to time so that he would not have to deal with those same peers anymore. Being out in peer groups from Catholic primary and secondary school were commonly described as challenging.

Once the participants reached secondary school, they received a copious amount of stigmatizing messages about their sexuality from Catholic instructors. Most notably, one participant reported hearing that their sexuality made them “objectively disordered.” After receiving that message, the participant reported that this was “when I really started to separate myself from it[the church].” Another participant reported an instructor's comparison of homosexuality to alcoholism, in that, “everybody struggles with something”—as if homosexuality is a disease. That same participant reported the likening of same-sex practices to having unprotected sex: something that the Church highly chastises. Consequently, most participants were led to believe that acting on their sexuality was attributed to a sickness and deserving of moral reproach.

Catholic secondary school instructors also sent messages to their students about the consequences of engaging in same-sex practices. One participant reported asking his instructor if gays were automatically sent to hell. The instructor responded with “I don’t feel comfortable answering that.” The participant noted that based on the instructor’s response, he and the rest of the classroom could conclude the answer for themselves. This message sent a cascade of self-loathing into the participant. He said, “I remember that was my first real memory at feeling like there was something wrong with me...like inherently wrong with me...like there's something you had to fix, and other people didn't, and it was your own kind of problem, and if you didn't fix it. You were a bad person.” During their secondary school years, participants reported a great deal of stigmatizing warnings about what might happen if they acted on their sexuality.

Participants’ Catholic mentors during secondary school also sent a variety of stigmatizing messages about their sexuality. One participant described a response he received from a Catholic mentor when he asked them if it was okay to be gay. He reported being told “No. It is a sin, and if you follow through with it, you’ll probably face judgment for it.” That same participant explained how the counter to this damnation was contrition: “one day you’ll meet St. Peter and you just have to hope you confessed enough.” The participant reported the extension of this message by saying his sexuality was supposedly his “cross to bear” which he found “quite appalling” and “put a lot of weight on my[his] shoulders.” Another participant had a mentor who began a Catholic retreat saying, “Don’t give into sins like

homosexuality.” Catholic mentors during secondary school were commonly described as sources of stigmatizing messages as opposed to supportive ones.

Many participants reported feeling self-loathing as a result of these messages. For example, one participant emphasized that he “lived with hating himself for a long time.” In addition to self-loathing, several participants reported feeling repressed, especially during secondary school. For instance, one participant reported being told to “get married in a straight marriage” even if it makes you unhappy. He further explained how this would be “so damaging to someone’s mental health.” He said you would be spending your entire life going, “what’s wrong with me?” Another participant agreed that there “was such a big pressure to procreate” amidst their overall secondary education. Forgoing same-sex practices in favor of heterosexual practices is the epitome of suppressing one’s sexual identity. The main message around sexual minority expression was to suppress it which ultimately had a damaging effect on the participants and the way they thought of themselves.

Participants’ experience with sexual education was reported as a substantial source of repression during secondary school and years to come. One participant described a very stigmatizing experience with a Catholic sexual education instructor. They reported that the instructor would cross themselves every time they said a term that referred to an STI or a sexual act that was disapproved of by the Church. As a result, the participant expressed a lot of distress around sexual health, like “What do I do if I get one of these[STIs]?” In response to the sexual education as a whole, he also said that “it makes you feel shitty for these natural things[sex]” Other participants

found that their sexual education had transitory effects on how they carried themselves during later years. For example, one participant looked back on their sexual education experience and felt like they missed out on a lot of healthy information. They said that “it really affected who I was for a while because I felt like I was missing a big chunk of knowledge.” Participants felt repressed during their secondary sexual education, as well as during the years following when they had to identify based on that previous education.

Being Out at College

Most participants reported finding a sense of belonging at college among friends but still faced stigma with peers outside of their social circle. For those participants who reported attending a Catholic college, their friend groups become like their second family. One participant emphasized that he finally feels comfortable being out at school, especially since “most of my[his] friends are either queer or really good allies.” That participant reported that his social scene at college was very refreshing after attending an all-boys Catholic high school. Another participant echoed the same idea that identifying at college has been a positive experience where they get “to be my[their] kind of true authentic self.” Several participants reported that LGBTQ alliances on campus made these experiences possible. One participant reported that he “liked that there is an alliance on campus...and I participate regularly.” Many of the participants’ college experience was a source of relief from their previous educational environments.

Several participants faced stigma on campus outside of their social circle. For instance, one participant actually “dealt with physical attacks” while surrounded by a group of men and having things yelled at them: “you guys are fags,” “look at these cum dumps,” etc. That same participant reported encountering homophobia in certain campus buildings. He reported dressing and walking differently if he was in a building affiliated with the business school, which had a reputation of being less inclusive. When it came to the rest of campus, the participant also explained how his partner and him would not “dare to hold hands” in fear of receiving extra stares and grimaces. The participants’ campus environments were not safe for them to be out in. Even with physical attacks aside, the campus stares were enough for the participants to feel excluded.

Catholic universities’ faculty also sent stigmatizing messages surrounding sexuality. For example, one participant reported a university instructor who “compared the Pride flag to the Confederate flag.” The participant reported feeling shocked that the comparison even came up saying, “that was bad.” Another participant reported a political science course experience where each student team was a legislator with respect to gun legislation. There had recently been a nightclub shooting in Colorado, making the topic was very fresh in everyone’s minds. The participant felt different pieces of the consequent dialogue in the room targeted queer people and the professor should have intervened but failed to do so. The participant reported reaching out to the professor to confront him about it because “it was just not addressed properly.” However, the professor was said to deflect the responsibility onto the

student to speak up in the classroom next time. As a result, the participant reported feeling very defeated and expressed it in the course evaluations with the highest hope of intervention but obviously, no intervention was guaranteed. Participants reported feeling very targeted and excluded by Catholic universities' faculty, as well as the learning environments that those faculty fostered.

Despite the stigmatizing messages from certain Catholic faculty, several of the participants' Catholic universities made advances towards inclusivity in social spaces. One participant reported their university putting on many events preceding pride month since students are not on campus in June. These events were reported to be very inclusive as they celebrated the LGBTQ community on campus. The participant felt more at-home on campus as a result of these events. Another participant reported how the university faculty "always make sure they have their pronouns" listed which made the participant feel more included. It is reassuring to see how something as simple as declaring one's pronouns cultivates an inclusive space for those who identify as LGBTQ. That same participant described the extent to which certain faculty research social justice related to various minorities. The faculty's research was reported to appear as part of regular courses' curricula which the participant readily gravitated to. He said that amidst all of the religious courses he took, "he was surprised in a good way." Many of the participants' Catholic universities made positive steps toward inclusivity including through LGBTQ alliances, celebrations, and/or research.

Future Disposition with respect to Religion and Advice

Participants noted shifts in their religious identity as a result of their stigmatized experience. Six out of ten participants reported currently identifying as either atheist or agnostic. Furthermore, none of the participants reported currently attending Catholic religious services. However, one of the participants still identifies as Catholic. He reported that he still follows the faith but does not attend the services because he sees the primary issue with Catholicism as “an organization problem” rather than a “faith problem.” He still follows rituals such as fasting during the Lenten season and receiving ashes on Ash Wednesday. The participant who grew up Methodist still identifies as religious but is “exhausted of the Catholic Church.” He shared that if he were to attend services, he would likely go to an Episcopal or Methodist Church instead of a Catholic one. Another religious participant currently identifies as Christian, particularly the Side-B perspective. He reported that in that particular perspective, “there's a lot of focus on finding intimacy through friendship and community, and not pursuing a sexual lifestyle of any kind.” He appreciates the ability to acknowledge his sexuality and avoid trying to change it while not acting on it. Every participant reported a shift in their religious practices following their Catholic involvement, the majority of which abandoned religion entirely.

Participants had a substantial amount of advice for the Church to be less stigmatizing. For example, one participant said that “The Church has to treat all relationships the same.” The participant advised that marriage cannot be reserved for just one type of family. There also cannot be damnation for just one type of couple.

Another participant critiqued the shame and guilt that the Church embeds into young gay men: “I just have always felt that the shame and the guilt that the Catholic Church, specifically, really emphasizes is dangerous, and I think that they've kind of created their own little cycle of abuse by doing that.” The participant further explained that because the church can drive young gay men “away from the church or drive them into it...rather really intensely...you think the only way to save yourself is to become really involved.” This causes individuals like the participant to deeply invest themselves in the Church where they then bring themselves closer to the shame and guilt that the Church perpetuates. In other words, they bring themselves closer to the stigmatizing messages and internalize them in a more negative way because of how entwined they are with the Church.

There was also a suggestion by a participant for Catholicism to become more like another religion. This participant explained that he “really like[s] what the Jesuits are doing.” He reported that their “goals are not so politically driven” compared to that of the Catholic Church. Since his Jesuit university is so welcoming and inclusive, the participant reported inadvertently coming out to the institutions’ religious mentors. That same participant explained that the pastors there are some of the only priests who “directly acknowledged science.” This resonated with him especially since a lot of Catholic principles have gray areas with respect to evolution, creation, etc.

The participants also had some words of wisdom for their younger self or perhaps another young gay Catholic man. Multiple participants consoled a future young gay man by saying that “it truly does get better” and that “you can escape it

eventually.” Another form of advice motivated young gay men to avoid holding the Church to a really high standard, rather than viewing it as an end-all-be-all source of truth and judgment. That same participant urged other young gay men to avoid looking at the Church as the sole source of authority in life while remembering that you have authority over yourself. One of the participants advised young gay men to “keep an open mind, especially towards those who demonstrate that they love you.” The participant wanted to emphasize that loved ones might not always say the right thing or take the best course of action, but it is a learning process of how to make for an inclusive environment between the two of you. Lastly, the participants advised other young gay men to find their support system and make it their second family. The main idea came from the fact that after all, family members are not always made to be your only source of support. They reported that finding a second family of people: friends, teachers, mentors, coworkers, etc. who support you might just transform your entire life.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

Participants of the current study described being stigmatized by the Catholic Church. The most stigmatizing contexts for participants were places of Catholic instruction, peer-group settings, and the family unit. The participants received a number of stigmatizing messages from Catholic instructors saying that minoritized sexual orientations are “objectively disordered” (Melina, 1998), comprise rebellious groups (e.g., The Confederate States of America), and are comparable to diseases like alcoholism. Participants also reported that their instructors would rather completely avoid topics surrounding minoritized sexual orientations or discuss them indignantly. Peers in these Catholic settings would also ridicule, mock, and glare at the participants. Catholic family members were also a source of stigma whether it be via verbal attacks or general dispositions. Evidently, the Catholic Church creates stigma in all social contexts discussed by participants: education, peer groups, and the family.

Within the reported contexts of education, peer groups, and the family, young gay men respond adversely to the Catholic view of sexual minorities. The participants, indeed, were experiencing a turbulent stage of development at the time of the study (Arnett, 2007). The lack of sufficient sexual education noted by Ogland (2014) was highly problematic for the participants. Participants felt excluded based on the limited sexual education they did receive in Catholic settings. They also felt a great deal of self-loathing that is consistent with the majority of young gay men regardless of religious background (Poteat et. al, 2014). The adverse effects of Catholicism were

present in all stages of development for the participants. None of them attend Catholic services anymore and most of them reject the idea of religion entirely. However, post-secondary education at Catholic-affiliated institutions was when participants had the greatest chance of experiencing a sense of belonging via more inclusive spaces on campus or with friends. The participants offered a beacon of hope to other young gay men by saying that their experience does get better and supportive peers can be their second family.

Strengths/Limitations/Future Directions

The qualitative methods used by the study enabled a broad exploration of participants' experiences with Catholic social contexts. Because the interviews consisted of open-ended questions, participants were able to share their story in their own way. The inductive analysis approach allowed for findings that were unexpected (e.g., understanding the experiences of young gay men from a developmental perspective as well as in several different social contexts).

Since the study's design was qualitative, it could not quantify associations between variables. The study's specific inclusion criteria makes it hard to generalize results to other populations such as those of other sexual minority orientations or religious backgrounds. Future studies should consider the experience of individuals with other sexual minority statuses (e.g., pansexual, nonbinary, etc.) and/or religious backgrounds (e.g., Protestant, Muslim, etc.). There also needs to be more research on interventions that support young gay men following their heavily stigmatizing experience with Catholicism.

Conclusion

The current study suggests that Catholicism stigmatizes young gay men and identifies challenges they face as a result. The findings further identify contexts where stigma surrounding minoritized sexual orientations is prominent. Families, educators, and peers can be more aware of how they might contribute to a stigmatizing narrative about minoritized sexual orientations through their words and actions. In terms of responding to the stigma motivated by Catholicism, behavioral health interventions can better target young gay men with a Catholic background to support their wellbeing. Ultimately, however, to ensure the wellbeing of young gay men and other sexual and gender minorities, more wide scale changes are needed to remove stigma from the Catholic Church.

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Appendix A

Letter of IRB Approval



Institutional Review Board
210H HULLIHEN HALL
NEWARK, DE 19716
PHONE: 302-831-2137
FAX: 302-831-2828

DATE: October 21, 2022

TO: Valerie Earnshaw
FROM: University of Delaware IRB

STUDY TITLE: [1966478-1] Stigmatizing Effects of Catholicism on the Understanding and Expression of Homosexuality among Emerging Adult Men

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED

EFFECTIVE DATE: October 21, 2022

NEXT REPORT DUE: October 20, 2023

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # (6,7)

Thank you for your New Project submission to the University of Delaware Institutional Review Board (UD IRB). The UD IRB has reviewed and APPROVED the proposed research and submitted documents via Expedited Review in compliance with the pertinent federal regulations.

As the Principal Investigator for this study, you are responsible for, and agree that:

- All research must be conducted in accordance with the protocol and all other study forms as approved in this submission. Any revisions to the approved study procedures or documents must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to their implementation. Please use the UD amendment form to request the review of any changes to approved study procedures or documents.
- Informed consent is a process that must allow prospective participants sufficient opportunity to discuss and consider whether to participate. IRB-approved and stamped consent documents must be used when enrolling participants and a written copy shall be given to the person signing the informed consent form.
- Unanticipated problems, serious adverse events involving risk to participants, and all non-compliance issues must be reported to this office in a timely fashion according with the UD requirements for reportable events. All sponsor reporting requirements must also be followed.

The UD IRB REQUIRES the submission of a PROGRESS REPORT DUE ON October 20, 2023. A continuing review/progress report form must be submitted to the UD IRB at least 45 days prior to the due date to allow for the review of that report.

If you have any questions, please contact the UD IRB Office at (302) 831-2137 or via email at hsrb-research@udel.edu. Please include the study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Interview Questions: *The Effects of Sexual Minority Stigma in Catholic Social Contexts on Young Gay Men*

I. Screening Questions:

1. Did you receive Catholic religious instruction in a Catholic school or through a CCD program?
2. Did you grow up in a family that frequently attended religious services?
3. Do you identify as a gay male between the ages of 18 and 25?
4. Do you consent to participate in this research?

II. Understanding of Homosexuality

1. Can you tell me more about your experience with Catholicism?
 - a. Years of education
 - b. Frequency of Church attendance
 - c. Sacraments received
 - d. Positive, Negative, or in the middle
2. How did the Church make you feel about your sexuality?
 - a. Connotations
 - b. Consequences
 - c. Represented, recognized, or ashamed?
3. Were there any messages that made you feel that way?
 - a. Teachings
 - b. Traditions
 - c. Events

III. Expression of Homosexuality

1. Where do you feel comfortable identifying as a gay man?
 - a. What is it like at home, school, friends, online?
2. Has the Church affected the way you express yourself as a gay man?

- a. Dress, behavior, interact...are you comfortable doing so at Church/home?
- b. Coming out experience
- c. How do you balance your religious/sexual identity?

IV. Future Religious Disposition

- 1. Do you see yourself personally involved with Catholicism in the future?
 - a. If yes, and what makes you want to stay involved?
 - b. If not, what would have to change for you to be involved?
- 2. If you could say anything to a younger gay male who received a similar Catholic education or grew up in a similar family, what would you say?