Relationships between Importance of Religious Belief, Response to Anti-gay Violence, and Mental Health in Men who have Sex with Men in East Africa

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Abstract

We studied the relationships between the Importance of Religion in 200 homosexual men in Tanzania, along with Depression, Anti-gay Violence experiences (physical, verbal, moral and sexual abuse) and Internalized Homonegativity. The majority of the respondents indicated that religion was very important to them (with no difference between Christian or Muslim respondents). Data indicated that Importance of Religion was an important mediator of the impact of Anti-gay Violence on Depression score, with those reporting that religion was more important to them having a significant relationship between experience of Anti-gay Violence and Depression. These data are consistent with both seeing the anti-gay abuse of violence as a deserved punishment as argued by fundamentalist religions and with the unavailability of religion as a coping or support mechanism for anti-gay abuse or violence. We discuss the data in terms of the Importance of Religion in these men’s lives for mental health (Depression and Internalized Homonegativity) and the potentially damaging impact of anti-gay religious beliefs on members of the religion who are themselves gay.

Keywords

Anti-gay violence – importance of religion, homosexual men – depression – internalized homonegativity, Africa

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The situation of homosexual men (usually referred to as *Men who have Sex with Men, MSM*) in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is one of high levels of discrimination and demonization, despite some states such as South Africa including protection based on sexual orientation in their constitutions. Religious condemnation is at the forefront of much of the attacks on homosexual men and women. Yet many MSM in SSA are highly religious, and it is unclear what impact their own religious views might have on the discrimination that they face.

A recent qualitative study of MSM and religion in Cameroon by Mbetbo (2013) has illuminated the conflicts between sexual orientation and religion. Mbetbo noted that in Africa, where religion and spirituality play a major role in people's lives, homosexuality is seen not only as a sin but also as being an evil which threatens religious principles. One might think, he argued, that religion for gay men is a source of guilt and fear. However, he also noted, nearly all of his respondents considered their religious life to be very important to them. The resulting conflict (being trapped in a religion they liked but which was not accepting of their sexual orientation) was associated with tension and guilt and lowered self-esteem. On the other hand, Mbetbo observed, religion provides access to a social network of acceptability and positive feelings resulting from religious experiences. Studies on coping with HIV stigma in five southern African countries including Tanzania confirmed that religion is an important source of coping (Makoe et al., 2008).

However, MSM exist in SSA within an extremely hostile and life-threatening environment. As an example of the present climate, in one East African country (Kenya), gay men are reported to have been slashed with machetes and beaten with hammers, and several have been killed: It is estimated that as many as five men per week fall victim to gay-related blackmail or eviction from their homes. The Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya noted that high religiosity and the conservative interpretation of religious doctrines have contributed greatly to the creation of a pretext to encourage the use of violence and discrimination against gay people (Hernandez, 2013). This is probably typical of Anglophone East Africa (Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania: these comprised British East Africa until independence in the early 1960s) and probably much of SSA. Recently, an anti-gay Bill was introduced into parliament in Uganda, strongly supported by evangelical churches and reportedly financed by US evangelical groups, which introduced the death penalty for some homosexual acts (Phoon, 2010). After international condemnation of the Bill, the death penalty was reduced to life imprisonment. Homosexual acts were already subject to up to 14 years imprisonment in the Ugandan, Kenyan, and Tanzanian legal codes (Wikipedia, n.d.).