

Mormon women's experiences with same-sex sexuality

Jacobsen, Jeanna

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This phenomenological qualitative study examines 28 Mormon women's experiences with same-sex sexuality through the use of in-depth interviews. Twenty-three women who have experienced same-sex sexuality comprised the primary group of participants from whom findings were analyzed. Additional findings from a theoretical sampling of 4 heterosexual women and 1 transgendered woman who identifies as lesbian are also presented. Participants identify as members or former members of The Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Half of the sample continues to hold a Mormon identity and the other half have dis-identified with the religion. Well-educated, Caucasian women who were raised in the Church comprise the majority of the sample. Findings present a synopsis of each woman's experience and thematic results. Major themes include sexuality, religion, spirituality, family, community, coming out, mental health, and reconciling. Findings suggest that family and community play a major role in the process of identity development. Women identify with their religious identity to differing degrees and same-sex sexuality may or may not pose a threat to this identity. Most women experienced some conflict between their religious identity and experience of same-sex sexuality. Many women struggled with issues of guilt, shame, and self-hatred. However, women who challenged their religious identity prior to questioning their sexual identity did not experience the same level of conflict between their religious identity and sexual orientation. Several women experienced challenges to their religious identity not related to their same-sex sexuality. Some women rejected their religious identity and still struggled with accepting their sexuality. Mormon women appear to go through traditional sexual minority identity development stages (including awareness, exploring, accepting, and then internalizing a sexual minority identity). Religious identity and sexual identity are two different, although potentially interconnecting, identities. Cultural factors and internalized homophobia from a Mormon upbringing appeared to impact the sexual identity formation process. Reconciling sexuality and spiritual/religious beliefs is an on going process. This process may be revisited throughout a woman's lifespan as she considers new experiences and re-evaluates prior choices. The women in this study showed incredible resilience in the face of traumatic experiences. Implications for counselors, social supports, families, ecclesiastical leaders, and women who experience same-sex sexuality are presented.