Mechanisms of religious trauma amongst queer people in Australia’s evangelical churches

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Abstract
Christian communities teaching traditional theology and ethics, which treat diverse sexualities and gender expansive identities as sinful, can be places where faithful LGBTQIA+ people are subject to spiritual abuse. This paper explores the complex dynamics and multilayered mechanisms of this abuse in Australian Evangelical Christianity. It is based on a qualitative research project using 24 semi-structured interviews with LGBTQIA+ people who have spent two or more years in Evangelical church settings. The project found that participants were subject to mischaracterization and viewed as a moral threat, and consequently experienced erasure, social distancing, and suffered psychological trauma. The paper uses minority stress and micro-aggression theory to conceptualize these experiences and inform social work practice. It also shows the rich resilience and spiritual growth of participants who navigated trauma and sometimes emerged with a more nuanced and deeper faith. These findings will help queer people coming out in Evangelical churches to understand their experiences, and provide clinicians and others supporting people that have experienced spiritual trauma with conceptual tools and practical examples to aid in therapy and informal recovery settings.

Keywords Religious trauma · Social work · LGBTQIA+ · Minority stress · Microaggression

Most clinicians are cognizant of the harms that religion can cause, especially to LGBTQIA+ people (Stone 2013). Despite this, most of the extant literature focuses on the positive associations of religious participation, assuming that religion and spirituality are tools of recovery from, rather than a cause of, trauma (Stone, 2013). While there are established bodies of literature about the traumatic impact of religious cults (Rosen, 2014), clergy inflicted child abuse (Doyle, 2003), and other forms of religious abuse (Panchuk, 2018; Stone, 2013), a growing area of research shows that LGBTQI+ people attending Evangelical Christian communities are also subject to spiritual abuse and suffer consequent trauma (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Cole & Harris, 2017; Gandy-Guedes et al., 2017; Gibbs & Goldbach, 2021). Religious trauma is the outcome of spiritual abuse. It is “pervasive psychological damage resulting from religious messages, beliefs and experiences” (Stone 2013, p. 324).

This paper brings a trauma-informed lens to explore the ordeal that generally accompanies being LGBTQIA+ in Evangelical churches. It uses a qualitative method to understand the complex dynamic of coming out in these communities and draws out the implications for social workers and psychologists working in this domain. The analysis develops our understanding of two mechanisms often used to explain religious trauma: minority stress and micro-aggression theories.

Minority Stress Theory

Minority stress theory holds that members of minority groups experience a range of stressors that permeate everyday life (Iniewicz et al., 2017). Initially framed as a model for understanding the experience of racial minorities, minority stress theory suggests that a group’s minority status within society can result in a chronic stress response,
which in turn leads to health complications (Nadal et al., 2010b). Adapting this, Meyer’s meta-analysis of studies of lesbian, gay and bisexual people’s mental health proposed minority stress as a model to explain the higher levels of mental disorders found in the non-heterosexual population (Meyer, 2003). He says that LGB people are subject to “stigma, prejudice, and discrimination,” which creates “a hostile and stressful social environment that causes mental health problems” (Meyer, 2003, p. 674).

A growing body of research has since confirmed the assertion that social stigma and prejudice are related to mental ill-health and other somatic health problems among non-heterosexual people (Brewster et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2016; Iniewicz et al., 2017). Social attitudes and behaviors to racial minorities and LGBTQIA+ people lead to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) type symptoms (Carter, 2007; Robinson and Rubin, 2016). Minority Stress is an “insidious trauma” that frames a significant part of a person’s social life, without a distinct beginning or ending (Robinson & Rubin, 2016). It is thus challenging to escape from and find healing.

In application to sexual and gender diversity, minority stress theory typically highlights themes such as internalized homophobia, expectations of rejection from families and communities, experiences of adverse events related to one’s sexuality and satisfaction with one’s “outness” (Iniewicz et al., 2017).

While Australian society has progressed toward more inclusive postures to many minority groups, including queer people, our research shows that this is not true for LGBTQIA+ people in Evangelical churches. This paper explores participants’ experiences of minority stress, particularly emphasizing the impact of chronic stressors on their mental health and faith journey.

Microaggression Theory

Increasing social awareness about the effect of prejudice and stigma has changed some of the more overt attitudes and actions directed at LGBTQIA+ people, even in conservative churches. However, microaggression theory recognizes that stigma is often more subtle than overt. The accumulation of small and often unnoticed discriminatory behaviors accumulate to form substantial experiences of trauma over the medium to long term, resulting in high levels of stress and anxiety (Lomash et al., 2019; Robinson & Rubin, 2016). Microaggressions are:

- behaviors and statements, often unconscious or unintentional, that communicate hostile or derogatory messages, particularly to members of targeted social groups (e.g., people of color; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and genderqueer LGBTQ] people; women; stigmatized religious groups) (Nadal et al., 2016, p 488).

Exposure to microaggressions is correlated with lower levels of self-esteem, decreased psychological well-being (Nadal et al., 2010a, 2015), negative emotional intensity, and increased levels of binge drinking (Nadal et al., 2010a, 201; Wang et al., 2011). Discrimination-based microaggressions often result in high levels of distress (Nadal et al., 2010b, 2016; Robinson & Rubin, 2016; Sattler et al., 2016) and lead to complex trauma responses (Livingston et al., 2019).

Despite its growing recognition in clinical social work, there is little research that identifies religious institutions as settings where discrimination-based microaggressions can be expected. There is likely to be a lack of understanding amongst clinical social workers about how to help clients navigate situations where faith communities are simultaneously settings of support and trauma. This simultaneity is particularly difficult given the seemingly innocuous nature of microaggressions that may be not readily identified as significant (Sue et al., 2008).

**Trauma-Informed Clinical Social Work Practice**

Minority stressors and microaggressions perpetrated against marginalized people function together over the medium to long-term to cause trauma. Clinical social workers are likely to encounter trauma survivors in various settings. It is crucial to understand how trauma can impact an individual’s functioning (Levenson, 2017). Despite its prevalence, it is often the case that trauma is not articulated as the presenting problem when a client seeks the care of a social work practitioner (Knight, 2015). Instead, poor mental health, addiction, homelessness, or forensic concerns may be what prompts an individual to seek help. Failure to see that problems have a deeper root in trauma often results in a frustrating cycle. Focusing on immediate concerns fails to help, and consequent frustration and unaddressed trauma exacerbate the presenting problem (Chemtob et al., 2011; Hepworth & McGowan, 2013). To stop this cycle, social workers need to be aware of the mechanisms of trauma and trained to identify red flags.

Trauma-informed practice does not assume that every person seeking care has experienced trauma, nor suggests that traumatic incidents always result in maladaptive coping mechanisms. Instead, the trauma-informed practitioner should be sensitive to the impact that past victimization can have on current functioning and willing and able to address these concerns should they arise (Knight, 2015).
Knight (2015, p.25) identifies four fundamental principles of clinical, trauma-informed practice: “normalizing and validating clients’ feelings and experiences; assisting them in understanding the past and its emotional impact; empowering survivors to better manage their current lives, and; helping them understand current challenges in light of the past.” In therapeutic spaces, these principles guide social work practice. However, in the context of LGBTQIA+ religious trauma, clinicians unaware of how Evangelical churches perpetuate spiritual abuse may be ill-equipped to apply these principles with confidence (Bozard & Sanders, 2011).

Method

The study involved interviews of twenty-four people who self-identified as LGBTQIA+ and had spent two or more years in Australian Evangelical churches. The interviews aimed to explore participant journeys within the Church and practices that hindered or helped their spiritual and religious development. The interviews were semi-structured, flexible, and in-depth to prioritize the participant’s perspective and concerns (Kvale, 1994).

Initially, the study recruited participants through convenience sampling via posts on social media. Many people volunteered to participate, so purposive sampling was undertaken to ensure a diversity of gender identity, sexuality and range of denominational backgrounds. Recruitment ceased once thematic saturation was reached. Interviews averaged 1.5 h in length. Interviews were transcribed and hand-coded in dialogue with minority stress and microaggression theories. Following initial coding, a retroductive analysis was used to critique and expand these theories.

Participants were from Anglican, Baptist, Pentecostal and Uniting Churches. Two of the participants no longer identified as Christian, six as Christian but no longer involved in institutional religion, nine remained regular attenders in churches where their queer identity was not fully recognized, and seven attended queer affirming churches. One interviewee firmly retained a traditionalist sexual ethic and was committed to celibacy, and one participant publicly maintained a traditionalist ethic but was privately affirming. The rest were either fully or largely publicly out and affirming of their diverse gender and sexual identities.

Ten participants identified as gay males, seven as lesbian women, three as bisexual (two women and one man), one as an asexual woman, one as a transgender man, one as a transgender woman, and one as a non-binary individual (using he/him pronouns).

Using a Critical Realist framework, the lead author derived initial codes from existing literature, particularly around themes of minority stress and microaggression theories. The second round of coding grouped dominant codes and established trends. Finally, data was collected and analyzed to critique and expand existing theories (Fletcher, 2017). This process resulted in rich insights regarding LGBTQIA+ spiritual identity development and the realities of queer religious trauma. All coding was completed utilizing NVivo software, while a research journal, use of memos and constant dialogue between the research team ensured a rigorous exploration of the data.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process, particularly around consent, the anonymity of participants and their communities, the retelling of potentially traumatic experiences, and the need to store data securely. The University of Sydney’s Human Research Ethics Committee approved the research (HREC Project 2019/361). Qualified counsellors were made accessible to participants, and the professional judgement of the lead researcher (a trauma-informed social worker) helped to minimize participant distress.

Positioning the Researchers

As with all research, we bring our experience and subjective perspective to the task. We note that our experiential knowledge of LGBTQIA+ people strengthens our engagement and analysis but also appreciate the importance of disclosure (Galdas, 2017). The lead author identifies as a gay Christian who is actively involved in a faith community. The other authors are a straight cisgender theologian and ally of LGBTQIA+ people of faith, and an LGBTIQA+ community identifying Christian.

Study results

Mechanisms of Trauma

Micro-aggressions cement and establish minority stressors. While most are unconscious or unintentional, micro-aggressions can also be deliberate. We identified four broad types of microaggressions that participants commonly experienced:

- Mischaracterizations.
- Being viewed as a threat.
- Experiencing erasure, and.
- Relational distancing.
Mischaracterizations

Most participants said that church members mischaracterized their queer identity. Eight participants highlighted repeated references to the “gay lifestyle,” noting how this phrase minimized and disparaged their experiences and emerging identity (Mutz, 2006). The use of the term as a broad generalization by conservative Evangelicals has drawn intense criticism for its lack of nuance and synonymity with more overtly open sexuality than any of our participants described. As a stark example of this term’s usage, Craig (a gay man in his late thirties) recounted a message in his Pentecostal church in which the pastor claimed a man dying from AIDS “got what he deserves” because “that’s just a consequence of the gay lifestyle.” For decades, Craig avoided acknowledging his sexual orientation. He belonged to a church that “often portrays that life as evil, perverted, drugs, sex, rock ‘n’ roll,” and at 21, he had decided he did not want to be “one of those naughty, naughty people.” Instead, he entered a mixed-orientation marriage that would eventually end in divorce. Mischaracterizations thus contributed to decisions that had a deep-seated and long-lasting traumatic impact upon Craig and his wife.

At the time of the interview, Anna, a lesbian in her early twenties, had just ceased going to her conservative Sydney Anglican Church and was seeking a new faith community. Forced to keep her girlfriend a secret from her church community, Anna realized they were not truly her friends:

I can’t bring up one of the people I love the most in this world, someone I wish I could marry, because immediately when I tell people, and I have told people, you hear it, and you see it… they immediately go “oh she is not a Christian. And that would explain why sex before, and that would explain why she swears so much. And that would explain why she is dating a girl. What a crazy homosexual. How weird that she goes to church.”

Like many participants, Anna was facing the experience of being mischaracterized by her church community. They also demonized the “gay lifestyle”. Similarly, othering rhetoric occurs in individual conversations and public presentations. As Emily shared:

Services would slide comments throughout about the LGBT community, about homosexuals, that they really didn’t know anything about, and it hurt because I was sitting there and listening, and I had to take all this on.

Emily’s account demonstrates the power difference that reinforces and perpetuates marginalizing rhetoric. She was a silent congregant, given no opportunity to respond to or challenge the leaders’ language and views. Without power and voice, it is tough to challenge pervasive mischaracterizations. Emily tried to persevere for a time to help change the leaders’ minds, but ultimately she ended up leaving:

I didn’t think I could go there in worship and not have all eyes on me, thinking these comments in their head about me and who I was – what they thought about me, not who I really was.

Mischaracterizations also made it hard for bisexual people to come to terms with their sexuality. Bethany found the misinformation and stigma confronting and confusing:

“We are undecided. We are promiscuous. We have threesomes all the time.” I had to deal with “I’m not bisexual if it means that I am that.” But I am bisexual. It means that I am attracted to both, but it doesn’t mean that I am going to end up having sex with two other people or being promiscuous. It just means that I have a wider opportunity to meet someone.

Ignorance rather than malice often grounded the mischaracterization. For example, Bethany recalled a conversation with her minister:

A few months before I got married, concerned, I went to my minister and said, “look, I’m having these feelings of attractions to women, and I think I’m gay. Am I doing the right thing by marrying this guy?” He laughed at me and said, “I think that you are not gay. You don’t look gay.” And I thought, “was there a look? What is the look?” Obviously, he had a stereotype of what being gay means. He said I had nothing to worry about because I wasn’t gay. So, I continued and married him, and it was disastrous.

Ignorance does not excuse mischaracterization. Clergy have a professional responsibility to understand religious trauma and equip themselves to minister without perpetrating spiritual abuse.

Viewed as a Threat

Being viewed as a threat is a more extreme form of mischaracterization, and its psychological impact can be severe. In this case, mischaracterization moves beyond a moral indictment of gender identity or sexuality. It depicts the person as an active danger to the community, such as conflating homosexuality with pedophilia. Participants told us that mischaracterization as a threat was pervasive, from fellow congregation members to senior leadership.

Nathan recounted a brochure that his Evangelical Uniting Church distributed when he was still coming to terms with his homosexuality:

“[This church] proudly does not support the Uniting Church’s stance on homosexuals. Rest assured that your children are safe with us.” … And I was like, “what is this connection? Why would they assume that my service and my time and energy and love for encouragement and helping people would be somehow tainted by what I identify with?” And that for me was like, “whoa”.


The distribution of this brochure led Nathan to leave his church. Similarly, Katie, a young queer woman, shared how she was stepped down from a volunteer ministry position as a way of shielding the children in her care from her discussions of sexuality, a move that would eventually lead to her leaving that congregation:

I had by then been asked to stop leading a year eight girls’ Bible study group because I refused to stop being public about my sexuality. The youth minister who asked me to stop said it was akin to a leader being open with the children about their drinking problems.

The misrepresentation of LGBTQI+ people as dangerous is grounded in deep-seated and inflexible culture and doctrine. For Sydney Anglican Chris, this meant that he never felt comfortable coming out as gay, fearing he would be labelled a pedophile:

At church, you constantly have that veneer of “I’m not like you, even though you don’t know that,” or “if you really knew who I was, you probably wouldn’t want to be mates with me. If I was a little bit older, you probably would not want your kids to get stuck in a room with me.” That is how they see old single men who are gay. That was the trope that I thought I would get put into if I stayed in the church.

In Chris’s example, it is not difficult to imagine how such demeaning misinformation caused his church to fear and other LGBTQI+ people. Coming to terms with their gender and sexuality, young LGBTQI+ people like Chris face a barrage of messages that serve to alienate them from the church community and other queer people. They are doubly isolated, without support in a cycle of trauma, silence and exclusion. The intensity of rhetoric directed against them imbues a deep fear of the sexual dimensions of their identity, perpetuating cycles of shame and self-loathing that frame their whole sense of self.

This culture of fear and misinformation extends beyond personal interactions and often informs the church’s political activity, impacting how Christians vote, lobby politicians, and interact with legislation. For many Evangelicals, the all-encompassing nature of their Christian identity provides a mandate to influence the public sphere (Ch’ng, 2015), and Lisa captures how this played out in the Pentecostal church she took a staff position on:

Every week there were clipboards up the back with petitions against the gay agenda, whatever that might be – homosexuals and schools, homosexuals this, homosexuals that. And I remember saying to the rest of the team that you cannot say “people are welcome in this place,” and then have a clipboard that says, “but we are lobbying against you and your lifestyle.”

In this instance, the “gay agenda” was seen as a threat to society’s good order, and the church acted politically to counter the perceived threat. Participants experienced this public mischaracterization as a violent, personal rejection.

Erasure

People presumed not to exist are far easier to stigmatize, marginalize and eventually exclude from a community. Erasure is the act of overlooking or ignoring the existence of a group of people (in this case, LGBTQI+ Christians). Evangelical churches silenced participants, refused to acknowledge their identity as queer Christians, and failed to listen to their concerns. For Elke, the public denial of her identity as a lesbian Christian has had significant ramifications:

…[Pastors] continue to affirm that it is not acceptable in a church, and there is no such thing as a “gay Christian”… It’s a terrifying experience.

Because there was “no such thing” as a ‘gay Christian’, Elke had to choose between her sexuality and her faith to remain in church. It was a choice she refused to make. Similarly, Belle recounted a talk she heard at Hillsong as a teenager as she was just coming to terms with her lesbian sexuality:

It was a talk just about relationships… It was a classic dot points on relationship, and point seven of fifteen was “being gay is not real.” It was such a confronting thing to hear when I was just at the pinnacle of realizing what was happening for me. Here was someone saying it doesn’t even exist. “It’s a disease that can be healed.”

Belle’s account demonstrates how misinformation undermined her faith and sexuality. When authoritative church leaders erase queer spirituality, they shape a congregation’s thinking and behavior. As with mischaracterizations, erasure alienates LGBTQI+ people from the church. For Samuel, who is nonbinary, erasure took place while filling out an online church survey:

The first time that it kind of hit me in the guts a bit, it was a really small thing. Our church does ministry reviews every year. They generate surveys to send to a random couple of people in the church to review everybody who is employed by the church. I got one for the head pastor, and the first question was, “What is your gender? Male/female.” And I just went, “oh crap”. Haha. The church doesn’t even, or hasn’t even, considered that there are people here with different identities.

Samuel brought this up with church leadership and was initially ignored. After bringing it up again, the lead pastor laughed at Samuel and insinuated that they thought it had been something of a joke. This invalidation was made more painful because the lead pastor was the father of one of Samuel’s closest friends. In Evangelical communities, the line between leader, pastor and friend is often blurred, making such erasure even more significant.
Many participants were frustrated by the lack of empathy shown to them by church leaders. Erasure inevitably undermines empathy. Emily, a young bisexual woman, shared her frustrations about not being listened to:

Unfortunately, a lot of leaders in the church didn’t really listen to what I actually had to say and just talked about what they believed, and I found that repeat, repeat, for each leader and each church leader I spoke to in different churches. That was crippling because at the end of the day, if those leaders aren’t going to take me as I am, what are they really saying to me? “You don’t belong here.” That’s how it felt.

Participants consistently told us that church leaders did not listen to them and made little effort to understand their experiences and perspective. Failure to hear what a person has to say is a microaggression that makes people aware of their minority status and lack of voice in the church.

**Relational Distancing**

All participants in this study experienced a change in their relational sphere after coming out. Over half spoke of these changes as a significant, ongoing source of stress, noting the pain of having friends and family deliberately distancing themselves. Relational distancing is a microaggression as it is a constant factor of life for many participants. While the initial intensity of the coming out phase wears off, the newly established distancing creates a strong dissonance in people’s understanding of how to navigate the world. Hugo, a gay man who came out after he divorced his wife, continues to confront relational distancing regularly. He notes:

When I go into the city shopping, I have people cross the street to avoid me, or in one case, a couple literally ran away from me, and I am thinking, “I taught all of your children, and you have known me for decades, and the only thing that has changed is that you now know something about me that you didn’t previously know.” So there is this kind of constant reminder where I run into these people, and they want nothing to do with me, and that is tough. I lost an older brother to cancer when I was in my 20s, he was a couple of years older than me, and Toby is dead and gone. But for those people, I am dead to them, but I’m still very much alive. In Canberra, being a small town, I run into them, but they treat me as persona non grata. So that is still quite difficult six years down the track to be confronted by that.

To be treated as “persona non grata” by the community you used to call family is a harrowing experience. Kyle, a bisexual man, recounted a similar story of exclusion from his church after he came out:

It almost feels like you’re being separated from the community, because you might be excluded from friendship groups. Sometimes you may not even be able to go to certain… I don’t want to say you can’t go to certain restaurants, but you would feel unsafe going to certain restaurants. A fear of “Bible-bashing” drove this feeling of being unsafe. At a school sporting event, Kyle was told that his lifestyle is unbiblical and sinful, and that he is going to Hell. Such traumatic experiences induce fear that similar microaggressions will recur. They thus have a psychological and behavioral impact that lasts well beyond the specific incident.

Katie expressed similar fears when she shared that she avoids church by telling her conservative father that she is going there, only to attend a local library instead.

Some relational distancing microaggressions take on a less intense form but prove equally detrimental over time. Belle recounted what she had heard pastors say to other people sharing:

They say, “I couldn’t come to your wedding if you were ever married” or “I love you, but I can’t support you” or “I can’t spend time with you, I don’t think God would want me to spend time with you if you are not planning on changing.”

These comments are “othering” as they function to separate the “sinful” queer person from the “holy” church. Condemning people they deem sinful, perpetrators of spiritual abuse thus imagine themselves righteous.

Even those who retain a traditional theology around gender and sexuality may face relational distancing. Matthew, a young gay man in his early twenties who has embraced celibacy, was grieved to hear that an older couple at his church had left after he openly shared that he experiences same-sex attraction. He notes:

It was after this that this couple left. It was a direct response to my ministry and my decisions, and so it’s a little bit harder not to take it personally. It’s not just some hypothetical thing, but it’s because of a decision that I made.

Matthew had thought that his conservative theology would mitigate against such distancing; however, it did not. Matthew appreciated that the senior pastor of the church supported him and was relieved to have found out that the couple had left without telling him, as he did not know them very well. While Matthew’s story shows us that celibate gay Christians can experience such microtraumas, they are more likely for those who adopt an affirming position.

**Minority Stress and Church Power**

In examining microaggressions and minority stress, we are not simply looking at interactions between people and their responses. Instead, we need to understand the structures that enable such phenomena. Minority stress arises because minorities are often subject to unequal power relations, and this is especially so for queer people in Evangelical
churches. To that end, we examine in more depth the two causal mechanisms that provided the undercurrent to acts of heterosexist microaggressions against participants in our study.

First is the pervasive nature of conservative theological rhetoric and its propensity toward “othering” those who do not fit the cisgender, heterosexual norm. This othering involved participants being described as “sinful”, “broken”, or “confused”, and threatened with eternal damnation. Traditional theology enables the othering of queer people, at least to the extent that assumptions about Christian orthodoxy go unexamined (while beyond the scope of this paper, assumptions about Christian tradition and orthodox gender and sexual ethics are disputed (Gushee 2020). Further, relational distancing is encouraged, for example, by invoking Paul’s call in 1 Corinthians 5:13 to “expel the immoral brother” in the case of sexual immorality.

Second, power structures within the church buttress various forms of microaggressions. Again, Belle shared succinctly:

When it [heterosexist ideology] is backed up by church leaders, it removes the sting out of it in the sense that nobody has to take personal responsibility for saying “I would never come to your wedding,” or “the love that you have for somebody is bad…” When it’s backed up by somebody in power, everybody just goes “oh that’s just the way it is.”

Most church congregations and nominations are structured by hierarchical power, with leaders (usually clergy or elected “elder” positions) given significant authority. Conservative rhetoric and the power of the clergy buttress one another. Only those who interpret Christian tradition conservatively (as anti-gay) gain power. They use that power to reinforce their views through the various types of microaggressions. If clergy subsequently change their perspective and behaviors, they are likely to be removed from positions of power.

For participants in our study, their minority position and relative powerlessness had a substantial negative impact. Participants had been taught to turn to community leaders for guidance and comfort. Because the relationship between a pastor and congregant is not one of equal power, they rarely provide meaningful comfort and healthy advice to LGBTQI+ people, who suffer microaggressions reinforced by authoritative power. Belle, who currently works in the mental health field, summarized this dynamic well, stating:

One thing that has been really prominent for me more as I learn about mental health, and in hindsight, is just realizing how damaging it can be for somebody in a community that is already experiencing high levels of suicide and self-harm and mental health issues to then have the one community that you go to for support not do it well, is so dangerous.

People have been primed to turn to their faith communities for aid, yet these faith communities are too often a source of harm. Further, the power structures acting as causal mechanisms in trauma are not confined to the Church. James, a trans man who is currently attending an affirming Anglican Church, shared the rhetoric he experiences from people who feel he should not be allowed in men’s toilets and change rooms:

[Conservative people say] “ScoMo [Prime Minister Scott Morrison] is not saying that your humanity needs to be protected and you could benefit from some safer places, so we are not going to accord you that.” That is one of the challenges for the conservative church.

James refers to an incident of August 2019 in which the Australian Prime Minister requested that gender-inclusive bathroom signs be removed from the Barton Offices of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Martin, 2019). This structure of anti-trans rhetoric goes to the highest level of power in Australia. Given that the Prime Minister identifies as a conservative Evangelical and Pentecostal Christian, his influence flows down into the Evangelical communities of our participants.

The Impact of Trauma on Spirituality

Participants’ negative experiences of the Church had profound, long-lasting impacts on their psychological, social and spiritual health. The stress they felt as members of an oppressed minority group within the Church accumulated over time to have significant ramifications. Nathan described how his heart began racing, and he became incredibly nervous as he stepped into a church for the first time in years.

Katie spoke of her Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder flaring up each time she walks past a place of worship. Lisa shared that she would sit and cry on Sundays because of heterosexist microaggressions against participants.

Samuel’s journey illustrates the profound impact of religious trauma. After attempting to reshape and educate the church he (though non-binary, Samuel uses male pronouns) had grown up in, Samuel and his fiancé ended up having to leave to find a new congregation. But this did not undo the trauma he had experienced:

Everything about church at the moment is triggering. Everything that I don’t like about the church… it’s hard to separate practices that are godly practices from the church that is institutionalized, unhappy, evilness. It’s hard to separate those two things. So even singing worship in the car, even trying to pray, I get this instant pressure in my chest – that classic triggered feeling of “oh” uncomfortableness. It’s like it doesn’t feel right. I get this voice in my head saying, “God is not going to hear you” or “God is not going to
engage with you.” “You’re in denial,” and that kind of stuff. It’s very hard to have an open and honest conversation with God when you don’t fully believe in yourself that you are accepted by God because of the way you have been treated by the Church.

Samuel’s use of the term “triggering” is significant. In raising the “pressure in my chest,” Samuel is speaking to the physiological symptoms identified with the alterations of arousal of the trauma response (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Ford et al., 2015). Samuel’s spirituality is now intimately tied to this response, with his ongoing doubts about his acceptability before God. A clinical social worker might assume that as a Christian, Samuel could benefit spiritually from attending a church. But if the simple act of listening to worship music in a car activates a fight or flight mechanism (Brandell, 2014), it is unlikely that Samuel could attend a faith community, participate in ministry or go to a mid-week Bible study — at least not without some earlier psychospiritual healing.

Other participants spoke of similarly significant times in their lives when their response to the traumatic experiences of the church shaped their ability to engage. Kyle said he was “outed” at school and then forced to attend counselling at church, where leaders said he needed to “change” to take part in the ministries he had been serving in:

That was probably the lowest point that it ever got because it was just a constant barrage of being told that I am horrible, that I am never going to amount to anything in life, and because of this small difference, I will never be considered human, never be considered like everybody else, never be loved, never be accepted, never have a wife. At this point, same-sex marriage was illegal, so I was also struggling with that — if I do this, I’m never going to marry the person I love, never going to have the same rights as everybody else. So that was the lowest it ever got.

The trauma experienced at this time led Kyle to attempt suicide. Elke told us that she continues to suffer distress:

Sometimes I cry a lot out of nowhere. You know, even just listening to a sermon, those thoughts come in a lot. It’s a bit odd to cry sad tears at church, I feel, but that’s reality. It feels like a bit of a ticking time bomb. And I know that’s sort of, jumping to conclusions, kind of thinking. But I know I have seen other people be rejected, and it pains me a lot. It really does.

When asked what she would say to a conservative pastor if given the opportunity now, Elke said:

I don’t need an apology or anything. Just not to think that they are the ones who are being hurt by pro-LGBT rhetoric. That’s not the case. They are not being driven to the edge of suicide because of what they believe, but I am because of how they have treated me.

It is impossible in this paper to do justice to all of our participants’ experiences of trauma. No participant journeyed through their Evangelical church experiences without a measure of pain. Many were forced to leave their communities (yet another source of trauma) and either find new congregations or exit the Church altogether.

Discussion

This study provides valuable information for clinical social workers who care for LGBTQIA+ people who have had negative experiences within the Church. Importantly, this study makes it clear that for LGBTQIA+ Evangelical Christians, minority stress is mediated through and compounded by experiences of microaggressions. Participants knew that they were in the minority because of their gender identity and sexuality, and this was traumatic when coupled with ongoing instances of subtle or explicit discrimination. While participants occasionally experienced overt abuse, it was far less frequent than the persistent and less obvious microaggressions that emerged from the underlying homophobia of conservative Christian doctrine and culture.

The principles of trauma-informed clinical practice described above (Knight, 2015) should be guided by such insights. In normalizing and validating clients’ feelings and experiences, the social worker should be able to share how their clients’ experiences of coming out in the Church are not unique. In assisting their clients in understanding the past and its emotional impact, the practitioner will guide them to understand seemingly insignificant instances of discrimination as harmful. In empowering survivors to better manage their current lives, they will assist their clients in finding safe spaces where spirituality can thrive. And to help them understand current challenges in light of the past, the practitioner will educate their client to be alert for microaggressions, name them for what they are, and keep seeking out support and a positive community.

Microaggressions against LGBTQIA+ people in the Church were unique in that in almost all cases reported by participants, the perpetrator was a trusted leader, close friend, family member, or valued part of the Church community. Participants rarely spoke about microaggressions coming from strangers. Typically, studies in minority stress examine the effects of microaggressions without making clear distinctions of relational proximity to the perpetrator or considering the significant difference relationship makes (Robinson & Rubin, 2016). In this study, we observed the importance of understanding proximity, suggesting that microaggressions enacted by a participant’s family member (for example) are interpreted in a qualitatively
different manner to if they were proffered by a street preacher unknown to the listener.

Understanding the importance of proximity in this way becomes even more vital within Evangelical Circles, given the highly communal nature of the Church. Participants wanted to develop spiritually in their “church family”. Yet microaggressions made this challenging. On the one hand, they longed to be part of a church community, while on the other hand, their church community was causing them harm. Practitioners should be aware of this paradox and be prepared to help clients find suitable, queer affirming places of worship that enable them to explore their spirituality without experiencing harm.

Affirming church communities are becoming increasingly available, and it would be erroneous to assume that LGBTQIA+ individuals experience deficient or unfulfilling spiritual lives. In heeding Meyer’s call to “move from viewing minority groups as passive victims of prejudice to viewing them as actors who interact effectively within society” (Meyer 2003, p.691), we recognize the vibrant strength and rich contributions that queer people of faith bring to this conversation. Many participants developed a more nuanced and profound faith and spirituality than was evidenced by the religious leaders they had encountered. After experiencing trauma, participants demonstrated resilience. Their spirituality had a hard-earned depth that transcended the too often unexamined religious tradition wielded against them (Gushee 2020, p129). While it is essential to give voice to trauma, further research needs to explore the positive spirituality and religious insights that LGBTQIA+ experiences and perspectives can generate.

Interestingly, no participant in this study spoke of microaggressions from society targeting their religious status. Australian Evangelicals often believe themselves to be targets of societal prejudice against religion, but our participants said their faith was widely accepted, even in the broader LGBTQI+ community. Is gender or sexual diversity a moderating factor in LGBTQIA+ experiences of religious discrimination, or is religious discrimination a response to church homophobia and not religious belief? More intersectional research is needed that examines the LGBTQIA+ Christian’s experience of societal hostility.

Further research should explore resiliency factors and positive coping techniques queer people of faith can draw upon and how practitioners can incorporate them into their therapeutic practices.

Limitations

This qualitative research did not set out to find universal themes applicable across wide population bases. It focused on a small group of English-speaking individuals in an Australian Evangelical context. More research is required to validate themes that emerged and to explore how these themes sit in a variety of cultures, religious traditions, and settings.

This paper has explored in-depth participants’ experiences of trauma within the Evangelical Church. Future research will need to explore the Church as a potential source of healing for LGBTQIA+ individuals. In anticipating this research, it is valuable to hear the words of hope offered by Lisa:

The most interesting thing for me has been that since I have been fully out and in an affirming church, and all that kind of stuff, for the first time in 30 years, I am not suicidal. And that is huge. In some ways, I don’t know a bigger sign of grace than that. It’s nice not to want to kill yourself.

Conclusions

Clinical social work provides a vital service to people who have experienced religious trauma at the hands of people and institutions they trusted. Understanding the mechanisms of this trauma equips practitioners with an ability to identify such trauma, even when the individual themselves may be unable to label it as such. Microtraumas, such as mischaracterization, being viewed as a threat, erasure and relational distancing, are compounded by the experience of existing as a minority within a faith community. LGBTQIA+ people may think that the instances of microaggression are insignificant. Social work practitioners must be aware that the accumulation of microaggressions can cause deep levels of stress that impact the person’s mental, emotional, psychological and spiritual health.

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