

Exploring religion, youth and sexuality

February 28 2011

Sexuality and religion are generally considered uncomfortable bedfellows. Now, for the first time, a team of researchers from Nottingham have carried out a detailed study around these issues and how they affect and influence the lives of British 18 to 25 year olds.

Led by The University of Nottingham, in collaboration with Nottingham Trent University, experts spent two years investigating the attitudes, values and experiences of sex and religion among young adults.

The study, which involved nearly 700 young people from six different religious traditions; Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism as well as young adults of mixed-faith, highlights the challenges they face in reconciling their [sexuality](#) and their religion and the concerns they have about the stigmatisation of religion and the increasingly sexualised culture in British society today.

The project Religion, Youth and Sexuality: a Multi-faith Exploration received funding of nearly £250,000 from the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council.

Dr Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip and Dr Sarah-Jane Page, in the School of Sociology and Social Policy at The University of Nottingham and Dr Michael Keenan from Nottingham Trent University's School of Social Sciences asked all the participants to fill in online questionnaires. Some were also interviewed individually and recorded week-long video diaries.

Young adults were asked to talk about their sexual and religious values,

[attitudes](#), experiences and identities. As well as looking at their family background, social and cultural expectations and participation in religious communities the researchers also examined young people's experiences of living in British society and how they understood and managed their gender identity in relation to their religious faith.

Dr Yip said: "Despite their diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, many of today's 18 to 25 year olds are following their own paths, drawing from a variety of resources such as religious faith, youth culture, the media and friendship networks. They are creating sexual ethics that are informed by their religious faith. Similarly, their sexuality also informs the ways they understand their religious faith and belonging.

"However, a majority of young people believe religious leaders do not know enough about sexuality — particularly youth sexuality. Others consider institutional religion a social control mechanism that excessively regulates gender and sexual behaviour, without sufficient engagement with young people themselves."

The research shows that nearly a third of young people think celibacy is fulfilling while nearly two thirds are committed to treating heterosexuality and homosexuality on equal terms. Meanwhile lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered participants reveal that there are psychological and social costs to living their everyday lives, particularly within religious communities.

Dr Yip said: "The aim is to document and disseminate the voices of religious young adults. We wanted to explore how they understand their sexuality and religious faith, and the significant factors that inform such understandings, as well as the strategies they have developed to manage their sexual, religious, youth and gender identities. We believe that the research findings would make a significant contribution to the debate

and dialogue in this contentious area of religion and sexuality. We hope the research will speak to religious leaders/professionals, professionals and practitioners working with young people in secular contexts, and of course young people themselves."

Well over half the participants (65.1 per cent) were involved in a religious community and just over half (56.7 per cent) attended a public religious gathering at least once a week.

Most thought that the expression of one's sexuality was desirable but opinions varied: some believing that consenting adults should be able to express their sexualities however they wished, while others believed sexual expression should be limited to marriage or a committed relationship. Despite the diversity in opinion, most salient was the support expressed across the board for monogamous relationships by 83.2 per cent of the sample.

Their experiences in connecting their [religious faith](#) and sexuality were diverse. Some had experienced tension and conflict. Others were able to deal with any conflict by compartmentalising faith and sexuality. While there were also participants who had found a way of accommodating both.

Dr Keenan said: "The majority of the religious [young adults](#) felt their religion was a positive force in their lives, and many felt that their faith was the most important influence on their sexual values and practices. The study also shows that the negotiation of [religion](#) and sexuality can be difficult and that there is a real diversity of experience among young religious adults. We hope the research findings will lead to greater discussion of these important issues and stimulate dialogue between religions and between religious and secular organisations."

More information: More information about this research and a copy

of the research report can be found at:

www.nottingham.ac.uk/sociology/rys

Provided by University of Nottingham

Citation: Exploring religion, youth and sexuality (2011, February 28) retrieved 26 April 2024
from <https://phys.org/news/2011-02-exploring-religion-youth-sexuality.html>

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