

Not everybody is doing it: Exploring the everyday university experiences of sexually abstinent religious students.

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This paper reflects on emergent findings from the Wellcome Trust funded project 'Finding something in nothing: Exploring meaning and challenge in the everyday experiences of sexually abstinent religious university students'. With reference to the sociology of nothing (Scott 2018) and McGuire's discussion of 'Lived Religion' (2008) this paper reflects on sexually abstinent students' experiences of individually meaningful absence, and the impact of absented experiences in the expected university community.

With reference to survey responses from sexually abstinent religious university students across England the paper reflects on the relevance of sexual abstinence to individual student experiences, peer and community interactions, and institutional practice.

Full paper

Recent years have seen an increasing awareness of the relevance of sex and sexuality to student lives, which has also recognised the sexualised nature of spaces on the university campus (Jackson and Sundaram 2021). Similarly the experiences of religious students has also gained notice and reflection (e.g. Aune, Perfect and Ryan 2024). However the sexual lives of religious students have been less engaged with, partly perhaps because the lives of religious students are often seen to be at distance from more secular discussions of sexual behaviour and sexual identity.

Scott's Sociology of Nothing (Scott 2018) allows us a lens to understand this absence through reflecting on sociology's (and wider social studies') tendency to focus on the 'present' or the 'done' rather than the 'absent' or the 'avoided'. Therefore university expectation, understanding and provision is often based on the needs of the active, excluding the inactive. In terms of sexual practice at university this means that often the focus is on the needs and experiences of the doers rather than the avoiders. This paper

encourages a rethinking of the relevance of sex on campus to include the done and the not done.

Alongside this the paper also reflects on the meaning and importance of not doing for the students both in terms of their self understandings and their experiences of university. McGuire (2008) argues that religion should be explored in terms of how it is lived. She asserts that religion is best understood in terms of what we do everyday. We assert that aspects of religious students not doings and avoidances are also important in understanding their engagement with university and the impact of religion on their studies.

This paper will explore students' reflections on these issues from survey and interview narratives.

Methodology

Our project has three stages –

An online questionnaire which is primarily qualitative and seeks to engage with students narratives the meanings and importances of abstinence

An online interview which explores in greater depth students narratives of being abstinent and key moments in their experience

A diary/interview stage which seeks to document the everyday relevance of sexual abstinence in terms of university experience and religious meaning and practice.

This paper explores emergent data from the first two methods

Key Findings

Our paper will discuss the impact and relevance of sexual abstinence on three levels

Individual student experience

The relevance of abstinence to individual students was discussed in terms of self meaning, living to God's will and avoiding distraction – for example

Simply put, I believe it gives me a higher sense of self-worth. I am not saying that people who are not sexually abstinent have a lower self-worth, but that's how I see it myself... I don't need to have sex with somebody else to feel this way.

I can make clear decisions and work harder towards my future goals because I don't have the sexual distractions.

Peer and community interaction

With reference to peers and community our respondents identify the possibility of greater friendships, but also reflect on feelings of exclusion and difference.

Deeper friendship bonds, religious closeness.

I think often, whether they realise it or not, there is an element of pity in peoples' reactions

People tend to be shocked at the beginning but then it becomes normal, in some settings some men tend to get a little intense and see it as almost a "trophy"

University culture and practice

With reference to wider experience respondents discussed hedonistic spaces as being spaces they avoid and that remind them of their different choices from other students. Some also discussed feelings of discomfort in study spaces.

[Wicked Wednesdays] and most parties because they are always related to either drugs or sex. And I've heard stories of my friends being sexually harassed there.

Nah though sometimes as a medical student it can be a bit awkward when we are being taught under the assumption that we all have the same sexual literacy

Final thoughts

The above quotes and the paper more broadly have illustrated the impact of abstinence across various levels of experience at university. Our paper highlights the importance of the recognition of diverse practice and need in the university body and being aware of impactful practice and nonpractice which impacts the university experience. Our research underlines the importance of reflection on religion and sex as parts of the university experience whether practiced or avoided, and emphasises the recognition of the presence of absence in university.