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## Mis-education of Australian Youth: exposure to LGBTQA+ conversion ideology and practises

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### ABSTRACT

Lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer and asexual (LGBTQA+) Australians are vulnerable to religion-based attempts to change or suppress their sexuality and/or gender identity, including conversion ideology messaging in school-based sex education. Conversion bans are currently being debated across the country. This paper reports on a critical survivor-driven study which retrospectively explored Australian LGBTQA+ youth exposure to conversion practices both within and outside of education settings. It privileges the perspectives of self-titled ‘survivors’ of conversion ideology and practices through the use of a reference group and constructivist grounded theory. Qualitative data were collected from 20 Australian LGBTQA+ conversion ideology and/or practice survivors aged 18 years and over, using focus groups and 35 individual interviews between 2016 and 2020. In conversion-promoting religious contexts including education institutions

and groups, messages concerning sexuality and gender changed as individuals grew older and were drawn into more enclosed settings in which core conversion messages of LGBTQA+ ‘brokenness’ were prevalent. While individuals progressed through the conversion experience in different ways, their experience was characterised by the absence of any form of affirming LGBTQA+ education – enabling conversion itself to become their LGBTQA+ (mis)information source. School policy addressing conversion, alongside enhanced provision of affirmative age-appropriate gender and sexuality education, may mediate this issue.

### Introduction

#### ARTICLE HISTORY

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#### KEYWORDS

LGBT; sexuality; gender; change; suppression; therapy

Following United Nations' prompting (UN 2020), six out of eight Australian states and jurisdictions have moved towards banning of religious efforts at converting lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer and asexual (LGBTQA+) people to fit cisgender heteronormative ideals. Bans have been enacted in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT Minister for Social Inclusion and Equality 2020), Queensland (QLD Government 2020) and Victoria (VIC

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Government 2021); are in the process of development in Tasmania (Hill 2019), South Australia (Richards and Skujins 2020) and Western Australia (WA Parliamentary Council 2020); and are being debated in New South Wales (Nsw) and the Northern Territory (NT).

Despite this, some religious and secular education, health and psychology institutions continue to promote these efforts (Jones 2015, 2020). This paper explores the connection between schools, sex education and religious LGBTQA+ conversion efforts. It first considers conversion research and practices. It then outlines the survivor-driven sociological lens to understanding LGBTQA+ suppression and change used in this paper. Finally, it reports and reflects on findings from a retrospective study of conversion survivors' experiences, addressing data gaps in how LGBTQA+ Australian youth become exposed to, and progress within, conversion ideology and practices.

### **Gaps in existing research**

Limited data have been collected on young people's exposure to conversion ideology and practices internationally. This predominantly Western (United

States/US, United Kingdom/ UK, Canadian) research field is largely dominated by consideration of adult experiences (Hurran 2020; Przeworski, Peterson, and Piedra 2020; Salway et al. 2020; UK Government 2018). Key findings underline the negative messages about LGB people promulgated by interventions (Flentje, Heck, and Cochran 2013); and the ineffectiveness and harmfulness of the interventions themselves (Shidlo and Schroeder 2002).

A small number of Australian studies consider youth experiences (Hillier et al. 2010; Jones 2015, 2020; Jones et al. 2021). A 2015 national survey showed a total of 7% of 3,134 same-sex-attracted and gender questioning Australians aged 14–21 had been exposed to the message ‘gay people should become straight’ as part of school-based sex education (Jones 2015), reflecting UK and Canadian data on prevalence (Hurran 2020; Salway et al. 2020; UK Government 2018). Australian youth exposure was significantly higher in QLD (9.56%) and NSW (8.41%), but lower in VIC where the state Department of Education has adopted more comprehensive anti-homophobia policies (4.44%) (Jones 2015). It was also significantly higher in Catholic (15.44%) and Other Christian (16.35%) schools, than in government/public schools (3.62%). School-level anti-homophobia policies also reduced the exposure of students to conversion ideology in sex education messaging (to under 5%); whilst 14.30% of those students at schools without anti-homophobia protections reported being exposed to the conversion messaging in sex education classes (Jones 2015).

In 2018, a combined online and offline national survey showed that 4.9% of 2,500 Australian students (including mainly students who were cisgender and heterosexual, not just same-sex-attracted or gender diverse) had been exposed to the message ‘gay people should become straight’ during their school-based sex education classes (Jones 2020). Those encountering this message were considerably more likely to report harm to concentration in class (58.2%); marks (40.0%); attendance including missed days (41.8%) and classes (25.5%); and facilities use including avoiding changing rooms (25.5%) and toilets (12.7%). Students exposed to conversion message were significantly more likely to hide at lunch (49.1%); move school (21.8%); and leave school altogether (7.3%). They were also significantly more likely than other students to consider self-harming (81.8%); attempt self-harm (61.8%); consider suicide (83.6%); and attempt suicide (29.1%).

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However, Australian studies to date have been based on relatively narrow questions (focussed mainly on ex-gay messaging<sup>1</sup> as part of sex education classes) simplifying our understanding of conversion ideology exposure. In the light of this limitation, this paper considers what conversion ideology messages in and beyond religious education settings are LGBTQA+ Australians exposed to as young people, and what contextual or ongoing processes contribute to the hold of these messages on people?

## Conceptualising conversion practices

Grounded in the perspectives of a peer-led group of (self-termed) ‘survivors’ of sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts of diverse LGBTQA+ backgrounds, the ***SOCICE Survivor Statement*** (Csabs et al. 2020) details a number of survivor-led definitions of ‘conversion ideology’ and ‘practices’, and pseudoscientific ‘false and misleading claims’. Conversion ideology is conceptualised in the form of overt spoken beliefs and teachings, and the

underlying culture of a community that sees being LGBTQA+ as broken or sinful, and requiring fixing or suppression. The goal of conversion practices is to achieve heterosexuality and gender normativity within a binary sex/gender model aligning to sex markers assigned at birth. Religious homophobia, biphobia and transphobia (as seen in some religious texts) is distinguished from 'conversion ideology' or ex-gay discourse focused on justifying change efforts (Csabs et al. 2020; Jones and Hillier 2012).

Within conversion ideology, core religious assertions (including claims that LGBTQA+ identity is rejected by a God or caused by demons/curses) are likewise distinct from pseudoscientific false and misleading claims that use psychological language to explain the origins, causes or supposedly dysfunctional nature of a person's sexual or gender identity. Only pseudoscientific claims lie within the scope of democratic government intervention, as these statements may contravene key professional guidelines, laws and/ or codes of ethics (APA 2009; UN 2020). These claims are distinct from religious assertions or discrimination against LGBTQA+ identities and people (such as outright exclusion). Rather, they view LGBTQA+ people as suffering a 'sexual/gender/sex-related brokenness' that can be cured by changing or suppressing their identities, and not just behaviours. LGBTQA+ people may be compelled to pursue conversion practices for religious reasons (moral goodness, alignment with God's/s' will/s, access to an afterlife, religious acceptance) and/or psychological wellbeing and community inclusion.

From within a critical survivor lens, conversion practices comprise processes engaged towards desired changes in gender and/or sexuality based in conversion ideology including, but not limited to, solo or group therapeutic or corrective intervention programmes, practices, prayer and/or celibacy efforts (Csabs et al. 2020; Salway et al. 2020).

## Methodology and methods

### ***Emancipatory methodology***

This study utilised a critical emancipatory methodology, aiming to work with, for and as, rather than 'on' or 'about' a marginalised community to enhance the community's self determination and expression (Farrelly, O'Brien, and Prain 2007; Mertens 1998). The study was designed to benefit from 'insider/outsider' community dynamics (Davis 2015) – and

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included several LGBTQA+ religious conversion survivor community members as co researchers, not just as participants. Constructivist grounded theory was utilised, underpinned by a relativist ontology which foregrounded participants' experiences, and presupposed the existence of manifold social realities in ways congruent with critical

community-driven conceptual analysis (Charmaz and Bryant 2011; Kenny and Fourie 2015). The approach stresses the importance of participants' own words, and participants' and researchers' co-constructions of knowledge and mutual interpretation of concepts and events (Kenny and Fourie 2015), albeit privileging conversion survivor terms and experiences **above** institutional perspectives.

### ***SURVIVOR FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS***

Recruitment targeted LGBTQA+ adults aged 18 years and older who had formerly been exposed to conversion ideology and/or practices in Australia. Approval for the study was provided by La Trobe University's (HEC19384) and Macquarie University's (52020790617585) human research ethics committees. Participants determined their consent regarding preferred levels of confidentiality, question engagement and transcript use. The targeting of older participants to discuss youth exposure retrospectively was important because anecdotally we understand young people may be under pressure to hide their engagement with and exposure to conversion ideology and/or associated practices by religious and school leaders. Data collection was piloted in 2016 and conducted July-December 2020. Focus Group sessions were conducted online via Zoom using a semi-structured questionnaire through a shared PowerPoint and verbal prompts. Each group lasted 2–3 hours. Recruitment included invitations emailed to networks of conversion survivors and snowballing/word-of-mouth, resulting in a total of 35 participants.

Table 1 provides participant demographics relevant to 15 in-depth life-history interviews with the survivors of conversion practices conducted for the pilot study in 2016; seven in-depth life-history interviews conducted with survivors purposely recruited from

**Table 1.** Participant demographics (N = 35\*).

<i>2016 Life History Interview Survivor Characteristics</i> (n = 15)	Mediterranean (1)	Australian (1); South-East Asian (1)
<i>Sexuality</i> gay (9); lesbian (3); bisexual (2); other (1)	<i>2020 Life History Interview Survivor Characteristics</i> (n = 7)	<i>2020 Group Interview Survivor Characteristics</i> (n = 15)
<i>Gender</i> cisgender man (9); cisgender woman (3); non-binary/gender queer (3); transwoman (1); transman (1)	gay (2); bisexual (2); lesbian (2); queer (2)	gay (6); bisexual (4); lesbian (3); asexual (2); pansexual (2)
<i>Religion</i> Protestant Christian (13); Jewish (1); Buddhist (1)	cisgender man (3); cisgender woman (2); transwoman (2)	cisgender man (8); cisgender woman (4); non-binary /gender queer (2); transwoman (1)
<i>Ethnicity</i> Anglo-Australian (13); South-East Asian (1);	Orthodox Christian (2); Protestant Christian (2); Catholic (1); Jewish (1); Druze (1); Muslim (1); Mormon/ LDS (1)	Protestant Christian (15)
	Middle-Eastern-Australian (3); North African (1); Greek (1); Anglo	Anglo-Australian (11); Anglo/Maori (1); European (1); Anglo/European (2)

Age 20s (3); 30s (5); 40s (4); 50s (3) 20s (5); 30s (1); 40s (1) 20s (6); 30s (5); 40s (1); 50s (2) \*Two interviewees also participated in focus groups.

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multi-cultural multi-faith networks in 2020; and 15 survivors involved in survivor peer support groups from two 2020 focus group sessions (including two from in-depth life history interviews). The contact details of relevant support services were made available during and after focus group sessions. Questions regarding conversion ideology and practices were developed and analysed with conversion survivors, including the 'Brave Network<sup>2</sup>' support group. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed, and participants were able to amend transcriptions prior to analysis.

## **Data analysis**

Grounded Theory was used to develop initial codes from the focus group data. Two

fluid coding stages placed a focus on emergent categories/strategies (Charmaz and Bryant 2011; Kenny and Fourie 2015). The content analysis programme Leximancer was used to analyse data on transcript comments relating to each topic area identified on the PowerPoint, on automatic settings (removing all transcript notes and merging singular and plural word forms). The aim was to generate concept maps foregrounding participants' concepts only (at 100% visibility, 50% theme size settings) and concept ranking lists and vocabulary data as detailed by Smith and Humphreys (2006) — 'showing' (rather than imposing biases in 'searching for') all data concepts. This took place to avoid LGBTQA+ conversion survivor work conducted by survivors being dismissed as 'cherry-picked'. Instead, the reproducible computer analyses sought to evidence 'what was there' in data.

Recurring/significant Leximancer-identified concepts were then elevated as provisional categories for theoretical sampling, and memo writing (tracing determining conditions, progression and consequence) using survivor-input as part of the analysis. Specifically, several of the researchers were survivors, and the team also held consultations with Brave Network representatives. Open coding processes included line-by-line coding, allowing interaction with each data piece by participants, using impressionistic memo writing, constant comparison and cross-checking co-researchers and participants' attributed 'meanings'. Inquiring into the chief concerns of participants, how they resolve these concerns, and then coding actions to expose implicit processes, enabled the identification of connections between active and emergent codes. Findings were therefore structured around Leximancer-elevated concepts in response to questions concerning conversion ideology messaging and the context, and progression of exposure to conversion, as understood with survivors.

## Findings

### ***Conversion ideology messaging***

Leximancer identified three concepts in conversion survivors' comments on the messages or information they heard about sexuality or gender in their religious communities: time, gay and gender (Figure 1).

#### ***Time***

'Time' captured early attempts by religious authorities in school, family and community to censor coverage of alternative genders and sexualities when participants were very young; and the negation of alternatives to procreative heterosexuality when participants

**Figure1.** Leximancer map and concept chart for survivors' discussion of religious views on gender and sexuality. Dark font indicates sub-concepts, pale font indicates overarching concepts comprised of sub-concepts that consistently cluster together (Leximancer automatically names these after the most dominant sub-concept in their cluster).

were older (80 hits, 71% relationality to other concepts, combining sub-concepts: time, church, people, group, youth, school, God, told, community, different, remember, attracted).

For example, several non-binary white-Anglo Christians in their 20s said they had not learned about gender or sexual diversity at all during schooling. One said 'Growing up Anglican, [I] didn't hear anything, really. (. . .) It wasn't until I started to go to an evangelical community that I heard'. Another said of the sexual censorship messaging received in their youth, 'At the time I was receiving all this messaging, I hadn't worked



through my gender at all. I'm non-binary, but at the time I was identifying as a woman. So, I was like, oh, I [had] better strive for that woman of God thing'. A white-Anglo evangelical Christian woman (20s) noted that growing up, her religious schooling had ensured 'the homosexuals weren't really spoken about very much, but it was a lot of that covert messaging in that it's almost like everyone knew better'. However, she recalled more explicitly homophobic educational moments when aged 13–15 years, including being pressured to sign a church petition against same-sex marriage; 'I very awkwardly signed it, not quite knowing at the time why'. An Orthodox Coptic Christian man (20s) said his Coptic school taught him 'no words or vocabulary' with which to understand sex beyond circumcision requirements, except that sex ***MUSO*** be with women. Gayness was framed by a Coptic Bishop at school in year 9 as being responsible for spreading HIV. A school priest later introduced the idea that he could suppress, convert or grow out of gayness.

Several participants agreed that homophobic and transphobic bullying in school was never addressed. A mixed-ethnicity gay man (30s) said that LGBTQA+ diversity was ' . . . a bit [ . . . ] of a question mark . . . like, what are we actually talking about here?' and it was only when he moved to a 'really, really big church' doing 'life key ministry work' that conversion ideology was 'put up on the projector screen . . . [and] the question mark [was] thrown in your face'. A white-Anglo asexual Anglican woman (20s) described the treatment of sexuality and gender diversity in primary-school as a 'blank' replaced by 'God's plan' for heterosexual marriage and reproduction: 'It was just completely removed from narratives of human experience. I didn't know that LGBTQIA+ existed until I got to high school'. At the same time, she noted that somehow, 'my brain knew this is bad, this is not right ( . . . ) It was just some underlying attitudes that I subconsciously managed to pick up on'. A Greek Orthodox man (40s) explained that homophobic epithets such as '***malakas*** [wankers] and ***poüstis*** [poofers] ( . . . ) were just typically said' both student-wide and as part of Greek male bonding. A queer Malaysian Muslim transwoman (20s) described being bullied and sexually attacked at her Muslim boys high school for using make-up, yet remembered bullying feminine boys herself, as part of bonding practices.

For some participants, especially in the later years of schooling, a key attraction of conversion proponents was the fact that their lessons and programmes mentioned gender and sexual diversity in schools that were otherwise devoid of LGBTQA+ information. An Anglo-Maori gay man (30s) explained: 'a lot of my community was quite strongly linked to that real purity culture thing that came through from the US right through the 90s and the mid-2000s. So, there was a lot of that at school'. He explained how purity-based gender and sexuality education messaging had precluded any recognition of diversity. Instead, it had promoted virginity pledges for boys, purity rings for girls, and repression of sexuality (for both) until heterosexual marriage: 'We're all going to be abstinent. And then that added another layer of trauma to a lot of people, actually, as soon as they messed up there, whether they were straight or gay . . . '. In contrast, conversion ideology did mention diversity, albeit negatively. Similarly, a white Anglo lesbian (50s) had attended 'a fundamental legalistic Pentecostal Church, and so straight preaching was a big part of what we did. And speaking out against homosexuality was quite common'. Being the only space in which gender and sexuality diversity was mentioned made conversion ideology appear relatively attractive and inclusive.

## Gay

The Leximancer concept 'gay' captured ideas of LGBTQA+ brokenness being revealed to participants behind closed doors when of age, via debates about marriage and sexuality (54 hits, 58% relationality, sub-concepts: gay, behind, closed, doors, attraction, sexual, sex, stuff, unclear, brokenness, marriage, homosexuality).

Conversion survivors described the portrayal of LGBTQA+ identities and 'anything outside of a monogamous, heterosexual covenanted marriage' (white-Anglo gay man, 30s) within conversion ideology as 'broken' or negated, and to be overcome, typically framed as an 'abomination (. . .) to be really pitied' (white-Anglo gay man, 30s); a 'temptation' (bisexual non-binary person, 20s); 'tied to demonic possession' (white Anglo gay man, 30s); and 'all sin' (asexual non-binary person, 20s). One white-Anglo Christian gay man (30s) said 'I remember being told specifically by a teacher I couldn't be gay because, 'God doesn't make junk". An asexual white-Anglo woman (20s) said that in her high-school being same-sex-attracted was presented as connected to 'adultery, child sex abuse, paedophilia, pornography addiction and homosexuality'. An asexual non binary participant (20s) noted sexuality was normalised, but only within heterosexual marriage, 'So, I felt kind of holy, because I didn't have sexual feelings, but also, I felt really bad about not having them.

Participants' religious leaders and teachers presented LGBTQA+ identities as issues to be overcome through prayer and effort, or suppression. A bisexual white-Anglo trans woman (20s) explained that in her evangelical church same-sex-attraction was to be corrected through prayer, informal counselling, pastoral care, scripture study, account ability with other ex-gay or ex-trans people, 'and that if you were sincere (. . .) 'God would heal you". A white-Anglo gay man (30s) with a 'charismatic Baptist' background said, 'I remember watching exorcisms and stuff when I was 10, 11, 12 . . . of gay people . . . demons of homosexuality were being exorcised'. A bisexual non-binary participant (20s) said religious leaders taught that their bisexuality was caused by their father having left home and having an overbearing mother. One white-European gay man (30s) explained that at the age of 17 ministers asked him to write down 'anything that was sin to do with my family at all so that those curses could be broken'.

An Anglo-Maori gay man (30s) explained that his pastor father called his sexuality 'an obsessive compulsion'. Existing 'deep, deep in the conversion therapy world', his community, church and school friends all supported the idea through prayer and 'dealing with past trauma and parental wounds' one could find 'a latent heterosexuality, that God intended for you (. . .) but nothing happened'. An Anglo-white gay man (30s) explained how LGBTQA+ identity was framed as caused by 'any avenue the devil could have come into your family [with], back three or four generations'. He explained that 'because my mum was raped, that became blamed for a point of demonic entry (. . .) down to me'. Thus, invasive interrogations of participants' young lives were used to inaccurately explain their so-called sexual and relational brokenness, using pseudo-scientific religious frames.

Differences existed in how the proponents of conversion proponents strategically approached LGBTQA+ issues, publicly and in private. For example, a white-European gay man (30s) reported, 'There is a big difference between the public messaging and private messaging (. . .) what we really teach behind closed doors'. Another white-Anglo gay man (30s) who worked for his church said he

regularly had to tell his minister “We’re just going to have to delete all of today’s (conversion-related) message . . .”. Because he

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worked in the Department of Education and I didn’t want him to lose his job’. Similarly, a white-Anglo asexual non-binary person (20s) reflected, ‘. . . publicly it was more like “change is possible and we love everyone”, (. . . but) the clear implication was that some sins were less than others, and some are very representative of very vile spirits’.

One bisexual white-Anglo intersex man (40s) said he had attended various youth groups. However, ‘it wasn’t until I went to Bible College (. . .) somebody decided to say that who I was, was wrong’. A white-Anglo gay man (40s) described university events at which experts lectured to a small group, including a conversion proponent speaking at a location that ‘could not be disclosed because people would heckle’. A bisexual non binary participant (20s) said, ‘what is told to the congregation . . . versus the version that’s told in the meeting during the week, are two very different things’. Both formal and informal sexuality and gender educational processes thus concealed conversion ideology from outsiders, introducing it only to people already deeply embedded within conversion educational communities.

### **Gender**

The Leximancer concept ‘gender’ captured the religious promotion of binary cisgender identities in the form of feminine submissive women and/or masculine religious men (39 hits, 50% relationality, sub-concepts: gender, message, sexuality, sinful, identity, down). A white-anglo gay Christian (30s) described how in religious messaging girls were constructed to be ‘submissive, raise children for the glory of God, look after the house’. In contrast, ‘The man is to be the father of the house and have the job and provide’. A white-Anglo transwoman (20s) explained that in the Church of Jesus of Latter-day Saints young people were taught that ‘men and women are essential to the family design’. Therefore, it was ‘essential to God’s plan to exult his children in heaven through covenants performed on the basis of gender on Earth’. Several participants described an enforced ‘woman of God’ trope. A white-Anglo non-binary participant (20s) said:

It was this idea of, ‘okay, you were born with this anatomy, therefore you have to strive to be a woman of God’, (. . . who . . .) holds to these things, is attracted to men of God, and follows all these rules and things that are scripted for you.

A white-Anglo lesbian (50s) said that within the Pentecostal church ‘it was very much [about] stereotypical roles . . . that you would marry a nice Christian man and yes you had lovely Christian children’. A white-Anglo bisexual woman (20s) agreed her ‘experiences echoed [. . .] the whole woman of God message’. The gender education she experienced was comprised of remarks like ‘you’re looking really feminine today or, how about you get up and you play this game with the girls?’. A white-Anglo gay man (30s) described a ‘manhood movement’ in which he was schooled ‘into straightness’ by older church men by reading manhood books and acting like ‘masculine dudes who think they’re better than women’.

Sometimes an anti-trans stance was implicit in the idealisation of gender binaries. For example, a sexually-fluid Maronite Catholic woman (20s) explained that at her girls-only school, binary marriageable woman and religion were ‘intertwined with Lebanese culture and every family gathering, Easter, Christmas, it circulates around

the calendar, the religious calendar and events' – creating positive reinforcement for performing femininity and isolation/punishment for failing to.

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A few participants reported trans conversion messaging, demanding cisgender conformity or risk of religious reprisal. A white-Anglo trans-woman (20s) from the Mormon church explained how within that church any expression of gender diversity was considered 'brokenness'. If a person medically transitions 'the current doctrine is that they are categorically condemned to hell' and 'they've made irreversible changes to God's design and rejected God's will'. A Malaysian Muslim transwoman (20s) had learned 'about the **khuntha** [intersex]' at school, but 'nothing about transgender as in **mukhannathun** and **mukhan nath**'. As a result, she faked being intersex when her religiously affiliated university threatened her with expulsion for wearing make-up. The lie was uncovered and she was sent to a 'gender camp', for, as she explained, sex/gender binaries were imposed on both intersex (surgically) and trans (via camps) people by her educational communities.

### **Context and progression of exposure to conversion ideology to practices**

Leximancer identified four key concepts within conversion survivors' comments concerning their initial exposure to conversion ideology and practices, and its later progression: people, ideology, person and wrong (Figure 2).

#### **People**

The Leximancer concept 'people' captured how multiple groups were often involved in participants' exposure to conversion ideology and/or practices (116 hits, 73% relationality, sub-concepts: people, church, claims, broken, idea, gay, stuff, saying, healing, knew, talking, someone, community, different, group). These people and groups provided the gateway to prayers, meetings, lectures, gender classes and a variety of other suppression and change practices.

For example, a mixed-ethnicity gay man (30s) said his initial exposure to conversion ideology 'started in the school yard and then it was compounded by the church'. He found it disconcerting that for many of his friends the church had afforded acceptance and love, whilst 'it was a place where my own pain was compounded'. His church had 'a whole lot of ideology and doctrine' around 'this certainty about why I'm wrong'; enabled by 'a broader community attitude of homophobia that actually seeps into the church and they just become more sure about it'. Similarly, a Muslim transwoman (20s) sent by her university to a rural 'gender camp', said that there Islamic scholars and ex-trans representatives declared it '**haram** to be gay, **haram** to be a trans, **haram, haram, haram**, and you have to change otherwise you go to hell'.

A white-European gay man (30s) felt the need to engage with conversion ideology as the result of constant messaging in educational, church and family contexts from 'a super, super young age'. These included 'claims about LGBT people being broken' and that 'you would never have a healthy relationship'. By the age of 12 in school year 7,

I just 100% believed that I was demon possessed. I was scared shitless (. . .) It's just a continual soaking in these messages and they become beliefs . . . . And so that's what sets you up, I believe, to then go through, to seek out (conversion practices).

A white-Anglo lesbian (50s) described how she had grown up 'with an ideology of what roles were supposed to be' from her community. A white-Anglo gay man (30s) noted how constant conversion ideology messaging from church and school from a very young age

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**Figure2.** Leximancer map and concept chart for survivors' discussion of context and progression of conversion ideology to practices. Dark font indicates sub-concepts, pale font indicates overarching concepts comprised of sub-concepts that consistently cluster together (Leximancer automatically names these after the most dominant sub-concept in their cluster).

was 'insidious because you take it on board as I'm like everyone else because we're all broken, but then for some reason I'm receiving a special kind of attention for my specific brand of brokenness'. Furthermore, 'it was all very loving and very caring and supportive in the way it was presented, and it was by people who were really close to me and that I really trusted'. As a result, he sought conversion therapy after being convinced his absent father had damaged his development.

However, resistance to conversion ideology was possible. A white-Anglo gay man (40s) said conversion ideology had been promoted by the church and 'a lot of people' who saw their gender and sexuality as abnormal. It was compounded in Bible College by 'manhood studies, and then that's when all of the crap came out that they wanted me to change'. After witnessing the Dean of his college people attacking two possibly gay students, 'I had to get alongside them afterwards and say

well (. . .) I think you're okay'. He progressively became 'more ashamed of the Bible College creating "a crusade" against LGBTQA+ community members', reacting against 'campaigning-spies who followed me into the toilet and told me that I was going to hell because I was gay' or that 'I was going to get  
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AIDS'. He told campaigners 'I think God loves me just as I am' and decided to become 'a barrier [against] what the Dean of our university was saying to GLBTIQ people (. . .) a bit of a shield for them'.

A grey-sexual Buddhist Vietnamese trans boy who attended an Australian high-school said his parents increasingly attempted to force him into a Vietnamese conversion programme after he came out. He had read frightening online descriptions of these programmes and their use of imprisonment, beating and even rape. To protect his family, he never lodged a prepared court intervention order application; instead choosing to escape to an Australian youth refuge. Not denouncing one's family/community or inadvertently reinforcing discrimination (Islamophobia, anti-Semitism or racism) against loved ones, mattered a lot for multi-faith multi-cultural interviewees when rejecting conversion ideology.

### ***Ideology***

'Ideology' captured how religious ideologies encountered in books and teaching – and the desire to fit in with them – increased participants' exposure to conversion practices as they became more embedded in religion and with key groups (73 hits, 67% relationality, sub-concepts: ideology, conversion, exposed, things, remember, guess, therapy, young, experience, ideas, early, important). For example, a white-Anglo bisexual woman (20s) growing deeper in faith over high-school, started to attend a 'more intense' Baptist Church around school years 10–11. A youth group excursion where there was a band playing was 'probably the first time I heard more relating to someone who was able to get away from the gay lifestyle, as (a featured conversion proponent) framed it'. Until then, a discourse of homosexuality as sinful had pervaded her reading and worship sessions; but conversion ideology opened-up many new conversations within these groups. She started trying to downplay and suppress her attraction to girls. Finally, 'I remember bawling my eyes out in the shower one day, just praying to God to take away the feelings'.

Whilst still identifying as a bisexual boy and trying to make sense of her gender identity through religious studies, a white-Anglo transwoman (20s) recalled having been 'introduced to conversion ideology, specifically its false and misleading claims, by pastoral leaders' in informal, one-to-one counselling. She felt that conversion practices 'retriggered and retraumatised me by evoking and creating a causal relationship between a childhood sexual assault and my sexuality and my gender identity'. This was so severely traumatising it created 'a separate identity living in my head'.

Similarly, a non-binary participant (20s) first encountered conversion ideology at the age of 15, after joining a religious youth group and expressing their feelings towards women to a 'safe mentor/youth leader'. They were quickly admitted to a 'secretive, shameful space' in the form of a 'women's purity-focused group (with people) who had queer sexualities', suggesting 'I'm not pure, that whole purity culture thing'. Although the purity group was known within the church, attendance 'was secret, confidential'. As the same participant got deeper into religion, they were drawn into 'more secretive stuff' including miraculous healings and meetings at an ex-lesbian's home.

Several LGBTQA+ participants were exposed to conversion ideology and practices through reading material, sometimes later accompanied by therapy sessions. An Asian Catholic woman (30s) 'wasn't . . . looking for a fix' when she 'Googled gay Catholic groups', however these groups slowly introduced her to conversion ideas and events over time. An

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Anglo-Maori gay man (30s) had been exposed to conversion ideology at around 8–9 years 'through books that I found at our local Christian bookstore table and at youth camps'. He exchanged letters with US-based conversion organisations at 11–12 years, receiving replies outlining 'steps of how I get help and how I start conversion. So that was super early, (. . . it continued) into my early 30s, almost two decades of it, traveling the world, going to (the organisation's practices) all over the world'. One white-Anglo gay man (30s) described how lacking access to education about LGBTQA+ issues external to his religious educational community's position, meant that the conversion texts they supplied had a significant influence on him as a boy, holding him in conversion practices for 14 years.

Importantly, most participants who encountered conversion ideology and practices through religious ideology and texts rather than school, said their parents were not told by the religious groups about the education sessions and practices they were subjected to. One non-binary person (20s) commented: 'I was going through this whole process without my main parental figure knowing, it was a terrible culture of shame and secrecy'. A transwoman (20s) similarly said: 'My family had no idea. My family still have no idea about the extent of the trauma'.

### ***Person and wrong***

'Person' (22 hits, 50% relationality) and 'wrong' (13 hits, 20% relationality) captured how some participants simply felt something was wrong/different, and wanted help because of it (sub-concepts: person, life, wrong, time, and wanted). For example, one white-Anglo gay man (40s) had felt his lifestyle was 'wrong' and agreed to study an ex-gay course said:

I realised, oh, shit. Now I'm a Christian and I'm still doing stuff with my dick with guys. This is so wrong. So, I spoke to my family about it, and then they had found about (conversion organisation). It was like, yes, thanks for sharing this (. . .) of course, you want to be straight (. . .) that's what I wanted as well, at the beginning.

And a white-Anglo lesbian (50s) who had been out for a couple of years, recounted that when at a religious session:

I just knew it was wrong and I needed fixing (. . .) Then of course as time goes on the culture in a church definitely cemented that 'this is wrong' or 'those feelings; you've got to hide them, you've got to work on them, get the healing'.

Similarly, a white-Anglo asexual woman (20s), whose father was a pastor, was concerned that her asexuality was a form of dissociative or complex childhood post-traumatic-stress disorder. She 'fixated on' this and informally 'went searching and [...] found all these online resources and pretty much put myself through my one-woman conversion therapy programme'. Asexuality was presented as problematic in the Christian ex-gay organisation's resources, which declared 'how trauma must have made me repress my natural attraction to men'. The resources claimed that 'I have to have enough self-control to control my frigidity or rejection of God's plan for my life. So, there was definitely "it's

a dysfunction that's caused by an external factor" as a key message. Some participants said that for asexual youth, the problematising of their sexuality in religious school communities was compounded by negative and corrective lenses similar to this present in some psycho-medical settings. A white-Anglo woman (20s) noted that of five health professionals she had encountered during her life, four suggested hormonal or

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other medical intervention to change her asexuality: 'It's this sort of attitude of it's something that needs fixing, it's disordered, and that's compounded in the church because apparently not wanting to be in a relationship or not being in a relationship is only godly if you're suffering for it'. The emphasis given to celibacy as the 'answer' for gay people but not asexuals, 'really depressed' her. It suggested that nothing could be done about her 'brokenness'. So, she explained, 'actually finding conversion therapy stuff was a relief, because it was "you are broken, but this can be fixed". So, there was some sort of hope attached [to it]'.

## Discussion

Rather than on one discrete occasion, conversion survivors participating in this study had been exposed to a combination of conversion ideology messages and practices from a young age. Education and psycho-medical institutions had contributed to these, as well as religious, community and family sources. The core conversion messages were that LGBTQA+ identities and practices signalled a kind of 'brokenness' from binary notions of 'men and women of faith'. These problems were to be interrogated and fixed, often behind closed doors given religious organisations' fear of bad press and negative public reaction.

The manner in which conversion efforts progressed varied. Some survivors found school-based messages were reinforced by those they later received in church communities, and for some this progressed to the need for later therapy. This implies the need for education policies banning conversion ideology and practices in line with current and proposed legislative bans. Governments and educational bodies could also usefully ban related external programme/therapy referrals, and support research on the impact of such bans. For other survivors, exposure to conversion ideology encouraged individual enquiry on how best to 'heal' oneself. However, in every scenario, and regardless of the participant's gender or age, conversion ideology became progressively sexist, cisheteronormative and misogynistic, with oppressive, homophobic and transphobic arguments and practices being used to bind conversion programme participants in hidden religious education communities.

Existing Australian youth research reveals regular exposure to conversion messaging in formal sex, sexuality and relationship education lessons (Jones 2015, 2020). This study showed how for participants in this study these formal conversion efforts were enhanced by informal institutional processes establishing secrecy, and links to external conversion resources and referrals. LGBTQA+ young people's anxieties about seeking approval or support concerning their difference(s), or becoming 'good' religious people, made them especially vulnerable to conversion.

These factors in youth found their counterparts in adult conversion motivations seeking belonging, and to improve family and religious standing (Flentje, Heck, and Cochran 2013; Shidlo and Schroeder 2002). However, for young people, conversion



exposure and progression were often more indirectly/incidentally motivated, only later becoming facilitated by other people, institutions and materials. At each stage, however, individuals were positioned to misconstrue LGBTQA+ conversion ideology and practices as positive by virtue of their prior exposure to everyday homo/transphobic discourses, and the

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absence of LGBTQA+ affirmative messaging at home and in school. Family and cultural loyalties were additional conversion motivations, or complicated ongoing processes of conversion rejection, for participants in multi-faith multi-cultural communities.

## Conclusion

The study identified factors increasing LGBTQA+ youth vulnerability to exposure to conversion ideology in Australia, and progression thereafter. Findings signal the importance of further research to assess how age-appropriate education affirming LGBTQA+ people may reduce conversion exposure. Beyond this, however, education and policy is required to consolidate existing legal provision around conversion, but also to extend this to address covert conversion education efforts even where bans exist.

## Notes

1. Messages that gay people should change or suppress their sexuality in order to 'become' heterosexual.
2. A Melbourne-based LGBTQA+ conversion survivors support group.

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