The Correlation Between Victimization and Suicidal Ideation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth

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Although our society has gained more acceptance for sexual minorities over the years, discrimination and homophobia are still issues that cause young people to have low self-esteem. Due to this, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth are 2 to 3 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (Russell & Joyner, 2001). There are several factors that are assumed to be the cause of this drastic difference including experiences of victimization and bullying, lack of school support and acceptance, gender nonconformity, fear of disclosing their sexual orientation, and lack of family support and acceptance. The following literature review gives reasons to support the notion that these factors cause LGBTQ youth to experience distress and in some cases struggle with thoughts of suicide.

**Victimization/ Bullying**

When young people are teased because of their sexual orientation, often times they begin to feel very isolated, which can lead to thoughts of suicide. Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, and Sanchez (2011), researched the affect that LGBT victimization in middle and high school had on overall social, emotional, and behavioral health for young people. Russell et al. (2011) found that males faced more victimization than females. The researches also found that participants who reported experiencing high levels of homophobic victimization were “5.6 times more likely to report having attempted suicide” (Russell, 2011, 227). Another study focused directly on the differences between students who identified as LGB or heterosexual and students who were questioning or confused about their sexual orientation. Birkett, Espelage, and Koenig (2009) assessed how the factors of victimization and homophobic teasing affected suicidality among seventh and eighth grade students. Birkett et al. defined victimization as being called names or being
physically attacked by peers. Homophobic teasing was specifically addressed by the question, “in the past 12 months, have you ever been teased, threatened or harassed about being gay, lesbian or bisexual?” Interestingly, students who reported being confused about their sexual orientation also reported facing the most victimization and homophobic teasing. This same group of students also reported significantly more feelings of depression and thoughts of suicide (Birkett, 2009). These results clearly show that students need more support in middle and high schools.

Almost every study involving LGBTQ youth has found that victimization and bullying are the leading factors that cause distress and lead to suicidal feelings. On an international level, Kelleher (2009) explained, actual experiences of heterosexism were the strongest individual predictor of distress” among young LGBTQ people. Another study in the U.S. also displayed these results. Rivers (2001) studied a group of LGB students and their experiences of bullying at school. Similar to every other research article, Rivers (2001), found that youth who experienced bullying at school because of their sexual orientation reported more feelings of depression than youth who experienced no bullying. All of these studies give evidence that supports the hypothesis that homophobic teasing cause youth distress and can lead to suicide.

School Support

Public schools all have different ways of dealing with issues such as bullying and teasing. There is a wide spectrum of support and toleration of LGBT victimization at various schools. For instance, some schools provide support groups for LGBT students and strictly do not tolerate homophobic teasing, whereas other schools do not have any
support for these students. Through conducting five focus groups, Grossman et al. (2009) discovered a few trends that LGBT students expressed experiencing in their schools. The major trends were: lack of community and empowerment, and victimization. In each of the five focus groups, students indicated being victims of “name-calling, hate speech, harassment, and sometimes physical violence” (Grossman, 2009, 32). These students also explained that school faculty rarely, if ever, stepped in to stop the bullying. Without the support of school faculty and staff, the youth were left to feel hopeless for change and extremely isolated from any form of community. Several focus groups discussed the importance of education for faculty and staff. One student, when talking about his school, explained, “the principal needs to educate her employees to make it safe for gay students” (Grossman, 2009, 39). Although, this study did not specifically focus on suicide, it is important because it helps us understand what LGBT students need in order to feel safe and comfortable in their surroundings.

When students do not feel secure in school, it affects their overall attitude, which in turn can lead to suicide. Birkett et al. (2009) examined the correlation between suicidality and the way students perceive their school climate. These researchers found that, despite sexual orientation, student experiences of “suicidal feelings are lowest… when there is a positive school climate.” Unfortunately, they also explained that students who were confused or questioning their sexual orientation were significantly more likely to describe their school environment to be very negative and non-supportive of LGB students. In finding this information, Birkett et al. (2009) expressed the need for schools to be more positive and supportive of LGBTQ students and aim at reducing homophobic teasing by peers. Sadowski, Chow, and Scanlon (2009) also examined the impact school climate had
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on students overall well-being. In their study, one 15-year-old girl, Lindsey, expressed how important her school’s Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) was to her. Having a support group through GSA allowed Lindsey to have a safe space to express herself and connect with a community of other students and staff she could relate to. On the other hand, 21-year-old Ashton explained that his high school did not have a GSA and when a teacher tried to start one, it got shut down by the school administration. Without a safe space to express himself, Ashton felt rejected and isolated (Sadowski, 2009). Both of these cases, along with multiple others gave evidence to support the claim that having support groups and supportive staff at public schools allows students to feel comfortable and connected to other students.

**Gender Nonconformity**

Our society places huge emphasis on gender roles. When people act outside of those perceived gender roles they are often ostracized and made to feel as though they are not normal. Fortunately, the negative stigma of gender nonconformity has gotten somewhat better over the years considering one study by Remafedi, Farrow, and Deisher (1991). Through extensive research, Remafedi et al. (1991) found that gay and bisexual males who presented themselves in a more feminine way were significantly more likely to attempt suicide than males who fit the typical masculine gender role. Since the more effeminate males did not fit into society’s definition of masculinity, they were often teased and ridiculed. In contrast of this 1991 study, a different study by Liu and Mustanski (2012) provided results that display the progress society has made in acceptance for gender nonconformity. Liu et al. (2012) hypothesized that gender nonconformity and victimization lead to suicidal ideation and self-harm. Interestingly, the researchers found
that gender nonconformity was not directly related to suicidal ideation; rather it was
directly related to self-harm. On the other hand, LGBT victimization was found to be the
cause of both self-harm and suicidal ideation. In fact, the only predictors of suicidal
ideation were LGBT victimization and low levels of social support. These two different
articles portray a shift in societal views on gender nonconformity over the last twenty
years. Further research has attempted to provide reasons for this change.

Over the years different generations have come up with different ways of viewing
issues such as homosexuality and these changes have made it easier for LGBTQ youth to
express themselves. Smith and Leaper (2005) conducted a study on the relationship
between gender typicality and self-worth. Smith et al. (2005) found that despite the
“American Psychiatric Association’s (2000) inclusion of ‘gender identity disorder’ as a
mental disorder,” adolescents are finding more peer acceptance of gender atypicality. The
research demonstrated that when gender nonconforming youth who feel accepted by their
peers have a good sense of self-worth compared to those youth who are not accepted by
their peers. Smith et al. (2005) concluded, “peer acceptance is likely more fundamental to
adolescent adjustment than is their gender conformity (p.102).” This research suggests
that gender conformity is essentially not the issue; rather it is acceptance by society.

**Disclosing Sexual Orientation**

LGBTQ individuals are faced with the pressure of “coming out” and disclosing
their sexual orientation to their families, friends, and community. For some youth, this is a
very daunting task because they fear being rejected. In 1991, Remafedi et al. discovered
one of the most significant risk factors for LGBTQ youth suicide was disclosing of their
sexual orientation at a young age (p.869). The statistics of this study show that every “year’s delay in bisexual or homosexual self-labeling, the odds of suicide attempt diminished by 80%” (Remafedi, 1991, p. 874). In discussing this statistic, the researchers proposed that younger people have a more difficult time coping with the negative stigma of homosexuality; therefore, the youth in this study who identified as gay or bisexual at a young age were significantly more likely to face suicidal ideation. In more recent research, Diamond et al. (2011) found that over half of the adolescents in their study reported experiencing stress because of nondisclosure of their sexual orientation. This group of youth expressed feelings of great fear of coming out because they did not know how people would respond. Many of them were specifically worried about how their parents would react to their disclosure.

**Family Support**

Parents of LGBTQ youth have a variety of responses when their children “come out” and disclose their sexual orientation. Some parents immediately offer support and make sure their child knows they are loved, while others do not have as great of a response. D’Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington (2001) explain, “parental rejection appears to be related to youths making a suicide attempt, with many of the attempts occurring in the same year youths tell their parents about themselves.” Unfortunately, many youth who disclose their sexuality are faced with unsupportive parents. Another study by D’Augelli et al. (2005), found that LGB youth who experience verbal abuse from parents, on the basis of their sexual orientation, are significantly more likely to attempt suicide than are LGB youth whose parents are supportive. Diamond et al. (2011) also discovered family rejection and nonacceptance to cause adolescents stress. Over half of the
participants in their study reported being rejected by their family after disclosing their sexuality. Many of these youth explained their parents’ rejection was the direct result of their religious beliefs. Unfortunately religious beliefs were presented in several articles as the main reason why youth were rejected by their families.

Relationships in the family are very important in making youth feel like they belong and have worth. In the previously discussed article, Sadowski et al. (2012) claimed that good, strong relationships within the family are central to emotional strength (p. 191). For example, Lindsey explained that her relationship with her mother was extremely important to her because everyone else around her treated her poorly. Lindsey’s mother was immediately accepting when Lindsey came out to her. On the other hand, her stepfather and sister called her names and constantly teased her. Lindsey described a time when her sister’s friends threw rocks at her and physically attacked her. This along with many other terrible moments happened in Lindsey’s life and caused her to feel isolated and suicidal. Lindsey attempted suicide in eighth-grade and had to be admitted to the mental hospital that year (Sadowski, 2012, 180). Unfortunately, Lindsey’s story is only one among many that depicts this kind of homophobia. Stories similar to Lindsey’s show how the lack of support and acceptance negatively affects LGBTQ youth and can ultimately lead them to attempt suicide.

Discussion

The articles presented above are only of a few studies out of many on the subject of LGBTQ youth and the causes of distress. There has been much research done on this topic and every study has found distress to come from these same recurring issues: homophobia
and peer rejection, lack of support from school staff and family, victimization because of gender atypicality, and fear of coming out. Gender nonconformity was only a factor leading to distress in cases where youth were teased or bullied because of their nonconformity. After reviewing the research the most significant leading cause of distress and suicide was homophobic victimization. More research needs to be done on how to support LGBTQ youth and stop bullying at the school level. Family rejection was the next leading cause of distress. The issue of family support needs to be further studied in order to help alleviate the pressure of coming out for LGBTQ youth. Perhaps through more research, the statistic of youth suicide among LGBTQ individuals will become lower and society as a whole will become more accepting.

Hypothesis

I suspect that if families are more supportive of their LGBTQ children schools will in turn be more apt to support these students because of parental involvement; therefore, I propose further research be done on the reasons why families reject their children who identify as anything other than heterosexual. I predict that the main reason for parents’ rejection will be religious reasons, lack of education about LGBTQ issues, and influence from the media.

Sample

In order to assess the reasons why parents do not accept their children I will focus my research on the population of LGBTQ youth between the ages of 13-18 across the country. The sampling frame will consist of all the LGBTQ students from 10 randomly selected high schools throughout the country. Within each of those high schools I will ask
for students who identify as LGBTQ to volunteer to participate in the study. I will also ask the volunteers to ask their friends to participate as well. Of all the volunteers I will randomly select 10 from each school to be the final sample. Unfortunately, using this convenience and snowball sample, I anticipate that students who are questioning their sexual orientation will not likely participate. Despite this weakness, the youth who do participate will be sufficient because they have most likely been in a stage of questioning and can express how they felt during that time.

The independent variable in this sample is the fact that all of the participants will be LGBTQ identified youth. The dependent variable will be how the youth perceive their parents reaction to their sexual orientation and what factors play into the reaction.

Method

In order to determine the factors that affect the way parents perceive and treat youth who identify as LGBTQ, I will conduct a focus group at each of the high schools in the sample. Using focus groups will allow me to cover more ground than personal interviews with each participant. The groups will first focus on specific characteristics about each participant’s family (e.g. religious affiliation, other LGBTQ family members, general moral beliefs, etc.). After determining these characteristics I will then ask the participants to talk about their personal experience of whether they feel accepted by their family or not. If they express a feeling of rejection by their family, I will ask about specific influences that they think cause their family to reject them.

Conducting focus groups will allow me to gather more information more quickly and will help me understand the data holistically. Although these groups might cause
some participants to shy away from answering every question, it would be the best option because the youth would be able to relate to one another and give more accurate answers.

Data Analysis

It will be important to record the focus groups and transcribe them quickly after the completion of each group. I will break up the data first by analyzing the number of people who expressed feeling rejected by their family. Of those students, I will then break up the data into sections determined by the reasons they expressed their parents rejected them. I will read the transcript and pick out themes that are discussed frequently throughout the group and code the transcript according to those themes. When analyzing all of the focus groups together I will look at the frequency of each theme being discussed in each group. Through coding the various themes and finding which ones were most frequently discussed, I will be able to determine what factors are most prevalent in determining whether families reject LGBTQ children or not.

Limitations

Since the research will be focused specifically on how youth perceive their parents, it will be limited to the biased opinion of the youth. I suspect it would be very difficult to find parents who reject their kids who would be willing to participate in this research. This specific research will not necessarily be enough to really generalize to the entire population of parents of LGBTQ youth across the country; however, it is a great place to start this research because it will allow us to see how kids perceive their parents and how they interpret their own needs.
Despite these limitations, the information gathered from this research will allow us to understand how LGBTQ youth perceive their relationship with their parents and what factors play into whether they feel accepted or rejected by them. With this information it will be easier to educate parents of the needs of LGBTQ youth and how they can be more supportive. Through understanding the reasons behind parents nonacceptance of their LGBTQ children we will be more able to tackle this issue and hopefully reduce the amount of stress and suicidal thoughts that these youth deal with.
References


