

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Sociology Department, Faculty Publications

Sociology, Department of

---

2017

# LGBTQ+ Young Adults on the Street and on Campus: Identity as a Product of Social Context


Rachel M. Schmitz

*University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*, [rachel.schmitz@utrgv.edu](mailto:rachel.schmitz@utrgv.edu)

Kimberly A. Tyler

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, [kim@ktresearch.net](mailto:kim@ktresearch.net)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub>

 Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#)

---

Schmitz, Rachel M. and Tyler, Kimberly A., "LGBTQ+ Young Adults on the Street and on Campus: Identity as a Product of Social Context" (2017). *Sociology Department, Faculty Publications*. 529.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub/529>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology Department, Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Published in *Journal of Homosexuality* 65:2 (2017), pp. 197–223; doi: 10.1080/00918369.2017.1314162.  
Copyright © 2017 Taylor & Francis. Used by permission.  
Published online May 23, 2017.

# LGBTQ+ Young Adults on the Street and on Campus: Identity as a Product of Social Context

Rachel M. Schmitz<sup>1</sup> and Kimberly A. Tyler<sup>2</sup>

1. Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, Edinburg, Texas, USA
2. Department of Sociology, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska, USA

*Corresponding author* – Rachel M. Schmitz, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, 338 Social and Behavioral Sciences, Edinburg, TX 78539, email [rachel.schmitz@utrgv.edu](mailto:rachel.schmitz@utrgv.edu)

## Abstract

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and other sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ+) young adults face unique identity-related experiences based on their immersion in distinctive social contexts. The predominant framework of performing separate analyses on samples of LGBTQ+ young people by their primary social status obfuscates more holistic understandings of the role of social context. Using 46 in-depth interviews with LGBTQ+ college students and LGBTQ+ homeless young adults, we ask: How are LGBTQ+ young adults' capacities for "doing" their gender and sexual identities shaped by their distinctive social contexts? In developing their identities, both groups of LGBTQ+ young adults navigated their social environments to seek out resources and support. Most college students described their educational contexts as conducive to helping them develop their identities, or "undo" rigid norms of gender and sexuality. Homeless young adults' social environments, meanwhile, imposed complex barriers to self-expression that reinforced more normative expectations of "doing" gender and sexual identities.

**Keywords:** college, gender, homelessness, identity, LGBTQ+ young adults, sexuality, social context

Approximately 6.4% of young adults aged 18–29 identify as a sexual or gender minority (Gates & Newport, 2012), and this population is growing in diversity across their social backgrounds and experiences (Wagaman, 2014). In addition to mental health issues, gay

and lesbian young people who experience homelessness or residential instability may be at risk for further negative outcomes, as a link has been established between same-sex attraction and running away (Waller & Sanchez, 2011). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth become homeless at disproportionate rates compared to heterosexual young people (Woronoff et al., 2006), with 20% of homeless youth identifying as LGBT compared to only 5%–10% in the general population (Center for American Progress, 2010). Identity, which we define as one's sense of self conceptualized through social interactions, cultural contexts, and intersecting sources of oppression (Jones & McEwen, 2000), is key to understanding how young people navigate gender and sexuality in their lives. According to Butler (1990), normative expectations of gender and sexual identities can be challenged and deconstructed, due to their fluid nature, through performances that disrupt the hierarchical status quo, such as LGBTQ identity (Butler, 2004). Moreover, West and Zimmerman's (1987) framework of "doing gender" is useful for examining the influential role of social context and interactions in individuals' displays of gender, and how individuals manage their sexual identities in light of heteronormative standards. Though little is known about the contextual complexities of identity development among sexual and gender minority youth (Horn, Kosciw, & Russell, 2009), social contexts, including both homeless environment and college campuses, can dynamically shape the stigmatizing experiences of marginalized gender and sexual identities.

Prejudiced attitudes regarding LGBTQ identities remain prevalent among homeless youth service organizations (Choi, Wilson, Shelton, & Gates, 2015) and on college campuses, where heteronormativity, or the privileging of heterosexuality, dominates normative expectations (Woodford, Kulick, Sinco, & Hong, 2014b). The combined search for identity and experiences of harassment and discrimination has the potential to place sexual minority college students and homeless youth at higher risk for numerous mental health issues, such as depression and suicide ideation, compared to their heterosexual-identified counterparts (Keuroghlian, Shtasel, & Bassuk, 2014; Westefeld, Maples, Buford, & Taylor, 2001). Despite these challenges, young adults who identify as LGBTQ can find the college environment to be a crucial time of identity development and self-actualization regarding their sexual orientation (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Similarly, many homeless LGBTQ young people are capable of overcoming prejudice and discrimination by fully embracing their stigmatized identities, becoming advocates for other LGBTQ street youth and working to improve their own life situations (Ray, 2006).

### *Significance of study*

Though research has identified the unique experiences of LGBTQ college students (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010) and LGBTQ homeless young adults (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2012) in separate studies, there has been no in-depth exploration of how these two groups compare and contrast across domains such as identity development. Although LGBTQ young adults in college and on the street are similar in chronological age, they typically navigate unique social contexts where access to resources and opportunity structures vary considerably (O'Rand, 2006). For example, though the theory of emerging adulthood uniquely captures the time of exploration and self-actualization that ideally encompasses the period between adolescence and adulthood, it is very much

a middle-class model of development that is often limited to the experiences of young people attending college (Arnett, 2000, 2016). Thus young people from marginalized social locations, such as homeless youth and LGBTQ young adults, tend to be excluded from conceptions of identity development that emphasize privileged backgrounds and social and cultural capital (Arnett, 2000). The predominant framework of performing separate analyses on samples of LGBTQ young people by their primary social context obfuscates more holistic understandings of the role of social context as these studies vary widely in methodology, geographical location, and theoretical framework. This limitation largely inhibits service providers and policymakers in establishing more widespread interventions for LGBTQ young people across multiple social contexts. We address these gaps by qualitatively examining the distinctive role of social context through a systematic analysis in a single study that allows for direct comparisons across diverse groups of lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and other sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ+) young adults. We ask the following research question: How are LGBTQ+ young adults' capacities for "doing" their gender and sexual identities shaped by their distinctive social contexts of either being in college or experiencing homelessness?

## **Literature review**

### ***Runaway and homeless LGBT youth***

Overall, young people with a history of same-sex attraction and/or relationships are considerably more likely to run away from home in relation to youth who report only opposite-sex experiences (Waller & Sanchez, 2011). Stemming from identity-related conflict, many LGBTQ homeless young people are also kicked out of their homes or forced to flee from familial abuse (Choi et al., 2015). Very little is known, however, about how LGBTQ homeless youth develop their gender and sexual identities, as the bulk of research focuses on their tangible experiences of risk-related behavior. Primarily, the risks that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) homeless youth face on the street are significantly exacerbated by their sexual orientation status (Gattis, 2013; Van Leeuwen et al., 2006). LGB-identified homeless youth engage in more survival sex in exchange for food, shelter, or other essentials (Gangamma, Slesnick, Toviessi, & Serovich, 2008) and experience more street victimization compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Tyler, 2008).

In addition, LGBT homeless youth experience inordinate adverse mental health consequences, such as depression, posttraumatic stress syndrome, and suicide ideation, when compared to heterosexual homeless youth (Keuroghlian et al., 2014). LGBT homeless youth also report higher levels of substance use and abuse (Van Leeuwen et al., 2006). Though there is limited research on the role of services for LGBT homeless youth, LGBT young people with histories of homelessness experience greater discrimination in homeless youth housing and other services based on their sexual orientation (Hunter, 2008), despite their higher likelihood of using services compared to heterosexual youth (Tyler, Akinyemi, & Kort-Butler, 2012). National organizations have begun to address the unique needs of homeless LGBT youth by releasing a best practices model for service agencies, such as expressing openness and acceptance toward diverse gender and sexual identities and ensuring inclusive access to health care (Lambda Legal, 2009).

Taken together, these unique issues faced by sexual and gender minority homeless youth call for further research on their identity development and how their immersion in homeless environments shapes their well-being. Whereas the majority of research on LGBTQ homeless young adults describes their experiences from an outsider's perspective, the present study places young people's perspectives at the core of analysis in understanding how they interpret their gender and sexual identities in light of barriers posed by their social context.

### *LGBT college students*

Similar to, yet distinctive from, LGBT homeless young adults, sexual and gender minority college students also face risks and challenges related to their identities in the social context of campus life (Rankin et al., 2010). Approximately 74% of LGB students attending college labeled their campus climate as homophobic, and 60% of these young people opted to remain closeted to reduce their chances of peer and structural discrimination (Rankin, 2003). Woodford and colleagues (2014b) found that 36% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ) college students had experienced sexual orientation-related victimization, such as verbal or physical assaults, but LGBQ students are 17 times more likely to endure verbal derogation than a physical attack (Rankin et al., 2010). Encounters with campus homophobia leads to anxiety and depression among sexual minority college students compared to heterosexual students (Woodford, Han, Craig, Lim, & Matney, 2014a).

Campus climate can also strongly impact LGBTQ college students' identity-related experiences, as LGBTQ college students are significantly more likely to feel uncomfortable with their overall campus climate compared to heterosexual students, and few institutions offer protective policies for gender and sexual identity (Rankin et al., 2010). Although sexual and gender minority college students can bear the brunt of discrimination through their involvement in LGBT activism on campus, they often also utilize LGBT student groups as sources of social support (Vaccaro, 2012). LGBT centers on college campuses are designed to provide critical resources for gender and sexual minority college students, yet their presence is closely linked to a college's liberal political leanings, which can limit their likelihood in more conservative regions (Fine, 2012). Furthermore, LGBT college students can establish stronger, more positive feelings surrounding their gender and sexual identities as a result of their involvement in LGBT-centered campus organizations (Renn, 2007).

Stemming from these unique contextual challenges and potential resources, LGBT young people experience distinctive identity transformations during their college years (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Processes of identity formation take on unique forms and intersect with varying social domains, making identity especially complex in the college environment (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). Sexual minority college students may also express more fluid identities if they do not conform to heteronormative expectations of roles and statuses (Abes & Kasch, 2007). The college context prompts lesbian and gay college students to engage in processes of self-actualization that can result in experiences of identity conflict (Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005).

Previous research on the identity development of LGBTQ+ young adults has provided a solid foundation of explorations into the challenges experienced by marginalized youth, most notably homeless young adults and college students, but it has done so in separate

analyses. As a result, these two groups of young people, who are similar in age but who inhabit vastly different life situations, have not been systematically compared in terms of how LGBTQ+ young adults navigate their social contexts in establishing their identities. Stemming from this oversight, there remains debilitating gaps in our understanding of this process. Furthermore, without the simultaneous inclusion of disparate groups of LGBTQ young people for comparison, the substantive role of social context will continue to remain unclear. As such, we lay the groundwork for elucidating the impact of social context in the lives of LGBTQ young adults because we systematically examine both homeless youth and college students in a single study.

### **Theoretical framework**

Within mainstream social views and societal constructions, the concept of gender exists within a binary, where individuals are labeled as either “men” or “women” based on their biological sex designation of “male” or “female” (Butler, 1990). These categorizations of gender identity are intricately tied to expectations of sexual identity, where attraction to the opposite gender (sex) is assumed in the dominant heteronormative culture (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Butler (1990), however, argued that gender identity is not intrinsic to an individual but rather consists of perpetual performances of gender expressions that can vary across interactions and contexts. In this way, one’s gender and sexual identities are indeed the outcome of particular performances and are interwoven with the dynamics and expected norms of social environments (Butler, 1990). Because of the fluid nature of identities and their corresponding presentations, it is therefore possible to challenge and to deconstruct hegemonic norms of gender and sexuality through performances that disrupt the hierarchical status quo, such as LGBTQ+ identity (Butler, 2004).

Therefore, West and Zimmerman’s (1987) framework of “doing gender” is a useful analytical tool for examining the influential role of social context and interactions in individuals’ displays of gender and, relatedly, how individuals manage their sexual identities in light of heteronormative standards. Within this conception of gender as an ongoing process that is continually socially constructed, displays and performances of gender are generally determined by normative expectations of what it means to be stereotypically feminine or masculine. The process of “doing gender,” however, can act as a source of resistance to rigid gender norms as it varies across numerous social locations, and anticonformity can potentially minimize the influential role of perceived “sex categories” in determining expected gendered behavior (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). Therefore, a young person’s dominant social context can shape their ability to successfully “undo” gender and sexuality as sources of inequality (Butler, 2004; Deutsch, 2007). The broader, intersectional framework of “doing difference” more holistically captures the complexities of how people’s multiple, coexisting identities (i.e., gender and sexuality) create dynamic social interactions whereby people experience multifaceted sources of inequality simultaneously (West & Fenstermaker, 1995).

Norms of gender and sexuality are prominent in young adults’ contextualized lives, and these social expectations can influence their identities and self-expression in unique ways.

College students, for example, often present and perform their gender identities in accordance with the gendered contexts of their peer interactions, such as exhibiting more pronounced masculine expression within male-dominated environments (Mehta & Dementieva, 2016). Although there is a growing number of campus resources available for gender and sexual minority college students (Poynter & Tubbs, 2008), the enduring impact of discriminatory interactions, such as homophobic microaggressions, can create barriers to young people feeling comfortable expressing themselves (Woodford et al., 2014b). Consequently, more research is needed to understand the subjective experiences of LGBTQ college students and how they interpret and manage contextual realities that impact identity development.

Homelessness also reinforces young people's struggles of identity expression, as many LGBTQ homeless young adults are pushed from their homes as a result of family conflict related to their gender and/or sexual orientations (Choi et al., 2015). Though many service providers are beginning to acknowledge the unique needs of LGBTQ homeless young adults (Ferguson & Maccio, 2015), additional research is required to appreciate their lived experiences within a broad social context that can fundamentally shape their ability to openly express their gender and sexual identities. To address this lack of knowledge surrounding the influential role of social environments in gender and sexual identity development, we explore the complex diversity of LGBTQ+ young adults by systematically comparing and contrasting the experiences of homeless young adults and college students in two medium-sized Midwestern cities from their own perspectives of doing gender and sexuality within their primary social contexts.

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

Eligibility required participants to be between the ages of 19 and 26 and to self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or another socially nonnormative, marginalized gender or sexual identity. To ensure the primacy of young adults' contextualized voices, we did not predefine the constructs of gender or sexuality but rather allowed participants to use their own definitions of what their identities meant to them. This process allows for more intricate explorations into gender and sexual identity development that are grounded in individual agency and experiences (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008). Our target enrollment number was 40 LGBTQ young adults (20 college students and 20 homeless young adults). We limited our age range to 19–26 to capture the critical developmental period between adolescence and young adulthood, which represents a pivotal turning point in young people's lives (Arnett, 2000).

Our final sample of 46 young adults included 24 women (52%), 18 men (39%), and four (9%) respondents who identified outside the gender binary, such as bi-gender or gender-queer. Of the total, eight respondents identified as transgender. Concerning sexual orientation, seven people identified as lesbian (15%), 11 were gay (24%), 20 were bisexual (43%), and eight people identified outside of the LGB spectrum, such as asexual or pansexual. Regarding young people's primary social context, 24 (52%) were full-time college students, and 22 (48%) were currently experiencing homelessness. Ages ranged from 19 to 26 years,

with a mean age of 21. Thirty-two respondents were White (70%), five African American (11%), two Asian American (4%), and seven biracial or multiracial (15%). Table 1 presents demographic information for the total sample and the two subsamples.

**Table 1.** Respondent demographics by primary social context

	College (N = 24)	Homeless (N = 22)	Total (N = 46)
Age			
Mean	21	21	21
Range	19–26	19–26	19–26
Race/ethnicity			
White	21 (88%)	11 (50%)	32 (70%)
African American	0	5 (23%)	5 (11%)
Asian American	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	2 (4%)
Bi/Multiracial	2 (8%)	5 (23%)	7 (15%)
Sexual orientation			
Lesbian	3 (12%)	4 (18%)	7 (15%)
Gay	5 (21%)	6 (27%)	11 (24%)
Bisexual	9 (37%)	11 (50%)	20 (43%)
Queer	4 (17%)	0	4 (9%)
Other	3 (13%)	1 (5%)	4 (9%)
Gender*			
Woman	13 (54%)	11 (50%)	24 (52%)
Man	8 (33%)	11 (50%)	19 (41%)
Transgender	4 (17%)	4 (18%)	8 (17%)**
Other	3 (13%)	0	3 (7%)

\* Categories not mutually exclusive.

\*\* Out of participants who identified as either a woman or a man.

### **Recruitment**

We recruited participants for the college student sample by advertising the study through campus bulletin boards and email Listservs (e.g., Women’s and Gender Studies program and the LGBTQA+ Resource Center and Women’s Center) on two different Midwestern college campuses, both of which are 4-year, medium-sized public universities. To participate, young adults also had to be enrolled in college. We recruited homeless young people through four different service agencies (e.g., homeless shelters, drop-in centers) that served this population using flyers, referral cards, and recruitment assistance through key agency personnel. To be eligible, youth had to currently reside in a shelter, on the street, or independently because they had run away, had been pushed out of their homes, or had drifted out of their family of origin (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011). Both samples were recruited using a nonprobability method of convenience and snowball sampling. Moreover, we screened out college students experiencing homelessness to maintain the focus of this study in examining distinctive social contexts.



Though the terms *lesbian*, *gay*, and *bisexual* (LGB) refer to sexual identities, *transgender* (T) denotes a gender identity, and *queer* (Q) can refer to both gender and sexuality, we included these identities together based on their societal subjugation in reference to heterosexuality and gender conformity (Jackson, 2006). To promote inclusivity, we welcomed additional sexual and gender minority identities to participate, such as genderqueer, questioning, and pansexual, and we use the acronym LGBTQ+ to capture the diversity of participants' identities.

### ***Data collection***

The first author conducted all of the interviews. Study participants completed a short demographic questionnaire and one in-depth face-to-face interview lasting approximately 1 hour. All interviews were tape-recorded. LGBTQ+ college students were interviewed at a private location that was convenient and comfortable for them, such as a reserved room at a public library or a small conference room. Homeless young adults were interviewed in a private room at a participating service agency or at a public library. Study procedures were explained to participants, and informed consent was obtained prior to the start of the interview. Participants received \$20 upon completion of the interview in exchange for their time. Pseudonyms were used to ensure respondent confidentiality. Both groups were provided with lists of available resources (e.g., college students provided with campus resources such as counseling services, and homeless young adults provided with agency resources such as transitional living). The institutional review board at the second author's institution approved this study.

Respondents were asked a series of open-ended questions on the topics of gender and sexual identity, family relationships, and current life situations. The same questions were used for LGBTQ+ college and homeless young adults to compare and contrast their experiences. The present study highlights the role of social context in shaping identity development by drawing from the following grand tour interview questions: How did you come to identify as (*insert LGBTQ+ identity here*)? What challenges have you faced being LGBTQ+? How does being (*insert a student or homeless*) affect these challenges related to your identity? How would you describe the community acceptance toward LGBTQ+ young adults/people?

### ***Data analysis***

We performed all data analyses using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis program. All interviews were transcribed verbatim (including pauses and filler words such as "uh" and "um"), and Microsoft Word documents of these transcriptions were uploaded into MAXQDA). We first utilized the method of initial coding to determine emergent themes and broad categories that linked to concepts of interest, such as LGBTQ+ identity formation and current life situations and identity-related challenges (Charmaz, 2014). Next, we employed focused coding to home in on the participants' subjective interpretations and to create more detailed, nuanced codes, such as "campus climate toward LGBT people" and "homeless social support." Focused coding helped us explore the role of social context in how young people formed their identities, and these codes were then grouped together into corresponding themes. The final themes emerged inductively from the data. The combination

of initial and focused coding allows for a constructivist perspective to emphasize the participants' understandings of their lived realities and the meanings they attach to their gender and sexual identities and their experiences (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2002).

To enhance the credibility of the findings, participants had the option of being recontacted to engage in member checking, whereby we asked them to review the raw data and to assess the accuracy of assigned codes and themes (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Eighteen college students (75%) and 10 homeless young adults (45%) provided feedback over email on both the accuracy of their interview transcripts and earlier versions of the themes that included brief, generalized descriptions of the major codes and subcodes. Member checking improved the validity of the raw data as well as the findings by allowing participants to ensure their intended meaning was captured and that our interpretations were legitimate. Finally, a collaborative data conference was held with other experienced qualitative researchers, including colleagues who have published extensively using qualitative methods, to assess overall validity of the findings. These data conference involved in-depth critiques of the emergent themes, surrounding topics such as clarity of the findings and accuracy of the code groupings into their corresponding themes.

### **Results: Identity as privilege**

Intersections between identity and social contexts emerged as a central theme among both LGBTQ+ college students and LGBTQ+ homeless young adults. In developing their sexual and gender identities, young people navigated their social contexts as a means of seeking out resources, support, and opportunities that helped them develop their self-concepts and coping strategies. For LGBTQ+ young adults, however, particular social environments created unique experiences that shaped their ability to express their identities. The majority of college students' descriptions of their educational context are captured in the following subtheme: "Campus Contexts as Conducive to Identity Development." Homeless young adults, however, found that their social environment imposed complex barriers to introspection, which are summarized as the subtheme "Homelessness as a Hindrance to Identity Development." These patterns highlight how multiple campus contexts allowed college students to largely "undo" rigid norms of gender and sexuality, while homeless environments often reinforced stereotypical, more normative expectations of "doing" gender and sexual identities among young adults (Butler, 2004).

### **Campus contexts as conducive to identity development**

For LGBTQ+ college students in this study, the campus context often represented a socially liberal atmosphere conducive to "undoing" gender and sexuality as well as their pathways of identity development (Butler, 2004; Deutsch, 2007). These findings demonstrate how campus-related environments served as sources of privilege for LGBTQ+ college students in bolstering their ability to explore their gender and sexual identities in largely supportive contexts. Although our findings show how experiences during college can broaden many students' views of the world and expose them to supportive social relationships and resources, LGBTQ+ young adults must also navigate the intricacies of campus contexts when

support for and acceptance of their identities is not readily available in certain college-related environments.

*Social support and access to resources*

In addition to pursuing a college degree, LGBTQ+ students also used this time to develop their multiple intersecting identities, including gender and sexuality. For the majority of students, social support and campus resources geared toward LGBTQ+ students and issues characterized their college experiences. One such example is Charlie (pansexual demi-girl), who believed that her major in the college of Arts and Sciences helped her feel accepted in the classroom when discussing controversial issues:

I feel a sense of protection. . . . I mean we're talking about the issues themselves and what the viewpoints are on either side and so I feel like it's a byproduct of the degree and the way it's set up by teachers for creating a safe space.

Similarly, Gabriel (queer transgender man) shared a positive view of the wider college campus context in supporting his nonnormative gender identity:

I majored in [Arts & Sciences] . . . it is probably the best department to have support and people around you who understand that kind of thing and I just sent out an email to all my professors. A few of them who I felt really close to I talked to them in person and they were very supportive in helping me find any resources I need on campus.

By finding support from and feeling accepted by their professors, these college students recounted positive experiences that helped them access resources and create a sense of belonging within campus-related environments.

In addition to perceiving institutional acceptance of their LGBTQ+ identities, college students also emphasized the importance of peer support from classmates and friends they met on campus. Rylan (pansexual bi-gender) recalled how their transition into college allowed them to be open with their identity:

It's definitely a lot more open here [at college]. I'll talk to other kids and see what they are going through. I'm like "okay, if these people accept me, why not just be me." It has definitely had a hugely, hugely positive impact being here, being a college student.

Being surrounded by similar others and establishing relationships with other young adults who share their experiences was important for college students, as it helped build a sense of solidarity that can be key in helping young people feel accepted. For example, Samantha (bisexual woman) described her perception of peer support on campus: "But now that I am in college, it is completely different here because I feel like we have a really diverse campus and there are a lot of people like me here." Creating supportive social

networks was especially important for LGBTQ+ college students as they navigated wider societal conceptions that marginalize nonconforming gender and sexual identities.

Broadly speaking, many LGBTQ+ college students noted the protective nature of environments related to the college campus, such that many felt at ease expressing their gender and sexual identities without fear of blatant prejudice and discrimination. One such example is Natalie (bisexual woman), who stated, "I think that for the most part it is pretty good. It's better on campus than it is off campus for sure just because of the university setting. Like education tends to make you less homophobic, go figure." In another example, Phillip (gay man) emphasized academic structures that protect LGBTQ+ identities and how this contrasted with the lack of legal safeguards he faced in the workplace in this particular region: "I think that being a student is probably better than if I was in the workforce. I mean there's less challenges . . . well, I mean the university has protective codes. I feel safer here than I would elsewhere." Constructing university campus settings as protective shows how LGBTQ+ college students can experience broad institutional college support and can use the campus as a safe haven within their wider community.

Several students specifically contrasted their experiences on campus to those they had in middle and high school, where they struggled with social acceptance. Lucy (queer woman) described her transition from high school to college as transformative in allowing her to more fully embrace her LGBTQ+ identity:

I tried to get a gay/straight alliance group going and they [high school] denied that . . . so I think being in college it's a lot different because you experience an array of different people and backgrounds . . . it's given me a different view and perspective about life . . . it's helped more than hindered me as a student.

Paul (gay man) shared a similar sentiment in the positive way he believes his transition to college shaped his life:

High school to college . . . oh man, that got even better, because at that point you know there's so many people on [university] campus who I can be friends with and I can be friends with guys and not have crushes on them but then there's a lot more gay people at [university] campus and so there's a lot better chance that if I start to develop feelings for someone that they might even reciprocate those. . .

Both Lucy and Paul's experiences illustrate how transitioning into college can open up opportunities for LGBTQ+ college students in expressing their identities and in forming supportive peer and romantic relationships.

### *Learning about identity in college*

For many LGBTQ+ students, their experiences during college also represented a crucial period in their lives when they were able to learn about their gender and sexual identities in environments that encouraged critical thinking. Considering both the positive and negative aspects of analyzing her LGBTQ+ identity, Clark (queer woman) discussed the challenges she faced as she encountered more complex ideas surrounding identity politics:

As I've been going through college I think I've had a lot more trouble because as I learn more, I have to pause more and be like "it's not quite that easy" or "it's not just born this way." There are things that we need to talk about when we talk about sexuality that we don't a lot of the time. Like class and race and gender.

For Clark, learning about her identity in college broadened her view of the complexity of sexuality by encouraging her to incorporate more intersectional perspectives. Engaging in critical discourse in supportive contexts, such as the college classroom, can help LGBTQ+ young people question their preconceived notions surrounding gender, sexuality, and other socially marginalized statuses.

In addition to experiencing feelings of enlightenment in the classroom, other LGBTQ+ college students specifically sought out classes that related to their gender and/or sexual identity. Rylan described how being more open about his identity helped him feel more comfortable presenting in nongender conforming ways (i.e., "I'm going to get my nails done for the first day of class") and pursue gender and sexuality studies: "I picked up an LGBT minor that we're now offering here and one of my classes is by a professor that I really looked up to. He's a trans male . . . so I'm going to be a lot more open." By actively seeking out educational opportunities concerning their identities, LGBTQ+ college students like those in this study can work to "undo" gender and sexuality and to reduce heteronormative structural inequalities through their alignment with supportive faculty and campus programs (Butler, 2004). In these ways, the campus context was largely characterized as conducive for LGBTQ+ college students to explore the meaning of their individual identity and learn more about social diversity.

### *LGBTQ activism and advocacy*

Opportunities for LGBTQ+ activism and advocacy sponsored by campus initiatives were also key in developing college students' sense of their identities and their role in breaking down barriers that prevent LGBTQ+ individuals from expressing their gender and sexual identities. Many students became involved in campus groups and activities that helped them engage in efforts aimed at improving LGBTQ+ lives. Alex developed a passion for educating others about LGBTQ+ issues after participating in an LGBTQ+ speakers' panel:

I'll go to a panel and there will be a gay guy and maybe a lesbian girl and then me. Then I get all the questions because they'll be like "oh my god, you're trans?" But I really like doing that because it gives me a chance to educate people that have no idea what being trans is about.

By engaging with opportunities for LGBTQ+ activism and advocacy on campus, college students developed their own identities while they engaged in the fulfilling experience of community education.

In addition to practicing LGBTQ+ activism and advocacy through campus opportunities, several students participated in community activities as a way to expand their advocacy. Gabriel, who strongly believed in helping other LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly transpeople, was eager to share his experiences:

For me I don't think it's possible for me to ever not be open about being trans because I want to be there to help others . . . it's very important that I am there to help others navigate what they're going through and be a role model.

Despite the challenges that LGBTQ+ young adults face, students like Gabriel reframed their experiences as having an important purpose, such as being "a role model" for other transpeople. Some students, such as Alex, highlighted the importance of LGBTQ+ activism on the college campus, while other students, like Gabriel, showed how extending advocacy to the broader community is personally fulfilling. Taken together, these examples demonstrate how forms of LGBTQ+ activism on the college campus and the larger community can serve as key sources of meaning and identity development for LGBTQ+ college students.

#### *Managing prejudice and discrimination on campus*

Some students involved in subcultures of the wider campus community noted that although college environments as a whole are accepting of LGBTQ+ individuals, they remained cognizant of how particular campus groups respond to nonconforming gender and sexual identities. Jake (bisexual man) is especially aware of the heteronormative nature of Greek life:

In the Greek community you can tell it is pretty toxic. In [Midwestern state] it is pretty homogeneously heterosexual. I'm not out to any of my Greek friends, at least people I know are Greek, and I don't know if I would be necessarily comfortable with it.

Furthermore, some students distinguished across different majors and academic departments in terms of levels of acceptance and comfort with disclosing their LGBTQ+ identity. Bethany (bisexual woman) recalled how being around students with particular regional and political backgrounds enhanced her social unease related to her own identity:

I'm a [STEM] student so I'm around a lot of guys sometimes . . . a lot of them are ag farmers which are from rural communities which are generally kind of conservative. And sometimes I'll hear something that they will say and it will kind of bother me.

This example of institutional inequality can potentially counteract LGBTQ+ young people's attempts to "undo" gender and sexuality by normalizing anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment and reinforcing heteronormativity (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). These participants' experiences highlight the multifaceted nature of college campus contexts and how college students

strategically navigate particular social groups and settings when they perceive the potential for prejudice or discrimination.

These examples show how identity development is a particular type of privilege for LGBTQ+ college students dependent on the predominantly supportive nature of college campus-related contexts. The overwhelming majority of college student participants stressed the freedom and support they experienced to “do” their identities while at college and the various resources at their disposal. It is important to note, however, that the campus context is not unidimensional, as there were LGBTQ students who described the challenge of navigating prejudice and discrimination within specific social circles. Despite these struggles, college students agreed that the campus context is broadly conducive to identity development, which often conflicts with the larger community’s attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people and how underprivileged populations pursue identity formation.

### **Homelessness as a hindrance to identity development**

Although homeless young adults considered their LGBTQ+ identity to play an integral role in their lives, their social context of homelessness (e.g., living on the streets or staying with multiple friends) acted as a hindrance to identity development and self-expression. In contrast to LGBTQ+ college students, LGBTQ+ homeless young adults engaged in concerted, deliberate efforts to explore their identity by seeking out resources and social support that may not be as readily available as they tend to be on a college campus.

#### *Homeless experience overrides identity development*

When considering how their LGBTQ+ identity shaped their experiences of homelessness, homeless young adults described residential instability as a hindrance to developing their identity. The never-ending search for basic necessities, such as food and shelter, overrode their ability to pursue identity-related activities, including self-reflection and social support. Abby (straight transgender woman) described how being homeless affected her gender transition:

It’s been an annoying, aggravating process because since I don’t have a regular place to go to, it kind of slows down the [gender] transition a bit because I don’t always know when I’ll be able to get the certain necessities that I need.

Sawyer (lesbian transgender man) recounted a similar experience in balancing the struggles of being homeless and lacking social support and simultaneously transitioning to his preferred gender:

It just made it harder when I was living on the streets and had nothing . . . Cause everything was just so difficult, every aspect of life. And that only made it harder, trying to deal with it [gender transition], especially when you’re being quiet about it. I never felt so alone before in my life.

LGBTQ+ homeless young adults, therefore, desired to explore and understand their identities, but they were unable to “undo” normative expectations of gender and sexuality while struggling to meet basic needs. In this way, LGBTQ+ homeless young adults in this study, compared to their college student counterparts, were much more beholden to societal expectations reinforcing normative gender displays (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014).

Additionally, some LGBTQ+ homeless young adults discussed the difficulty of finding LGBTQ+ resources when they were living on the street, which stands in stark contrast to the majority of LGBTQ college students’ experiences. Bernard (gay man) downplayed his LGBTQ+ identity when describing how his sexuality was not at the forefront of his mind when he became homeless:

It was more being afraid of being on the streets, where I’m gonna go, where I’m gonna sleep, how am I gonna get food. So that was the scary part of it . . . the LGBTQ part didn’t come in until I got to [youth service agency] and started coming out to my caseworker. . . . I had no phone, I had no way to contact anybody and everything was just gone.

Even when services are available for LGBTQ+ homeless young adults, they often have more pressing survival issues and may be unaware of such services.

Other young adults felt that being homeless made it especially difficult to form a romantic relationship, which was compounded by LGBTQ+-related prejudice and discrimination. For Bianca (bisexual woman), residential instability acted as a formidable obstacle to establishing meaningful partnerships:

It’s kind of hard to get attached to somebody if you have to go from place to place to place. It’s just more stress going from house to house just staying with anybody because you don’t want you and your baby out in the street. I’d rather just be single until I can get myself together, till I can get things stable for me and my daughter.

Bianca’s experience of homelessness was further exacerbated by her status as a mother, whereby her caregiving responsibilities, combined with her lack of housing, took precedence over her LGBTQ+ identity. In this way, it can be especially difficult for LGBTQ+ young people to develop supportive networks when they cannot secure permanent housing, let alone access to resources and opportunities for LGBTQ+ issues.

#### *Creation of homeless social support*

Despite the distinctive challenges LGBTQ+ homeless young adults faced that prevented them from developing their identities, many overcame the structural barriers of homelessness by fostering relationships that supported their efforts to “undo” heteronormative scripts of sexuality (Butler, 2004; Risman, 2009). Yolanda (bisexual woman) found that treatment centers were significantly more welcoming than her home life, even though she acknowledged that this was not the norm:



I went to [name of treatment center] and there was only like 2 females that were straight on my unit and all the others were bisexual or lesbian and I felt like I was home. I felt like I had a family there because we all knew that we were different but at the same time we were the same. So, strangely enough, at every treatment center I felt like home.

Lawrence (gay man) recounted his positive experiences in juvenile detention because of the social support he experienced:

It was better. It was better than being at home. . . . I got attention. People that you could actually talk to. I mean yeah they were all criminals and they made mistakes, but at least I pretty much got a better place to live, it was better than nothing.

Despite the challenges youth faced as they transitioned across multiple detainment situations, homeless LGBTQ+ young people were able to create supportive networks that filled a void in their lives as many were detached from their families. Similarly, many young adults created LGBTQ+ support networks with other detained youth, which underscores their ability to develop their identities with limited organizational support.

In many ways, experiences of homelessness created a sense of social solidarity among homeless participants by uniting people through a shared sense of struggle and conflict, which can then act as opportunities for “undoing” norms of gender and sexuality outside of mainstream society (Butler, 2004). Melanie (bisexual woman) emphasized that fellow homeless people were accepting of LGBTQ+ identities:

I think people are a lot more open in homelessness . . . it seems to be the more upper class you go the more judgmental they get. So like being down at the bottom, people are a lot more open because they have been there.

Melanie’s description of elevated social class as a barrier to acceptance strongly contrasts with some college students’ portrayals of higher educational levels being linked to more inclusive, less biased attitudes, such as in the case of Natalie (“Like education tends to make you less homophobic, go figure”). Like Melanie, Elliott (bisexual man) shared a similar sentiment in how he found support through other homeless people and experienced more challenges related to being bisexual than from being homeless. When asked how being homeless affected identity-related challenges, he replied:

There are challenges but not as many because people are in the same predicament that you are because you’re homeless. . . . I’ve met other transgenders [people] or other bisexual or transgender couples who are homeless and . . . despite what other people think, we do kind of stick together because we can protect each other that way.

These young adults' experiences emphasize the importance of created kinship among homeless communities, particularly when support from service agencies is not guaranteed.

*Navigating acceptance/discrimination from service agencies*

When LGBTQ+ homeless young adults did locate and utilize services, their experiences were mixed in terms of acceptance and discrimination from service agencies. The majority of homeless young people described their interactions with service agencies as generally positive, especially when they were geared toward youth and young adults and/or emphasized particular supports for LGBTQ+ individuals. Tamara (gay transgender woman) stressed that the youth service agency she frequented made her feel like she fit in and acknowledged her uniqueness: "They treat me normal, like I'm a human being as well. But then again, they know how I am, but everybody, every transgender [person] has their own individuality." Many of these young people wanted to utilize homeless services without fear of prejudice or discrimination at the same time that they valued organizations that acknowledge LGBTQ+ identity. In stressing the importance of LGBTQ+ groups for homeless young people, Kellen (gay man) described these organizations as safe places:

Here they're trying to make it more accepting for those who come in . . . to show that it's ok, like you don't have to hide it. And trying to teach those who aren't as accepting to be more accepting. It does help, because if you're ever in danger or anything, you have this place you can go to.

As these examples demonstrate, homeless service agencies, and specifically those designed for LGBTQ+ young people, can be crucial sources of support for youth who are multiply marginalized.

Other LGBTQ+ homeless young adults, however, avoided certain service agencies based on negative experiences with these organizations. Oftentimes, service agencies that exhibited prejudice and discrimination toward LGBTQ+ individuals were religious-based or widely known for their conservative political views. In some cases, homeless shelters appeared to accept LGBTQ+ individuals but placed more regulations on their behavior compared to non-LGBTQ residents. Harris (gay man) provided an example of this type of treatment:

The shelters are kind of open to it, but not really. They don't treat people differently, but they kinda disregard a lot of the LGBTQ people. They are open to letting us stay, but they don't let us do what we want. Like, I couldn't stay with my boyfriend because it made them uncomfortable.

Similarly, Bernard (gay man) expressed his concern in utilizing Catholic-based services because he felt that the workers informally policed nonconforming gender and sexual identities, which barred his ability to express himself and to challenge, or "undo," stereotypes:

I believe it was more of religious views . . . that was the issue. Some of the community support system, such as the shelters and organizations like [Christian-based organization] didn't feel so supportive and accepting. I got a lot of judgmental looks and I just didn't feel like I was safe to go to those areas without other people to come with me.

Even though these young adults were in dire need of institutional support and services, in some instances they preferred to avoid service agencies altogether if they perceived them to be discriminatory. These diverse spaces described by participants are indicative of both more inclusive contexts where categories of "doing" gender and sexuality are determined by identity (LGBTQ+-centered groups), whereas other, more socially conservative environments (Catholic-based services) draw from biological sex as an indicator of gender and sexuality (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014).

Not all young adults' encounters with homeless service agencies could be characterized as positive or negative, as some LGBTQ+ young people altered their views of particular agencies after interacting with them. When asked about his experiences with religious-oriented organizations, Elliott replied:

They're [Catholics] not really against, they just don't agree with it. Actually asking for help at the church while being homeless and the way we were [LGBTQ], we weren't really comfortable going to other churches but we did end up going into a Catholic church and a pastor actually creates groups for the LGBTQ . . . and after that I kind of, I made a friend of course.

This type of interaction underscores the complexity of homeless LGBTQ+ young adults' relationship with service agencies and the influence of cultural assumptions regarding the idea that religion is inherently hostile toward nonconforming sexual and gender identities. Whereas Bernard felt explicitly discriminated against from religious-oriented groups, Elliott experienced a welcoming environment in a Catholic church, despite his preconception that all Catholics were prejudiced against LGBTQ+ people. These experiences demonstrate the complexity of homeless young people's encounters with service agencies and the range of structural obstacles they faced on the continuum of "doing" or "undoing" gender and sexual identities.

## **Discussion**

Our study demonstrates the importance of social context within the lives of LGBTQ+ young adults and how these young people navigate their environments in distinct ways when seeking out support and managing identity-related challenges. Furthermore, our findings illustrate the importance of considering the multiple, interacting aspects of LGBTQ+ young adults' lives, including their varying identities and social contexts, in understanding their identity development (Abes et al., 2007). In comparing college students and homeless young adults, our results reveal how campus contexts are largely conducive

to the task of “undoing” norms of gender and sexuality through their identity development, as students are afforded a breadth of supportive resources and opportunities. Having access to LGBTQ+-related resources and support networks is critical for young people in helping them develop their identities (Wagaman, 2014). Homelessness, on the other hand, overwhelmingly acts as a hindrance to identity formation for LGBTQ+ young adults, and they must make concerted efforts to overcome structural barriers that perpetuate normative expectations of “doing” gender and sexuality. This stark contrast between these two groups of young adults points to identity as a mechanism of privilege that is shaped by one’s social context rather than chronological age. The structural inequalities inherent in the wider society between the “haves” (i.e., college students) and the “have-nots” (i.e., homeless young adults) are further illustrated by LGBTQ+ young adults’ varying capacities for “doing” their preferred gender and sexual identities based on their distinctive social contexts (Butler, 2004; Risman, 2009).

Despite the ways that social context created disparate experiences of identity development among LGBTQ+ young adults, similarities were also evident in how respondents viewed sexual and gender identity as an important aspect of their lives. For both LGBTQ+ college students and homeless young adults, social surroundings were key in determining how they expressed their identities. Though social context acted as a source of privilege for college students in accessing support on campus, they remained aware of environments where the potential for prejudice existed, such as Greek communities. Highly masculinized campus contexts may pressure students to express more stereotypical norms surrounding gender and sexuality (Mehta & Dementieva, 2016) if they anticipate the potential for discrimination. Although college students perceive widespread campus support, they must still navigate the prevalence of heteronormativity that abounds in particular college contexts (Woodford et al., 2014b). Similarly for homeless young adults, social context shaped how they navigated different service providers at the same time that it prompted them to create supportive networks in the absence of formal resources. In these ways, LGBTQ+ identity can interact with varying social environments in complex ways that highlight the fluidity of young people’s engagement with “doing” or “undoing” gender and sexuality (Connell, 2010).

These findings demonstrate how LGBTQ+ young people’s expressions of identity are intricately influenced by the dynamics of their social contexts, which in turn largely dictated young adults’ abilities to “do” their desired gender or sexuality. The complexities of social contexts and interactions are critical determinants in individuals’ displays of their nonconforming gender and sexual identities (Connell, 2010). LGBTQ+ college students’ experiences of support and acceptance within the institutional bounds of the college campus highlight unique environmental opportunities for the “undoing” of normative, exclusionary expectations of gender and sexuality (Risman, 2009). On the other hand, the class-based structural and interactional constraints imposed on homeless LGBTQ+ young adults prevented them from expressing and developing their identities, which worked to further stigmatize them and to reinforce heteronormativity (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). The development of supportive networks, however, were key in promoting LGBTQ+ young adults’ identities across social contexts and providing them with spaces conducive to self-expression. Positive social interactions can indeed be sites of “undoing” gender and sexuality whereby

expressions of nonconforming gender and sexual identities can work to dismantle inequality and promote equity (Butler, 2004; Deutsch, 2007).

Findings here demonstrate the key role of young people's conceptions of their sexual and gender identities in their pathways to adulthood and how this transformative period is shaped by shifts in identity development (Torkelson, 2012) and sources of inequality (O'Rand, 2006). Social context perpetuated inequalities between college students and homeless young adults, as college students experienced more ease and support in accessing resources, whereas homeless young adults faced many barriers in seeking assistance for identity development. Furthermore, this study expanded the scope of emerging adulthood to encompass a wider array of young people's life courses and their contexts, including LGBTQ+ young adults in college and those who are homeless, by emphasizing the empirical impact of the college environment (Arnett, 2016) and that of homelessness (Ream & Forge, 2014).

Differences across race and class are key when comparing LGBTQ+ young adults in distinctive social contexts, yet due to lack of diversity, a true intersectional analysis was beyond the scope of this study. In our study, for example, one half of LGBTQ+ homeless young adults identified as people of color, whereas only 12% of LGBTQ+ college students were non-White, which corresponds to studies suggesting the overrepresentation of youth of color among LGBTQ+ homeless populations (Cray, Miller, & Durso, 2013). An intersecting matrix of systems of oppression can adversely affect marginalized people, particularly individuals of color (Collins, 2009) when contemporary LGBTQ rights movements are continually impacted by racial divides that reinforce anti-Black perspectives (Bassichis & Spade, 2015). For example, research on LGBTQ bullying in schools often neglects the pervasive effects of racism and how racial, ethnic, and class identities can worsen experiences of bullying for LGBTQ youth of color (Pritchard, 2013). Although a predominant, white-washed misconception of "gay affluence" persists in mainstream mentalities, scholars are beginning to raise awareness of the increasingly marginalized nature of LGBT people across race and class to further activist movements (Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015).

Furthermore, in our sample, more college students (42%) than homeless young adults (5%) identified outside of the LGBT spectrum, such as queer or asexual, which could point to social class differences in having more opportunities to learn about and to educate oneself about nonmainstream sexual and gender identities. Access to technology and informational resources are critical determinants in how LGBTQ young people can learn about their identity and issues related to their well-being (DeHaan, Kuper, Magee, Bigelow, & Mustanski, 2013). From this perspective, the college environment may not only be more conducive to identity development, but it can also expose college students to a wider variety of identity options from which they may choose, whereas homeless young adults may not reach that level of identity complexity as they struggle to meet their basic needs.

### *Limitations*

This study has limitations that require consideration. First, both samples of LGBTQ+ young adults were recruited using convenience-sampling methods. This recruitment strategy created a constrained sampling frame that captured a particular subset of LGBTQ+ college

students and homeless young adults. Many of these homeless young adults were also involved in service-agency-sponsored LGBTQ+ support groups, which highlights their desire to engage with processes of identity development. The disparate knowledge of LGBTQ+ language and issues across the subsamples may also have influenced the data and how young people responded to interview questions. This was evident in this study in terms of young people's identities, such that college students articulated more variation in identifying outside of the more normative convention of the LGBT spectrum. Additionally, many homeless respondents admitted that they were not familiar with the LGBT acronym and had more difficulty understanding explanations of each of these terms. Social desirability bias could also have affected how respondents' disclosed information based on the sensitive nature of the interviews concerning their sexual and gender identities and the social stigma attached to these statuses.

Future research should explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ young adults who simultaneously inhabit multiple, overlapping social contexts and how these environments shape their experiences. College students in particular may be pushed to homelessness due to the inability to afford housing and other financial concerns related to the growing costs of higher education (Ringer, 2015). LGBTQ+ homeless college students, then, would encounter the dual stigma of residential instability and having nonconforming gender and sexual identities, highlighting the importance of examining how they navigate differing social contexts and environmental influences in their lives.

### *Policy implications*

These findings have vast implications for policymakers and service providers. Exploring the intricacies of the campus context is key in examining the nuances of LGBTQ college students' experiences, so that college officials can address more homophobic and heteronormative environments, such as fraternities (Worthen, 2014). Furthermore, colleges and universities should work to implement more programs and resources for LGBT college students, as research has identified the positive influence of programs such as the LGBT Safe Zone, including increasing awareness of and support for LGBT-identified people and issues on campus (Evans, 2002). As college students emphasized the importance of engaging in LGBTQ activism and advocacy on campus in developing their identities, college officials should continue to work to provide opportunities for LGBTQ leadership and advocacy that allow students to become involved and to shape campus climate surrounding LGBTQ issues (Renn, 2007).

Similarly, homeless service providers should take into account the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ homeless young adults in understanding how they tailor services and programs for these young people. For example, homeless shelters may be perceived as hostile environments for LGBTQ young adults, especially if shelter rules dictate homophobic or transphobic regulations, such as prohibiting young people from sharing rooms or beds with their partners or not allowing trans individuals to use the bathroom reflective of their preferred gender (Mottet & Ohle, 2006). Additionally, homeless youth shelters should be especially mindful of the disproportionate rates of victimization of LGBTQ homeless youth (Tyler, 2008) and should work to provide added protections and safeguards for them while in shelter care (Hunter, 2008).

## Conclusion

Identity is not static across social contexts, but instead shifts and transforms as young people become immersed in varying institutional structures and relationship groups. By acting as a source of privilege and as a barrier to resources and opportunities for different groups of LGBTQ+ young adults, social environment can help determine processes of identity formation and the ability for “doing” or “undoing” normative conceptions of gender and sexuality (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). Furthermore, it is essential to understand that LGBTQ young adults are not a monolithic social group. Despite sharing the trait of chronological age, these young people are a dynamic, complex subpopulation that can simultaneously undergo similar, yet disparate, experiences in their capacity for “doing” their sexual and gender identities in social context-specific situations.

**Acknowledgments** – This research was funded by the Joyce Hertzler Sociological Research Fund sponsored by the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Sociology Department.

## References

- Abes, E. S., Jones, S. R., & McEwen, M. K. (2007). Reconceptualizing the model of multiple dimensions of identity: The role of meaning-making capacity in the construction of multiple identities. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48, 1–22. doi:10.1353/csd.2007.0000
- Abes, E. S., & Kasch, D. (2007). Using queer theory to explore lesbian college students’ multiple dimensions of identity. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48, 619–636. doi:10.1353/csd.2007.0069
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55, 469–480. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469
- Arnett, J. J. (2016). College students as emerging adults: The developmental implications of the college context. *Emerging Adulthood*, 4, 219–222. doi:10.1177/2167696815587422
- Bassichis, M., & Spade, D. (2015). Queer politics and anti-Blackness. In J. Haritaworn, A. Kuntsman, & S. Posocco (Eds.), *Queer necropolitics* (pp. 191–210). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bilodeau, B. L., & Renn, K. A. (2005). Analysis of LGBT identity development models and implications for practice. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2005, 25–39. doi:10.1002/(ISSN)1536-0695
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Center for American Progress. (2010). *Gay and transgender youth homelessness by the numbers*. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbt/news/2010/06/21/7980/gay-and-transgender-youth-homelessness-by-the-numbers/>
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Charmaz, K., & Belgrave, L. L. (2002). Qualitative interviewing and grounded theory analysis. In J. F. Gubrium, J. A. Holstein, A. B. Marvasti, & K. D. McKinney (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of interview research: The complexity of the craft* (pp. 347–365). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Choi, S. K., Wilson, B. D. M., Shelton, J., & Gates, G. (2015). *Serving our youth 2015: The needs and experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth experiencing homelessness*. Retrieved from <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/1pd9886n#page-2>
- Collins, P. H. (2009). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge.

- Connell, C. (2010). Doing, undoing, or redoing gender? Learning from the workplace experiences of transpeople. *Gender & Society*, 24, 31–55. doi:10.1177/0891243209356429
- Cray, A., Miller, K., & Durso, L. E. (2013). *Seeking shelter: The experiences and unmet needs of LGBT homeless youth*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress.
- Creswell, J. W., & Miller, D. L. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory Into Practice*, 39, 124–130. doi:10.1207/s15430421tip3903\_2
- DeHaan, S., Kuper, L. E., Magee, J. C., Bigelow, L., & Mustanski, B. S. (2013). The interplay between online and offline explorations of identity, relationships, and sex: A mixed-methods study with LGBT youth. *Journal of Sex Research*, 50, 421–434. doi:10.1080/00224499.2012.661489
- Deutsch, F. M. (2007). Undoing gender. *Gender & Society*, 21, 106–127. doi:10.1177/0891243206293577
- Diamond, L. M., & Butterworth, M. (2008). Questioning gender and sexual identity: Dynamic links over time. *Sex Roles*, 59, 365–376. doi:10.1007/s11199-008-9425-3
- Evans, N. (2002). The impact of an LGBT safe zone project on campus climate. *Journal of College Student Development*, 43, 522–539.
- Ferguson, K. M., & Maccio, E. M. (2015). Promising programs for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning runaway and homeless youth. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 41, 659–683.
- Fine, L. E. (2012). The context of creating space: Assessing the likelihood of college LGBT center presence. *Journal of College Student Development*, 53, 285–299. doi:10.1353/csd.2012.0017
- Gangamma, R., Slesnick, N., Toviessi, P., & Serovich, J. (2008). Comparison of HIV risks among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual homeless youth. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 37, 456–464. doi:10.1007/s10964-007-9171-9
- Gates, G. J., & Newport, F. (2012). *Special report: 3.4% of U.S. adults identify as LGBT*. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/158066/special-report-adults-identify-lgbt.aspx>
- Gattis, M. N. (2013). An ecological systems comparison between homeless sexual minority youths and homeless heterosexual youths. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 39, 38–49. doi:10.1080/01488376.2011.633814
- Hollibaugh, A., & Weiss, M. (2015). Queer precarity and the myth of gay affluence. *New Labor Forum*, 24, 18–27. doi:10.1177/1095796015599414
- Horn, S. S., Kosciw, J. G., & Russell, S. T. (2009). Special issue introduction: New research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth: Studying lives in context. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 38, 863–866. doi:10.1007/s10964-009-9420-1
- Hunter, E. (2008). What's good for the gays is good for the gander: Making homeless youth housing safer for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. *Family Court Review*, 46, 543–557. doi:10.1111/j.1744-1617.2008.00220.x
- Jackson, S. (2006). Gender, sexuality and heterosexuality: The complexity (and limits) of heteronormativity. *Feminist Theory*, 7, 105–121. doi:10.1177/1464700106061462
- Jones, S. R., & McEwen, M. K. (2000). A conceptual model of multiple dimensions of identity. *Journal of College Student Development*, 41, 405–414.
- Keuroghlian, A. S., Shtasel, D., & Bassuk, E. L. (2014). Out on the street: A public health and policy agenda for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth who are homeless. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 84, 66–72. doi:10.1037/h0098852
- Lambda Legal. (2009). *National recommended best practices for serving LGBT homeless youth*. New York: Lambda Legal.



- Love, P., Bock, M., Jannarone, A., & Richardson, P. (2005). Identity interaction: Exploring the spiritual experiences of lesbian and gay college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 46, 193–209. doi:10.1353/csd.2005.0019
- Mehta, C. M., & Dementieva, Y. (2016). The contextual specificity of gender: Femininity and masculinity in college students' same- and other-gender peer contexts. *Sex Roles*, 1–11. doi:10.1007/s11199-016-0632-z
- Mottet, L., & Ohle, J. (2006). Transitioning our shelters: Making homeless shelters safe for transgender people. *Journal of Poverty*, 10, 77–101. doi:10.1300/J134v10n02\_05
- National Center on Family Homelessness. (2011). *The characteristics and needs of families experiencing homelessness*. Needham, MA: National Center on Family Homelessness. Retrieved from [www.familyhomelessness.org/media/147.pdf](http://www.familyhomelessness.org/media/147.pdf)
- O'Rand, A. M. (2006). Stratification and the life course: Life course capital, life course risks, and social inequality. In R. H. Binstock & L. K. George (Eds.), *Handbook of aging and the social sciences* (6th ed., pp. 145–162). Burlington, MA: Academic Press.
- Poynter, K. J., & Tubbs, N. J. (2008). Safe zones: Creating LGBT safe space ally programs. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 5, 121–132.
- Pritchard, E. D. (2013). For colored kids who committed suicide, our outrage isn't enough: Queer youth of color, bullying, and the discursive limits of identity and safety. *Harvard Educational Review*, 83, 320–345. doi:10.17763/haer.83.2.7n07k41t2kn26708
- Rankin, S., Weber, G. N., Blumenfeld, W. J., & Frazer, S. (2010). *2010 state of higher education for lesbian, gay, bisexual & transgender people*. Charlotte, NC: Campus Pride.
- Rankin, S. R. (2003). *Campus climate for LGBT people: A national perspective*. New York: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute.
- Ray, N. (2006). *Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth: An epidemic of homelessness*. New York: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless. Retrieved from [http://www.thetaskforce.org/static\\_html/downloads/HomelessYouth.pdf](http://www.thetaskforce.org/static_html/downloads/HomelessYouth.pdf)
- Ream, G. L., & Forge, N. R. (2014). Homeless lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth in New York City: Insights from the field. *Child Welfare*, 93, 7–22.
- Renn, K. A. (2007). LGBT student leaders and queer activists: Identities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer identified college student leaders and activists. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48, 311–330. doi:10.1353/csd.2007.0029
- Ringer, B. (2015). College students experiencing homelessness: The consequence of failed macro policies. *McNair Scholars Research Journal*, 8, 103–124.
- Risman, B. J. (2009). From doing to undoing: Gender as we know it. *Gender & Society*, 23, 81–84. doi:10.1177/0891243208326874
- Rosario, M., Schrimshaw, E. W., & Hunter, J. (2012). Homelessness among lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth: Implications for subsequent internalizing and externalizing symptoms. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 41, 544–560. doi:10.1007/s10964-011-9681-3
- Schilt, K., & Westbrook, L. (2009). Doing gender, doing heteronormativity: "Gender normals," transgender people, and the social maintenance of heterosexuality. *Gender & Society*, 23, 440–464. doi:10.1177/0891243209340034
- Torkelson, J. (2012). A queer vision of emerging adulthood: Seeing sexuality in the transition to adulthood. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 9, 132–142. doi:10.1007/s13178-011-0078-6
- Tyler, K. A. (2008). A comparison of risk factors for sexual victimization among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual homeless young adults. *Violence and Victims*, 23, 586–602. doi:10.1891/0886-6708.23.5.586

- Tyler, K. A., Akinyemi, S. L., & Kort-Butler, L. A. (2012). Correlates of service utilization among homeless youth. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34, 1344–1350. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.03.010
- Vaccaro, A. (2012). Campus microclimates for LGBT faculty, staff, and students: An exploration of the intersections of social identity and campus roles. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 49, 429–446. doi:10.1515/jsarp-2012-6473
- Van Leeuwen, J. M., Boyle, S., Salomonsen-Sautel, S., Baker, D. N., Garcia, J. T., Hoffman, A., & Hopfer, C. J. (2006). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual homeless youth: An eight-city public health perspective. *Child Welfare*, 85, 151–170.
- Wagaman, M. A. (2014). Understanding service experiences of LGBTQ young people through an intersectional lens. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 26, 111–145. doi:10.1080/10538720.2013.866867
- Waller, M. W., & Sanchez, R. P. (2011). The association between same-sex romantic attractions and relationships and running away among a nationally representative sample of adolescents. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 28, 475–493. doi:10.1007/s10560-011-0242-0
- West, C., & Fenstermaker, S. (1995). Doing difference. *Gender & Society*, 9, 8–37. doi:10.1177/089124395009001002
- West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender & Society*, 1(2), 125–151.
- Westbrook, L., & Schilt, K. (2014). Doing gender, determining gender: Transgender people, gender panics, and the maintenance of the sex/gender/sexuality system. *Gender & Society*, 28, 32–57. doi:10.1177/0891243213503203
- Westefeld, J. S., Maples, M. R., Buford, B., & Taylor, S. (2001). Gay, lesbian, and bisexual college students: The relationship between sexual orientation and depression, loneliness, and suicide. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, 15, 71–82. doi:10.1300/J035v15n03\_06
- Woodford, M. R., Han, Y., Craig, S., Lim, C., & Matney, M. M. (2014a). Discrimination and mental health among sexual minority college students: The type and form of discrimination does matter. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, 18, 142–163.
- Woodford, M. R., Kulick, A., Sinco, B. R., & Hong, J. S. (2014b). Contemporary heterosexism on campus and psychological distress among LGBQ students: The mediating role of self-acceptance. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 84, 519–529. doi:10.1037/ort0000015
- Woronoff, R., Estrada, R., Sommer, S., Marzullo, M. A., Ryan, C. A., Downs, C., . . . Karys, P. (2006). *Out of the margins: A report on regional listening forums highlighting the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth in care*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.
- Worthen, M. G. F. (2014). Blaming the jocks and the Greeks? Exploring collegiate athletes' and fraternity/sorority members' attitudes toward LGBT individuals. *Journal of College Student Development*, 55, 168–195. doi:10.1353/csd.2014.0020