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The first-year university experience for sexual minority students: A grounded theory exploration

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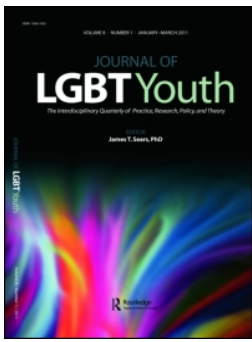
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The first-year university experience for sexual minority students: A grounded theory exploration

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study used grounded theory to understand the role of minority stress on the first-year experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and questioning emerging adults attending a university in the Northeastern part of the United States. Twenty-one lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and questioning sophomores participated in focus groups asking them to reflect on their first-year of university. Themes suggest that participants tackle multiple challenges simultaneously: the developmental task of increased independence and stressors specific to lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and questioning adults such as encountering stigma. Furthermore, participants manifested resilience in response to minority stress. Participants joined campus organizations, expressed pride in their identities, made use of social supports, and sought out safe opportunities to disclose. The discussion concludes with implications for practice and policy.

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Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer; first-year university experience; minority stress; resilience; grounded theory

According to recent estimates, 2.1 million (66%) of the 3.2 million high school graduates in 2012 enrolled in 2- or 4-year colleges the following fall (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Developmentally, these students (ages 18–25 years) find themselves in a stage of life between adolescence and adulthood, first identified by Arnett (2000) as *emerging adulthood*. Emerging adults who attend university experience a kind of semi-autonomy, in which freedom from adult responsibilities allows for protracted explorations in love, work, and worldviews (Arnett, 2000). However, attending university for the first time can also be fraught with stress and anxiety as emerging adults encounter new experiences without the support of parents and long-time friends (Cook, 2007). This stage of life is recognized as one of both heightened risk for psychopathology (Arria et al., 2009; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010) as well as an opportunity for demonstrating resilience in response to earlier experiences of adversity (Burt & Paysnick, 2012).

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Although studies have investigated a host of factors impacting the first-year university experience, research has yet to explore the first-year experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) university students. The first year is likely to pose additional challenges for LGB emerging adults, who not only confront new academic and social experiences but also contend with sexual orientation prejudice (Fine, 2011; Tillapaugh, 2013; Woodford, Kulick, Sinco, & Hong, 2014). Studies indicate that LGB university students are more likely than heterosexual university students to experience stress and mental health problems (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2012; Borders, Guillen, & Meyer, 2014; Kerr, Santurri, & Peters, 2013; Przedworski et al., 2015; Schauer, Berg, & Bryant, 2013). Furthermore, little is known about resilience among LGB university students. Until recently, the higher education literature has tended to focus on deficits among this population (Renn, 2010), thus not investigating their sources of resilience and strength. This study aimed to explore the influence of minority stress on the first-year university experience of LGB emerging adults and to understand the ways in which they manifest resilience during their first year.

Minority stress

The heightened vulnerability to stress among LGB emerging adults is present before entering their first year of university. In high school, and often earlier, sexual minority adolescents encounter victimization and harassment because of their sexual orientation (Grossman et al., 2009; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011) and may experience rejection and even banishment by family members (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2009; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). Given the unique stressors encountered by LGB adolescents, they are more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to be diagnosed with depressive and anxiety disorders (Fergusson, Horwood, & Beautrais, 1999; Marshall et al., 2011). The higher prevalence of psychiatric disorders among LGB populations has been partially explained by minority stress theory. Specifically, prejudice and discrimination create stressful social conditions that cause negative mental health outcomes among sexual minority populations (Meyer, 2003). Meyer (2003) defined four specific minority stress processes: (a) external, objective prejudice events; (b) the expectation of minority stress (e.g., anticipating rejection on sexual minority status) and the vigilance this expectation requires (perceived stigma); (c) the internalization of negative societal attitudes (internalized homophobia); and (d) sexual orientation concealment. These stress processes account for distal minority stressors (objective, external prejudice events) as well as proximal stress processes, or those stemming from individual perceptions and appraisals (i.e., stigma, internalized homophobia, and sexual orientation concealment; Meyer, 2003).

The four minority stress processes can affect LGB individuals in a number of ways. Exposure to external prejudice events requires adaptation to a perpetual state of stress (Brooks, 1981), regardless of whether these stressors are acute or chronic.

When adaptation fails, this may precipitate mental health problems such as anxiety and depression (Alessi, 2014). LGB individuals also contend with perceived stigma, which is the expectation of being rejected on the basis of one's marginalized status (Link, 1987). Stigmatized individuals continuously find themselves subject to the scrutiny of others and must question the accuracy of this perception (Goffman, 1963). Goffman's (1963) groundbreaking work on stigma has been used to understand the higher prevalence of mental health problems among LGB people (see Meyer, 2003; Hatzenbuehler, 2009). Two recent meta-analyses provided further support for the negative relation between perceived discrimination and psychological well-being (Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014). However, the pioneering research of Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, and Major (1991) has demonstrated that stigma may also have protective properties when outcomes related to prejudice are attributed to others rather than oneself.

In addition to objective prejudice events and perceived stigma, LGB individuals deal with internalized homophobia, which is defined as the LGB person's direction of negative societal attitudes toward the self (Meyer & Dean, 1998). Internalized homophobia does not stem from individual pathology or personality traits but is fueled by heterosexism and prejudice toward sexual minorities (Russell & Bohan, 2006). In other words, while internalized homophobia is considered an internal process, the minority stress framework locates it as social stressor stemming from negative attitudes toward LGB people (Frost & Meyer, 2009). Studies indicate that internalized homophobia correlates with low self-esteem (Rowen & Malcolm, 2003), anxiety and depression (Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010), and relationship difficulties (Frost & Meyer, 2009). Although internalized homophobia may subside as LGB individuals become more comfortable with their sexual orientation, it never fully dissipates because heterosexist norms are entrenched in the structures of society (Huebner, Davis, Nemeroff, & Aiken, 2002; Meyer, 2003). Last, the effort involved in concealing one's sexual identity has cognitive, emotional, and behavioral implications (Pachankis, 2007). Pachankis (2007) identified multiple stressful aspects of concealing a stigmatized identity, such as having to regularly make decisions about whether to disclose one's identity; feeling anxious about whether others will discern the stigma; being isolated from others who could potentially provide support; and being detached from one's true self.

LGB emerging adults may be at increased risk for mental health problems, but there is concern that focusing solely on their vulnerabilities obscures their capacity for resilience (Russell, 2005). Rather than being viewed as passive victims of minority stress, many demonstrate agency when it comes to making decisions about how to deal with prejudice and discrimination (Wexler, DiFluvio, & Burke, 2009). *Resilience* has been defined as "a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). The process of resilience evolves with development—especially for LGB emerging adults—since changing life circumstances present the opportunity to make use of one's strengths (Luthar et al., 2000). For example, one study demonstrated that

LGB emerging adults manifested resilience by resisting discrimination, finding safe people and places, and affirming the naturalness of sexual diversity (Scourfield, Roen, & McDermott, 2008). In another study, Fine (2011) interviewed LGB undergraduate students from two universities in the United States, and he found that these students minimized experiences of prejudice and discrimination as a strategy to navigate daily life, while also working to actively confront homophobia and heterosexism.

The university experience

Managing social and academic demands as well as issues of disclosure can be especially challenging for first-year LGB university students (Sanlo, 2004; Stroup, Glass, & Cohn, 2014). Successful adjustment to university requires first-year students to develop a sense of autonomy, manage their emotions, and engage in goal-oriented tasks without supervision (Johnson, Gans, Kerr, & LaValle, 2010). For LGB university students, the increased demands of emerging adulthood must be balanced alongside meeting new peers in an environment that can be potentially hostile toward sexual minority students. Compared with earlier generations, more LGB university students arrive at university having already come out in high school or earlier (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). At the same time, emerging adults are coming of age at a time when growing political support for same-sex relationships is coupled with increasing backlash against the gains made by the LGB community (Frost, Meyer, & Hammack, 2015). To this end, studies have explored the difficulties of being a LGB university student (Fine, 2011; Tillapaugh, 2013) but have not yet explored the experiences of first-year LGB students specifically.

Sexual minority university students can experience coming out as uniquely challenging and therefore have to adapt their degree of disclosure on the basis of the environmental context and their assessment of risk (Tillapaugh, 2013). For many LGB emerging adults, the university environment includes direct harassment and discrimination such as derogatory remarks, verbal threats, written comments, and physical assault (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010; Woodford, Kulick et al., 2014). In addition, LGB college students may experience subtle forms of discrimination (Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz, & Yu, 2012), commonly referred to as *microaggressions* (Sue et al., 2007). *Microaggressions* are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward members of oppressed groups” (Nadal, 2008, p. 23). Examples of microaggressions encountered by LGB adolescents include hearing phrases such as “That’s so gay,” being told not to act gay in public, and feeling objectified (Nadal et al., 2011). One study showed that 65% of male heterosexual undergraduates reported saying “That’s so gay” at least once on campus in the past 12 months (Woodford, Howell, Kulick, & Silverschanz, 2013). These subtle forms of heterosexism are associated with symptoms of physical and emotional distress (Woodford, Han,

Craig, Lim, & Matney, 2014; Woodford, Kulick et al., 2014) as well as decreased academic and social engagement among LGB students (Woodford & Kulick, 2015).

A recent study found that although microaggressions contribute to psychological distress among LGB college students, this relationship was mediated by self-acceptance (Woodford, Kulick et al., 2014). Physical exercise, having LGB friends, and positive relationships with faculty members have also been shown to buffer the effects of heterosexist harassment (Woodford, Kulick & Atteberry, 2015). The presence of social support from family, friends, and members of the LGB community can help sexual minorities to cope with minority stress (Kwon, 2013). Affiliation with the LGB community may help to offset isolation and promote positive identity development (Wexler et al., 2009).

The present study

This exploratory study aimed to (a) understand the first-year university experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and questioning (LGBQQ) emerging adults; and (b) explore how these adults manifest resilience in their university environment. This grounded theory study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How did participants experience their first year of university?
2. How did minority stress influence their first year?
3. What were the processes through which participants managed elements of minority stress during their first year?

The motivation for the present study emerged 3 years after a student, Tyler Clementi, committed suicide during his first year of university. The story received national attention given the circumstances involved in the case. Without Tyler's knowledge, Tyler's roommate streamed footage online of Tyler's intimate sexual encounter with another male student; Tyler subsequently ended his life the following day (Human Rights Commission, 2014). This led us to question the phenomenon of sexual minority students' transition from high school to university.

Method

Participants and procedure

The final sample consisted of 21 participants, of which 11 identified as female and 10 as male. The majority ($n = 18$) were 19 years old, and the remainder was 20 years old. They identified their sexual orientation as lesbian ($n = 3$), gay ($n = 3$), bisexual ($n = 9$; 7 women, 2 men), queer ($n = 1$), and questioning ($n = 1$). Participants identified their race/ethnicity as Hispanic/Latino ($n = 7$), White ($n = 7$), Asian ($n = 4$), Black ($n = 2$), and Middle Eastern ($n = 1$). They reported first becoming aware of their same-sex physical attraction between the ages of 8 to 16.5 years old ($M = 12.45$ years). Of the 21 participants, 12 reported that they were currently not out to their parents, and 9 participants reported that they were out to a least one

parent. The age at which 19 participants disclosed their sexual orientation to someone besides their parents ranged from 13 to 19 years ($M = 16.55$ years). There were 2 participants who had not told anyone about their sexual orientation.

We used purposive sampling to recruit participants from a large public university in the Northeastern United States. Flyers were posted in campus centers and residence halls, and a study announcement was e-mailed to potential participants through the university's listserv for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students and faculty. To participate in this study, participants had to (a) be at least 18 years old, (b) identify as LGBQQ, and (c) be second-year university students who completed their freshman year in the spring or summer of 2013. We recruited second-year undergraduate students because we expected that second-year students would have gained some perspective with which to reflect upon their first-year experience. Interested students contacted the first author, who, along with the second author, conducted phone screenings to ensure that individuals met eligibility criteria and were comfortable participating in a focus group. Participants received US\$65 for their participation in the focus groups. The first author's university's institutional review board granted approval for the study.

Data collection

Data were collected from three focus groups conducted in October and November 2013. Focus groups are a valuable tool for exploring social and psychological processes among diverse populations, providing direct access to language that participants use to think and talk about their experiences (Hughes & Dumont, 1993). The first author moderated the focus groups. He identifies as a gay White male and has more than 14 years of clinical experience. The presence of a moderator identifying as LGBQQ can help to create a space that provides focus group members with the safety to share their experiences of prejudice with one another (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011). The primary investigator responded to participants' descriptions with empathic statements, helping to facilitate an environment where probes could be used to gain access to rich descriptions of participants' experiences. To ensure that his experiences of minority stress did not prevent the development of new perspectives to emerge, he monitored his biases using self-reflective memos. These self-reflective memos helped him to examine whether he projected his biases or assumptions onto participants (Hall & Callery, 2011). To provide additional insight into the investigation, the second author was present in each of the focus groups (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011). She identifies as female, White, and a straight ally and was selected as a process observer because of her research interests in adolescent development and her clinical experience with adolescents. The process observer recorded her reflections in the form of memos, which were included as part of the data collection process (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011).

There were 7 participants in the first focus group, 6 in the second, and 8 in the third. The focus groups lasted 120 to 130 min, were digitally recorded, and were

professionally transcribed. Before each focus group, participants reviewed and signed the study consent forms and completed a demographic questionnaire. They also answered questions about coming out milestones adapted from a study by Floyd and Bakeman (2006). Next, the primary investigator discussed the ground rules for participation (e.g., respect for one another, one person speaks at a time, and confidentiality) and asked the participants to sign a group confidentiality agreement emphasizing the importance of keeping group members' information private. The focus group protocol was developed through a review of the literature on the first-year university experience and minority stress. The first author asked the following questions:

1. How did you feel about starting university?
2. Did you experience prejudice or discrimination involving your sexual orientation during your first year?
3. Did you feel people would judge you or think less of you for being LGBQQ during your first year (perceived stigma)?
4. Did you avoid contact with other people, or feel uncomfortable about being LGBQQ during your first year (internalized homophobia)?
5. Did you feel the need to hide, conceal, or not talk about your sexual orientation or lifestyle during your first year (sexual orientation concealment)?

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This type of analysis allows for the generation of theory that is based on a set of systematically related themes, which are used to form a framework to explain a pertinent social or psychological phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It invites the weaving together of extant theories into the analysis, while remaining open to discovery throughout analysis of the data (Padgett, 2008). In this study, the theoretical construct of minority stress served as a sensitizing concept to guide—but not constrain—the analysis. The first three authors independently coded the transcripts using open coding, which involves breaking down the data into discrete parts, closely examining it, and then comparing it for similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The third author identifies as a straight White female and an ally. She has significant clinical practice experience with sexual minorities and uses qualitative research to understand their unique experiences. Before developing the final list of codes, the three authors met to discuss the findings. They discussed disagreements until reaching consensus and then engaged in axial coding to create connections between codes and categories, which were compared until no new ones emerged from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Relying on theoretical constructs aligned with minority stress theory allowed for saturation sooner than the use of less structured inquiry (Padgett, 2008). Last, the three authors moved toward the development of key themes, guided by sensitizing concepts representing the four domains of minority stress; at this point, the fourth author was brought in to contribute to theme development. She identifies as White

and lesbian, has extensive clinical practice experience with sexual minority youth, and has conducted numerous studies that examined the mental health of sexual minority youth.

We used a number of strategies to enhance data trustworthiness. We used memos to record our ideas, reflections, and biases throughout the coding process. Memoing helped us shift our thinking about single incidents to emerging patterns and themes (Rennie et al., 1988). We participated in peer co-coding and debriefing meetings to review and refine codes, and our different areas of expertise (i.e., minority stress, adolescent development, qualitative research, and sexual minority adolescents) allowed for investigator triangulation (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014). We also searched for evidence that disconfirmed the emerging themes, kept track of all research processes and decisions, and invited participants to review the focus group transcripts and emergent themes (Padgett, 2008). However, none of participants chose to do so.

Researcher biases and assumptions

We assumed that participants would describe experiencing a number of challenges during their first year of university and that many of these challenges would relate to minority stress. There was also the assumption that participants would report situations in which they manifested resilience during their first year. We acknowledged our biases and challenged one another as we moved from initial coding to final theme development. Disagreements were openly discussed during peer-debriefing meetings. Doing so ensured that coding of the data and subsequent theme development stayed as close to the data as possible. This meant moving beyond existing conceptualizations of minority stress to generate theory grounded in the social and psychological processes of first-year LGBQQ university students.

Results

The themes provided insight into the first-year university experience for LGBQQ emerging adults. Participants reported that they spent a period of time *settling in*, requiring them to balance academic expectations with the social realities of university. Themes also encompassed a trajectory that captured their experiences of minority stress. [Figure 1](#) illustrates these themes, which are subsequently discussed in detail. We used pseudonyms to protect participants' confidentiality.

Anticipating and preparing for the first year

Participants expressed excitement about the opportunity to attend a university recognized for its large and diverse student body, because doing so offered them the possibility of feeling less marginalized than they had felt in high school. Alex described her excitement about the prospect of being more open about her sexual orientation:

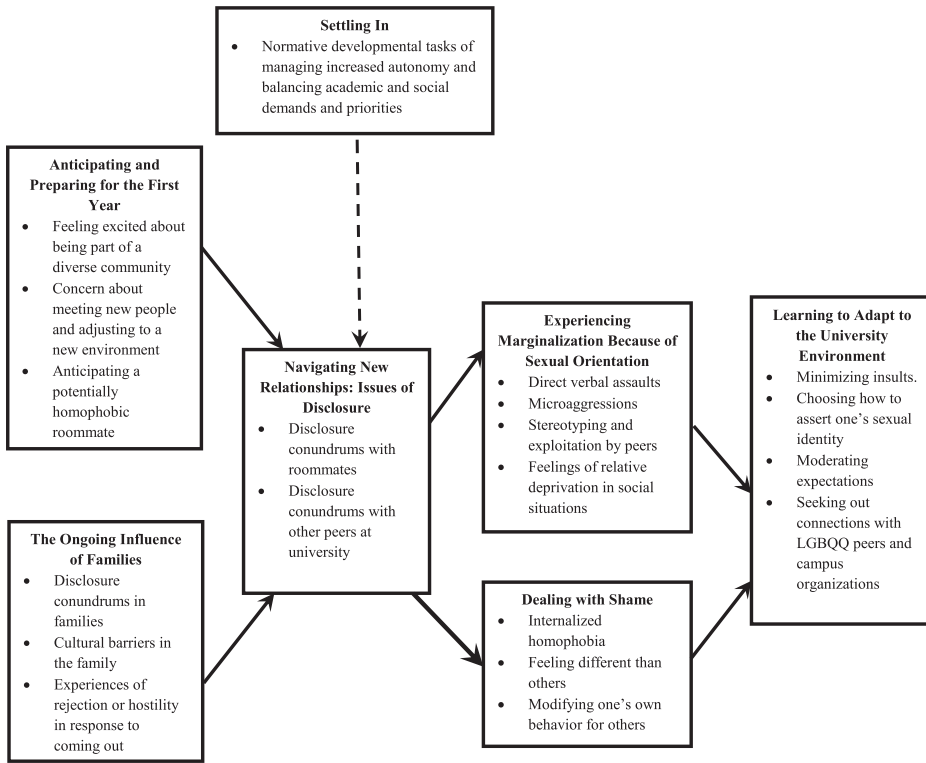


Figure 1. Themes from lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and questioning students’ experience of the transition from high school to university.

So during high school I just felt like I had to keep that a secret, and like only my best friend knew, and a few other people. But I was really excited to come here because like it’s ... a big community here, and it’s a diverse community, so I felt as if I’d see more people like me, there’d be more people that are part of the LGBT community ...

Although participants expressed excitement, they reported concerns about taking college courses, meeting new people, living away from home, adjusting to the university environment, and selecting a roommate. Participants talked about their desire to protect their potential roommates from the discomfort that might accompany living with someone identifying as LGBQQ. At the same time, participants tried to prepare themselves for the real possibility of being rejected. As Eley explained:

I was hoping that [my] roommate wasn’t gonna be religious or would have any type of ... homophobia. Because I thought that like eventually, even if I didn’t tell my roommate that I was a homosexual or lesbian, that like she would eventually find out, and I didn’t want her to be uncomfortable or have to switch ...

To deal with his concerns about being rejected, Sean used a website to match him with a gay roommate. However, he still encountered difficulties, because his potential roommate had concerns that Sean’s boyfriend might spend too much

time in their dorm room. Consequently, they decided not to live together before the fall semester began:

Then I got really nervous again because I was like, now I'm gonna get someone random ... But I ended up with someone who was cool and everything was fine. But the person I was supposed to be with before him actually backed out being my roommate because his parents didn't want him rooming with someone who was gay.

Similar to Sean, other participants expressed that their efforts to prepare for their first year were not always as successful as they might have hoped, resulting in anxiety even for those who were out.

The ongoing influence of families

In anticipation of their first year of university, participants looked forward to exploring their sexuality with greater freedom. However, as emerging adults in the process of identity exploration, they encountered multiple disclosure conundrums regarding their families of origin. Participants' families featured prominently in the stories that they shared, serving as reminders of unresolved tensions and past hurt that accompanied them when starting their first year of university. Elijah described his concern about being rejected by parents whose cultural and religious affiliation strongly influenced their attitudes toward LGBTQ people and, in turn, contributed to his need to “compensate” for being gay:

In hopes I wouldn't get the rejection, I've tried to like combat it, like prevent them from caring [about my sexual orientation]. I try to like make my parents like proud in like every other aspect of my life, trying to like see that like I'm doing good in my life, like ... I'm a student leader on campus, I join organizations, I'm—like my grades are good.

Lucas also stated that his parents' strong cultural affiliation contributed to his concerns about coming out to them. He reported that before starting university he identified as bisexual, instead of gay, because he thought it would be easier for his parents to accept him if he was attracted to men and women. However, when Lucas started his first year he realized he was attracted to men only:

It was a pretty dark time for me because I was just afraid what my parents were going to say and how people at school would treat me and view me. And when I did come out eventually, my parents—well, they weren't on the boat with it. They were pretty angry, depressed and all that. They're used—they're okay with it now, but they, you know, they hope too that one day I'm just going to, you know, get married with a girl and all that ...

The ongoing tension pertaining to concealment versus disclosure created a chronic source of stress for participants, regardless of their racial and ethnic identification. There was pressure to conceal, but at the same time there was a desire to come out. As a result of this tension, participants entered university knowing that their parents did not support their need to be open about their sexual orientation. Although they could explore their sexuality without their parents finding out, they

were fearful of potential banishment and consequent withdrawal of financial support should their parents learn the truth. Those who had come out to their parents reported reactions ranging from acceptance to avoidance to intense emotional distress. Participants whose parents were aware that they identified as LGBQQ reported that they felt comfortable confiding in them when in need of support that they could not get from friends. Furthermore, they felt they could be themselves when returning home during breaks or times of stress.

Navigating new relationships: Issues of disclosure

Participants reported spending much of their first year navigating new relationships, which involved scanning the environment in search of cues about whether or not it was safe to disclose their sexual orientation or to behave in ways not considered stereotypically male or female. This theme was especially poignant when participants had to make decisions about whether or not to disclose to roommates. For instance, Jay decided to come out to her roommate immediately. However, doing so did not make things easier for her. Her roommate ended up kicking Jay out halfway through the semester:

So my old roommate, one thing I noticed about her was that she always got dressed like under a towel. And it was really awkward for me 'cause it was like 7:00 in the morning, she's getting ready to go to class, I didn't want to like go sit out in the hallway so she could get dressed, but it was just awkward for me. And then I didn't really think anything of it until I moved in with my second roommate and we just ... dealt with it.

Other participants offered their roommates subtle hints, rather than disclosing their sexual orientation outright. For example, Alex hoped that her roommate would ask about the Pride pin on her backpack:

And the funny thing was [laughs], like a few weeks ago one of my friends told me that my roommate saw my Pride pin and thought that she meant I had pride for [this university]. [laughter] She's originally from India, so I thought it was so funny, now like thinking back on it. ... But eventually I ended up just telling her because I didn't want to like keep it a secret anymore. So it went well. We're still rooming together.

On the other hand, some did not feel it was safe to discuss their sexual orientation with their first-year roommates because they had expressed homophobic sentiments either overtly or covertly. Bob discussed his concerns about living with a roommate who he described as "macho," making him feel uncomfortable at times: "We became friends and everything, but I still to this day have never really told him anything ... I kind of had to do that like straight façade that I always had to do, 'cause I was an athlete."

In addition to roommates, participants navigated a wide range of social contacts in their first year (i.e., from friendly acquaintances to new friends), and they reported struggling to determine the appropriate time to disclose their sexual orientation. Alex explained her decision to use discretion when self-disclosing

because: "... I didn't want it to be assumed that like if you're friends with me and I'm a lesbian and you happen to be a girl that ... I'm checking you out or things like that." Participants reported that they were concerned about being judged for not conforming to heterosexual norms, increasing their anxiety in certain social situations.

Experiencing marginalization because of sexual orientation

Participants' statements suggested that heterosexism and homophobia were embedded in the structure of the university environment. They encountered a continuum of marginalization experiences that ranged from microaggressions to targeted verbal assaults. At the subtle end, participants related a phenomenon in which feelings between them and a straight peer shifted after they disclosed their sexual orientation. Sam described this experience as "an awkward type of like vibe going on" between her and her friend. Next along the continuum was the pejorative use of the term *gay* by straight peers. As Sean stated: "hearing the word 'gay' offends me in the way the 'n word' would offend a black person." Embedded in the everyday language of their peers, the term *gay* often arose unexpectedly and casually. Participants also spoke about hearing other derogatory terms. For example, Dwayne mentioned feeling perplexed when his heterosexual female friend called herself a "fag hag": "I think it sounds stupid that she's describing herself as someone who like associates themselves with gay people more than any other person, like I'm her pet or something." Not all participants experienced feelings of exploitation when friends used such terms. For example, Sean stated: "I have friends that will call themselves fag hags too, just because they really like gay people."

Along the marginalization continuum were experiences of direct and targeted behavior at university. Male participants reported hearing the word *faggot* hurled as a threat as well as suffering the stares of others. As Ray explained: "It's just something that happened that, which like every time like I'm with my friend, I get—I definitely always get stares, you know. People always stare." In addition to the continuum of insults built into the linguistic and/or behavioral norms of the university environment, participants experienced overt stereotyping by peers. For example, gay participants reported that peers sometimes assumed that they listened to certain types of music or identified as either a "top" or "bottom," while bisexual participants had to contend with the stereotype that they were promiscuous. As Naomi described: "If you go to a party you're like making out with girls and making out with guys and like I guess people expect you to wanna have a threesome. That's really crazy awkward, man."

Experiences of marginalization involved deprivation-based comparisons with heterosexual peers, too. Although social activities sponsored by fraternities are ubiquitous in universities, participants reported that fraternity parties often precluded opportunities for them to freely seek out sexual encounters. They described

feeling left behind and mentioned experiencing a mix of fatigue and apprehension during fraternity parties intended for straight students. Stephanie reported:

... Let's say I just want to like dance with like a different girl or something, but ... it's so hard. You won't know if they're like also, and you don't wanna creep them out, like, 'Hey, do you wanna dance?' They'll be like, 'Why?'

Participants described that having few options for meeting other sexual minority students left them yearning to partake in the same level of sexual exploration as their straight peers. Some mentioned that attending these events left them feeling lonely, especially when the evening ended without meeting other LGBQQ people.

Dealing with shame

Experiencing marginalization precipitated feelings of alienation from the self and others, and participants reported that they sometimes wished they did not identify as LGBQQ. This feeling did not vary between those who were completely out and those who were only out to a few people. Eley described her feelings after learning that some of her peers left the bathroom when she entered the shower in her dorm: "If you're running, like—and like a couple people running quickly, then it makes me feel like, oh, the monster just entered and let me just run away." A common theme emerging from the focus groups was the feeling of shame associated with expressing one's sexual identity in the university environment. For example, Ray expressed the need to temper certain behaviors when spending time with his heterosexual peers, or those perceived to be heterosexual:

I mean it kinda sounds bad, but I almost feel like a little bit embarrassed when they like see me like with my other group of friends acting like, you know, a little more flamboyant ... it makes me almost want to apologize to them for, like, making them see me like that.

Others discussed the concern that LGBQQ who could not pass as straight may make it more difficult for those who wanted to fit in. As Kat stated:

You feel like that's almost hurting it for the rest of us, who are not as out there. You know, so if there is a gay guy who is, you know, wearing a bright pink shirt and speaking with a lisp about a Broadway musical, you feel like some straight person who's not very knowledgeable might think, 'Oh, that's what all gay guys are like.'

For some, feelings of shame precipitated the need to hide and close themselves off to meeting new people. However, participants also described how their first-year experience helped to bolster a more positive self-concept. Ken explained: "Coming to college definitely made—shifted my mindset, so that I thought that being gay was not a negative thing, that it was something that I could be—that I could be proud of, that I could be open."

Learning to adapt to the university environment

When faced with discrimination and prejudice during their first year, participants used a number of strategies to protect and empower themselves. For example, Sean described how he minimized his response to a peer who tried to antagonize him by saying, ‘You’re so gay!’:

It really wasn’t that serious ’cause I just laughed it off and I was like, ‘... I don’t know, are you trying to insult me or something?’ Like ... it’s not like I don’t tell people this. Yeah, like I am gay, so what’s the big deal?

Participants also described situations in which they choose to freely assert their identities through dress, haircuts, or non-gender-normative activities. For instance, Elsey chose to dress in ways that felt authentic to her, while also acknowledging that a more traditionally feminine style might have allowed her to pass as heterosexual:

I felt kind of like, a bit like left out because it—it just seemed like I was, I guess because of the way I dress, and I skateboard and it’s just a stereotype to be a lesbian right off the bat, and it’s like I can’t—I’m not gonna not skateboard and not do these things because I don’t want people to know my sexuality.

Developing supportive relationships and establishing ties with organizations that allowed participants to meet other LGBQQ students helped to decrease feelings of isolation. The decision to seek connections with other LGBQQ students and to join LGBQQ campus organizations marked a significant turning point for participants during their first year. Dwayne’s comments illustrated this defining moment:

... I knew there were all these groups and different clubs and organizations for LGBT people, but I kind of ignored, like I kind of stayed away from them ’cause I was scared of coming out—because at this point I hadn’t really come out to anyone. And then, yeah, like a month into school I went and joined a few of these and, you know, went to the fall reception and—and it was fine after that.

Participants described the value of becoming friends with other LGBQQ students. Seeking authentic friendships was an important part of their first-year experience. However, participants who were not totally out described hesitation about initiating contact with campus groups that offer ways to meet other LGBQQ students. Others reported being unaware of events designed for LGBQQ students. They mentioned that having at least one “out” friend was crucial for providing support when it came to attending campus events for sexual minorities, as it helped them to manage feelings of discomfort that could emerge when attending these events on one’s own.

Discussion

This exploratory study aimed to understand the role of minority stress on the first-year university experience for LGBQQ emerging adults. Themes suggest that

participants not only had to balance academic expectations with the social realities of college, but also had to deal with stressors exclusive to their sexual orientation. The first-year experience for LGBQQ university students can be conceptualized along a trajectory in which common developmental issues coincide with minority stress. We expected that participants' newfound independence would challenge as well as encourage them to explore, but this was more complicated than expected. Having greater freedom did not mean that participants were ready to explore their same-sex attractions and feelings. They were still trying to discover what it means to identify as LGBQQ, and this occurred at the same time they were adjusting to university. Similar to Tillapaugh's (2013) findings, participants coming from families with strong ethnic or religious affiliations experienced additional challenges. There was concern that their parents' traditional religious and cultural beliefs would make it difficult for them to understand that LGBQQ people could be in committed relationships, get married, and have children. Parental support can be critical at a time when LGBQQ emerging adults are not only adjusting to their first year of university but also trying to manage minority stress.

The themes also shed light on how minority stress influences the first-year experience for some LGBQQ university students. Participants frequently experienced sexual orientation microaggressions, which was consistent with previous research (Nadal et al., 2011; Woodford et al., 2012; Woodford, Han et al., 2014). They heard the phrase "you're so gay" and the word "gay" used in a derogatory manner. Gay male participants reported being defined as tops or bottoms, while bisexual female participants reported being labeled as promiscuous. Although much less common, they also encountered direct forms of discrimination including stares, snickers, and threatening remarks. Participants contended with perceived stigma even before entering university, especially when selecting roommates. They were anxious about being rejected and were concerned about making potential roommates uncomfortable. This suggests that in the early stages of sexual identity development, some LGBQQ emerging adults may be acutely aware of their stigmatized status. Rather than externalizing the problem (e.g., holding roommates accountable for being homophobic), they may worry about making others feel uncomfortable (Borders et al., 2014). This tended to occur regardless of whether participants were out or not. Participants were not aware of how homophobia and heterosexism contributed to feeling different than their straight peers. Similar to previous studies, decisions pertaining to sexual orientation disclosure presented a challenge for participants (Evans & Broido, 2002; Stroup et al., 2014; Tillapaugh, 2013). They tended to adapt their degree of disclosure on the basis of specific situations and their assessment of risk. Managing issues of disclosure not only provoked anxiety but also required extra time and energy that they reported could have been directed toward settling in (e.g., learning time management skills, managing procrastination). Participants described the multitude of consequences that come along with concealing a stigma including vigilance, shame, and social avoidance (Pachankis, 2007). Contending with minority stress also took time away from their

studies, which was similar to previous research (Silverschanz, Cortina, Konik, & Magley, 2008; Woodford & Kulick, 2015).

Focus group discussions tended to center around participants' descriptions of these proximal-level minority stress processes (i.e., stigma, internalized homophobia, and sexual orientation concealment), and similar to previous studies they manifested an extraordinary ability to adapt to the university environment (Fine, 2011; Kingsbury, 2011; Tillapaugh, 2013). They were able to recover from situations that left them feeling confused, uncomfortable, or silenced. Participants managed minority stressors by directly confronting homophobia when provoked by certain peers, freely asserting their sexual identity through dress and haircuts, establishing ties with supportive faculty and staff members at university, joining LGBQQ-related organizations, and seeking connections with other sexual minority students. Participants described situations in which they felt it was important to assert their sexual identity in order to feel authentic, even if it meant facing ridicule by peers. Moreover, participants manifested resilience in much more subtle and nuanced ways. Selective disclosure was actually a way for participants to protect themselves from situations that could be potentially dangerous. Participants also learned to temper their expectations, especially when it came to socializing. Although they felt straight events and fraternity parties could be alienating, participants framed these events as opportunities to connect with peers and to relax with friends.

Implications for practice and policy

To harness the resilience and strengths of first-year LGBQQ students, findings suggest that prevention efforts need to be implemented as early as possible. This could be accomplished by conducting orientation sessions catered to first-year LGBQQ students; training residential life staff to identify sexual minority students struggling during their first year, including those who may not be out or may be questioning their sexuality; developing outreach programs that educate LGBQQ students about first-year challenges and available support services; and providing safe spaces. Counselors also need to provide first-year students information about sexual identity development as a way of reiterating that LGBQQ orientations are a normal aspect of identity development. Helping first-year students to challenge negative societal attitudes may help to decrease feelings of shame about identifying as LGBQQ (Davies, 1996) and therefore may indirectly support academic development (Sorgen, 2011). Providing education about the effects of heterosexism and homophobia may also help to empower first-year sexual minority students who may feel they are to blame for some of the unique challenges they encounter. Sexual minority students with strong racial/ethnic affiliations would also benefit from discussions about the intersectional impact of familial and cultural values with minority stress (Balsam et al., 2011; Meyer, 2010). Campus officials should organize regular social events that offer first-year students the opportunity to explore their emerging sexual and romantic feelings in spaces that affirm LGBQQ identities.

Students who are not ready to disclose their sexual identities may benefit from exposure to on-campus signage and physical spaces (e.g., LGBT centers) and online resources that affirm sexual minority identities. Knowing about safe spaces on campus can reduce anxiety and encourage closeted students to disclose when they feel comfortable (Tillapaugh, 2013). Additionally, affirming faculty members play an important role in ensuring that sexual minority students are able to develop and thrive in a university setting. Faculty members should create classroom environments that are free of heterosexist bias and should educate students about the negative impact of sexual orientation microaggressions on LGBQQ students. Last, universities must develop and enforce institutional policies that protect sexual minority students from prejudice in all aspects of campus life (Rankin, 2003; Rankin et al., 2010).

Limitations and future research

The present study had some noteworthy limitations. First, recruitment of participants was limited to one university in the Northeast, and therefore, themes may not be applicable to all LGBQQ university students. Given the exploratory nature of the study, it needs to be replicated with LGBQQ college students from more than one geographic area. We also recognize that future research should explore the experiences of transgender students to understand the challenges that they encounter during their first year of university. This study did not include transgender students in order to avoid the conceptual and methodological problems that can occur from combining sexual minority and transgender identities in one study. The experiences of LGBQQ college students tend to differ from transgender college students, who contend with prejudice stemming from social norms that privilege individuals whose gender aligns with their birth sex (Efrig, Bieschke, & Locke, 2011; Pusch, 2005). Future research would also benefit from understanding how the first-year university experience may differ between students who were out before college and those who came out during their first year. Students who are already out may not be dealing with disclosure issues to the same extent and thus may feel more comfortable embracing their LGBQQ identities. Second, we used only one method of data collection. Conducting one-on-one interviews with LGBQQ students, in addition to focus groups, would have served as a form of data triangulation. One-on-one interviews would also be appropriate for students who may be uncomfortable in group settings. Third, the use of sensitizing concepts indicates that we did not use full induction in applying grounded theory techniques (Padgett, 2007). Although we conducted the analyses in ways that left us open to new insights (e.g., the ongoing influence of families), it is possible that we overlooked others (Padgett, 2007). Last, we did not fully explore the influence of race and ethnicity on the experiences of first-year LGBQQ university students. Additional questions might have yielded themes regarding the intersection of sexual and racial/ethnic prejudice. Future research would benefit from exploring the

experiences of first-year university students holding more than one minority identity. Longitudinal research could help to demonstrate how experiences of minority stress change over time, especially when trying to understand how students manage stress related to their sexual and racial/ethnic identities.

Despite the study's limitations, there were a number of strengths. The use of qualitative inquiry allowed participants to provide rich descriptions of their first-year experience. The themes emerging from the data provide a solid foundation for future research, especially as scholars continue to explore the influence of stigma, internalized homophobia, and sexual orientation concealment on the first-year experience of LGBQQ students. Researchers using quantitative methods may draw from these findings to develop questionnaires that examine the role of these proximal-level processes on their university experiences. The current study also serves as an important reminder for counselors and university staff members to consider the role of resilience in buffering the negative effects of minority stress among LGBQQ university students. Fostering supportive relationships across campus can strengthen their inherent resilience and help to ensure a more successful transition to their first year of university.

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