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Abstract

When people receive supportive listening, they are more likely to be able to address their problems more clearly, feel better, have more satisfying relationships, as well as be less likely to be rejected by their peers (Burleson, 2003). Therefore, it is alarming that instead of supportive listening, lesbian and gay support seekers often face embarrassment, hostility, suspicion, pity, and condescension when they discuss their problems with friends, family, or even mental health staff (Hughes et al., 2018). In this qualitative research ($N = 27$), positioned at the intersection of interpersonal communication and queer studies, the resilience-related elements of supportive listening situations are examined. The research broadens the perspective related to the assumption that being listened to is an empowering experience when it focuses on the experiences of lesbians and of gay men regarding situations in which they have felt or been excluded because of their sexual orientation. The results of the narrative analysis indicate that in supportive listening situations, the elements contributing to resilience are the person-centeredness of the supportive listener's messages, the ability to make sense of the experience and the reasons leading to it, and temporal distance when closely attached to the first two elements. If supportive listening is low person-centered, and/or shared sense-making is missing or fails, it hinders the participants' ability to engage their resilience capacity and affects the long-term attributions and relevance given to the experience. Therefore, the listening that support-seekers receive in a support-seeking situation may help them recover from an ostracizing experience, but it can also reactivate the traumatic memories and reinforce the experience of exclusion.

Keywords: resilience, interpersonal communication, supportive listening, ostracism, sense-making, sexual minority

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Humans have an innate need to be a part of social groups (Williams, 2007). The experiences of fitting in and belonging have been noted to boost our physical and mental health (Sommer et al., 2001), as well as self-esteem and sense of identity (Gillig et al., 2019). However, people often encounter situations in which they are denied a sense of inclusion. This can be done in various ways, but this study focuses on the communicative aspect of exclusion. This approach stems from the theoretical background of the research as it positions itself within social constructivism in which the creation of reality is constructed through social communicative acts.

As individuals often experience the sense of belonging with people like them, these excluding experiences are more commonly present in the lives of minorities (Craig et al., 2017). These experiences occur although representatives of minorities often use a great number of strategies, such as avoiding expressing their sexual orientation or putting in more effort to accomplish a task than their straight coworkers, to avoid exclusion (Miller & Major, 2000). From the perspective of this study, this regulation of self-expression is a very interesting notion, as the study focuses on listener feedback and the relation it has to the well-being of the speaker. Previous research suggests that the need to use these strategies diminishes empowerment, as when people must prove themselves worthy of equal treatment or hide important aspects of themselves, they are likely to experience a vital lack of control over their own lives (Miller & Major, 2000). In this research, the ostracizing (meaning socially excluding; Williams, 2007) experiences of sexual minorities, that is, representatives of lesbian and gay communities, form the contextual framework.

Ostracizing situations have been noted to cause emotional stress and discomfort (Sommer et al., 2001), and recovering from these emotionally negative experiences may take considerable effort. To do that, people need *resilience*, that is, the ability to adapt positively when confronted with adversity and recover from difficulties (Luthar, 2003). Previous researchers (Kocjan et al., 2021) suggested that resilience is a personality feature that some people have since birth but also a

learned way to react to things. It may take time, but with healthy connections as well as positive thinking and accurate meaning-making, it is possible to increase resilience (Houston & Buzzanell, 2018). Many of these elements of increasing resilience are based on constructive communication relations. However, in situations in which people feel excluded, or ostracized, the communication is often negative; thus, resilience-increasing interaction must be sought elsewhere. In this study, the goal is to understand how supportive listening increase resilience when lesbian and gay individuals seek support after experiencing exclusion.

Previous studies conducted among sexual minorities (Bry et al., 2018; Craig et al., 2017; Li et al., 2017) emphasized the connection between communication and resilience. However, scholars have noted that these two elements are not enough: Only if lesbian and gay individuals receive adequate support when discussing difficult experiences with others are they more likely to experience higher quality of life. As resilience-related elements of support are still relatively unexplored, Houston and Buzzanell (2018) called for further communication research that could develop general insights into and deeper knowledge of the phenomenon. In this research, the goal is to fill the gap and examine resilience through the relevance given to ostracism after supportive listening experiences of lesbian and gay individuals.

Attributions and Interactional Ostracism

The relevance given to any experience is based on the attributions attached to the experience. In fact, the subjective experience of social life is moderated by attributions (Weiner, 1985). In this research, *attributions* are understood as processes by which individuals explain the causes of behavior and events. This definition stems from attribution theory (Weiner, 1985) which assumes that people try to reason and explain observed or perceived behavior. It can be determined to be intentional and attributed to internal or external causes. Due to the common occurrence of ostracizing experiences, attributions given to experienced discrimination are likely to have greater

emotional consequences for representatives of minorities than for those of majorities (Branscombe, 1998; Branscombe et al., 1999).

In social situations, attributions that define interactions are usually formed in the beginning of each interactional situation (Weiner, 1985). People are quick to pick up signs of possible disapproval and rejection (Richman & Leary, 2009), and to notice if something poses a threat to their role as a member of a group (Williams & Nida, 2011). When others make an individual feel as if they do not belong to the group, their behavior is socially isolating. Most often, the experiences of ostracism are created either by explicitly communicating the exclusion or by using "the silent treatment" (Sommer et al., 2001), that is, ignoring someone and denying the possibility of meaningful and necessary communication. All forms of interactional ostracism can cause tremendous amounts of emotional and social pain to the ostracized person (Poulsen & Kashy, 2012).

Lesbians and gays often invest a lot of thought and effort into fitting in yet experience increased amounts of ostracism (Subhrajit, 2014) as nonaccommodating reactive behaviors can make a person feel ostracized (Williams & Nida, 2011). As ostracism is emotionally and socially even more harmful if that ostracism is related to identity (Teliti, 2015), the experiences of lesbian and gay populations call for particular attention, because perceived reactions and attributions given to them tend to affect people's sense of self and how they evaluate themselves as human beings (Buckley et al., 2004). A continuous state of attributional ambiguity regarding others' attitudes toward one's identity can lead to discounting of one's personal role in bringing about positive communication outcomes (Crocker et al., 1991).

In interactionally ostracizing situations, constructed attributions of the situation shape the decisions that people subliminally make regarding their communication behavior (Sommer et al., 2001). If the goal is to regain a sense of inclusion, some individuals may open up more. Paradoxically, this may lead to increased ostracism, as others do not necessarily respond positively

to the individuals' attempts (Buckley et al., 2004; Williams & Nida, 2011). However, a more common reaction in an ostracizing situation is to decrease the amount of self-disclosure as the causality between self-disclosure and exclusion becomes evident (Sommer et al., 2001; Williams & Nida, 2011). When listeners either do not want to hear what a person has to say or attack the person based on what has been disclosed, the speakers may feel they are being punished for being open, and the value of self-disclosure diminishes (Petronio, 2002). Among lesbian and gay individuals, this may lead to pseudo-self-disclosure as they interpret that an honest and accurate self-disclosure is not welcomed but may lead to being ostracized (Azmitia et al., 2005).

In addition to the negative experiences related to self-disclosure and openness, a socially ostracizing experience often includes the lack of assurance, that is, messages that confirm the intrinsic value of the person, which can be detected in the listening behavior (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2012). Sometimes, when people try to seek support, they face interactional intimacy avoidance, that is, people not wanting to talk about a personal, emotional experience. This type of social exchange also contributes to the creation of ostracizing experiences (Roberts & Greenberg, 2002). Zimmer-Gembeck et al. (2012) noted that lesbian and gay individuals take intimacy avoidance and social perception into account to a greater degree than their straight peers when they seek support or contemplate disclosing information regarding their sexual orientation. Therefore, intimacy avoidance may trigger stronger negative emotional responses in them if it is indicated, by several factors. Those factors include not offering support or assistance in problem solving, not caring to participate in joint activities, not keeping the communicative exchanges pleasant, or discussing specific issues that may make them feel belittled or discriminated against (Petty et al., 2010).

Supportive Listening

When people feel that they have been treated unfairly, they tend to talk about their experience with someone (Burleson, 2003). This leads to an interaction in which the communicative actions performed between two individuals through listening are usually loaded with empathic

tendencies (Bodie, 2011). This supportive communication is an ongoing process that includes taking turns in speaking and listening. When the support seeker feels that the communication has met the need they have for support, the listener has usually performed communication acts that the speaker interprets as supportive. *Supportive listening* requires a listener to demonstrate emotional involvement and attunement while attending to, interpreting, and responding to the emotions of the support seeker (Jones, 2011). This abstract and complex task often includes emotional support. The enacted emotional support can be detected in what people say and do when they help others manage difficult emotions (MacGeorge et al., 2011). When people receive supportive listening, they may address their problems more clearly, feel better, have more satisfying relationships, and be less likely to be rejected by their peers (Burleson, 2003). So, it is alarming that instead of supportive listening, lesbian and gay support seekers often face embarrassment, hostility, suspicion, pity, and condescension when they discuss their problems with friends, family, or even mental health staff (Hughes et al., 2018).

The idea of supportive listening is closely tied to the concepts of *nonverbal immediacy*, that is, behaviors that reflect the degree of psychological distance between individuals (Andersen & Andersen, 2005), and *verbal person-centeredness*, that is, the extent to which messages explicitly acknowledge, elaborate, legitimize, and contextualize the feelings and perspective of the distressed other (Burleson, 1994, 2003). Verbal person-centeredness has been divided into three categories. According to Burleson (1994), as well as Bodie and Jones (2012), low person-centeredness (LPC) is indicated by denying the other person's feelings and perspectives by criticizing or challenging their legitimacy. Moderate person-centeredness (MPC) is shown by providing comforting messages that implicitly recognize the other person's feelings, suggesting nonfeeling-centered explanations for the situation, attempting to steer the distressed person's attention to other things, or offering expressions of sympathy and condolence. High person-centeredness (HPC) is displayed by expressing comforting messages that explicitly recognize and legitimize the other person's feelings

by helping the person discuss those feelings and elaborate why they may feel that way, and by placing the feelings in a broader context (Bodie & Jones, 2012; Burleson, 1994). Highly person-centered messages are usually better received, as these messages encourage speakers to express their feelings and elaborate upon them (High & Dillard, 2012). Recently, researchers (Cole & Harris, 2017; Ingham et al., 2017; Rivers et al., 2018) have explicitly indicated that in support-seeking situations, lesbian and gay populations often face a lack of these behaviors that would indicate a genuine interest in the speaker's well-being.

The goal of this study is to examine what kind of role perceived supportive listening has in the recovery from an emotionally hurtful situation. This goal was approached with two research questions from the perspectives of meaningfulness and relevance of the ostracizing experience and attribution-related resiliency:

RQ1. After support seeking, how do the targets of ostracism evaluate the experience regarding the long-term effects it has on their lives?

RQ2. After support seeking, what elements contributed to the attributions and relevance given to the ostracizing experience and affected the resiliency of lesbian and gay individuals?

The additional purpose of these research questions was to develop the concept of supportive listening further and to offer practical knowledge to various interest groups regarding the multidimensionality of supportive listening.

Method

Data Collection

A total of 27 U.S. Americans (15 lesbian women [F], and 12 gay men [M]) participated in this qualitative research. The mean age of the participants was 39.07 years (from 25 to 77 years), and all participants self-reported as Caucasian. The participation was open to everybody, so the completely Caucasian participant sample was not something that was sought after or intended. The participants were sought through social media (Twitter and Facebook) as well as word of mouth (a

couple of people were invited to respond using personal contacts), and people were invited to

participate if they were over 18 years old, identified as queer, and had a sexual orientation–related

experience of being ostracized. It is a coincidence that answers were received only from lesbians

and gay men. A link to the survey was offered for them to guarantee that people not matching the

criteria did not respond.

Participants responded online (in Survey Monkey) to nine open questions, topics varying

from their ostracizing experiences to interactions that took place when they sought support (for

instance, following questions were asked: "What happened? Please, describe the situation and give

it some context.", "Whom did you seek support from? Please, describe the person and your reasons

for choosing them.", "How did you feel about the responses you received from the person you

sought support from?", and "How did the support-seeking situation make you feel regarding the

ostracizing experience?"). The questions had a temporal structure meaning that the first question

was about the original ostracizing event, then the questions proceeded to the support seeking

situation and finally to the conclusions the participants draw from the whole experience. This

allowed the possibility for the responses to form temporarily coherent narratives. The participants

were not aware of the temporal structure of the questions, even though they may have noticed it

during their participation. Most of the reported experiences of ostracism and supportive

conversations related to them happened when the participants were in their 20s, but some

participants reported incidents that happened later in life or even life-long experiences of sexual

orientation–related exclusion.

Analysis

The data was examined with a narrative analysis that drew from Bruner's (1991) functional

approach, as it views narratives as individuals' ways of making sense of reality and creating

meaning from events that they are describing. This approach enabled classification and narrative

thematization of the data. First, the data were read thoroughly to get a thorough understanding of

them and all participants were given a pseudonym. The functional approach emphasizes the narrator's specific understanding of the events (Bruner, 1991). At this point, start codes such as 'acknowledged feelings', 'belittling', and 'compliments' were used when notes were made of the data. The contexts (f. ex., school–home, workplace–coffee shop, or a friend's house–home), characters (f. ex., parents, friends, coworkers, siblings), sequential and temporal order of events (what happened and when), and turning points (moments that turned the course of how participants felt) were carefully examined. To construct a thorough understanding of the meaning of events from the narrator's perspective and create comprehensive codes regarding how the data answered the research questions, the data was analyzed in more detail.

After that, codes were combined into overarching themes that were carefully described, and reflexive journals were kept guaranteeing consistent interpretation of the codes, as the narrators often used different terms interchangeably in their narratives. A particular attention was paid to specific and general terms, the ways that people and conversations were explained, what was considered normal or different, and sociocultural norms, as the human mind structures reality through cultural products and symbolic systems (Bruner, 1991). Then, the themes were reflected both against the data and the overarching theoretical perspective, and consequently, through comprehending the social and interactional phenomena that were examined allowed the functional naming of the themes. Only then was it possible to conduct a comprehensive analysis of what the narratives and themes emerging from them contributed to the understanding of the data. Finally, the findings were compared with the data sample to guarantee their accuracy and validity. Throughout the process, the focus on attributions and supportive listening allowed construction of a wider, transferable understanding regarding the elements that promote resilience.

Results

The results indicate that after the targets of ostracism had had an opportunity to discuss the experience with someone whom they hoped would be supportive, the attributions and relevance

given to the experience divided the experiences into three groups: negative, neutral, and positive. In all, three elements contributed to the attributions: the person-centeredness of the supportive listening (low/moderate/high), sense-making of the reasons for ostracism, and temporal distance from the ostracizing experience. In general, the results show that behavior is an essential factor in understanding resilience related to ostracism.

The results are discussed further below. For the sake of clarity, the results for research questions 1 (attributive evaluations: negative, neutral, and positive) and 2 (the elements contributing to these evaluations) are discussed one evaluation and contributing factors at a time.

Ostracism as a Negative Experience and Elements Contributing to This Evaluation

When the participants described their sexual orientation–related ostracism experience and the responses they received after they sought support, 12 reported that the whole experience (i.e., ostracism and support, or the lack of it) had a negative impact on their lives:

> I was called "Gay Jay," but name calling or leaving me alone wasn't the worst of it. I was beaten up so many times growing up that I never had a chance to recover or overcome it. There was no one to talk to. I have battled severe depression most of my life and still see a therapist on a regular basis. (Jay)

Similarly, in another participant:

> I still don't know how to make friends. In the past, I would constantly try to change myself into something I thought people would accept, but I couldn't stop being who I am. I was always told that I made other girls uncomfortable. How am I supposed to become friends with someone when I still feel like there's something wrong with me? (Celeste)

As the exemplars above indicate, when the participants felt they did not belong, and they did not get the support they needed, their relationship with the listener deteriorated. They tried to time the social interaction well, but they repeatedly encountered impatience, disinterest, and emotional

unavailability. When the participants detected low person-centered supportive messages from the listener, they became insecure about their social skills in general. They started to doubt their ability to choose the people they could confide in and wondered if their personality was interesting enough for people to want to listen to them.

The elements contributing to negative attributions given to the ostracizing experience were related to three different indicators. The first was the experienced low person-centeredness of the listener's supportive messages. For example, Mike stated, "I felt her tone and reactions were condescending and not appropriate and didn't make me feel welcome to speak about my feelings." Fred offered another perspective to what low person-centeredness may look like and said, "I tried to speak about the problems to some friends, but I could quickly tell if they were interested or not— frequent eye wandering is a good sign. They just said I was doing everything I could to fit in." These exemplars indicated that listeners' low person-centered messages included nonverbal hints and platitudes that did not help the support seekers. These low person-centered support givers also often blamed the participants for the ostracizing situation, that is, "if you were interested in men, y'all would have more to talk about," making them responsible for the problem.

The second element that seemed to lead to negative attributions and lower the participants' quality of life was related to their ability to make sense of the reasons for the ostracizing experience. The narratives indicated that participants had thought about their situation and tried to understand it:

> First, I couldn't figure out why these women hated me so much. I am good at picking up social cues and understanding when I am being rude or annoying, but there was never any of that. From the moment I was hired, they went out of their way to challenge everything I said and make me feel excluded. Later, I learned that one of them knew I was a lesbian. (Jill)

The exemplar above indicates that when the participants failed to understand the reasons, they felt confused, because they wanted to fix the issue, but could not figure it out. Later, they tried to seek support from others to make sense of the exclusion. However, in these situations, the participants

reported that the person who was supposed to be supportive often downplayed their feelings and concerns. This negative support from the listener made the participants feel that their attempts to understand the situation were ineffective or that the sources of ostracism had a right to exclude them. They felt helpless which contributed negatively to their self-esteem. When the participants experienced a lack of support and uncertainty, the negative consequences of the experience seemed to follow them throughout their lives. Participants reported that they were still depressed, had low self-esteem and low coping skills, and did not trust their own social and relational skills.

The third element contributing to negative attributions was not related to supportive listening but to the length of the ostracizing experience. The results indicate that long-term exposure to sexual orientation–related ostracism was one of the indicators that led participants to consider their experience negative. However, this connection existed only if they did not receive support in the meaning-making process or if the listener's messages were reported to be low person-centered.

Ostracism as a Neutral Experience and Elements Contributing to This Evaluation

Seven participants framed the ostracizing experience in a way that did not hold particular value for their overall quality of life. Thus, they called their experiences "neutral". The ostracizing experience seemed to be a passing moment that they described with phrases such as "their loss," "not my type of people anyway," and "it was almost comical really." Feelings related to it were not very negative. Fred said, "Being gay means that I'm well used to being ostracized, and other than frustration, I don't feel much else. It's not the kind of thing that would make me sad or depressed." Alex stated, "I responded by playing it cool as it didn't really bother me; you can't make everyone like you."

The examples above demonstrate that participants understood that all people do not get along, and sometimes, it can lead to ostracizing situations. They stated that values differ, and although the feeling of being ostracized was unpleasant, they were able to move on and focus on long-lasting relationships with people who shared their values and accepted their sexual orientation.

The same three elements, that is, the degree of person-centeredness of the supportive messages, the ostracized person's ability to make sense alone and/or with the supportive person of the reasons that led to the ostracizing experience, and the temporal exposure to ostracism, also affected the participants who considered the exclusion a neutral experience. First, the results showed that when these participants sought support, they reported that their communication partner responded to them in a manner that can be interpreted to include moderately person-centered messages:

> I remember him telling me that, that sucks man, what a shitty thing to do, and saying that he was sorry even though it wasn't his fault. He was listening to me as he was actually responding to what I was saying. (Jay)

In similar situations as described in the exemplar above, the participants felt that in these messages the feelings and their validity were acknowledged by listeners although the suggested solutions were not feeling-centered. There were clear attempts to meet the participants' needs for support. Participants reported that listeners offered some sympathy and steered the attention from sexual orientation–related ostracism to other things: "He tried to make something positive about the situation by pointing out that now that my roommate learned I was gay and left, I would have the whole room to myself (Jay)." The exemplar shows the support was very practical and matter of fact.

Second, participants seemed to be somewhat able to make sense of the experience on their own and often rationalized that the ostracizing experience was caused by others' narrow-minded reactions. However, if they were still uncertain about the reasons after they had thought about it, discussions with supportive listeners were reported to be helpful:

> Before I was ready to talk about it, I had to understand my own feelings and reactions. Then I talked to my sister about the situation and explained it to her. Basically, she was very direct in her response, and it made sense. She said that I can't care about someone else more and value their opinion more than I value myself. (Kate)

The exemplar above indicates that the combination of self-reflective behavior and shared meaning-making created a better understanding of the whole experience than introspection alone did.

Third, all participants who considered the experience neutral had only short-term exposure to ostracism. They spent most of their time in an accepting environment and were not exposed to discrimination or exclusion regularly.

Ostracism as a Positive Experience and Elements Contributing to This Evaluation

The eight participants who considered ostracism a positive, constructive experience described the actual situation as hurtful. However, when they narrated their experience, their stories were positive. Ann said, "I began to accept my exclusions as gifts unique to me and this became a healing feeling for me as I continued to grow up and progress through school." The empowering element in the exemplar includes was prominent in all of Ann's responses.

For these participants, representing a minority in a workplace or among peers was not something that negatively affected their well-being. On the contrary, they actively challenged others' prejudiced opinions and called them out for relying on stereotypes. The participants sometimes even managed to change an ostracizing experience into a collaborative learning experience.

Occasionally, these participants even used the ostracizing experience to their advantage:

I began to feel sorry for those that made fun of me. This helped me to form my own community of those that were loving, understanding, and supportive. I took something that was once traumatic to me and made it my community. They wanted me around. (Sara)

This exemplar above shows that these resilient participants were able not only to receive support from their family and friends but also to give support to them. This was important to the participants as they knew they were loved and needed by their loved ones.

The first element, as in all other attributions, was the degree of person-centeredness of the supportive messages that the participants reported receiving from the listener. All participants who thought that the experience eventually had a positive impact on their lives reported that they had received highly person-centered messages when seeking for supportive listening:

> We check in when something bad happens. Empathy is what helps most, and reassurance that I am not a freak, and that my approach sounds reasonable and probably the best. Or that others are being ridiculous or misleading. My friends share how they have handled similar situations, with which they validate my thoughts and feelings. (Jacob)

The exemplar above includes empathy, reassurance, and reframing the situation from a positive perspective. It also shows how sometimes the listener sharing their own experiences does not mean stealing the spotlight from the speaker, but it can be used as a framework of reference for shared sense-making. The power of person-centeredness can be seen also in another exemplar, as according to Lisa, "Their words and actions showed that they understood and cared. They accepted me for who I am, and that meant a lot to me. This was the true foundation for lasting friendships." These listeners that Lisa described seemed highly person-centered and willing to listen, and the emerging feelings were explicitly recognized and legitimized in the interaction. The listeners were reported to empathize with the experience, pay attention to verbal and nonverbal behavior, and be attentive to the message.

The second element contributing to positive attributions was the participants' ability to understand the reasons for ostracism:

> I totally understood the exclusion when trying to approach this community. I would have rather not been lumped together with transphobic gay men, but I completely understood the defensiveness. Despite my understanding, I felt incredibly frustrated and judged because of the behavior of gay men, when I certainly don't fit the norms as I am pro-feminist, anti-capitalist, radical queer who is pro-trans. (Fred)

The exemplar above summarizes the perspective that all participants in this group seemed to have. They had first thought about reasons on their own, but when the reasons were discussed with a highly person-centered supportive listener, the overall value given to ostracism was more positive. With a person-centered supportive listener, the participants turned their exclusion experience into something that gave them a broader perspective and more inner strength. Tom said, "Having someone that understands you is a big help, you see that what defines you is who you really are and what you can become." The more immediate the support was and the more clearly the nonverbal behavior of the listener confirmed the verbal message, the more empowering the support was considered.

The third element contributing to the positive attributions was time. However, the actual length of exposure seemed to be unimportant when participants ended up considering the outcome of the ostracizing experience positive, as some participants had been exposed to ostracism all their lives and for some, it was just a short one-time experience:

My family has ostracized me even before I came out, but things got worse when I told them I'm gay. They didn't want to come to my high school graduation, because they didn't want people to know that their son is gay. (Jay)

I went to the library for an event that was for broadening the member base of a social group. As I was new in the area, it interested me, and I wanted to sign up. I honestly wasn't very surprised when I saw the person at the desk get the kind of a "deer in the headlights" look on her face when she saw me. I mean, I am a very masculine butch, and all the others there were more like Southern belles. The person said the event was filled up, but when a seemingly straight woman showed up, she was able to sign up. I had to leave. (Celeste)

What these participants in the exemplars above had in common was that the ostracizing experience was not very recent for any of them. They explained that they had gotten some temporal distance

from the experience and were now able to see the whole experience as something that had pushed

them toward personal growth:

> I embrace the past, because without those memories, I wouldn't know how to analyze why I
>
> am engaging in my current activities. I must do, with or without the support of others, what
>
> is best for me to reach my own goals. (Chuck)

The results indicate that the original temporal exposure itself did not relate as much to the

attributions and relevance given to the experience as the temporal distance to the experience. The

more time had passed, the more the participants were able to understand the reasons for what had

happened, and the more person-centered support they got, the more positive attributions they gave

to the experience.

Discussion

The research focused on identifying elements related to resilience that can be detected in

supportive listening experiences of lesbian and gay individuals. The contextual framework

consisted of ostracizing experiences related to others' reactions to the participants' sexual

orientation. The analysis focused on the interaction between the participant and the person they

were seeking support from regarding the ostracizing experience. The overarching conclusion from

the results is that in interactional situations, resilience seems to be a capacity that consists of

support, sense-making, and an ability to take a holistic approach to the crisis which, in this case,

was created by ostracism. These elements allow the person to recognize their own resilience and

lead to personal growth (positive), to reintegration back to the comfort zone (neutral), or to

repetition of dysfunctional behavior patterns (negative). The results are summarized in Table 1.

(Table 1 here)

Supportive Listening

The results broaden the understanding of the multidimensionality of supportive listening, as

in previous findings supportive listening was connected mainly to positive ways of helping in

emotionally challenging situations (Bodie et al., 2018). The present research results agree with these previous findings and show that when constructing and maintaining resilience is necessary, genuine supportive listening can be a positive resource. However, in situations in which listening is intentionally only seemingly supportive or accidentally fails in being supportive, it can reactivate or multiply the trauma caused by the original experience of ostracism and thus, decrease the target's resilience capacity. If the listener's responses include low person-centered features, such as criticism and denial of the legitimacy of the speaker's feelings, the target of ostracism cannot recreate the sense of belonging with the listener. That can lead to the secondary experience of not belonging which, in turn, may reinforce negative perceptions of self-worth.

Identifying this darker side of supportive listening enables the detection of subtle, often hidden ways in which low person-centered listening may undermine the resilience of support seekers, lower their quality of life, and hinder their recovery from a stigmatized experience. Inattentive listening does not foster resilience but decreases self-disclosure and increases the sense of worthlessness, as the speaker's message is not acknowledged. This is highly destructive, as self-discovery and self-advocacy have been noted to be two of the driving forces of resilience (Li et al., 2017). Sometimes, low person-centered listening behavior of the "supportive" listener led participants to accuse themselves of their ostracizing experiences and to doubt their sexual identity and its legitimacy when a low person-centered, inattentive listener belittled the value of the participants' self-disclosure. This demonstrates that it is possible to attempt to control and manipulate another person through pseudolistening. This broadens the perspective to asymmetrical tensions between individuals, as Boyd (2003) previously stated that an attempt to control or manipulate another person is usually done through pseudo-self-disclosure.

In addition to establishing the connection between pseudolistening and control, as well as reinforcement of the support seekers' ostracizing experience, the results indicate that low person-centered supportive listening can lower the speakers' perceptions of their social skills. This seemed

to have a lasting negative effect on the participants' self-esteem. This result is supported by Pasupathi and Rich (2005), who found that undermining speakers' self-verification can have serious, long-term consequences for their quality of life.

When the supportive listening that the participants received was moderately person-centered, they applied resilience to the situation and adapted to it as a neutral experience. This was particularly true when the listener's support focused on practical problem-solving. This notion is supported by previous research: relational partners who have an interest in viewing stressors as a shared problem commonly share a broader, more positive mindset (Afifi et al., 2016).

The complex nature of listening was also revealed in the narratives of participants who stated that the hurtful ostracizing experience had a profoundly constructive effect on their lives. The data suggest that participants who experienced highly person-centered supportive listening found it to be growth-promoting. Thus, the attributions and relevance given to the ostracizing experience were positive. This is an interesting finding, as it indicates that even a very hurtful experience can benefit a person in the end if the traumatized person receives appropriate supportive listening that contains empathic responsiveness, emotional concern, and an attempt to understand their frame of reference. The supportive listeners also often implied their acceptance with confirming messages. This finding is supported by Doohan's (2007) results suggesting that confirming messages helps people maintain the identities they have chosen to construct.

Sense-making

Another major contribution of this research is that it broadens the understanding regarding the role of sense-making as a part of the resilience capacity. Although understanding the meaning of something essentially is an intrapersonal process, the results of this study demonstrate that the possibility to share, discuss, and get various perspectives enabled a formulation of a subjective understanding of the experience that allows the person to use their resilience capacity. This connection between social skills and resilience has been acknowledged from the perspective of self-

efficacy by Gillig et al. (2017) and Ginsburg and Kinsman (2017), but the results of the present study show that despite the skill level, the opportunity to engage in supportive interaction allows people to turn their exclusion into an empowering, personal growth experience. This finding is supported by the notion that sense-making is a crucial component of restoration in tragic bereavement experiences (Currier et al., 2006).

Participants who had no one to talk to or were not listened to and who struggled with the sense-making aspect of the experience seemed to have the most difficulty in engaging their resilience capacity in the healing process. The lack of support and alternative perspectives caused these participants to repeat coping behaviors that did not offer functional help in the sense-making process. This finding expands the previous understanding of sense-making and suggests that the inability to find a reasonable sense of understanding over time not only complicates recovery and adds distress (Bonanno et al., 2004) but also reinforces feelings of alienation and exclusion. This finding also aligns with a notion by Holman and Horstman (2019) who suggested that if the speaker uses a negative tone in their narration of an event, their well-being is usually poorer than the well-being of those whose narration includes more positive elements. This alignment suggests for more research regarding the role of listening and resilience as it remained unclear whether the more positive narrators had already engaged in shared sense-making situations that included supportive listening prior to the research situation or not.

The more interpersonal sense-making the supportive listening situation included, the more participants seemed to benefit from the support on the levels of emotional validation and comprehension. The context of shared sense-making was effective in alleviating the consequences of ostracism because finding meaning and purpose helped the evaluation of the experience. Therefore, the ability to conceptualize and rationalize the ostracizing experience holds a higher value than the ostracizing experience itself regarding the long-term effect of the ostracizing experience in the quality of life of the target.

Temporal Exposure and Distance

The temporal aspect related to the ostracizing experience was the most ambiguous concept that emerged in the results. It was interesting that temporal exposure to sexual orientation–related ostracism itself did not seem to determine whether the participants were able to use their resilience capacity and eventually, consider the ostracizing experience positively because those who managed to do that had short- and long-term experiences. Thus, the length of the exposure itself did not seem to determine the resilience that the participants demonstrated.

However, the temporal distance from the ostracizing experience turned out to be an important element in the attribution-giving process. It became a particularly meaningful element once it was linked to the supportive listening that the participants received and to their ability to understand the experience and the reasons that led to it. If the participants felt accepted when seeking support, the temporal distance facilitated the use of resilience capacity and the reconstruction of their personal world of meaning. The growth that led to self-distancing and perspective broadening allowed them to reappraise the relevance of the experience. Previous researchers have reported similar findings (Gross & John, 2003; Schartau et al., 2009). However, the present results expand those findings by indicating that when the participants can conceptualize the challenging experience, they are able to transfer its empowering effect to later experiences, which, in turn, increased the participants' resilience across multiple spheres of functioning.

Conclusion

The findings of the study indicate that supportive listening seems to function as an integral interactional resource related to resilience. Supportive, person-centered listening can facilitate the sense-making process related to the traumatic situation and assist in taking a holistic approach to the crisis. When a person feels that they understand their situation and events that lead to it, it can create a sense of self-efficacy and allow them to recognize and apply various dimensions of their own resilience reserves. Previous research (Ala-Kortesmaa, 2015) recognizes the connection

between well-being and the ability to use listening competence for individual (personal agency) as well as shared (collective agency) improvement of one's own situation. This research develops that finding further by confirming the related nature of supportive listening, shared sense-making, well-being, and resilience.

However, the findings also highlight the darker side of supportive listening. If the speaker experiences that the listener only pretends to be supportive or accidentally fails in being supportive, it can reactivate or multiply the trauma caused by the original experience and thus, decrease the speaker's resilience capacity. This finding emphasizes the importance of listening awareness. The better listening competence people have, the more they can identify features of their own listening behavior as well as these features in the listening behavior of others. This awareness can facilitate healthy, constructive, and genuinely supportive interaction situations which aim at helping the support seeker to recover from a stigmatized experience through increased self-disclosure and higher sense of self-worth.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study has several limitations, the most important being that it examined the resilience-contributing experiences of Caucasian lesbians and gay men. This narrows the generalizability of results, as the conclusions may not resonate with the experiences of other sexual minorities or people with nontraditional gender identities or different racial and ethnic backgrounds. In the future, research on supportive listening experiences could be expanded so that the results are more generalizable. Another limitation is the subjective narratives of the participants regarding their interpretations of supportive listening. Although a considerable amount of listening, resilience, and queer research data have been gathered with similar methodological choices (see e.g. Azmitia et al., 2005; Oliver, 2016; Sommer et al., 2001; Williams & Nida, 2011), combining observing and subjective narratives regarding the same support-seeking situations would offer a broader perspective on the phenomenon. Future research could also focus more on observed interactional

elements that contribute to immediate attributions that targets of ostracism give to the original ostracizing experience, as well as the supportive listening situation, and analyze communication patterns that fortify the ostracizing experience.

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Table 1

Combined Results

Attribution/relevance given to the ostracizing experience	Elements related to the attributions and relevance given to the ostracizing experience		
	Supportive listening	Sense-making	Temporal exposure
Negative	Low person-centeredness	Alone/not successful	Long-term
Neutral	Moderate person-centeredness	Alone and partially shared/partially successful	Short-term
Positive	High person-centeredness	Alone and shared/ successful	Indifferent, but temporal distance crucial