

ELEMENTS OF RESILIENCE AND SELF-ACCEPTANCE AMONG GAYS AND LESBIAN STUDENTS AT THE INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING

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Abstract: Research continues to identify a myriad of negative consequences ranging from name-calling, cyberbullying, to gang-rape for gay or lesbian students at the institutions of higher learning. However, this study determined the elements associated with self-acceptance and resilience amongst gay and lesbian students from one South African university, based in a rural setting. Carol Ryff's psychological dimensions theory and Michael Ungar's resilience theory guided a qualitative study of six lesbians and six gay students, aged 18 -28, purposively selected from five faculties. The participants gave their informed consent to be audio-taped during face-to-face interviews and were later debriefed by one of the researchers, a qualified clinical psychologist. To ensure trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba's principles were opted for, namely, credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Tesch's steps of thematic analysis were useful in identifying the following themes: self-esteem, purpose in life, spiritual resilience, sense of belonging, support from the lecturers and family members, gym and sport, discrimination, and drug and alcohol abuse. Better coping strategies for gay and lesbian students require a multi-dimensional approach from the university management, family members, and the implementation of policies that promote tolerance, sexual health, and respect for gay rights. It would be proper to determine how the gay and lesbian students' family and their sexual partners influence their university experiences.

Keywords: gays, lesbians, purpose in life, resilience, self-esteem

Introduction

Self-acceptance of sexuality refers to being comfortable with one's sexual preference, internal sexual feelings and it plays an important role in positive identity- formation for lesbians, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, queer, intersex (LGBTQI) individuals (Cass, 1979; Perrin- Wallqvist & Lindblom, 2015). Self- acceptance among LGBTQI students in the institutions of higher learning could be attributable to the formal policies and programmes that are in place to address gender inequality and embrace diversity in the form of promoting campaigns, Gay pride marches and celebrations of annual International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT) (Makapela, 2021). A strong correlation between LGBTQI's self-acceptance and higher levels of mental health is fueled by resilience, which acts as a buffer against discrimination from heterosexual counterparts (Bakacak & Oktem, 2014; Camp, Vitratou & Rimes, 2020). Resilience is a construct pioneered by multiple scholars, such as Ungar (2013) and Zimmerman (2013), and it is defined as the ability to recover from adversity and effectively adapt to conflict-laden experiences while sustaining a positive outlook in the process (Ungar, 2011). Resilience theory highlights that personal resources (e.g., self-esteem, positive coping strategies, self-efficacy) and protective factors (e.g., social support from family members, peers, church) can enhance strength when individuals experience adversity. Other characteristics, such as hope and optimism, are linked with resilience (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Affirmations of the programmes that are

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implemented at the universities support the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's principles (UNESCO) and 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in prioritizing the mental health and overall well-being of the LGBTQI students. Thus, this study is aimed at investigating the elements of resilience and self-acceptance among gay and lesbian students at one historically black institution in the Eastern Cape province, South Africa.

The establishment of resilience can be of importance for gays and lesbians at the institutions of higher learning to counteract the negative effects of stigma while restoring the positive identity development and self-actualization (Poteat, Calzo & Yoshikawa, 2016). Positive identity development has far-reaching implications for gay and lesbian students as they transition into adulthood, access resources to better manage challenges regarding their careers, social lives, and relationships (Schmitz & Tyler, 2019). Positive- identity development among gays and lesbians entails labeling oneself as non-heterosexual, disclosing one's sexual orientation and usually occurs during adolescence (Erikson, 1959; Marcia, 1980) although it may be hindered by cultural/ religious factors, parenting styles, and geographical locations (Kosciw, Palmer & Kull, 2015). Due to the prominence of the gender binary at the institutions of higher learning in rural areas, gay and lesbian students may find it hard to disclose their sexuality (Kosciw et al., 2015). Self-actualization is the process of becoming all that one is capable of, and in terms of the hierarchy of human needs, is determined by love, motivation, purpose, belongingness, acceptance of the family and peers, and self-esteem (Cleofas, 2023). In a study investigating gay and lesbian (GL) students in the Philippines, findings reveal that family support and associated unconditional love enabled them to thrive, subsequently, their self-actualization cemented their self-acceptance (Reloj, 2021). It is important to note that their sexual identity is tied to their emotional and psychological well-being.

However, in previous South African studies, Copp and Koehler (2017) found that LGBTQI students suffered verbal attacks, cyberbullying, social exclusion, and feelings of insecurity. Researchers like Nduna and her colleagues (2017) are of the idea that homophobic practices at the universities are perpetuated by how African literature and religious books portray homosexuality. Evidence of the existence of homophobia in African countries could be traced back to how the political, religious, and traditional leaders demeaned and criminalized homosexuality (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Some of the derogatory examples were uttered by South African Zulu King, Mr Goodwill Zwelithini, that gay people are rotten (Miya, 2012), while the late former Zimbabwean president, Mr. Robert Mugabe, degraded the LGBTQI individuals to the level of pigs and dogs (Van Heerden, 2018). In Nigeria, the former president, Mr. Goodluck Jonathan, signed the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act of 2013 (Nzwili, 2014). Even in developed countries such as Canada and United Kingdom, LGBTQI students who were victims of discrimination demonstrated lower self-acceptance, which accounted for poor mental health and impaired psychological well-being (Pepping, Cronin, Halford, & Lyons, 2018). Owing to social exclusion and thwarted belonging around campuses, according to surveys conducted in the United Kingdom, the LGBTQI students reported depressive symptoms (Taylor, Dinger, Dickson, & McDermott, 2018; Semlyen, King, Varney, & Hagger-Johnson, 2016). However, research on resilience (Fernandes, Vázquez & Gato, 2024) has revealed that protective factors have the propensity to help and positively reinforce sexual minority group resist self-harm behaviors (e.g., suicidal ideation, risk sexual behavior) and promote self-efficiency in their ecological systems (Rutter, 1987; Taliaferro,

McMorris, & Eisenberg, 2018; Ungar, 2013). Based on this background, this study intends to answer the following questions: (i) What are the elements of self- acceptance and resilience employed by gay and lesbian students from one university in the Eastern Cape, South Africa and (ii) What are the coping strategies for gay and lesbian students when faced with adversity?

Research Objectives

- To identify the elements of self-acceptance and resilience employed by gay and lesbian students from one university in the Eastern Cape, South Africa.
- To explore the coping strategies that gay and lesbian students utilize when faced with adversity

Theoretical Framework

According to resilience theory posits external resources (e. g community engagement and social support) and demonstration of self-esteem and coping skills can enhance quality of being able to survive and navigate the adverse consequence of stress on the physical, emotional and psychological health (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). The evidence to this effect has been found among 776 self-identified LGBTQI students in the United States, where there was a strong correlation between resilience and reports of decreased attempted suicides (Woodford et al., 2018). Several components that facilitate resilience among LG students are self-esteem, emotional and social support to achieve self-actualization and optimal cognitive functioning and coping when stress seem to be overwhelming (Mustanski, Newcomb & Gorafalo, 2011). Hence, Ryff's six dimensions of psychological well-being (PWB), namely, self-acceptance, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, personal growth and positive relations with others (Ryff and Keyes 1995) as shown in the diagram below, also guided this study. Woodford et al., (2014) found that LG students who described their universities as safe, are those implementing anti-discrimination policies and supporting students without considering their sexual orientation. Involving sexual minority groups in student organizations has also been associated with self-acceptance, emotional support, social cohesion and improved PWB (Pitcher et al., 2016). Beyond helping them cope with ostracism as widely researcher (Brown,2018; Coley & Das, 2020), they tend to find purpose in life and become autonomous (Vaughan &Rodriguez, 2014).



Figure 1: Six dimension of psychological Well-being: Adapted from Ryff and Keyes, 1995

Literature

The next three paragraphs will discuss the contributory factors that enable LG students to be resilient and self-sufficient.

Family-based acceptance of gay and lesbian students

In pursuit of academic excellence, purpose and sustainability of mental health among gay and lesbian students at the institution of higher learning, the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003), Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008) and wellness model (Myers & Sweeney, 2008) emphasize that the role of social support from immediate family members and educational settings may influence their life goals, aspirations and vitality. When LG receive recognition from their lecturers, Ryff and Keyes (1995) found that they are most likely to flourish in multiple life-domains. They take leadership roles in sports, politics, and become conscientious. However, when the family members reject their siblings based on their non-heterosexual sexual orientation, there is a high possibility that they may cover their emotional emptiness through engaging in risky sexual behavior. Kheswa (2017) defines risky sexual behavior in terms of how individuals carry themselves under the influence of alcohol, and how often they take precautionary measures to prevent unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Agreeing with Kheswa is Mkhize and Maharaj (2021) who found that men who have sex with other men (MSM) from one university in KwaZulu- Natal, when under the influence of drugs, they practice unsafe anal sex with multiple sex partners, which could result in contracting the virus.

Institutional support and access to mental health facilities by gay and lesbian students

Contrary to the expectations that at institutions of higher learning, students live peacefully, Msibi and Jagessar (2015) found that mob power is rampant and has contributed to the concealment of gay and lesbian students' sexuality at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Homophobia expressed towards LGBT students included insults, physical abuse, and being blocked from accessing transport and residence. In the same country, at the University of Johannesburg, accessing the bathrooms on campuses was a challenge. Brown (2018) noticed that lesbian students would prefer to use those in town

rather than to be embarrassed by heterosexual students and security officers. The universities should create a conducive environment for LGBTQI students so that they can equally benefit academically, rather than being perceived as powerless and hopeless. Echoing these sentiments is Msibi (2009) who cautions the policy makers at the universities to address heterosexism because effeminate gay and masculine lesbian students are targets of bullying and corrective rape, respectively. Specifically, building gender-neutral bathrooms on campuses, just like in Europe (Porta et al., 2017), user-friendly health care facilities, and non-biased psychological support for LGBTQI students, could help with self-acceptance (Prilleltensky, 2008). To achieve this, Prilleltensky (2008) calls for the Emancipatory Communication Approach (ECA) from the management and committees within the universities to practice compassion and promote democracy and acts of kindness towards the sexual minority group. According to the ECA, the university policies linked to the gender identity of the students should be augmented in such a way that they restore the dignity of the gays and lesbians by using appropriate pronouns, *they*, *them*, and *theirs* when addressed. Furthermore, engagement of LGBTQI students to programmes that focus on resilience and coping strategies may promote self-awareness (Simmons et al., 2019). More resources can be obtained from organizations such as the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2017)

Spirituality, Religion, and Resilience

Spirituality and religiosity are interwoven, and research found that students have united their sexuality and spiritual identities to have a relationship with a higher power (Means, 2017). Spirituality refers to the beliefs and practices GL students employ to find meaning in their lives, while religiosity is confined to the behavior, faith, and feelings ascribed by a particular church (Pargament & Sauters, 2007). Although literature on churches and families that are homophobic condemns same-sex relationships (Oswald, 2002; Shilo & Savaya, 2011), Kubicek et al (2009) found that some gays and lesbians report religious activities as responsible for their mental health and resilience. In South Africa, the late black theologian, Rev Alan Boesak, advocated for the acceptance of gays and lesbians in the United Reformed Church (Davids, 2020). Tajfel's social identity theory states that the LG students can build their self-concept, social values, and morals and maintain positive relationships, unlike their alienated counterparts (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Thus, Vaughan and Rodriguez (2014) view commitment to religious activities as a catalyst for psychological well-being

Materials and Methods

Participants (six lesbians and six gay students) ranging from 18 to 28 from one university campus in the Eastern Cape province, South Africa, volunteered to be recruited for a non-probability, purposive study. In non-probability sampling, not every participant has an equal chance to be selected in a research study, unlike in a survey. (Creswell & Pot, 2018). In a non-probability sampling, participants often share the same characteristics such as sexual orientation, culture, race, or education. In this regard, the researchers recruited self-identified gay and lesbian students from one university based in the rural areas of Raymond Mhlaba Municipality. In terms of education, of the six male participants, two reported that they were pursuing their Honours degree while four were pursuing their bachelor's degrees. Three female participants had enrolled for their bachelor's degrees, two pursuing master's degrees, as compared to only one who was doing a postgraduate Diploma in Records Management and Archives.

Their native language is isiXhosa, and they are reported to have been raised in families with a Christian background. However, 8 participants indicated having been raised by single parents, while only four reported that their parents had married. Before one focus group interview that lasted approximately one hour, one of the researchers applied for Ethical Clearance (KHE021SCHA01) and ensured that the participants' human dignity and privacy were protected. The researcher used an interview schedule to facilitate the focus group. To achieve confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, and the female participants were given codes FP1, FP2..... while the male participants were referred to as MP1,MP6. The researcher also sought the informed consent of the participants to be audio-taped for transcriptions of their responses, which were later destroyed. A thorough data analysis, which entailed all Tesch's steps to code and categorize the themes, was also followed. Researchers ascertained that they code even the gestures and feelings demonstrated during data collection by the participants, as suggested by De Vos et al (2011).

Trustworthiness

For the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher who interviewed all the participants in English, followed Lincon and Guba's (1995) principles. Trustworthiness consists of four criteria, specifically credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, and has been carefully adhered to in researching to ensure that the study is honest. To ascertain transferability, the three researchers confirmed that the findings could be replicated. Credibility is defined as the confidence in research that is placed in the truth of research findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018); the findings in this instance yielded what was intended to be studied, which was the issues around the elements of self-acceptance and resilience among gays and lesbians pursuing higher education. Korstjens and Moser, (2018) define dependability as the degree to which the findings of the study are consistent over time. The researchers immersed themselves in data analysis and agreed on the themes after they had repeatedly referred to all the transcripts. Confirmability in qualitative research is about maintaining a non-biased stance when interpreting the results. The data generated yielded findings that were not biased and truly reflect the experiences of the twelve LG students who participated in the study.

Results

Self-esteem

There is a strong affirmation that respondents want to be successful in life. They also highlighted the fact that they want to go back to society to help other homosexuals. For example, they were clear in their responses, *"I am a conqueror, staying positive is the best thing I have ever done for myself. I almost lost myself in the process of listening to other people's opinions. I have a great future ahead of me, that's what I told myself. I am proud of calling myself gay, I don't feel ashamed. So, other people's opinion to me doesn't matter"* [MP5... Honours in Public Administration, Age 24]

“I see myself in the future helping others, like doing campaigns that will help homosexuals to accept themselves. I want to be a successful person in life” [FP2 ...Bachelor of Education, Level 1, Age 23]

Purpose in life

“In future I want to explore more on the side of entertainment industry, also to create a society where there is no discrimination, be an activist, make people understand homosexuals” [MP2....Bachelor of Science, Level 3, Age 21]

Conscientiousness

“Regardless of everything that has happened in my life, I have confidence and I feel I am in charge of every situation in which I live in because I am quite good in managing many things in my life, my studies I excel as well as my personal life is going well. I derive sense of satisfaction from keeping up with everything” [Bachelor of Education, Level 3, Age 27]

Spiritual resilience

“My efforts to find the kind of activities and relationships that I need have been quite successful as I believe in myself and trust God that everything is going according to the plan” [MP3 ...Bachelor of Library and Information Science, Level 1, Age 19]

“Belonging to a church and engaging in bible studies here on campus reconnected me with God. I am no longer emotionally weak with or without direction as I used to. God has helped me to solidify my relationship with my mom, who accepted my sexual orientation and appreciates my lover, who is my source of strength” [MP2....Bachelor of Science, Level 3, Age 21]

Gym and sports

The study revealed that the gym is very important among participants because they use it to conquer the problems they have. This can be supported by the following statement:

“To cope with the stress and problems I come across, I conquer them by visiting the gym. I made the gym my hobby, and it has become a part of my life because it’s helpful” [MP 1...Bachelor of Education, Level 3, Age 27]

“Playing for the university Rugby women's team is one of the coping mechanisms because that is where I keep myself focused, except when I am studying. I should mention that being a sportsman provides me with positive mental health. Moreover, I am not into alcohol. ”

Sense of belonging

“I am friends with other lesbians, and we joined the LGBT group ‘Rainbow blood’ I feel the group we have has a great support system; at least we get to socialize and know other people whom we identify with and we’ve been supporting each other” [FP4.....Bachelor of Science, Level 3, Age 21]

Support from the lecturers

Two postgraduate students in this study mentioned how their lecturers have been academically supportive and provided emotional support. Hence, they had to say when asked to describe their source of resilience.

“I relate professionally with my supervisor. I would not have coped financially had it not been for the support I received from him. I can buy clothes and pay for my accommodation since I do not have a bursary.” [FP6.....From the Faculty of Social Science & Humanities, Age 28]

“I experience self-regulated learning because of the support I keep on receiving from my supervisor. She helped me cope even when I had a bereavement of my grandmother. I might graduate for my master's in September 2024” [FP5.....From the Faculty of Commerce and Public Administration, Age 25]

Discrimination

Regarding the challenges hindering the self-acceptance and resilience effect for LG students at one university in the Eastern Cape, SA, participants expressed that they were stigmatized by other students. Also, not welcomed in the church from her village.

“Students have been ignoring me, I was even chased out of my local church by the pastor when he became aware of my sexuality. This made me think of killing myself as I saw at the time no purpose in life. I felt humiliated in my community” [Postgraduate Diploma in Archives, Age 25]

“I do not fit well with the people in my community, as they always tease me for who I am. So, I decided to withdraw from community activities, I am always indoors” [FP1..Bachelor of Science, Level 3, Age 21]

Drugs and alcohol abuse

During the interview, one participant highlighted that alcohol, and drugs are one of the coping mechanisms. In respect to the question asked, “How did you approach negative experiences associated with your sexual identity?”

“I often go to the clubs every weekend, I drink a lot just to forget about my worries, to forget about my problems. It helps me when I feel depressed. The alcohol eases the stress” [Bachelor of Science Foundation, Level 3, Age 26]

Discussion and Conclusion

Lesbian and gay students who participated in the qualitative study at one university campus in the Eastern Cape reported purpose in life, sense of belonging, and self-esteem as the elements of their self-acceptance and resilience. This could be due to progressive legislation, especially on human rights as enshrined in Chapter 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996, because

none of them were exposed to homophobic attacks. Instead, they expressed to be socially productive, conscientious and to advocate for other LGBTQI members in the future. Because of support from their lecturers, the participants in this study demonstrated that they even excel academically. A conducive and friendly environment for LG students at the universities and nondiscrimination policies, serve important symbolic functions. This finding correlates with what McMurtie (2013) found among university students in the U.S. Findings show that a gay-friendly university environment accentuates positive academic results unlike the one where LGBTQI community would be harassed and humiliated by the homophobes. Credits should be given to lecturers who act as *loco parentis* in creating job opportunities and being pillars of strength for sexual minority groups who live with single parents. Drawing from resilience theory, it is true that external support from the significant others can enhance quality of life, thus, two master's students can now meet their own financial needs and most likely to graduate (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). In contrast, Sumbane and Makua (2023) found that at the University of Limpopo, LGBTQI students reported poor mental health due to rejection from their lecturers. Discrimination of students based on their non-conforming sexual orientation from the lecturers or other students should not be taken light because a teenage boy from Soweto committed suicide following being ridiculed by a student teacher (Roxburgh, 2022). Furthermore, discrimination can contribute towards higher attrition rate because students may stop attending classes and using the bathrooms.

Sense of belonging also emerged as an element of resilience and self-acceptance because the participants revealed that they have a non-conforming organization, called Rainbow Blood, which provides security for the LGBTQI community. As we have mentioned, the classical work by Tajfel on social identity, research shows that non-conforming students, when grouped, become more fulfilled and safer. Upon probing some of the participants, they commended that a support group integrates their sexual identity, promotes leadership skills, and offers them a chance to engage in extramural activities and an opportunity to meet with potential same-sex lovers through networking. For example, one male participant mentioned that by being in love with his partner contributed immensely to his psychological well-being and spirituality. This participant also mentioned the support from his mother as overwhelming. More accepting reactions from significant others for LG students have the propensity to experience life- satisfaction (Rosario, Schrimshaw & Hunter, 2008). This finding is supported by Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Ryan and Deci's SDT, where an individual can be driven to be more self-actualized, economically resilient and intrinsically motivated because they are appreciated by their parents and dating partners. Regarding the coping mechanisms, the participants identified to be spending time at the gym and in sport. They further mentioned sports as good for their mental health. Thus, they do not drink alcohol. Sport participation has been correlated with improved social skills, physical health, and psychological well-being (Clark, Kosciw & Chin, 2021). These findings imply that LG students who exercise autonomy remain optimistic about their future.

From the findings, negative coping among the LG students was evident by resorting to substance abuse following discrimination and rejection from their peers and church leaders. By attending the taverns every weekend, it could be a signal of depressive symptoms. Gay students may be grappling with their sexuality, hence, they declared to avoid thinking about discrimination. In a qualitative study investigating the coping strategies of LG students at North-West University, Mahikeng Campus,

research shows that they prefer not to seek psychological support because they become subjected to revictimization from the campus-based psychologists or social workers (Idemudia, Kolobe & Tsheole, 2015). While other studies have shown that alcohol abuse among the LGBTQI students is alarming than that of the general population (Salerno et al., 2021; Schipani-McLaughlin et al., 2022), this study found that the LG students may not only be prone to academic failure when drinking excessively, but be exposed to myriads of risks, namely, poor health condition including cirrhosis (liver damage), addiction and opportunistic infections such as HIV owing to ill-informed decisions when intoxicated. Because alcohol drinking and other drug abuse among university students is rife (Kheswa & Hoho, 2017), even in Australian universities, where 25 % of LGBTQI students used alcohol as a stigma coping method (Dau & Straus, 2016). Establishment of the psychological support and opening of the campus-based clinic on weekends could save lives of many LG students who might have been gang raped and contracted STIs or HIV. In this case, a Post-exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) can be administered within 72 hours after exposure to HIV to reduce the risk of becoming HIV positive (Hugo et al., 2016).

In conclusion, although the study was confined to one institution, policies and programmes must be implemented, workshops for lecturers and students on LGBTQI issues conducted to enhance resilience among the LGBTQI community. Future research recommends participatory research, as this study determined that non-conforming students have a lot to share based on their experiences in different settings.

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