It Takes a Village: Promoting the Social Ecologies of Resilience among Queer and Trans Youth

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Research Partners: Thank You!

- Pride & Prejudice program, Central Toronto Youth Services
- Supporting Our Youth program, Sherbourne Health Centre
- The Studio, Delisle Youth Services
- Youthlink
- Planned Parenthood Toronto
BACKGROUND & STUDY PURPOSE
Pathways to Resilience among Queer & Trans Youth Project

Overall Study Purpose

- To understand how queer and trans youth navigate adversities to maintain or achieve wellbeing

Resilience

- “The dynamic processes encompassing positive adaptation in the face of significant adversities” (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 543)
Integrating a Resilience Framework in Studying Queer & Trans Youth

- Youths’ sexual and gender diversity has been overlooked in the 5 decades of resilience science.

- Research on queer and trans youth has focused historically on documenting risk and vulnerabilities.

- My research sought to integrate a resilience framework in studying queer and trans youth.
Queer & Trans Youth & Resilience

- **Variable-focused analysis** (Masten, 2014) as the predominant methodology to identify resilience factors

- Common (or general) factors:
  - Family support
  - Caring or supportive adults
  - General social support
  - School connectedness
    (e.g., Craig & Smith, 2014; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Gastic & Johnson, 2009; Grossman et al., 2011; Mustanski et al., 2011; Simons et al., 2013; Veale et al., 2015)

- Unique factors:
  - Family acceptance of LGBTQ identities (Ryan et al., 2010; Travers et al., 2012)
  - Friendship with other LGBTQ youth (e.g., Ueno, 2005)
  - Schools with anti-bullying policies (e.g., Hatzenbuehler & Keyes, 2013) and Gay-Straight Alliance groups (e.g., Goodenow et al., 2006)
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
Theoretical Framework

Social ecological theory of resilience (Ungar, 2011, 2012) as a sensitizing concept (Bowen, 2006)

- Resilience occurs within the interaction between youths’ capacity and the capacity of their social ecologies
- Resilience process is culture- or context-specific
METHODOLOGY
Methods

- Person-centered analysis (Masten, 2014)

- Nomination of “resilient” youth as a sampling strategy

- Grounded Theory methodologies (Charmaz, 2006, 2008, 2011)
Participants

- Individual interviews \((n = 35)\)
- Two, concurrent study phases
  - Phase 1: Service providers \((n = 16)\)
  - Phase 2: Nominated “resilient” LGBTQ youth ages 16-24 \((n = 19)\)
Service Providers ($n = 16$)

- **Gender:**
  - Cis-female (11)
  - Cis-male (2)
  - Trans-male (2)
  - Gender queer (1)

- **Experience:** 12.5 yr (3 – 33)

- **Age:** 44.5 (25-69)

- **Race/Ethnicity:**
  - White (12)
  - POC (4)

- **Orientation:** LGBTQ (16)
Youth \( n = 19 \)

- Cis-female (4)
- Cis-male (3)
- Gender queer (6)
- Trans-female (1)
- Trans-male (5)

Age: 20.5 (16-24)

- White (8)
- Mixed (6)
- Asian (3)
- Black (2)

- Born in Canada (17)

- Immigrant family (9)

- In post-secondary (9)
  - In high school (5)

- In immigrant family (9)
Data Analysis

- Conducted data collection and analysis simultaneously: December 2013 – September 2014

- Initial coding (n = 70) → Focused and axial coding, using constant comparative method → Categories (n = 8)

- Hand coding → Dedoose software → Hand coding

- Abductive process: Began with inductive and ended with deductive analysis

- Participants in a later part of data collection were asked to comment and further elaborate on the preliminary results → Served as a form of member checking
KEY RESULTS
Resilience Processes

- Navigating safety across contexts
- Asserting personal agency
- Seeking and cultivating meaning relationships
- Un-silencing queer/trans and other marginalized social identities
- Engaging in collective healing and action
Resilience Processes

- All youth participants made use of all of these five processes
- The degree to which and the ways in which youth made use of each process varied
Resilience Process

- Each youth carved out personalized pathways by turning their experiences of emotional pain into an opportunity for survival and growth
  - Paving Pathways through the Pain
    (Core category)

- Resilience as a process: Importance of both the availabilities of resources and youths’ capacity to make use of them
“I thought about coming out to my parents two years ago. But it wasn’t a possibility because they would disown me... **I would have to be able to sustain myself financially before telling them.** I talked to a financial officer. I chose to come out at my neighbour’s house because I was afraid that my dad was going to get violent.”

(Youth 02)
(2) Honoring me, myself, & I: Asserting personal agency

“Over the years, I refused to tell [my mother] that I go to [a queer agency]. I told her I was out volunteering or was out in choir practice. And that was **power I was taking back**.

I was **taking back agency**. I started learning how to explore haircuts, shopping my own clothes, becoming independent of her”

(Youth 08)
(3) Do you ‘see’ me?: Seeking and cultivating meaningful relationships

“[My mentor] and I joke in the first year of our relationship that I was constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop. I was like, ‘she’s a really cool person. But when is she going to hurt me?’

It took me about a year to be like, ‘this person isn’t gonna let me down. She was always there. I realized that this person is going to be there for me.’”

(Youth 06)
(4) *Coming into my own:* Un-silencing marginalized social identities

“Youth come to a process of accepting their sexuality or gender and get to a place where they’re comfortable with it. I’ve seen that happen for a number of youth who... **suddenly seem to be doing better**... Their reaction to people is different because they’re referred to in a way that makes sense for them.”

(Service Provider 03)
Becoming me, us, & we: Engaging in collective healing & action

“I didn’t have language to think more critically about what was going on. [Learning about oppression] was really helpful… I was able to stop blaming myself for everything that happened with my family… I could start recognizing it as part of a systemic oppression towards trans and queer folks.”

(Youth 10)
Unique Resilience Resources for Queer & Trans Youth

- Access to safer spaces
- Relationships with queer & trans adults and peers
- Involvement with counterculture communities
- Intentional use of social media
- Critical consciousness building
DISCUSSION
Study Limitations

- Small, context-specific sampling
  - Cautions re: transferability

- The use of “nomination” sampling
  - A diversity of adversities and access to resources among youth
  - Excluded youth from certain demographics

- Choice of theory and methods
  - Individual, interpersonal, and community-level resources domains VS the policy- and structural-level resources
Implications for Research

- Need for simultaneous research foci on risk and resilience in advancing social workers’ knowledge-base on queer and trans youth

- Continued research on the specific mechanisms of various resilience resources (e.g., the role queer and trans affirming legislation, greater media representations)

- Continued research on exploring similarities and differences in the resilience processes among queer and trans youth across demographic groups and contexts
Conceptualizing Resilience as a Social Ecological Process
Case study: Alex (pseudonym)

- Designed to show an example of resilience as a social ecological process
- Alex: 20-year-old trans male
- Chinese Canadian
- Parents immigrated from Hong Kong
- Only child
Adversities across Contexts
Adversities across Contexts

- Shelter
- Employment
- Medical System
- School
Pathways to Resilience

- Safer Space
- LGBTQ Peers
- LGBTQ Youth of Colour
- Therapist
- Mentor
- New School
Social Ecologies of Resilience

- Safer Space
- LGBTQ Peers
- LGBTQ Youth of Colour
- New School
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Key Factors:
- Ontario Human Rights Code
- Equity & Inclusive Education Strategy
- Federal Anti-Discrimination Laws
- Capacity Building Within Agency
- Critical Consciousness
- Funding
- Social Work Education
Working with Queer & Trans Youth:
A Social Ecological Framework of Resilience
Micro Practice: Working with Individuals

- To promote the capacity of queer and trans youth to navigate their way to wellbeing in the face of adversity

- Assist youth in cultivating skills to assess and navigate safety across contexts

- Empower youth to make use of their personal agency in identifying needs and goals and making life decisions

- Support youth in navigating oppression related to their queer and trans as well as other marginal social identities
Mezzo Practice:
Working with families, schools, and other relevant systems

- To build or restore capacity of these systems to better support queer and trans youth
  - Engage families of queer and trans youth, teachers, peer, and other community groups in building or restoring their capacity to support youth
  - Engage social service agencies to build greater capacity to offer affirmative services to queer and trans youth
Macro Practice: Working with institutions and systems

- To advocate for relevant social and policy-level changes to prevent system-level oppression that poses risks to queer and trans youth
  - Advocate for funding for LGBTQ-relevant resources
  - Advocate for legal rights and protection for queer and trans people as human rights concerns
  - Engage in social action to eradicate homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of oppression
Limitations of the Practice Framework

- How could one social worker engage in all scopes of practice?
- How about specialized knowledge and skills (e.g., clinical expertise)?
- Heuristic framework—Does not signal the how
Thank you!

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