

THE MEDIATING ROLES OF COPING AND SOCIAL SUPPORT ON
ADOLESCENT LESBIAN HOMELESSNESS

by

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the stress and coping mechanisms of lesbian homeless adolescents to identify potential buffers against homelessness. The Minority Stress Model and identity theories are used as a framework to interpret the findings in the literature. Based on the findings in the literature, it is possible to conclude that lesbian homeless youth are more susceptible to minority stress due to a lack of adaptive coping resources and social support. Increased levels of minority stress may lead to internalizing and externalizing symptoms that cause runaway and throwaway episodes in homeless youth. This paper proposes a new model to understand the internal and environmental factors that contribute to homelessness in lesbian adolescents.

Key words: runaway, throwaway, homeless, youth, adolescents, lesbian, minority, identity, theory, stress, coping

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Chapter One: Introduction

This paper seeks to provide insight for future stress and coping research on sexual minority homeless adolescents, with a particular focus on lesbian girls. By analyzing the effect of identity relevant stressors and minority stressors on sexual minority homelessness the author will develop a theory involving multiple identities that lesbian homeless adolescents experience. Social support and coping mechanisms are explored as mediators in lesbian adolescents' pathways to homelessness. The literature review will provide an overview of material regarding homeless sexual minority adolescents, and will then focus on lesbian adolescents. The author will propose a theory of multiple identities for homeless lesbian adolescents.

Defining the Population

Research on sexual minority adolescents covers a wide variety of perspectives. For the purpose of this paper the term "sexual minority" is used to reference lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender individuals. The term "lesbian" refers to a female who experiences sexual attraction to other females but not males. The term "adolescent" refers to individuals aged 11 to 25.

There is little consensus in the literature on the meaning of the word "homeless." Research on homeless adolescents can refer to adolescents at imminent risk for homelessness (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2012b), those experiencing periodic homelessness (Gattis, 2013, Unger et al., 1998) or the chronically homeless (Unger et al., 1998). The literature reviewed defines a runaway or throwaway episode as, "A child leaves home without permission and stays away overnight," or "A child is asked or told to leave home by a parent or other household adult, no adequate alternative care is arranged for the child by a household adult, and

the child is out of the household overnight,” and other similar situations (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002, p. 2). Often, runaway and throwaway adolescents are studied simultaneously due to the overlap in experiences (Moskowitz, Stein, & Lightfoot, 2013; Rosario et al., 2012b). The term “homeless” is used throughout the course of this paper because it is inclusive of both runaway and throwaway adolescents.

Defining the Problem

According to a report by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, sexual minority adolescents make up 3 to 5% of the U.S. population but comprise 20 to 40% of the runaway adolescent population (Ray, 2006). Homeless sexual minority adolescents have a higher rate of substance abuse, victimization, psychopathology and risky sexual behavior than their non-minority counterparts (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002; Gattis, 2013). The maladaptive behaviors homeless adolescents engage in, such as substance abuse, have been conceptualized as coping mechanisms (MacLean, Paradise, & Cauce 1999; Moskowitz et al., 2013) but, limited research on the coping mechanisms of homeless adolescents is available (Ayerst, 1999; Unger et al., 1998)

Lesbians must cope with additional stressors due to their double minority status as women and sexual minorities. Both their sexual orientation and gender put them at increased risk for prejudice, abuse, and victimization (Brooks, 1981; Kulkin, 2006). There are a number of theories that may shed light on lesbian runaways. The following sections will focus on the more relevant theories that address sexual minority runaway adolescents, especially those theories that are closely associated with lesbian runaways.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Foundations

Social Stress Theory

Stress theory asserts that stress occurs when an individual appraises the situation as exceeding his or her resources and threatening his or her well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stress research typically studies stress in terms of personal events. Social stress theory expands stress theory to include stressors in the social environment. Social stress theory is particularly relevant to minority individuals who face stress due to the social stigma of their minority status. Since the social stigma of the minority status is a constant environmental factor, minority stressors are longer in duration than personal stressors and tend to be chronic rather than acute (Meyer, 2003).

Stress prompts individuals to adapt and cope. Problem-focused and emotion-focused coping and social support have been considered potential buffers against stress since the foundation of stress research (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It is important to examine the role of minority stress and buffers in the homeless lesbian population due to their high exposure to stress.

Minority Stress

Research suggests low-status groups are vulnerable to stress due to variance in stress buffering resources and unique stressors across social groups (Thoits, 1991). Meyer's Minority Stress Model theorizes four stress processes: prejudice events, vigilance, internalized homophobia, and concealment. This paper uses the Minority Stress Model to examine the stress processes that affect lesbian adolescents' role identities and to further understand the connection between lesbian adolescents' minority status and their high risk for homelessness.

The Minority Stress Model calls for a distinction between personal resources and group level resources. The model discusses personal resources and group level resources as “stress-ameliorating factors” lesbians use to cope with the excess stress caused by their minority status.

Personal resources refer to the individual’s coping mechanisms and vary from individual to individual (Meyer, 2003). Group level resources are social resources that operate on a macro level for every minority group member to access (Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998; Meyer, 2003).

Identity Theory

Identity development models have been created for women (Downing & Roush, 1985) and sexual minorities (Cass, 1984). These identity models fail to account for the multiple identities lesbians face. Minority Identity Development Model, defines minorities as “a group of people who because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination (Wirth as cited by Atkinson, Morten & Sue, 1989). By referring to minorities in a general sense, Atkinson and colleagues’ model seemingly allows for the consideration of multiple minority identities. However, the Minority Identity Development Model is criticized for describing conflicts that minority groups may have among one another, which implies that they are not also members of other minority groups (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). The stepwise progression used by identity models is criticized in the literature because individuals follow different paths of identity development (Rosario, Schrimshaw & Hunter, 2011). Furthermore, “existing models have been criticized for being androcentric, subtly or explicitly based on male behavioral norms” (Fassinger, 1991, p 168). This paper considers identity models as a reference point to understand the developmental processes of lesbian

adolescents; however it seeks to express a more dynamic understanding through examining role-identities.

“Role-identities are self-conceptions in terms of one's position in the social structure (e.g., ‘I am a father, husband, welder, union member, uncle. . .’). Specifically, *role-identities* are viewed here as self-conceptions based on enduring, normative, reciprocal relationships with other people” (Thoits, 1991, p. 103). Role-identities have normative expectations that provide a sense of behavioral guidance. Individuals self-evaluate based on their ability to perform their role-identities. *Identity relevant experiences* threaten or enhance an identity that an individual values highly (Thoits, 1991). Conceptualizing stressors in the terms of identity relevant stressors allows the theorist to examine multiple identities at once. This paper seeks to combine the insights of the Minority Stress Model with the simplicity of identity relevant stressors.

Chapter Three: Risk Factors

Age & Sexual Orientation

During puberty, lesbian adolescents work towards *identity integration* that “involves an acceptance of the unfolding identity, its continuity over time and settings and a desire to be known as such” (Rosario et al., 2011, p. 4). Studies suggest that early sexual development can lead to negative health outcomes. A two year longitudinal study of sexual minority adolescents found that females with early onset menarche experienced more externalizing problems. Additionally, the adolescents’ time of menarche correlated with age of first disclosure of sexual identity (Grossman, Foss, & D’Augelli, 2014). According to Rosario and colleagues’ (2012b) longitudinal study, homeless sexual minority adolescents experience pubertal milestones a year earlier than non-homeless sexual minority adolescents on average. Another comparison of homeless adolescents found that sexual minority adolescents, “were significantly younger than heterosexuals in regard to age at first voluntary intercourse” (Cochran et al., 2002, p. 775). It may be the case that increased duration of minority stress associated with early sexual development is a risk factor for homelessness.

Gender

A study of 474 homeless adolescents found that females and sexual minority adolescents were more likely to report Emotional Distress on the Brief Symptom Inventory. Figure 1 illustrates that significant predictors of Recent Stress are female gender, sexual minority status, and Emotional Distress. The mediator Recent Stress predicted self-harming behaviors and suicide attempts (Moskowitz et al., 2013).

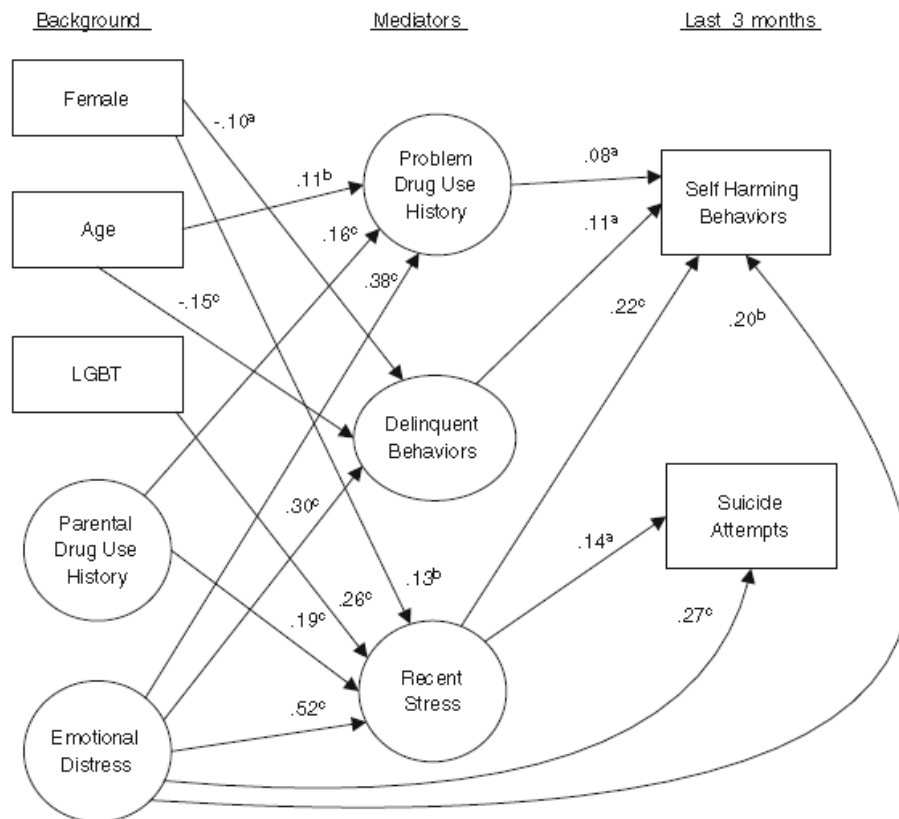


Figure 1 “Significant regression paths in model testing impact of stress and maladaptive behaviors on self-harming and suicide attempts among homeless youth (N = 474)” (Moskowitz et al., 2013, p. 1027).

Unger and colleagues (1998) also found that homeless females report higher levels of stress and depression than males. While Markowitz and colleagues (2013) did not find female gender or LGBT identity to be a predictor of problem drug history, other studies suggest that female gender and LGBT identity put adolescents at higher risk for drug use (Cochran et al., 2002; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2012a). These findings are notable because they show that homeless lesbian youth are at high risk for using maladaptive coping skills due to the stress they experience as females and sexual minorities. Lesbian homeless adolescents are a particularly vulnerable population due to the large amount of stress associated with their environment.

Chapter Four: Stressors

The Minority Stress Model focuses on the excess stress minority individuals experience due to their often-stigmatized social standing. The Minority Stress Model depicted in Figure 2 provides four stress processes in regards to sexual minority individuals: 1) external, objective stressful events and conditions such as prejudice 2) expectations of prejudice and the vigilance this expectation requires 3) internalized homophobia and 4) concealment of one's sexual orientation (Meyer, 2003).

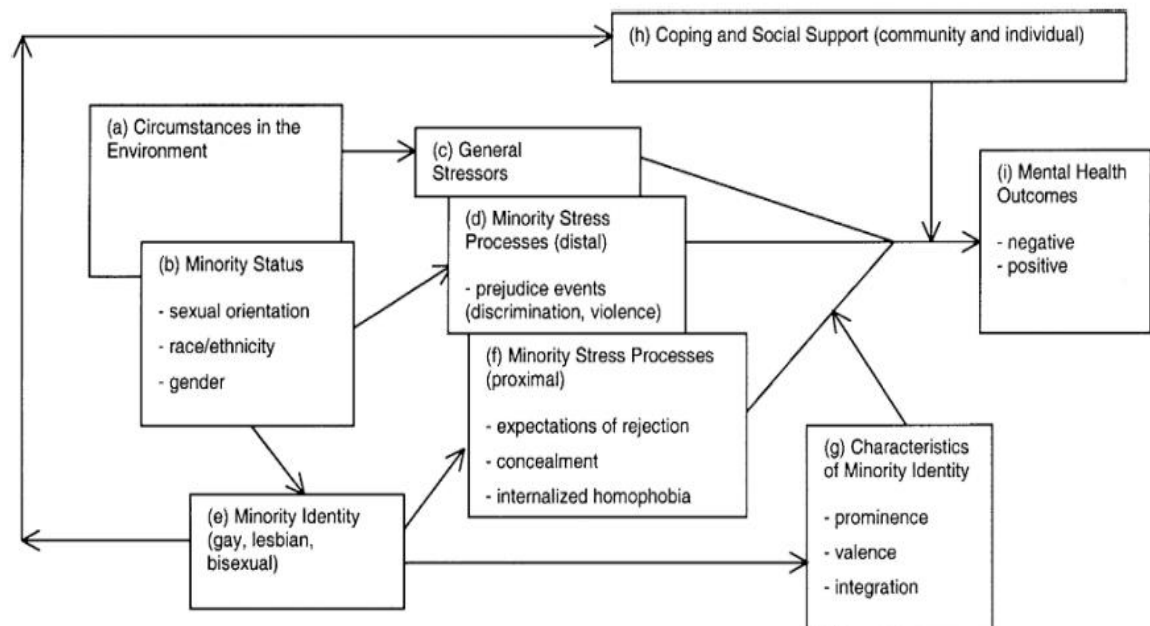


Figure 2 "Minority stress processes in lesbian, gay and bisexual populations" (Meyer, 2003, p 8).

Prejudice Events

In Allport's foundational research, *prejudice* is operationally defined as "an assertive or hostile attitude towards a person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to that group, and is, therefore, believed to have objectionable qualities ascribed to the group" (1979, p. 7). Prejudice against a group can lead to discrimination in which a person acts based on their

prejudice. Sexual minority adolescents experience prejudice and discrimination in their homes (Durso & Gates, 2012; Friedman et al., 2011; Hong & Jacinto, 2011; Ryan, 2009; Savin-Williams, 1994) at school (Friedman et al., 2011; Kosciw, Grotak, Bartkiewicz, Bosen, & Palmer, 2012) and on the streets (Cochran et al., 2002; Gattis, 2013) in the form of homophobic remarks, verbal and physical abuse, and victimization.

Lesbian adolescents experience additional stress due to their gender. During puberty, females have to cope with additional, more drastic biological changes than males. As described in Downing and Roush's foundational Feminist Identity Development Model, as women mature, they must grapple with the realities of a patriarchal society that allows for injustice such as violence against women and unequal pay (1985). Therefore, lesbian adolescents experience stress associated with both their gender identity and their minority sexual identity.

Homeless adolescents given a Major Life Events Scale adapted for homeless adolescents ranked "Conflict with a family member," as fourth out of 25 stressful life events. This finding suggests that homeless adolescents value their family member role identities and are stressed when events threaten their identity as a respected member of the family (Unger et al., 1998). Family rejection is one identity relevant stressor that lesbian adolescents face due to their minority sexual orientation. Higher rates of family rejection are significantly associated with negative health outcomes such as illicit drug use and depression (Ryan, Huebner, & Sanchez, 2009). Sexual minority adolescents also face high rates of physical and sexual abuse in the home (Friedman et al., 2011; Savin & Williams, 1994). A meta-analysis of research comparing abuse of sexual minority adolescents and non-minority adolescents found that sexual minority adolescents are 1.3 times more likely to report parental physical abuse than non-minority

adolescents (Friedman et al., 2011). These findings suggest that lesbian adolescents are more likely than heterosexual adolescents to experience identity relevant stressors relating to their role in the family.

Lesbian adolescents may leave home due to the role strain they experience in the home. Service providers report the top two reasons that sexual minority adolescents run away are they, “ran away because of family rejection of sexual orientation or gender identity,” or they were, “forced out by parents because of sexual orientation or gender identity” (46% and 43% respectively) (Durso & Gates, 2012). Adolescents’ self-reports run contrary to the common theory that sexual minority adolescents leave home primarily due to conflict over their sexual orientation. Structured interviews of 375 homeless adolescents found that sexual minority adolescents,

“left home for reasons similar to those of their heterosexual counterparts. However, GLBT youths left home more often than did heterosexual youths (means of 12.38 times and 6.69 times, respectively; $t_{160}=1.91$, $P=.058$). The most common reasons reported by youths for leaving home were family conflict (59.9%), desire for freedom (51.5%), and difficulties with a family member (48.5%). GLBT youths were more likely to leave as a result of physical abuse in the home ($\chi^2_{21}=3.6$, $P=.044$), and there was a trend toward more GLBT youths leaving as a result of alcohol use in the home ($\chi^2_{21}=3.2$, $P=.055$). Twelve (14.3%) GLBT youths indicated that they had left home because of conflicts with their parents over their sexual orientation” (Cochran et al., 2002, p. 774).

The top three stressors most frequently reported by homeless adolescents involved their friends and lovers. In order of most stressful to least, they are: “Lost a lover or close friend, had a conflict with a lover or close friend, and worried about a serious illness or injury of a friend” (Unger et al., 1998, p. 145). Identity theory suggests that such events are stressful to adolescents because they threaten the youth’s role-identity as a friend and lover.

Sexual minority adolescents experience higher rates of peer victimization than their heterosexual peers (Cochran et al., 2002). According to the National School Climate Survey of students ages 13 to 20, 81.9% were verbally harassed and 38.3% were physically harassed due to their sexual orientation (Kosciw et al., 2012). Peer victimization affects sexual minority adolescents’ role identities. For example, sexual minority adolescents were given a survey of questions about feeling a part of their school to rate their school belongingness. Sexual minority adolescents that experienced more victimization based on their sexual orientation and gender expression reported less school belongingness than youth who experienced less victimization (Kosciw et al., 2012). Conversely, a comparison study of homeless sexual minority youth and non-minority youth found no significant difference in their sense of school belonging (Gattis, 2013). More research is needed to understand the effect identity relevant stressors have on lesbians’ social support system.

Vigilance

According to the Minority Stress Model, objective stressors cause minority individuals further stress because they carry expectations of rejection into their everyday interactions. These expectations of rejection put lesbian adolescents in a state of *vigilance* which Allport describes as, “the first step the ego takes for self-defense,” against prejudice (1979, p. 144). Vigilance

affects how lesbian adolescents operate in the world. According to the National School Climate Survey, sexual minority youth who experienced higher levels of victimization, “were less likely than other students to plan to pursue any post-secondary education,” and, “were about three times as likely to have missed school in the past month because of safety concerns” (Kosciw et al., 2012, p. 39) In summary, lesbian adolescents experience expectations of rejection due to their previous experiences of prejudice events. Consequently, sexual minority youth miss school or drop out altogether (Kosciw et al., 2012; Savin-Williams, 1994).

These findings have implications for understanding why lesbian youth leave home. Sexual minority youth report family conflict as the most common reason for leaving the home (Cochran et al., 2002). Expectations of rejection likely lead to internalizing and externalizing symptoms that create conflicts within the family. Additional research is needed on the effects of minority stress on lesbian adolescents’ social support systems.

Internalized Homophobia

Repeated experiences of negative societal attitudes are directed inward creating *internalized homophobia* that leads “to a devaluation of the self and resultant internal conflicts and poor self-regard” (Meyer & Dean, 1998). Youth develop their sexual identity during a critical period for identity formation making them vulnerable to internalized homophobia. Allport suggested that repetitive exposure to prejudice will inevitably affect an individual’s self-evaluation. He said, “One’s reputation, whether false or true cannot be hammered, hammered, hammered into one’s head without doing something to one’s character” (1979, p. 142). Youth live in a heteronormative environment and are assumed to be heterosexual unless proven otherwise. Therefore, when sexual minority adolescents begin to develop their sexual orientation,

they internalize the culture's attitudes towards sexual minorities and label themselves deviant (Harrison 2003; Cox Alexis, van Houtte, & Vincke, 2010). Internalized homophobia is significantly associated with a number of psychosocial problems such as anxiety, depression, and self-harm (Meyer, 2003; Williamson, 2000). These findings suggest that stagnation during the development and integration of a minority sexual identity places stress on the sexual minority youth. Internalized homophobia often decreases as an individual comes out (Cox et al., 2010) but sexual minority youth may choose to keep their sexual identity concealed if they consider the threat to their role-identities too large.

Concealment

According to the National School Climate Survey (2012), "LGBT students who were out to their peers and school staff reported higher levels of victimization based on their sexual identity and gender expression." Due to the stigma of a minority identity, youths may cope via *concealment*, choosing to hide his or her identity to avoid prejudice and discrimination (Meyer, 2003). While concealment may operate to reduce stress caused by victimization, it can increase stress by reducing social support and disrupting positive identity integration (Harrison, 2003).

A qualitative retrospective study of 79 sexual minority college students' experiences with Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) revealed that sexual minority students who were not members of their high school GSA did not attend due to efforts to conceal their minority status and expectations of prejudice if their minority status was discovered. One study participant stated:

"I did not want to associate with things that were blatantly gay. Although (I think) it was quite obvious that I was gay throughout high school, I did not want people to know that I

was gay because I was afraid it would somehow get back to my parents” (Heck, Lindquist, Stewart, Brennan, & Cochran, 2013b, p. 90-91)

Family members often perpetrate gay related violence; youth may hide their sexual identity for fear of rejection and violence from their family (Savin-Williams, 1994). However, due to their effort to conceal their minority status, sexual minority youth miss out on the positive identity relevant experiences provided by LGBT+ supportive teachers and peers.

Structured interviews of 156 youths from LGB youth organization and LGB college student organizations found that homeless youth developed their sexual orientation a year earlier than non-homeless youth. Homeless adolescents reported they were an average of around 14 years when they experienced both awareness of internal same-sex sexual orientation and initiation of same-sex behavior whereas non-homeless youth were an average age of slightly over 15. Disclosure of sexual orientation to another person occurred at a mean age of 15.4 for both homeless and non-homeless youth (Rosario et al., 2012b). These findings suggest the early development of sexual orientation and subsequent concealment places stress on the sexual minority youth. The stress of prejudice events, expectations of rejection, internalized homophobia and concealment, may mediate the relationship between a lesbian identity and homelessness. More research on minority stress processes is necessary to reach a conclusion.

Chapter Five: Stress Ameliorating Resources

It is important to examine the resources of lesbian youth because stress is characterized by an individual's appraisal that the situation is "taxing or exceeding his or her resources," (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). Meyer's Minority Stress Model calls for a distinction between personal resources and group level resources, "because when group-level resources are absent, even otherwise-resourceful individuals have deficient coping. Group-level resources may therefore define the boundaries of individual coping efforts," (2003, p. 6). The model discusses personal resources and group level resources as "stress-ameliorating factors" sexual minority individuals use to cope with the excess stress caused by their minority status.

Personal Resources

Sexual minority adolescents experience specific stress processes due to their minority status (Meyer, 2003) and must use personal resources to manage their stress. *Personal resources* refer to the individual's coping mechanisms and vary from individual to individual. Personal resources have been researched since the foundation of stress research and include problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Coping is, "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Two coping mechanisms originally proposed by Lazarus and Folkman are problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (1984). Problem-focused coping strategies involve problem solving directed at changing the stressors. Emotion-focused coping strategies involve changing one's emotional state to reduce the emotional impact of the stressor.

The stress-buffering effect of personal resources. A comparison study of 27 homeless adolescents and 27 non-homeless adolescents found that homeless adolescents had higher current stress levels and reported experiencing more stressors in the previous year than non-homeless adolescents. Homeless adolescents reported experiencing higher stress levels and more depression when living at home compared to living on the streets (Ayerst, 1999). One limitation of the study is its small sample size. The findings are worth noting because they suggest that runaway behavior is sometimes an adaptive coping technique to escape negative living situations. This idea has been suggested multiple times in the literature (Hong & Jacinto 2011; Savin & Williams, 1994) Therefore, examining the interaction between stress and coping in lesbian youth will highlight opportunities for intervention.

In a cross-sectional study of stress and coping among homeless youth, Unger and colleagues (1998) found that emotion focused coping was associated with symptoms of depression and poor subjective health status. In contrast, problem-focused coping was associated with good subjective health status and a lower risk of alcohol disorder. It is possible to conclude that problem-focused coping is more adaptive than emotion focused coping. A longitudinal comparison between sexual minority adolescents with and without a history of homelessness found that homeless sexual minority adolescents reported more internalizing and externalizing symptoms than their non-homeless counterparts. Symptoms included substance abuse and conduct problems which can be conceptualized as emotion-focused coping mechanisms. The authors found that stressful life events mediated the relationships between homelessness and symptomatology (Rosario, 2012b)

The impact of stress on personal resources. Unger and colleagues (1998) hypothesized that if an individual determines his or her resources and coping abilities exceed the demands of the stressor, he or she will use problem-focused coping. If the demands of the stressor exceed the individual's resources and coping abilities, he or she will use emotion focused coping. They found that use of emotion focused coping was positively correlated with stressful life events. The authors asserted, "Choice of coping strategies was dependent on stress" (Unger et al., 1998, p. 151). The study used respondents that were either homeless or at imminent risk for homelessness and gathered respondents from street sites and fixed sites, which makes the findings more generalizable.

According to the Minority Stress Model sexual minority youth experience additional stress due to their minority status (Meyer, 2003). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect a sexual minority youth to report a difference in stress and coping strategies in relation to non-minority youth. However, the study reported no difference in stress or coping strategies, between sexual minority youth and non-minority youth (Unger et al., 1998). A limitation of the study is that 36% of respondents reported their sexuality as "other/not sure/refused/missing" and were not included in the regression.

A cross-sectional study of 474 homeless adolescents found that a sexual minority identity predicted recent stress which mediated self-harming behavior and suicide attempts. Sexual minority identity did not predict the maladaptive behaviors of delinquent behavior and drug use (Moskowitz et al., 2013). This finding is notable because it runs contrary to the theory that increased stress from a minority identity increases the use of maladaptive coping. Both the cross-

sectional studies used a version of the Major Life Events Scale for adolescents but internal consistency and reliability for the scale is low (Moskowitz et al., 2013).

In contrast to the findings of Moskowitz and colleagues, there is abundant literature showing high rates of drug use among homeless sexual minority youth (Gattis, 2013; Noell & Ochs 2001) When using the milestone approach, Rosario and colleagues found that homeless sexual minority adolescents used substances at an earlier age and more frequently than their non-homeless counterparts. However, on average, adolescents' reported initiation substance use occurred after the first episode of homelessness (2012a). While homeless adolescents may use substances to cope with stress, substance use is not a clear predictor of homelessness. Additional research into the adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies in homeless sexual minority youth is necessary to clarify the pathways to homelessness lesbian adolescents and to identify potential buffers.

Although very little research has been conducted on the coping of lesbian adolescents, there has been research on adolescent female coping. According to Kulkin, "females tend to use a variety of emotional coping" such as wishful thinking and avoidance (2006, p. 100). Since females are relational, their social support systems have an impact on their coping. The following section examines the impact of social support systems on the coping and stress of lesbian adolescents.

Social Support

Social support is one resource that is shown to provide benefit to homeless adolescents. Unger and colleague's (1998) study of homeless youth found that respondents that reported higher levels of problem-focused coping also reported higher levels of social support. The study

found social support is positively correlated with positive subjective health status and social isolation is positively correlated with symptoms of depression (Unger et al., 1998).

A longitudinal comparison between sexual minority adolescents with and without a history of homelessness found that homeless sexual minority adolescents reported more internalizing and externalizing symptoms than their non-homeless counterparts. The authors stated, “negative social relationships, and social support from friends mediated the relationships between homelessness and symptomatology” (Rosario, 2012a, p. 544). In comparison to sexual minority adolescents without a history of homelessness, sexual minority adolescents with a history of homelessness reported less social support from friends and more negative social relationships at Time 1. Additionally, a comparison of sexual minority homeless adolescents and heterosexual homeless adolescents found that sexual minority adolescents reported more negative peer relationships (Gattis, 2013). These findings suggest that negative peer relationships are likely a mediating factor for homelessness.

Rosario and colleagues found that social support from family was not significantly related to homelessness (Rosario et al., 2012a), which goes against conventional theory that youth are homeless due to family conflict and rejection from family (Durso & Gates, 2012). However, a comparison study of sexual minority adolescents with heterosexual adolescents found that sexual minority adolescents reported less satisfaction in family communication (Gattis, 2013). The effect that social support from family has on homelessness remains unclear.

An important implication of these findings is that sexual minority adolescents are adversely affected by negative social relationships and low levels of social support. The authors theorize that homeless sexual minority adolescents are more susceptible to poor social support

due to a lack of coping resources. Rosario and colleagues state, “A careful analysis is required of the coping resources available to and used by LGB homeless and non-homeless youth to manage common challenges they experience, such as those associated with gay-related stress” (2012a, p. 555).

Group level resources. Group level resources are social resources that operate on a macro level for every minority group member to access (Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998; Meyer, 2003). They allow minority members to experience environments where they are not stigmatized and receive social support to cope with prejudice (Pettigrew, 1967 as cited in Meyer 2003). It is important to note an individual’s access to group level resources because, without group level resources their coping capacity is limited (Meyer, 2003). Research has shown that group level resources such as Gay Straight Alliances benefit sexual minority adolescents. Sexual minority students attending a school with a GSA are less likely to hear homophobic remarks, experience victimization, and feel unsafe than students attending a school without a GSA (Kosciw et al., 2012). As result, sexual minority students who attend a school with a GSA have report more favorable outcomes for alcohol use, depression, and psychological distress than students who did not attend a GSA (Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2013a).

It is possible to hypothesize that Gay-Straight Alliances benefit lesbians by creating a safer school environment, which reduces minority stress processes. Group level resources such as GSAs may reduce minority stress and increase lesbian adolescents’ ability to adaptively cope. By providing an environment for adaptive coping, group level resources can act as a buffer to prevent crisis situations that lead lesbian adolescents to become homeless. In spite of evidence of the benefits of GSAs only 45.7% of students surveyed in the National School Climate survey

reported that their school had a GSA or similar student club (Kosciw et al., 2012). Such lack of access to group level resources affects a lesbian adolescents' ability to cope (Meyer, 2003).

Chapter Six: Conclusions on Adolescent Lesbian Homelessness

This paper has investigated the stressors and coping resources of lesbian adolescents. The literature shows that lesbian adolescents experience discrimination and victimization from their family and peers (Durso & Gates, 2012; Friedman et al., 2011; Hong & Jacinto, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2012; Savin-Williams, 1994). Experiences of prejudice affect lesbian identity development by increasing vigilance (Allport, 1979; Meyer 2003). Increased vigilance encourages lesbian youth to conceal their sexual-identity in order to protect their role-identities as friends and valued family members. Concealment fosters internalized homophobia by reinforcing the idea that a sexual minority identity is deviant (Harrison, 2003).

Homeless sexual minority youth report earlier sexual orientation development than non-homeless sexual minority adolescents (Rosario et al., 2012b) and homeless heterosexual adolescents (Cochran et al., 2002). Minority stress processes such as experiencing prejudice, expectations of rejection, internalized homophobia and concealment likely affect sexual orientation development.

It is possible to theorize that early sexual orientation development is correlated to homelessness because it increases the duration of minority stress that adolescents experience. The lesbian adolescent is more likely to experience a lack of adequate coping resources due to age and minority status. The research shows that adolescents with high stress levels are more likely to use maladaptive coping. As result, lesbian adolescents are at higher risk for externalizing and internalizing behavior (Grossman et al., 2014; Moskowitz et al., 2013; Rosario et al., 2012a). It is possible to theorize that externalizing symptoms such as conduct problems

and substance use and internalizing symptoms such as depression may be the cause of family conflicts that are the main reason sexual minority youth leave the home (Cochran et al., 2002)

This paper explored the effects of a minority status on stress levels. Recent research finds that sexual minority status is associated with increased stress. Analyses of stress buffering resources in populations of homeless sexual minority youth suggest that social support and problem focused coping is associated with a lower risk of symptomology, while emotion focused coping and negative peer relationships is associated with a higher risk of symptomology. Therefore, social support and coping skills are likely stress buffering resources for lesbian youth. It is possible to theorize that lesbian adolescents are at a higher risk of becoming homeless because they lack adequate stress buffering resources. Stress, stress buffering resources, and homelessness appear to interact in a complex fashion. Additional research is necessary to evident the nature of interaction and draw definitive conclusions.

Chapter Seven: A New Model

This theory is extrapolated from the literature about LGBT youth and further observations of the author regarding runaway lesbian girls. Building off the minority stress theories of Brooks (1981) and Meyer (2003), the proposed model lists sources of oppression such as sexual orientation, age, gender, and race as risk factors contributing to minority stress. Thoits' observed that, a

“‘unique stressor’ approach to status differences in distress has explanatory advantage... On the other hand, adopting a unique stressor approach entails a theoretical disadvantage: Sociodemographic patterns in psychological distress (by gender, by minority status, by age, by social class) can no longer be explained parsimoniously” (1991, p 103).

The proposed model is based on identity relevant stressors to incorporate the multiple oppressions lesbian adolescents' experience. Lesbian adolescents face multiple oppressions on the basis of gender, sexual minority status and age. Some lesbian adolescents also face oppressions based on race, social class, and ability. The proposed model (Fig. 3) suggests that sexual orientation, age, gender, and race are background factors that affect identity relevant stressors. Identity relevant stressors are conceptualized in terms of peer relationships, familial relationships and romantic relationships. The proposed model describes the role strain associated with each identity relevant stressor using the stress processes outlined in the Minority Stress Model. Thus, the model retains the explanatory advantages of the “unique stressors approach” while providing a dynamic construct to examine separate aspects of the multiple oppressions lesbians face.

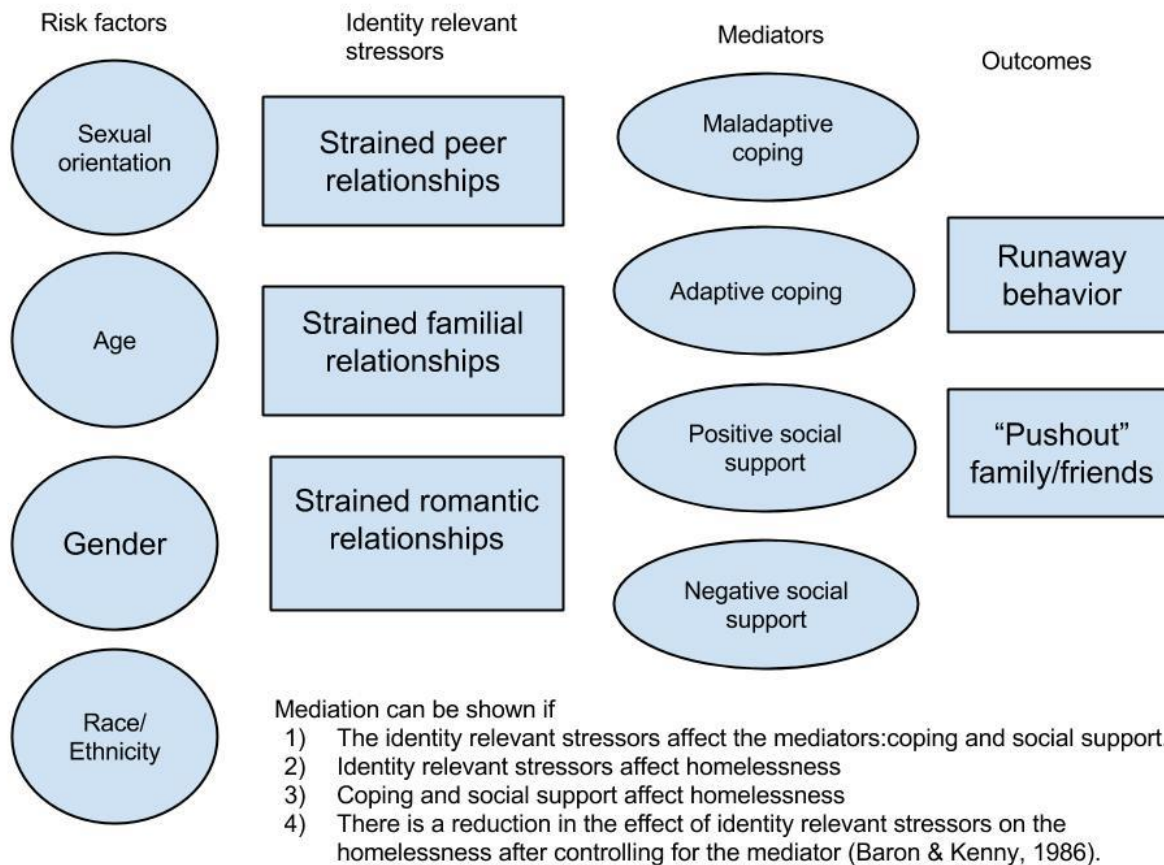


Figure 3 Theorized Mediators of Homelessness in Lesbian Adolescents

Based on the studies of suggesting that coping and social support act as stress buffering resources in populations of homeless adolescents (Ayerst, 1999; Unger et al., 1998), and homeless sexual minority adolescents (Kulkin, 2006; Rosario et al., 2012a), maladaptive coping, adaptive coping, positive social support and negative social support are hypothesized to be mediators between identity relevant stressors and homelessness. As mediators, coping resources are hypothesized to account for the relation between the identity-relevant stressors and homelessness. In recognition of the different pathways to homelessness, the proposed model separates the outcome variable into runaway behavior and “push-out” family and friends.

Chapter Eight: Implications for Further Research

The model proposed suggests that experiencing identity relevant stressors leads to homelessness. For example, a lesbian adolescent may experience difficulties in her role as a student due to peer victimization, difficulties in her roles as a daughter due to expectations of familial rejection, and difficulties in her role as a girlfriend due to efforts to conceal her relationship. These identity-relevant stressors are further compounded by the lesbian adolescent's age, gender, and race which generate additional oppressions and identity challenges. If a lesbian adolescent lacks adequate coping resources and social support to manage her stress she may display externalizing and internalizing symptoms. The adolescent's inability to fulfill her role-identity and resulting psychological symptoms may cause conflict in her social environment. Consequently, she may runaway or be told to leave by family or friends.

The majority of current research on sexual minority homeless adolescents focuses on understanding and treating the origin of negative psychological symptoms they experience (Cochran et al., 2002; Moskowitz et al., 2013; Rosario et al., 2012a). While some research has examined the pathways to homelessness additional insight is needed on the specific experiences of lesbian adolescents (Cochran et al., 2002; Gattis, 2013; Hong & Jacinto 2011). Homeless adolescent lesbians need to be studied independently because they experience additional stressors due to their double minority status. More research on effects of the intersections of lesbian identities is needed to understand the complex processes affecting the high rates of adolescent lesbian homelessness. Additionally, research on females suggests that adolescent lesbians cope differently than males (Kulkin, 2006). Future research should assess the importance of social support and coping styles for lesbian adolescents and homeless lesbian

adolescents. While the existing research on Gay Straight Alliances shows promising evidence of the beneficial effect of group level resources (Heck et al., 2013a; Heck et al., 2013b), research is needed to explore if access to group level resources is a potential buffer for homelessness. Future research on the stress, coping, and social support of lesbian adolescents has potential to identify risk factors of homelessness, buffers to prevent homelessness, and interventions for lesbian adolescents experiencing homelessness.

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