



Published in final edited form as:

*Youth Soc.* 2014 September ; 46(5): 663–687. doi:10.1177/0044118X12449630.

## Negative and Positive Factors Associated With the Well-Being of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning (LGBTQ) Youth

Darrel Higa<sup>1</sup>, Marilyn J. Hoppe<sup>1</sup>, Taryn Lindhorst<sup>1</sup>, Shawn Mincer<sup>1</sup>, Blair Beadnell<sup>1</sup>, Diane M. Morrison<sup>1</sup>, Elizabeth A. Wells<sup>1</sup>, Avry Todd<sup>1</sup>, and Sarah Mountz<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA

### Abstract

Factors associated with the well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth were qualitatively examined to better understand how these factors are experienced from the youths' perspectives. Largely recruited from LGBTQ youth groups, 68 youth participated in focus groups ( $n = 63$ ) or individual interviews ( $n = 5$ ). The sample included 50% male, 47% female, and 3% transgender participants. Researchers used a consensual methods approach to identify negative and positive factors across 8 domains. Negative factors were associated with families, schools, religious institutions, and community or neighborhood; positive factors were associated with the youth's own identity development, peer networks, and involvement in the LGBTQ community. These findings suggest a pervasiveness of negative experiences in multiple contexts, and the importance of fostering a positive LGBTQ identity and supportive peer/community networks. Efforts should work towards reducing and eliminating the prejudicial sentiments often present in the institutions and situations that LGBTQ youth encounter.

### Keywords

gay; lesbian; well-being; youth

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) youth have greater vulnerability to a wide range of health, mental health, and social problems such as eating disorders, sexually transmitted diseases, school difficulties, forced sex, homelessness, violence and suicide (Austin et al., 2009; Blake et al., 2001; Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002; Garofalo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey, & Durant, 1998; Perdue, Hagan, Thiede, & Valleroy, 2003; Russell, Driscoll, & Truong, 2001; Thiede et al. 2003). These negative outcomes are not inevitable as a result of a sexual minority status (Diamond, 2003) but their occurrence may increase due to the discrimination, marginalization, and isolation that are often associated with being LGBTQ (Remadeffi, 2008;

© The Author(s) 2012

**Corresponding Author:** Marilyn J. Hoppe, School of Social Work, University of Washington, 4101 15th Ave. NE, Box 354900, Seattle, WA 98105, USA mjhoppe@uw.edu.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Savin-Williams, 1995). Despite the increasing acceptance of LGBTQ persons in the US, being a young person who is a sexual minority can still be difficult in a society largely oriented toward heterosexuality (Meyer, 2003).

Sexual minority youth can experience difficulties in multiple contexts. In families, for example, some LGBTQ youth have described their relationships with parents as distant or strained due to their sexual orientation (Floyd, Stein, Harter, Allison, & Nye, 1999), a fear of victimization from family members (D'Augelli, 2006), and a lack of acceptance from socially conservative parents (Newman & Gerard, 1993). In school, sexual minority youth report negative experiences such as bullying and antigay victimization by other students (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009), or having their property damaged or stolen (Garofalo et al., 1998). While religion may sometimes be a source of support and a protective factor against health risks, it may be less so for LGBTQ youth than for their heterosexual counterparts (Rostosky, Danner, & Riggle, 2007). In particular, religion may be a source of distress and contribute to internalized homophobia if religious beliefs are irreconcilable with one's sexual identity (Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005). Finally, the larger social environment may affect the well-being of LGBT youth. A recent Oregon study found the risk of attempting suicide for lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth was 20% greater in social environments unsupportive of LGBTQ persons compared to LGBTQ-supportive environments (Hatzenbuehler, 2011).

The research described above has been valuable in identifying the difficulties experienced by sexual minority youth and the contexts in which these experiences take place (Birkett et al., 2009; D'Augelli, 2006; Floyd et al., 1999; Rostosky et al., 2007). However, this literature suffers from two limitations. First, many studies narrowly focus on a single domain such as school or family. Such an approach may not fully capture the extent or multiplicity of negative factors affecting the well-being of LGBTQ youth. The second limitation is the scant attention devoted to investigating positive factors that may contribute to LGBTQ youth well-being (Bouris et al., 2010; Elze, 2005; Horn, Kosciw, & Russell, 2009; Russell, 2005; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010; Savin-Williams, 2001). A handful of studies have begun to examine positive factors such as parental support (Ryan et al., 2010), affirmative school environments (Espelage, Aragon, & Birkett, 2008; Russell, 2005), emotional connectedness to family and school (Saewyc et al., 2009), emotional resiliency within antigay environments (Scourfield, Roen, & McDermott, 2008), and positive role models and social support (Fenaughty & Harre, 2003; Russell, 2005). Identifying and acknowledging these positive factors balances the picture of LGBTQ youth that emerges from an overly problem-focused research literature.

An approach that contextualizes individuals within increasingly broader systems may be a useful way to describe how multiple systems affect the well-being of LGBTQ youth. For example, Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994) ecological perspective argues that human development is largely shaped by interconnected environmental systems that include the people's immediate (e.g., family, peers, school), larger (e.g., neighborhoods, communities), and cultural/societal contexts, as well people's development in the context of historical events. Bronfenbrenner further suggests this model is bidirectional and emphasizes that the individual shapes his or her microsystem or the immediate environment. Incorporating a

person's influence within the immediate environment is useful for understanding adolescent development in general but may be particularly beneficial when examining the relationship between multiple contexts that may be unsupportive of same-sex sexuality and how sexual minority youth cope with and respond to these contexts. By looking at the experiences of LGBTQ youth in different contexts and exploring their positive aspects, we may capture the range and complexity of life circumstances that influence the developmental trajectories and enhance and/or diminish well-being for LGBTQ youth.

Equally important is using research methods that approximate an ecological perspective of well-being for LGBTQ youth. Qualitative research methods are appropriate for this for several reasons. First, they can provide a rich understanding of the contexts and experiences of sexual minority youth from their perspectives and in their own words. Second, qualitative research methods are useful because they allow for exploring phenomenon that are largely unknown, important here given the relative infancy of the research literature (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998) on positive life aspects of LGBTQ youth. Finally, qualitative methods offer the potential for representing human agency or how individuals express their choices and actions in the world (Reissman, 1994). This aspect of qualitative research may be particularly important when doing research with marginalized populations who may be perceived as lacking visibility and power.

## Study Purpose

This study elicited descriptions of negative and positive life factors from LGBTQ youth. Using qualitative analysis methods, we describe these factors and the related contexts in which they occur. A better understanding of these factors may help to identify relevant components for effective health and mental health prevention interventions for this population. This includes identifying positive factors that can be enhanced and negative factors whose effects might be ameliorated in service of reducing the challenges faced by LGBTQ youth.

## Method

The University of Washington's Institutional Review Board approved all procedures. Parental consent was not required for participation.

## Recruitment

We recruited 14 to 19 year olds, who spoke English, and self-identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning one's sexual or gender identity (LGBTQ). We recruited the majority of study participants from existing LGBTQ youth groups in Washington state, such as LGBTQ youth-focused community agencies and school-based Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs). We also distributed posters, flyers, and postcards to community agencies and other venues frequented by youth, such as cafés, barbershops, music venues, and youth centers. Youth self-selected to join the study and some chose to participate even if they did not meet the core recruitment criteria (see below).

## Sample

A total of 68 youth (50% female, 47% male, 3% transgender) participated in the focus groups ( $n = 63$ ); some youth were unable to take part in the focus groups, but wanted to be included, so individual interviews were also conducted with 5 persons. Participants ranged in age from 14 to 24 with almost half indicating they were 16 or 17 years old. Four youth reported being over 19 and 11 youth self-identified as “straight allies” of LGBTQ youth. We chose not to exclude these individuals from participating in the focus groups because they were part of intact groups and because of their recent membership in the target age range or insightful input as allies. Forty-two percent identified as White, 35% as multiracial, and the remaining 23% were spread across other race/ethnicity categories, with 6% identifying as African American and 6% as Latina/o. Most of the youth lived with their parents (60%), friends/roommates (15%), other family members (9%), or in other living situations (10%), while 6% were homeless.

## Procedures

We chose focus groups as the primary data collection method to stimulate discussion and take advantage of the dynamics of the group process. Qualitative methods such as focus groups are ideal when a large sample is not necessary and it is desirable to dig more deeply into the topic of interest, giving the researcher more insight into understanding an issue. Focus groups can be more efficient than in-depth interviews and more cost-effective than some qualitative or quantitative methods.

We conducted nine focus groups: eight were held in LGBTQ youth focused agencies and one at a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). The majority of focus groups were conducted in mid-sized cities and smaller towns outside the urban core of LGBT community programs in Seattle. We sought youth from these locations because they would not have the same level of access to community support programs as do LGBTQ youth within more resource-rich urban centers. All study participants were given \$15 cash for participating, and snacks were served. Research staff read the consent information statement to participants at the beginning of the focus groups and interviews, during which youth read along on their own copies. Facilitators then gave youth the option to leave if they decided they did not want to participate, but none did. Facilitators used a semistructured interview guide that covered topics such as sexual and gender identity, and being LGBTQ in one's school, place of worship, racial/ethnic community, and family. Participants also completed a brief demographics survey at the end of a focus group or interview. All focus groups and individual interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist.

## Analysis

We analyzed transcribed interviews in Atlas.ti, Version 5.0 using strategies from a consensual methods approach (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). The goal of the consensual methods approach is to identify core ideas contained within interview data, and to determine the representativeness of these ideas across the complete dataset. In this approach, multiple analysts are involved in an iterative process of developing and applying coding decisions to transcripts, and making decisions based on the consensus of the analysis

team. First, each team member independently reviewed at least 2 transcripts and created initial codes such as “coming out,” “negative religious experiences,” and “positive associations with school.” These codes reflected general categories of topics that arose during the focus groups/interviews, based on statements made by participants. The coding team then met to review each transcript and its associated codes, and worked to develop a consensus about what set of codes should be used to represent the patterns identified within and across cases. This process of code development included the identification of discrepancies between team members, which were resolved through group discussion. Codes were revised, added, and deleted as a result of this consensual process, which resulted in codes the team agreed on in terms of their definition, relevance, and scope.

With this list of initial codes, the research team divided the remaining transcripts and coded these in pairs. This involved reading over the transcripts and attaching one or more codes to each key idea or statement made by participants. The two coders’ codes were compared and, when discrepancies in coding occurred, the pair of coders discussed these until consensus was reached. New codes that emerged from coding remaining transcripts were added to the initial code list by consensus of the research team. A senior researcher and a doctoral student audited the final coded transcripts and checked the coding for accuracy.

Analysts then compiled a comprehensive listing of codes and organized these codes into domains from the intrapersonal to the larger community level (e.g., family, school). Next, we identified codes based on their valence or whether it represented a negative (i.e., nonsupportive, dismissive, harmful) or positive (i.e., supportive, affirmative, helpful) experience. We then identified the most commonly mentioned core themes in each domain that represented either a negative or positive factor. Being identified as a common theme was based on both the number of people who discussed the topic and the number of focus groups or interviews in which the topic was independently raised. By identifying both the number of individuals and groups who discussed a theme or factor, the team was able to ascertain the intensity of a theme by looking at whether it was discussed by multiple youth across focus groups, or was the product of discussion by a handful of people in only a few groups. This approach guards against equating the number of quotes with importance, favoring instead the presence of an idea across more than one person and group as an indicator of its relative level of significance (Carey & Smith, 1994).

## Results

Youth in the study discussed many negative and positive factors in their lives. The most frequently mentioned themes within each domain are summarized in Table 1. Table 1 shows the number of people (individuals) who discussed the topic (No. of IN) and the number of focus groups or interviews in which the topic was independently raised (No. of FG/I). Overall, although youth discussed both negative and positive factors across all domains, negative factors were reported most often in the domains of families, schools, religious institutions, and community or neighborhood while positive factors were mentioned most frequently in the domains of the youth’s own identity, peer networks, and LGBTQ community. The number of negative and positive factors for one domain, responses to and

ways to cope with a stigmatized identity, was almost equal. In Table 2, we provide examples of statements the youth made that reflected a positive and negative factor in each domain.

## Identity

Youth discussed identity issues in a more positive than negative light. For example, the idea that an LGBTQ identity was flexible was apparent in almost three fourths of the groups. While a flexible identity may suggest instability or confusion, youth referred to it as a way to exercise control in how they self-identified and presented their sexual/gender identities to others. A flexible identity included not wanting or needing labels (even LGBTQ labels), using multiple terms to identify one's sexuality, being open about pronouns when referring to oneself, and using terms that reflected the complexity and fluidity of gender and/or sexual identity such as “two-spirit,” “gender queer,” and “pansexual.” Closely related to flexibility, youth also made statements about their identities that reflected having a greater sense of control. For instance, some youth discussed reclaiming derogatory terms (such as faggot or dyke) as a positive step in deflecting and reappropriating their negative connotation and usage. Finally, youth spoke about being visible as LGBTQ as a way to express a sense of pride in their identities and not conform to stereotypical gender roles. Visibility was often achieved by purposely wearing clothing and accessories to mark themselves as being different and/or LGBTQ (i.e., pink triangles), and disclosing their sexual identities to others.

In contrast, the most frequently mentioned negative factor associated with an LGBTQ identity was feeling the need to hide it from others such as teachers and from the community in general (hiding an LGBTQ identity was also common in the family—see Table 1). Youth also mentioned being concerned about being “outed” as LGBTQ (i.e., having their sexual orientation revealed without their permission) or being labeled by others. In general, these quotes reflected the perception that youth faced resistance in being able to determine the labels they wanted for themselves and the timing of disclosing their sexual identities (if at all) to others. Rigid gender roles were also mentioned as posing conflicts and limiting self-expression for some youth. For example, a Chicano male youth mentioned that males within his culture were expected to be strong family figures, making it difficult for males to identify as female or transgender persons.

## Responses to and ways to cope with a stigmatized identity

The number of negative and positive responses for dealing with a stigmatized identity was almost equal. Youth reported negative factors that reflected feelings of social isolation and negative internalized feelings related to being gay. In over half of the focus groups, youth described being isolated, primarily at school. Because they were often the only gay person they knew of at school, they felt there was no one else with whom to share experiences. One youth noted that even in the LGBTQ community, there were few adults who had gone through similar situations because many older LGBTQ persons came out after leaving middle or high school. This difference made finding support within the adult community sometimes difficult. Additionally, three quarters of the focus groups included discussion about negative internalized feelings related to being LGBTQ. For instance, one youth said other people's reactions made her feel bad about herself and wonder if she was wrong to be

gay. Another young woman referred to herself as “mentally disabled” by the negative interactions she has with others related to her sexuality.

In terms of positive factors, youth reported various methods and supports for coping with a stigmatized identity. In over half the groups, youth discussed two active methods for coping with stigma: fighting back and advocating for LGBTQ rights. Youth frequently reported being targeted for harassment based on how they looked or having others know or believe them to be LGBTQ. For some, these experiences resulted in the youth actively standing up for themselves or friends through verbal confrontations or physical fights with the harassers. Other youth channeled these energies into efforts to advocate for LGBTQ persons or activities, such as creating “pink proms,” organizing LGBTQ positive media campaigns at school, or talking with school officials about anti-LGBTQ attitudes and behaviors in the school. In addition to these social methods of coping, youth also discussed developing a sense of self-acceptance, which included understanding themselves as unique, and learning how to be comfortable with themselves.

## Family

Negative factors were more common than positive factors when youth discussed their families. Experiencing or fearing rejection was the most common concern for LGBTQ youth in terms of negative family responses. Youth mentioned being concerned about being kicked out and denied financial support if their parents or guardians found out about their sexual identity. Youth also felt the need to hide their LGBTQ identity and were unable to openly talk about being LGBTQ with family members, particularly parents, because of previous antigay or otherwise gay-negative statements in their families. For example, one young woman reported that members of her family were “hardcore gay bashers,” while others noted that their family members encouraged them to be straight, or believed their being LGBTQ was a passing phase.

In terms of positive factors, the most frequently mentioned was being accepted as an out LGBTQ person by family members, primarily siblings. Acceptance and support ranged from conditional (i.e., youth needed to behave in a more hidden or heterosexually identified way in order to maintain their parents’ “acceptance” of their LGBTQ identity) to unconditional support where a family member was excited that the youth was LGBTQ, welcomed romantic partners, and engaged in activism. A few LGBTQ youth came from families where their parents were openly LGBTQ and they saw this as affirming for them. Youth also mentioned being able to openly discuss being LGBTQ in one’s family as a positive.

## Peer networks

Positive factors outnumbered negative factors in the peer network domain. Peers of LGBTQ youth were described as sources of information and help. For example, many of the LGBTQ youth or their allies said friends were a major source of social support to whom they turned when they had questions or when they needed someone to talk to. While the majority of the youth singled out peers as the most likely to provide support, they noted that support can come from many different people, including non-LGBTQ parents, siblings, teachers, and principals, for example, as well as friends.

In contrast to the support that peers provided, there were also ways that peers were the source of nonsupport or negative experiences. For example, some youth in our study found it difficult to find peers to talk to and understand what they were going through, especially in contexts where it was not safe or comfortable to be “out” to others. Sometimes, participants reported outright negative experiences. One youth reported discomfort with an overnight school field trip because she was not out and other girls on the trip made fun of and “simulated” lesbian sex to boys they were talking to on the phone. A small number of youth experienced a lack of support from their peers but at least one youth who found support among other LGBTQ peers reported pressure from these peers to be sexually active, even when the youth did not want to do so.

## School

School was associated with more negative factors than positive factors. Over half of the groups discussed experiencing verbal or physical harassment at school because of being identified as LGBTQ. Youth described verbal harassment such as being called names, hearing derogatory labels or phrases such as “faggot” or “that's so gay,” being sworn at, and being told one is going to hell for being LGBTQ. Youth also reported experiencing, hearing about or witnessing physical harassment such as being pushed, bullied, beaten up, or having food thrown at them when they were identified as LGBTQ. Youth discussed the inaction of school staff such as teachers and administrators who did not intervene when youth were being harassed as another negative aspect associated with school. In addition, youth experienced resistance to starting Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in their schools from students and staff. Overall, persons in the school environment who were mentioned most frequently as exhibiting antigay or otherwise nonsupportive behavior were principals, staff, or religious students and teachers.

Despite these negative experiences, some youth reported positive and supportive school environments. Participants often described this acceptance and support as the result of having peers who were open-minded, or school personnel who could be turned to when they were “hassled” by other students. They also saw GSAs as contributing to a positive school environment by providing safe spaces for LGBTQ youth and decreasing isolation. One youth stated she felt like she was “the only one and now that there's a GSA, it's a lot easier because I'm not the only one.” Along the same lines, having visible LGBTQ persons in school such as teachers or other students also helped with promoting a supportive school climate for youth.

## Religious institutions

Many LGBTQ youth in our study discussed religion as a negative factor. They consistently described hearing negative messages from faith communities related to their sexual orientation. Youth stated that others in their lives had told them that they are sinners, abominations, or that God hates them and they will go to hell for being LGBTQ. Youth reported being harassed at their places of worship, and many had either left their faith communities or been forced out. Youth also heard negative messages from religious leaders in the media and, based on religious beliefs, from youth and adults at their schools that maligned them for being LGBTQ. These negative encounters also occurred in the youths’



families with some youth reporting that they were ostracized from their families for being LGBTQ due to the family's religious beliefs. Youth also mentioned being physically confronted in public spaces such as school with negative religious messages and calls to “repent.”

A smaller number of LGBTQ youth shared positive statements about religion, faith or spirituality which they experienced as a source of strength in their lives. Some youth had already sought out religious communities that were openly accepting of LGBTQ people, and others found new ones that were accepting of their sexuality. Some LGBTQ youth left nonaccepting religions and participated in spiritual traditions such as paganism and Wicca since these religious movements are typically accepting of gender and sexual diversity. Some youth were able to discuss their concerns about religion and LGBTQ issues with persons who belonged to various religious communities, even those that were relatively less LGBTQ-accepting.

### **Community/neighborhood**

Study youth mentioned more negative encounters in their communities and neighborhoods than positive ones. Youth reported experiencing physical harassment and hearing about other LGBTQ youth being similarly victimized. For example, in Table 2, youth reported two different experiences of harassment including being spit on and getting beaten up. Besides harassment, experiencing a combination of discrimination, such as LGBTQ discrimination in conjunction with racism and sexism, were also discussed. Specifically, youth of color and young women described additional experiences of rejection that they saw as related to the ways their sexual identity overlapped with their racial/ethnic background and gender. For example, a bisexual multiracial female described the lack of safe spaces that simultaneously acknowledged her multiple identities. Finally, participants reported meeting strangers who openly voiced antigay views either to the youth themselves, or to their parents or friends.

In terms of positive factors, some youth were able to navigate their neighborhoods and communities by finding a core group, agency, or event that was not specifically LGBTQ-focused but nevertheless buffered them against negative experiences (see LGBTQ Community Involvement section for LGBTQ-specific agencies). For example, one young person found support in a writing group while another cited a community sponsored sporting event where youth were able to hang out and talk. Another positive that encompassed the larger community was the visibility of different kinds of diversity. Specifically, youth suggested that more racially diverse communities were more likely to be open to diversity in general, including sexual orientation. Youth cited their own families, ethnic communities, and role models from the media they believed promoted visibility and acceptance for racial and sexual diversity. Finally, a handful of youth believed their neighborhood or community was safe for LGBTQ people. One youth mentioned he felt safe enough in his neighborhood to hold his boyfriend's hand in public.

### **LGBTQ community involvement**

Youth held more positive than negative views on LGBTQ organizations. LGBTQ youth organizations provided formal and informal programs for youth, a safe place for youth to go

and meet other LGBTQ youth, and a place where youth felt like they can be themselves. In addition to organizations, youth also noted that they turned to LGBTQ adults for mentoring and advice. Several youth mentioned they could not attend activities at local organizations because of anti-LGBTQ sentiment in their family, but they made ready use of the internet, particularly MySpace and Facebook sites, to interact with other LGBTQ youth and community forums.

Although youth frequently mentioned the importance of LGBTQ organizations as sources of support, they were not always available. Several youth lamented the lack of opportunities for LGBTQ community involvement, particularly in rural areas, and especially the lack of places for LGBTQ youth to meet. Even in more populated areas, youth commented about problems with access at some organizations, especially those that relied on volunteers for staffing. Although not mentioned frequently, youth did report a lack of community organizations for segments of LGBTQ youth; specifically LGBTQ youth of color and LGBTQ youth between the ages of 18 to 21.

## Discussion

The goal of the study was to elicit information on the current perspectives of LGBTQ youth using an ecological framework, considering both the negative and positive factors in their lives. Our findings indicate that LGBTQ youth tend to experience negative factors such as rejection and harassment in more heterocentric social environments (e.g., family, school, general community, religion) but that this is less the case in environments that tend to be more LGBTQ-supportive (e.g., peer groups, and LGBTQ community). These findings underscore the usefulness of the ecological framework as a guide to understanding how different contexts, both positive and negative, influence LGBTQ youth well-being. Our findings replicate previous research that suggests the importance of social context for sexual minority youth, and that their interactions with this context may be particularly complex and challenging (D'Augelli, 2006). Moreover, our study found evidence of youth influencing their immediate social contexts, especially in response to dealing with a stigmatized identity. This finding supports the idea of the bi-directionality of influence within the ecological model. Keeping in mind the importance of within-group variation (Diamond, 2003), these findings and provide implications for intervention and support services, future research, and policy.

It is notable that many youth viewed their sexual and/or gender identity as more of a positive factor than a negative one, and frequently described their identities as being flexible but under their control. Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, and Laub (2009) identified “personal empowerment” as resulting from the feeling of having agency over things in one's life and feeling good about oneself. It may be that this is achieved through people feeling in control of how they describe their sexual and/or gender identity, or feeling unique and special because of not fitting into a typical “box” or rigid category. Feeling and perhaps, even embodying a sense of uniqueness because of one's LGBTQ identity may contribute to authenticity but this sense of being “different” may also be isolating for some LGBTQ youth, particularly in contexts (e.g., peer groups, school, religious institutions) where individuality may be undervalued. This dilemma suggests that identity presentation for

LGBTQ youth is strategic and lends support to the importance of espousing a “flexible” identity.

Other areas where positives outnumbered negatives were related to peer networks and connection to LGBTQ community or mentors. Having friends/ allies to turn to and get support from was frequently mentioned as an asset as well as having a connection to other people in the LGBTQ community or mentors. Although connection to the LGBTQ community was an important positive resource, we did see evidence (though more rarely) that some youth experienced negative interactions with LGBTQ peers. These findings have implications for those wishing to provide helpful services to this population. It would be important to facilitate the formation of supportive networks or connections in the community, helping youth to negotiate conflict in peer relationships, especially reinforcing norms for cooperation. One way to accomplish this is to encourage development of school or community GSA's where young people can come together in a safe environment; however, this may be challenging in some environments. For example, youth in rural areas may have fewer opportunities for connecting to peer and community support, while school environments may differ in their support of LGBTQ youth. Another way to create helpful networks or connections may be facilitated by using online resources and forming online communities for LGBTQ youth. Community events and groups that are not LGBTQ-specific should also work towards being LGBTQ-friendly and welcoming of diverse backgrounds. For example, a writing group (or any youth-related group or activity) that encourages and allows authentic self-expression within a supportive environment would help LGBTQ youth.

While youth expressed various areas that were mostly positive, negative factors outnumbered those across several domains, including those usually considered places of support for youth such as family, school, and religious institutions. Two important strategies are suggested by this finding. First, efforts could be focused on determining the most effective methods for diminishing anti-LGBTQ attitudes and behaviors in these environments. For example, LGBTQ-friendly health care providers, religious leaders, and school personnel could find ways to routinely make information available regarding sexual identity development for all youth and their parents, providing empirical evidence about the durability and stability of sexual identity structures. Second, in situations where it is not possible to affect shifts in family, school or religious institutions, an important alternative service for this population would be the creation of support programs in the community, such as providing mentors and role models for LGBTQ youth.

School experiences deserve a special mention for this population. School attendance is a legally mandated activity for all youth, yet this environment may be one in which LGBTQ youth face the most frequent harassment. Efforts should be made to create positive school climates for all students; current efforts focused on intervening to prevent bullying of students should include components on diminishing the harassment and bullying of LGBTQ youth. This includes working to change negative attitudes and behaviors toward LGBTQ youth that can sometimes be fostered by students, teachers, and administrators. There is evidence that creating a more positive environment benefits the entire student body in a school, not just the sexual minority students (Birkett et al., 2009). The Gay, Lesbian, and

Straight Education Network (GLSEN) may be a helpful resource for creating safer and more positive school environments for LGBTQ youth. Other long-term solutions include providing more LGBTQ-related content in teacher-training/certification courses, preparing all school personnel with diversity training, and enforcing antibullying and harassment policies.

Although there is a spectrum of attitudes towards same-sex sexuality and LGBTQ persons among religions and within individual religions over time (Swidler, 1993), many of the youth in our study felt that religion was a source of negativity in their lives, alienating them from places of worship, from other youth and adults in their communities, and perhaps most importantly from members of their family. Given these experiences, some sexual minority youth may feel compelled to distance themselves from or reject traditional religious involvements temporarily to manage the coming out process (Rostosky et al., 2007) but other youth mentioned positive religious affiliations that provided support and a sense of belonging. These youth may have successfully managed the cognitive dissonance often arising from the conflict between religious and LGBTQ identities (Rosario, Hunter, Yali, & Gwadz, 2005). Beyond referring LGBTQ youth to welcoming and accepting religious institutions and groups, LGBTQ communities and their allies could profit from seeking opportunities for constructive dialogue with places of worship, including but necessarily limited to those that are not overtly welcoming but do not promote antigay rhetoric and discrimination.

### **Future Research Directions and Policy Implications**

The study's findings suggest several research directions and policy implications. Future research could profit from the use of a longitudinal study design. A longitudinal study would not only better follow the youths' developmental trajectories over time but also better capture the dynamic social environment and how it impacts the well-being of LGBTQ youth. Further research on LGBTQ youth and well-being should also be conducted to better understand how other identities such as racial/ethnic background, socioeconomic status, and physical abilities intersect with sexual and gender identity to influence well-being. We touched on these intersections of identities in our study but more research is needed to better understand how multiple minority identities influence well-being for LGBTQ youth. In terms of policy implications, our findings support the need for stronger antibullying policies in sites where youth congregate or access the internet (e.g., school, social networking sites). Given the current media attention on bullying, this is an opportune time to advocate for antibullying policies that explicitly include sexual orientation and gender identity.

### **Study Limitations**

Our findings and interpretations have several limitations. First, individuals recruited from established LGBTQ groups may have different perspectives and experiences than others, especially since they are more likely to have access to positive influences and less isolation. Perspectives from more closeted and isolated individuals are not present in these findings, and would likely increase reports of negative experiences in the study. Also, while the sample did include people from a range of communities from large to small, and

conservative to liberal, it was limited to one state and may not represent other geographical areas.

## Conclusions

Two overarching themes were identified in these data: the pervasiveness of the experience rejection and harassment in a multiplicity of contexts, and the youths' own perception that they were doing relatively well in the face of these negative experiences. These overarching themes are reflected in the types of negative and positive factors mentioned in each domain. Suggested approaches at this time are to build on what can be strengthened and provide more support to individuals to ameliorate the stressors that are not easily amenable to change. Ultimately, efforts should work towards reducing and eliminating the negative sentiment often found in the institutions and situations that LGBTQ youth encounter.

## Acknowledgments

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported in part by the National Institutes of Mental Health, MH075030.

## Biography

**Darrel Higa** is currently a Senior Service Fellow in the HIV Prevention Research Branch, Division of HIV/AIDS at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. His research interests include HIV prevention for gay and bisexual men, and Asian and Pacific Islander populations, and engagement in HIV care for HIV-positive persons.

**Marilyn J. Hoppe** is a Senior Research Scientist in the School of Social Work, University of Washington. Her research interests include adolescent and young adult health risk behavior and prevention, and data collection methodology.

**Taryn Lindhorst** is a Carol LaMare Associate Professor of Social Work, University of Washington. Her interests include issues of victimization, LGBT health and mixed methods research.

**Shawn Mincer** is currently a Research Coordinator with the Department of Anesthesiology and Pain Medicine at the University of Washington, Seattle. His research interests include adverse outcomes in general anesthesia, patient-doctor shared decision-making, same-sex intimate partner violence, and LGBTQ health.

**Blair Beadnell** is a Senior Research Scientist in the School of Social Work, University of Washington. His research focuses on youth and adult health risk behavior, and research methodology.

**Diane M. Morrison** is a Professor in the School of Social Work, University of Washington. Her research focuses on sexual behavior and decision making about risky sexual behavior.

**Elizabeth A. Wells** is a Research Professor at the University of Washington's School of Social Work. Her research interests include adolescent relationships and sexuality and adolescent and adult substance use.

**Apryl Todd** is a Clinical Social Worker at Stanford Hospital and Clinics. Her research focuses on illuminating strengths of minority and at-risk youth in a variety of clinical and social contexts.

**Sarah Mountz** is currently a PhD Candidate in the School of Social Work, University of Washington. Sarah's research interests focus on the experiences of LGBTQ youth in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, and among homeless youth populations, where they are overrepresented, underserved, and unsafe.

## References

- Austin S, Ziyadeh N, Corliss H, Rosario M, Wypij D, Haines J, Field A. Sexual orientation disparities in purging and binge eating from early to late adolescence. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2009; 45:238–245. [PubMed: 19699419]
- Bentz, V.; Shapiro, J. *Mindful inquiry in social research*. SAGE; Thousand Oaks, CA: 1998.
- Birkett M, Espelage DL, Koenig B. LGB and Questioning students in schools: The moderating effects of homophobic bullying and school climate on negative outcomes. *Journal of Adolescence*. 2009; 38:883–866.
- Blake SM, Lesky R, Lehman T, Goodenow C, Sawyer R, Hack T. Preventing sexual risks behaviors among gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents: The benefits of gay-sensitive HIV instruction in schools. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2001; 91:940–946. [PubMed: 11392938]
- Bontempo DE, Augelli AR. Effects of at-school victimization and sexual orientation on lesbian, gay, or bisexual youths' health risk behavior. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2002; 30:364–374. [PubMed: 11996785]
- Bouris A, Guilamo-Ramos V, Pickard A, Shiu C, Loosier P, Dittus P, Waldmiller JM. A systematic review of parental influences on the health and well-being of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth: Time for a new public health research and practice agenda. *Journal of Primary Prevention*. 2010; 31:273–309. [PubMed: 21161599]
- Bronfenbrenner, U. *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University; Cambridge, MA: 1979.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. *Ecological models of human development*. In *International encyclopedia of education*. 2nd. ed.. Vol. 3. Elsevier; Oxford, UK: 1994.
- Carey M, Smith M. Capturing the group effect in focus groups: A special concern in analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*. 1994; 4:123–127.
- Cochran B, Stewart A, Ginzler J, Cauce A. Challenges faced by homeless sexual minorities: Comparison of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender homeless adolescents with their heterosexual counterparts. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2002; 92:773–777. [PubMed: 11988446]
- D'Augelli, A. Developmental and contextual factors and mental health among lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths.. In: Omoto, A.; Kurtzman, H., editors. *Sexual orientation and mental health*. American Psychological Association; Washington, DC: 2006. p. 37-53.
- D'Augelli A, Pilkington N, Hershberger S. Incidence and mental health impact of sexual orientation victimization of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths in high school. *School Psychology Quarterly*. 2002; 17:148–167.
- Diamond L. New paradigms for research on heterosexual and sexual minority development. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*. 2003; 32:490–498. [PubMed: 14710457]
- Elze D. Research with sexual minority youths: Where do we go from here? *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*. 2005; 18:73–99.

- Espelage D, Aragon S, Birkett M. Homophobic teasing, psychological outcomes, and sexual orientation among high school students: What influence do parents and school have? *School Psychology Review*. 2008; 37:202–216.
- Fenaughty J, Harre N. Life on the seesaw: A qualitative study of suicide resiliency factors for young gay men. *Journal of Homosexuality*. 2003; 45:1–22. [PubMed: 14567651]
- Floyd F, Stein T, Harter K, Allison A, Nye C. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youths: Separation-individuation, parental attitudes, identity consolidation, and well-being. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 1999; 28:719–739.
- Garofalo R, Wolf RC, Kessel S, Palfrey J, Durant R. The association between health risk behaviors and sexual orientation among a school-based sample of adolescents. *Pediatrics*. 1998; 101:895–902. [PubMed: 9565422]
- Hatzenbuehler M. The social environment and suicide attempts in lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. *Pediatrics*. 2011; 127:896–903. [PubMed: 21502225]
- Hill C, Thompson B, Williams E. A guide to conducting consensual qualitative research. *Counseling Psychologist*. 1997; 25:517–572.
- Horn SS, Kosciw JG, Russell ST. Special introduction: New research on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth: Studying lives in context. *Journal of Adolescence*. 2009; 38:883–866.
- Kosciw J, Greytak E, Diaz E. Who, what, where, when, and why: Demographic and ecological factors contributing to hostile school climate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. *Journal of Adolescence*. 2009; 38:883–866.
- Meyer I. Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin*. 2003; 129:674–697. [PubMed: 12956539]
- Newman B, Gerard P. The effects of traditional family values on the coming out process of gay male adolescents. *Adolescence*. 1993; 28:213–224. [PubMed: 8456611]
- Perdue T, Hagan H, Thiede H, Valleroy L. Depression and HIV risk behavior among Seattle-area injection drug users and young men who have sex with men. *AIDS Education and Prevention*. 2003; 15:81–92. [PubMed: 12627745]
- Ream G, Savin-Williams R. Reconciling Christianity and positive non-heterosexual identity in adolescence, with implications for psychological well-being. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education*. 2005; 2:19–36.
- Remaedi, G. Health disparities for homosexual youth: The children left behind.. In: Wolitiski, R.; Stall, R.; Valdiserri, R., editors. *Unequal opportunity: Health disparities affecting gay and bisexual men in the United States*. Oxford University; New York, NY: 2008. p. 275-302.
- Rosario, M.; Yali, A.; Hunter, J.; Gwadz, M. Religion and health among lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths: An empirical investigation and theoretical explanation.. In: Omoto, AM.; Kurtzman, HS., editors. *Sexual orientation and mental health: Examining identity and development in lesbian, gay, and bisexual people*. American Psychological Association; Washington, DC: 2005. p. 117-140.
- Rostovsky S, Danner F, Riggle E. Is religiosity a protective factor against substance use in young adulthood? Only if you're straight! *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2007; 40:440–447. [PubMed: 17448402]
- Russell S. Beyond risk: Resilience in the lives of sexual minority youth. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education*. 2005; 2(3):5–18.
- Russell S, Muraco A, Subramaniam A, Laub C. Youth empowerment and high school gay-straight alliances. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*. 2009; 38:891–903. [PubMed: 19636734]
- Ryan C, Russell S, Huebner D, Diaz R, Sanchez J. Family acceptance in adolescence and the health of LGBT young adults. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*. 2010; 23:205–213. [PubMed: 21073595]
- Saewyc E, Homma Y, Skay C, Bearinger L, Resnick M, Reis E. Protective factors in the lives of bisexual adolescents. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2009; 99:1–8.
- Savin-Williams, R. Lesbian, gay male, and bisexual adolescents.. In: D'Augelli; Patterson, C., editors. *Lesbian, gay, & bisexual identities over the lifespan: Psychological perspectives*. Oxford University; New York, NY: 1995. p. 165-189.

- Savin-Williams R. A critique of research on sexual minority youths. *Journal of Adolescence*. 2001; 24:5–13. [PubMed: 11259066]
- Scourfield J, Roen K, McDermott L. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans-gender young people's experiences of distress: Resilience, ambivalence, and self-destructive behavior. *Health and Social Care in the Community*. 2008; 16:329–336. [PubMed: 18328055]
- Swidler, A. *Homosexuality and world religions*. Trinity Press International; Valley Forge, PA: 1993.
- Thiede H, Valleroy LA, MacKellar DA, Celetano DD, Ford WL, Hagan H, Torain LV, for the Young Men's Survey Study Group. Regional patterns and correlates of substance use among young men who have sex with men in 7 U.S. urban areas. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2003; 93:1915–1921. [PubMed: 1460066]



**Table 1**

## Domains of Negative and Positive Factors for LGBTQ Youth

<b>Domains</b>					
<b>Sexual and Gender Identity</b>					
<b>Negative Factors</b>	<b>No. of IN<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>No. of FG/I<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>Positive Factors</b>	<b>No. of IN</b>	<b>No. of FG/I</b>
Feeling the need to hide a LGBTQ identity	14	5	Believing an LGBTQ identity is flexible	27	10
Being “outed”/given labels	9	5	Feeling in control of one's identity	15	9
Encountering rigid gender roles	6	6	Being visible as LGBTQ	14	5
<b>Responses to/Ways to cope with a Stigmatized Identity</b>					
Isolating oneself or feeling isolated because LGBTQ	16	8	Fighting back	9	4
Having negative feelings about self	13	10	Advocating for LGBTQ persons/issues	8	5
			Accepting self	7	4
<b>Family</b>					
Experiencing/fearing rejection by parents	37	11	Being accepted by parents/siblings	17	5
Hiding LGBTQ identity	19	9	Being supported by family	12	8
Mentioning or perceiving family as homophobic	10	9	Being able to talk openly to family	6	4
Having other difficult family issues not related to being LGBTQ (i.e., alcoholic family member)	8	6			
<b>Peer Networks</b>					
Experiencing difficult situations when youth feel they cannot come out	3	3	Having LGBTQ peers/friends who are supportive and can provide information	17	10
Feeling that peers are not supportive	2	2	Having allies that can come from different parts of one's life	8	7
			Having trusted straight friends	4	4
<b>School</b>					
Being verbally & physically harassed by other students	29	9	Having supportive responses from teachers and students	21	8
Encountering homophobia and indifference by school personnel	24	7	Having GSAs available at school	14	7
			Having visibility of LGBTQ persons in school (teachers, students)	5	3
Experiencing resistance to starting GSAs	7	7			
<b>Religious Institutions</b>					
Being exposed to a faith community that expresses homophobia	23	9	Belonging to an accepting faith community	11	5
Having a family who is intolerant based on religion	18	9	Embracing Wiccan/spiritual beliefs	4	2
Being confronted by religious persons	16	5	Hearing positive religious messages	4	3
Hearing negative religious messages	8	7	Finding other LGBTQ persons who are positive about religion	4	2

Domains					
Sexual and Gender Identity					
Negative Factors	No. of IN <sup>a</sup>	No. of FG/I <sup>b</sup>	Positive Factors	No. of IN	No. of FG/I
Being physically harassed in community	21	10	Having social acceptance from larger community	13	5
Being verbally harassed in community	18	9	Being in a diverse community may be more accepting of being LGBTQ	8	6
Experiencing other kinds of discrimination that compound being LGBTQ	12	6	Feeling the neighborhood/city is safe for LGBTQ persons	3	2
Interacting with ignorant/homophobic strangers	10	4			
LGBT Community Involvement					
Lack of resources for LGBTQ orgs	4	3	LGBTQ organizations provide safe place to meet people, learn	13	4
Lack of LGBTQ orgs in many places	2	1	LGBTQ adults provide mentoring and support	13	5
Staff at some places fall short	2	2	Internet for support/connection	10	5
			Place to find people to talk to who understand	6	4

Note: The intensity of a theme should be judged as the product of both the number of individuals who talked about the theme, as well as the number of groups or interviews in which the theme was raised.

<sup>a</sup>No. of IN = number of individuals who mentioned a certain stressor or strength.

<sup>b</sup>No. of FG/I = Number of focus groups/interviews—number indicates how many groups or individual interviews out of the 13 groups/interviews discussed the stressor or strength.

Table 2

## Examples of Quotes From LGBTQ Youth Representing Negative and Positive Factors by Domain

Domain	Negative Factor	Positive Factor
Sexual and gender identity	And I was like “Did you just call me a faggot?” And he's like, “So, you are then?” I was like, “What does it matter?” because in my mind maybe I was bi but it wasn't like a fully developed thought. I wasn't out to myself yet and I wasn't out to anyone else yet.	The thing that's really cool about it [being LGBTQ] is I'm a very independent person, and it gives me a sense of, not like standing out, but it gives me a sense of being unique and individual.
Responses to a stigmatized identity	As for me . . . I do the self-negative part. I do have very low self-esteem type thing, so whenever someone says something [homophobic], it really cripples me. Like him, I'm mentally disabled that way, so I'm just going to avoid [inaudible]. But yeah, so I take it the negative way, but it's what I've grown up with so . . . I mean I've been yelled at “fag” here [at school] like twice . . .	I have strong internal principles. I have faced enough adversity over the years in various forms, and I know I am, and I'm sticking to that because I figure I've paid my dues with what I've been through—and I owe it to myself to make something out of it, or else like what's the point of going through all this? I'm going to do what I want to do. I'm going to make something out of it.
Family	Bad thing is like you're in the closet and you don't really like want to tell your family. You have no idea if they are going to support you or if they're going to kick you out of their life or whatever.	Like the best experience you could have asked for coming out, I had with my parents. And they were a hundred percent accepting, and I was really happy.
Peers	[My] friend ‘freaked out’ when I told him I was bisexual and he came to our group to hang out—at first he was scared and didn't want anyone to touch him and then he calmed down.	I think that your best bet for people that are going to accept you and that are going to help you out— when you're going through trouble is going to your friends.
School	The other big thing that I've heard a lot of people complain about and that I've dealt with personally a lot like the less direct homophobia, like “oh that's so gay, that person's such a faggot,” when it's like not even that they're talking about someone who is actually homosexual, they're just like, “oh, he's such a fag.”	A lot of people aren't out, so especially in junior high when we didn't have a GSA or anything—I felt kind [like] I was the only one and now that there's a GSA, it's a lot easier because I'm not like the only one. It's like having other people there who are like the same age and already out, or not or half or whatever”
Religious institutions	There was one girl in particular who would constantly say “Well, because you're gay or lesbian or whatever, you're going to hell.” And then she'd constantly come up to us and ask, “Are you gay? Are you lesbian?” knowing we were those things and then she's like, “You need to find Jesus. I think you need to find the holy way.” On the last week of school, she even took me out of two class periods to sit down in [name deleted]'s office and try to get me to convert.	I do have friends who are Christian or Catholic or whatever, and you know they're fine with me being gay. They're not like telling me I'm going to hell and I'm blah, blah, whatever. You know they're just like, “Okay. That's cool.” There are some churches that are okay, I mean that are gay-friendly. So it just depends on where you are and what type of religion you have.
Neighborhood & community	A pretty bad thing that happened to me was I was on the bus and I was spit on because I was commenting on someone's purse and I was wearing purple nail polish. I got spit on six times before I got off the bus.  My ex-girlfriend's little brother, he's gay and he lived in [city name], and now he's laying in a coma that he's been in for the past six months because some kids started beating the shit out of him because they knew he was gay.	I grew up in a place where walking down the street holding hands with your boyfriend was probably not the best idea but here I always expect someone to yell something from a car or say something or give me a dirty look and it doesn't happen anywhere near as much as I'd expect it. Like I walked all over the mall with my boyfriend, holding hands and barely got any looks and no one said anything.
LGBTQ community	I think that you know eighteen through whatever, . . . I mean they're adults, but . . . Maybe like they're not twenty-one, so they can't meet people in places that you have to be twenty-one. When they hear about adult things it's people who are like forty and up, so like there's a point that it's kind of like you're an adult, but you're such a young adult that you're not--there's nothing there for <i>you</i> .	It actually has been a safe haven coming for myself because if I have any like gay type or like questions or stuff . . . because at my house I have a homophobic father, which I need to once in a while leave and feel safe and happy . . . when you want to come out to like my father you can't really . . . but [name of organization] is to actually help you, like how do you come out to a person who's not “acceptive” to it, or plus just being safe in an area that you know you're in a group of other gay people that can actually help with those situations or just . . . just have fun in a safe area.