

“Family Support Would Have Been Like Amazing”: LGBTQ Youth Experiences With Parental and Family Support

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines gay and bisexual adolescent experiences with parental and family support using a phenomenological inquiry approach. Four themes related to peer support emerged from the data including (1) coming out was necessary; (2) initial reactions of parents are most often not positive; (3) lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth view religion as a barrier to support from parents; and (4) LGBTQ youth want explicit support from parents and family members. Implications for counselors working with parents, families, and individuals are discussed.

Keywords

LGBTQ, gay, family, parents, support, adolescent, children

Parental support for children of all ages is important. Helping children and adolescents to feel safe in the world and navigate their identity development process leads to improved physical and mental health outcomes (Moak & Agrawal, 2010). Moreover, according to Blum, McNeely, and Nonnemaker (2002) and Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, and Sanchez (2010), having caring and accepting parents serves as a protective factor for children against a host of issues. Parental support may be even more important to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth, given that support from other typical sources such as peers, teachers, and clergy may not always be available (Stone, 2003).

Parental support for LGBTQ youth leads to a number of positive outcomes for LGBTQ youth. When examining differences in perceived parental support between LGBTQ youth and their heterosexual peers, Needham and Austin (2010) found that parent support fully or partially mediated associations between LGBTQ youth and a number of risk factors including depressive symptoms, suicidal thoughts, and drug use. Resnick et al. (1997) found that parental support or connectedness is related to higher levels of psychological well-being, lower levels of interpersonal violence, later onset of first sexual activity, and lower levels of alcohol, cigarette, and marijuana use. Furthermore, Homma and Saewyc (2007) found that among LGBTQ Asian American youth, those who believed that they had caring families showed lower levels of emotional distress.

Santrock (2001) states that having a strong supportive relationship with an adult, such as a parent, is one of the strongest predictors of long-term adjustment in the general adolescent population. Although this is also true for LGBTQ adolescents

(Needham & Austin, 2010), there may be barriers to establishing such relationships. Safren and Pantalone (2006) found that LGBTQ individuals perceive less social support from others when compared to their heterosexual peers. This may be in part because LGBTQ youth often face unique developmental circumstances, in that they are most often not raised by people who are similar to them in terms of sexual orientation and are not raised in homes that support their identity development (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004). In many cases, not only are LGBTQ youth not raised in supportive households, they are raised in environments where their individual identity development process is not supported (Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2006).

An increase in poor health outcomes is associated with lack of support for LGBTQ youth (Needham & Austin, 2010). Knowing that many LGBTQ youth are not raised in supportive home environments may be especially damaging, as *coming out* at a younger age has been associated with LGBTQ youth being more comfortable with their sexual identity (Floyd & Stein, 2002). However, when compared with coming out as an adult, these youth have increased levels of family rejection and harassment at school (D’Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998). In addition, youth who have disclosed their LGBTQ sexual orientation to their family have higher rates of physical

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and verbal abuse as well as higher suicide attempt rates (D'Augelli et al., 1998; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). Family rejection can have devastating consequences for LGBTQ youth, as this rejection has been associated with higher rates of suicide, substance abuse, and unprotected sex (Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2009; Ryan et al., 2009) and contributes to the disproportionate number of homeless LGBTQ youth (Coker, Austin, & Schuster, 2010). In spite of the research related to family rejection, most *out* adolescents feel as if disclosing their sexuality was a positive experience, perhaps because they are selective to whom they disclosed (Grafsky, Letcher, Slesnick, & Serovich, 2011; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998).

This study examining parental and family support for LGBTQ adolescents has been conceptualized using Cohen and Wills's (1985) buffering hypothesis. In their discussion of their hypothesis, the authors discuss two ways in which stress is mediated by social support, the buffering model and the main effect model. As the name suggests, the buffering model views social support as "buffering" the impact of stress on those currently coping with stressful situations. One example could be the buffering effect a supportive parent could have on an LGBTQ adolescent being harassed at school. The second model described by Cohen and Wills is known as the main effect model. This model purports that social support from parents would be beneficial for all LGBTQ adolescents, regardless of whether or not they are currently experiencing life stressors. Positive and meaningful relationships between LGBTQ adolescents and parents therefore promote positive self-worth.

The buffering hypothesis is supported by the work of Eisenberg and Resnick (2006) who found that family connectedness and the presence of other caring adults at school were significant protective factors for LGBTQ adolescents and those participants with higher levels of either of these protective factors were half as likely to be at risk for suicide. Underscoring the important role of the family as a support system, Eisenberg and Resnick (2006) found that family connectedness accounted for more variance in their study than did sexual orientation or the other protective factors. Learning how to improve relationships between LGBTQ youth and their parents is vital, given the importance that the role of a supportive family members can play in the lives of LGBTQ youth.

Method

This study was designed to address gaps in the literature regarding parental support for LGBTQ adolescents. Those data presented here are related only to those responses to questions related to parent and family support for LGBTQ youth and were part of a larger study examining protective factors across a number of domains, including school and among peers (Roe, 2013; 2014). A phenomenological approach was chosen over other qualitative approaches, as there is limited research regarding the perceptions of parental support from LGBTQ adolescents (Moustakas, 1994). Seven

(six male, one female) LGBTQ adolescents were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol regarding the phenomenon in question, parental and family support. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure that participants who were selected based on their experience with the phenomenon (Silverman, 2010). Participants all self-identified as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) and White and were between the ages of 16 and 18 years. Instead of using the generic "participant," fictitious names have been used throughout the presentation of findings to humanize the words of the participants. Three participants were recruited at an *It Gets Better* event, sponsored by a high school Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), held in Central Pennsylvania and the other four were referred via snowball sampling from the original three participants. After initial phone contact with parents, students and parents were asked to complete an informed consent form which described the study purpose and data collection procedures. As a participation incentive, participants were given US\$15.00 in cash. Interviews were audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis.

Data analysis was completed first by reading and rereading transcripts to begin to reduce the data to meaning units, a process referred to as horizontalization as described by Moustakas (1994). These meaning units were then arranged into themes which were described using textural and structural (context) descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Themes and exemplar quotes were collectively reviewed by research team members in an effort to avoid bias. In those instances when team members did not agree, the differences were discussed until consensus could be reached regarding the themes (Patton, 2002). Research team members consisted of two school counseling colleagues and three college faculty members who are well versed in the phenomenon under investigation.

Steps were taken to limit bias and improve rigor and trustworthiness throughout the process as recommended by Morrow (2005). Specific methods used by investigators included bracketing assumptions, being interviewed by colleagues regarding assumptions and biases, consulting with research team members throughout the process as questions arose, journaling, and using two member checks as part of the research design. Triangulation was completed by asking participants to review transcripts to ensure that their thoughts about the topic were accurately represented (Silverman, 2010). Participants offered no changes or additions to the transcripts.

Findings

Four themes related to parent support emerged from the data including (a) coming out was necessary, (b) initial reactions of parents are most often not positive, (c) LGBTQ youth view religion as a barrier to support from parents, and (d) LGBTQ youth want explicit support from parents and family members. Detailed descriptions of themes and exemplar quotes are presented below.

Coming Out Was Necessary

LGBTQ youth believed they needed to disclose their sexual orientation to their parents for their own mental well-being. Students interviewed for this study were asked to whom they were “out” and whether or not that varied across domains (home, school, work, etc.). Each of the seven interviewees indicated that they were out across all domains and believed that coming out was necessary for them. A quote from Marco best illustrates this point; he said, “yeah, I had to, it was like really, really, really, really messing me up just hiding it every single day or putting effort into hiding it,” and when asked if he thought coming out was a good or bad decision, he replied, “good, I never felt better about it, even with people going against it, it felt much better just to be myself.” This sentiment, that coming out was necessary for mental well-being, was shared by every participant in the study.

Initial Parent Reactions Were Not Supportive

Initial reactions from parents were not typically positive. Parent reactions ranged from disappointment, to anger, to choosing to ignore the disclosure. Comments made by students illustrate various levels of acceptance among parents ranging from refusing to acknowledge their child’s disclosure to telling their child that they will go to hell. In addition, family members within the same home often reacted differently. Devin reported that,

She [mom] was ok with it, and my step-dad was ok with it [Devin’s sexual orientation], and she told my gram, and my gram kind of I guess already knew, and she didn’t really care, and then my dad found out, and he wasn’t as supportive—still isn’t really supportive.

None of the students interviewed reported a particularly positive reaction and used words and phrases like “okay” and “accepted it” to describe responses from parents. Jason said,

My mom was just, she was okay with it, but my dad had been in Afghanistan, and so my mom kind of told him, so that gave him like a year to kind of deal with it on his own.

One student, Jonathan, described a letter his parents wrote to the court awarding custody to his grandmother. He said, “They wrote a letter disowning me and signing it at the bottom saying for homosexuality [and a host of other behaviors].” Devin points to incidences where his father refused to accept that he is gay saying, “oh, she; that girl right there; you could go ask her out.”

Brian reported that although he has come out to his parents on three separate occasions, his parents chose to ignore his disclosure, as sexual orientation is not something that is discussed in their household. He describes his father as, “he’s kind of ostrich in the ground.” Devin reported that his father is not very accepting, and he believes, “I think he [his father] just wants the best and he doesn’t think being gay is the best, so we

don’t really talk.” Another participant, Jason, says that he told his dad, “but we still don’t really kind of talk about it [sexual orientation].” Sam reports that he is close with his grandfather and that his grandfather knows that he is gay but, “I like never really brought it up to him . . . that never just felt, like comfortable I would say.”

Reactions of participants in this study to comments made by parents illustrate the resilience of the adolescents interviewed. Students reported that they got used to hurtful comments made by parents and learned to ignore them. When Brian’s parents repeatedly told him that they believed he was going to hell and other derogatory comments, he said, “I actually got a little bit more used to it, I know it sounds terrible, but I got used to it [the hurtful comments his parents made].” Jason described how he learned to ignore and block out his father and other relatives using the word faggot in front of him. Another student said, despondently, “like she loves me, she just really doesn’t support my lifestyle or like my choices.”

LGBTQ Youth View Religion as a Barrier to Support From Parents

LGBTQ youth viewed their faith as a barrier to a positive relationship with their parents and believed they are not welcome in their places of worship. Each participant mentioned the negative impact that they believe religion has played in their coming out process. Barbara, the lone female in the study, was not out to her mother because, “She [mom] has no idea, simply because she’s Catholic, and I have a feeling I would be out of her view if she knew.” Her parents are divorced, and she and her dad have not shared information regarding her sexuality with her mother. When Brian told his parents, he reported, “They [his parents] have very much had a lot of negative things to say, a lot of the Bible says this kind of comments. My dad has repeatedly told me not to come out.”

Most participants viewed religion as something that their parents or others have used against them to condemn their sexual orientation. None of the students interviewed regularly attended church, and those reasons can be summed up by the words of Jane, “it just feels like more weird because I know that it’s not allowed, so to walk in there, I would feel out of place.” Jonathan, who lives with his grandmother, puts it this way, “I live with my gram, so it is like generation blockage, plus she is hard-core Christian so religious blockage.” Jason states, “um, because I know, I see their [his parents] views, I know obviously it is the view of the church, that’s what they are taught.” Both Jonathan and Jason believed that the negative views their grandmother and parents had about their sexual orientation were related to the teachings of their respective churches.

Many of the students interviewed were previously involved in the churches attended by their parents, but as they became more aware of their sexuality, they decided not to attend. Another student (Marco) discussed what church leaders told him after he came out and was still attending church. He said,

Yeah, like what did they call it, you need to recant your ways or pray or something to fix it, and I was like, it is not something to be fixed and it is me, and eventually the church said, well if you are not going to even try to fix yourself then why come? And since then I haven't gone.

Devin said, "I don't go to church anymore because, I don't think, I don't think I'd be accepted at the church I used to go, so I don't [long pause], I don't know."

LGBTQ Youth Want Explicit Support From Parents and Family Members

LGBTQ youth do not want to have to guess or figure out if their parents and family members are supportive; they would like support to be verbalized. The concept of parental and family support was important to all of the students interviewed. Participants in the current study came out to the parents because they were seeking their support. Sam said that although he is grateful for the support of friends, he would like a lot more family support because, "But they're [friends] not like, they won't always be there; so where like family, family will always be there, so I think, like a stronger foundation of family support would've been like amazing."

In addition to parents, participants reported that extended family members often play supportive roles. Having an older sibling or relative who identified as LGBTQ was also described as helpful. Brian reports having an aunt who identifies as a lesbian with whom he can talk. He believes she understands him and describes her type of support by stating that, "She is a fixer and she's been very, if there is a problem and we can fix it, let's fix it; if you just need to grow a thicker skin, grow a thicker skin." He also reports that she is supportive because, "she listens all the time." Jason continued, speaking of his grandmother, "I sometimes reach out to my gram because my gram knows how to talk to me and give me good advice."

A variety of specific, explicitly supportive, actions that were taken on behalf of participants by parents and family members were described. Participants reported feeling supported when others took action on their behalf. Whether or not the action resulted in any significant changes, students were grateful that action had taken place. For example, Devin was being harassed on the way home from school, and when he got home, he told his mom. Devin reports,

My mom actually got in her car and she was like, were going to the kids and, [in mom's voice] we're gonna teach them a lesson, and we went back and we never found them, but I don't know, she kind of held her ground I guess, for her son.

Students commented that they appreciated explicit verbal support, the more explicit the better. Jason reports, "My mom tells me every night that she loves me no matter what, she will always be there for me." Another participant, Jonathan, described an incident on the school bus where he was being bullied by another student and said that "my gram made a big

deal about it and called up to the school." Although his grandmother was not successful in getting the perpetrator punished, he was appreciative of her efforts to support him. Sam believes his father is supportive because, "I have brought it up to my dad when I had problems about kids making fun of me, and he'll go right to the principal, and he'll bring it up so they will address it."

When speaking of support from his grandmother, Devin reports: "like my gram, like the other day she said 'I don't even care that you are gay, I just think about how you are doing in school.'"

Discussion Major Findings

As previously mentioned, four themes related to peer support emerged from the data including (a) coming out was necessary, (b) initial reactions of parents are most often not positive, (c) LGBTQ youth view religion as a barrier to support from parents, and (d) LGBTQ youth want explicit support from parents and extended family members.

Social support and family concerns are cited as both sources of conflict (Stone, 2003) and sources of support (Moak & Agrawal, 2010), and the current study was no exception. Improving relationships between LGBTQ youth and their parents is important for the health and well-being of LGBTQ youth (Blum, McNeely, & Nonnemaker, 2002), but very little is known about how to improve that relationship. The buffering hypothesis, detailed above, describes two ways in which stress is mediated by social support including the main effect and the buffering models (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Every participant in the current study described hurtful remarks or stressful situations related to their coming out process that they had to overcome, making it clear that the buffering model is most useful considering the most appropriate ways to assist LGBTQ youth.

Coming out to parents was an important first step for gay and bisexual youth seeking parental support in this study. Youth typically become aware of their sexual orientation between the ages of 8 and 11 years and typically self-identify between the ages of 15 and 17 years, a time when nearly all adolescents are still living at home (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). This is an important developmental time for adolescents when seeking support and guidance from parents is crucial. Students in the current study came out to their parents between the ages of 14 and 18 years. Furthermore, consistent with the findings of Grafsky, Letcher, Slesnick, and Serovich (2011) and Savin-Williams and Dube (1998), students in the current study reported that disclosing their sexual orientation was overall a positive experience, after accounting for initial disapproving parent reactions.

Initial Parent Reactions

Given that Hillier, Turner, and Mitchell (2005) found that LGBTQ youth have various ways of protecting themselves both physically and emotionally, it is reasonable to expect that the students interviewed for this survey were judicious about

from whom they sought social support. In a general adolescent population, Blum et al. (2002) found that good family relationships and supportive friends served as protective factors. The relationships described by students in this study imply that these supportive parent and family relationships work similarly for LGBTQ youth.

Participants in the current study often received mixed messages regarding support from their parents. Often parents told students that they loved them but did not support their lifestyle, choice, or sexual orientation. Counselors reported in Fontaine's (1998) study that fear of family rejection was one of the primary reasons that LGBTQ youth sought counseling. Mixed messages regarding love and support from parents can have devastating effects on LGBTQ youth. When students have been told that they are loved unconditionally their entire lives and are suddenly rejected because of their LGBTQ identity, the results can have devastating effects. Fears of parental reactions may prevent students from disclosing their sexual orientation to family members which is cause for concern, given that Floyd and Stein (2002) found that LGBTQ youth who disclosed their sexual orientation at an earlier age were more comfortable with their sexuality. It is also clear that LGBTQ youth do not stop seeking support from parents, even if they are met with initial rejection; youth learned to protect themselves by rationalizing hurtful remarks made by parents.

Members of extended families often played a supportive role for gay and bisexual adolescents in the current study. Students mentioned supportive roles played by siblings, grandparents, and aunts and uncles. Having an older or extended family member who also identified as LGBTQ also appears to be supportive for adolescents in the current study. In some cases, having a family member who identifies as LGBTQ provided a role model that youth could emulate. As the buffering hypothesis suggests, the impact of unsupportive parents had on the participants in the current study may have been mediated by the presence of a supportive LGBTQ family member.

Moreover, Turbin et al. (2006) discuss the protective role that appropriate LGBTQ role models can play in the lives of LGBTQ adolescents. Students spoke with relatively little emotion regarding hurtful comments that have been made by parents. Students used phrases like, "you get used to it," when discussing these comments. Bandura (1979) said that adolescent development is an adaptation to environment, and it seems as if these students have done just that—adapted to hearing hurtful remarks from parents.

Religious Beliefs

Consistent with the research of Schuck and Liddle (2001) and Hillier, Turner, and Mitchell (2005), the current study found that religion complicated the coming out process for LGBTQ youth at best, and at worst, it was a source of pain. Several parents in the current study routinely and repeatedly let their children know that their sexual orientation was a sin. Rostosky, Danner, and Riggle (2007) found that religiosity was a protective factor only for heterosexual adolescents and that LGBTQ

adolescents report lower levels of religiosity when compared with their heterosexual counterparts. The current study lends support to these findings. It is unfortunate that each of the participants in the current study have had negative experiences with religion and spirituality, as religiosity has been found to be a protective factor against health risk behaviors (Rostosky, Wilcox, Wright, & Randall, 2004).

LGBTQ Youth Want Explicit Support From Parents and Extended Family Members

Participants felt supported when parents or other family members took action on their behalf. Students reported feeling valued when they were given explicit verbal support from parents and family members. Based on the interview transcripts, it appears that the more explicit and direct the support is, the more powerful the message. This concept is related to Rogers's (1951) concept of unconditional positive regard, which counselors have come to view as a necessary condition of effective psychotherapy may well be a condition of healthy parent-child relationships.

Implications for Counselors

Improving relationships between LGBTQ youth and their parents is important for the health and well-being of LGBTQ youth (Blum et al., 2002), but family support or lack thereof may not be predictable for LGBTQ youth. As the buffering hypothesis suggests, having friends, counselors, teachers, or LGBTQ extended family members are important to buffer the impact of negative family reactions. While improving parental support is the focus of this investigation, counselors should also be helping LGBTQ clients individually to identify supports to buffer against the impact of limited parents support. Individual and family counselors should consider using the following recommendations to help buttress parental and family support for LGBTQ youth.

First, coming out to parents is difficult for many LGBTQ youth, and although this is not universally the case, counselors working with LGBTQ youth need to be cautious about recommending that students come out to their parents or other family members. Students have become homeless or been met with verbal and physical abuse after disclosing their LGBTQ identity to family members (Durso & Gates, 2012). Youth remain the best judges regarding the reaction of their parents, and decisions about coming out should not be made without careful consideration. Counselors working with LGBTQ youth should consider helping youth to prepare for any reaction that parents may have, helping them to understand that an initial "gut" reaction might not be an accurate indication of eventual support. For many parents, it takes time to process this new information. Counselors working with families may find a narrative family therapy approach useful, as a disclosure of nondominant sexual orientation may "upset" the family system and change the family narrative. Family members may process the coming out of youth differently and need space and time to adjust to

new family roles and expectations. In many cases, one parent, sibling, or extended family member may take longer to process the information in a healthy way, causing conflict among family members.

Narrative family therapy can be particularly useful as parent or siblings who react negatively to a family member's disclosure may do so as a result of the negative stories that they have been telling themselves about what it means for a loved one to identify as LGBTQ. Family therapists working from a narrative approach can help family members to deconstruct the narratives they have about what identifying as LGBTQ means. Using narrative family therapy can help family members begin to understand the role that culture or the environment may have had in shaping their views. The goal of narrative therapy would be to help family members construct positive narratives about what it means for a family member to identify as LGBTQ.

As many of the participants in the current study demonstrated remarkable resiliency, counselors working with LGBTQ youth should work to foster resilience and equip these youth with various coping skills to negotiate parent-child relationships. Parents or families seeking help from a counselor may be in various stages of accepting their child's disclosure of an LGBTQ sexual orientation or may have suspected that their child identified as LGBTQ. Counselors can help parents by normalizing their initial thoughts, feelings, and reactions to their child's disclosure. While normalizing is important, it is also important that counselors help parents understand the potential consequences of not supporting their children including increased rates of suicide and depression. Many types of counseling and support groups can help with this normalizing process, which may also include referring parents to support groups such as Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), provided parents are ready for a group experience. In cases where parents are not ready for discourse with others or group settings, bibliotherapy may be an appropriate option. Counselors should have lists of titles or even copies of relevant titles on hand to provide to clients. Counselors may also need to play the role of a parent educators to help them understand what it means for their child to identify as LGBTQ, what specific needs their children might have, and ways to help parents to meet those needs. For some parents, pointing them in the direction of research related to their own process of acceptance, such as a recent article by Gonzalez, Rostosky, Odom, and Riggle (2013) entitled "The positive aspects of being the parent of an LGBTQ child" will be useful.

Religious values of parents may serve as a barrier to parental support. Counselors should ask parents what role they believe their religious beliefs play in providing or not providing appropriate support to their children. Helping parents thoughtfully consider their religious convictions and the impact those convictions may have on their LGBTQ child is crucial. Counselors should familiarize themselves with religious leaders of various faiths who are supportive of LGBTQ individuals in the communities in which they work. Counselors are challenged to find ways to connect parents as well as LGBTQ youth to supportive religious and spiritual institutions. This can be accomplished

by compiling and providing a list of local and online faith-based resources that can be distributed to parents who are seeking additional faith-based assistance in supporting their LGBTQ child. For example, in Central Pennsylvania, there is an unofficial group of LGBTQ supportive church leaders who meet monthly to brainstorm ways that they can be more supportive of LGBTQ individuals and their families wishing to be part of their congregations. Counselors in the area are aware of which pastors are a part of this group and direct clients to those church leaders for faith-based guidance regarding LGBTQ issues. In addition, parents may benefit from attending a church that has a supportive leader or congregation, helping them to understand that it is not necessary to give up on your faith to be supportive of your LGBTQ child. However, counselors need to exercise caution in making referrals to churches and particular pastors, providing brochures with a number of helpful resources may be more appropriate to avoid a possible conflict of interest.

Youth in the current study report that opportunities to interact with positive LGBTQ role models are needed. Openly LGBTQ guest speakers as well as LGBTQ adults within the school system should make themselves available to students as they feel comfortable. School district antidiscrimination policies can help create environments where LGBTQ adults may feel more secure in making these connections. Counselors can help parents find ways to connect their children with open LGBTQ friends and family members who can offer support. As attitudes regarding LGBTQ individuals continue to change and more and more individuals in all walks of life and from various geographic locations continue to come out, more and more families will have open LGBTQ family members who can serve as role models for LGBTQ youth.

LGBTQ youth want explicit support, and parents may need help from a counselor in determining ways to show the explicit support that is needed. This may prove even more difficult in families that already struggle to discuss emotionally charged topics. Providing parents and families a safe place to engage in dialogue related to issues surrounding sexual orientation may be beneficial. Additionally, providing concrete examples of ways to show explicit support may prove useful.

Counselors can teach parents how to advocate on behalf of their children, especially in the school setting. For example, parents can help students establish school-based support groups such as GSAs to provide school-based support in areas where they do not exist, demonstrating their explicit support. Moreover, if it is apparent that support is not available within the immediate family, counselors should assist adolescent clients in finding supportive resources outside of their family, while at the same time helping parents and LGBTQ youth negotiate difficulties within the family, as recommended by Hershberger and D'Augelli (2000).

Finally, as counselors working with individuals or families, it is important to be mindful of context. For example, one LGBTQ-specific protective factor found by Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter (2004) was involvement in LGB community groups. Supportive groups such as PFLAG may also not be

available in every community. As these groups are often not available in rural areas, counselors may need to find other ways such as online venues to provide linkages to support.

Strengths and Limitations

The participants in this study represent a group of adolescents from a predominately rural area of Central Pennsylvania which is politically and geographically isolated, which can be viewed as a strength and a weakness as studies of this nature are most often completed in urban areas. Participants, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adolescents, were interviewed, “in the moment” which is a strength of this study, as adolescents were not asked to look back in time, but instead describe their current experiences. In addition, participants of this study were not considered “atypical” in that they were not part of an identified clinical population.

The need to receive parent permission could be viewed as both a strength and a limitation of this study, as those adolescents who needed to receive parent permission had at least some measure of parent support in that participants were comfortable asking their parents for permission to participate in the study. However, interviewing only participants who are out in each of their life domains does not capture the experiences of adolescents who are not out to their family. Furthermore, the experiences of racial and ethnic minority LGBTQ individuals are not represented.

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