



Non-parental adults in the social and risk behavior networks of sexual minority male youth[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The presence of non-parental adults (NPAs), or adults outside of caregivers (e.g., extended family and natural mentors), in the lives of adolescents and emerging adults has received a rapidly expanding amount of empirical attention in the last decade. Compared to their heterosexual counterparts, sexual minority male youth (SMMY) experience disproportionate rates of abuse and victimization from parents and peers. Yet, despite the fact that this group, therefore, may be potentially vulnerable to negative interpersonal influences but also poised to benefit from additional relationships, NPA involvement in the lives of SMMY is currently not well understood in the extant literature. This study sought to examine and characterize the involvement of NPAs in the social and risk networks of SMMY ($n = 175$; 54% African American, 21% Hispanic/Latino, 14% Caucasian; ages: 17–23). Most SMMY identified at least one NPA, such as friends and grandparents, in their networks. Three categories of relationships were identified, Strictly Social, which only involved social interactions; Complex, which were both social and involved substance use and/or sexual activity; and Risky, which purely consisted of substance use or sexual activity. Relationships were rated as emotionally “closer” among ethnic minority SMMY, although, racial/ethnic similarity between SMMY and NPAs was not associated with relationship closeness. In addition, relationships involving female and heterosexual NPAs were also rated as stronger. These findings suggest the potential usefulness of considering multiple types of relationships between SMMY and NPAs when designing intervention and prevention efforts. Moreover, African American and Latino SMMY, who represent the most vulnerable sub-groups of SMMY in terms of HIV-risk, may be particularly poised to benefit from positive NPA relationships.

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1. Introduction

A broad literature base demonstrates that non-parental adults (NPAs), or adults other than parents and significant others (e.g., mentors and extended family members), can help promote positive functioning among adolescents and emerging adults (e.g., Arrington-Sanders, Leonard, Brooks, Celentano, & Ellen, 2012; Farruggia, Greenberger, Chen, & Heckhausen, 2006; Sterrett, Jones, McKee, & Kincaid, 2011). Relationships with prosocial NPAs are associated with lower rates of psychological symptoms, substance use, and risky sexual behavior (e.g., Farruggia et al., 2006; Haddad, Chen, & Greenberger, 2011; Rishel, Sales, & Koeske, 2005) as well as with higher levels of positive adjustment, such as self-esteem (e.g., Bowers et al., 2012;

Sterrett et al., 2011; Schwartz, Rhodes, Spence, & Grossman, 2013). NPAs are often salient figures during late adolescence and emerging adulthood (spanning ages: 17 to 25; Arnett, 2007) as this developmental stage is commonly characterized by a diversification of interpersonal resources to promote adaptive functioning (Spear, 2003; Steinberg, 2008). More specifically, according to socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1992; Wrzus, Hanel, Wagner, & Neyer, 2013), during adolescence and early adulthood, individuals put more emphasis on whether they can receive useful information when deciding whether to form a relationship with a person compared to in middle adulthood, when the ability of a potential acquaintance to satisfy emotional needs for companionship or validation is prioritized more highly. Young people may perceive NPAs to have more experience than peers but to be less likely to judge or punish them than parents (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; Haddad et al., 2011), and, thus, seek out advice and guidance from them about a variety of topics, such as romantic relationships and school difficulties (Greenberger, Chen, & Beam, 1998).

While understanding the roles of NPAs as a typical part of development is an important endeavor, there is some evidence that these roles may have particular significance within specific sub-groups of

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adolescents and emerging adults (Farruggia et al., 2006; Sánchez, Esparza, & Colón, 2008; Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2006). Considering the involvement of NPAs in the lives of particular sub-groups of adolescents and emerging adults allows for a culturally-nuanced conceptualization of their involvement and influence. One sub-group of youth and emerging adults currently understudied in terms of relationships with NPAs but for whom the concept of NPAs may be particularly salient are sexual minority male youth.

1.1. Sexual minority male youth as a sub-group within which to study NPAs

Sexual minority male youth (SMMY) face disproportionately high rates of problematic relationships with parents and peers. It has been estimated that 26% of LGBTQ youth are kicked out of their homes after coming out to their parents (APA, 2013). In addition, LGBTQ youth are more likely to experience distant relationships with parents (Wilson, Zeng, & Blackburn, 2011) and parental physical abuse (see Friedman et al., 2011 for a meta-analysis) than non-sexual minority youth. Sexual minority youth are also more likely to be the victims of physical assault at school and to miss school because of fear (see Friedman et al., 2011, for a meta-analysis). Given their heightened risk of fractured or abusive relationships with parents and peers, it is imperative that we expand our understanding of the interpersonal contexts surrounding SMMY, particularly by including potentially protective factors (Herrick, Stall, Goldhammer, Egan, & Mayer, 2013). Moreover, according to resilience theory and retrospective empirical work with resilient adults (Masten, 2007; Werner, 1995), one way in which young people are able to overcome environmental and interpersonal risks is through forming relationships with adults outside of parents.

Consistent with this idea, theoretical and qualitative work specifically with sexual minority individuals is beginning to elucidate the involvement of individuals in their interpersonal networks who are not biologically related to them, but instead are part of a “chosen” or “found” family (Allen, Blieszner, & Roberto, 2011; Kivalanka, 2012). The creation of “found families” is thought to occur in part to compensate for disruptions or lack of support in their family relationships as well as societal stigma and oppression. Two recent qualitative examinations of LGBT adolescents highlight the significance of NPAs who are affirming of their sexual and gender identity, and provide them with social support (Davis, Saltzburg, & Locke, 2009; Torres, Harper, Sanchez, Fernandez, & the Adolescent Medicine Trials Network for HIV/AIDS Interventions, 2012). A related line of research is that on the House and Ball scene. The House and Ball scene refers to close-knit social networks of mostly African American and Latino sexual minority men and transgender individuals who act as both chosen families and teams during dance and gender expression competitions (Arnold & Bailey, 2009; Kubicek et al., 2013). Qualitative studies have begun to document the social support provided by “House parents,” often adults in their 20s, 30s and 40s, to “House kids,” who typically are adolescents or emerging adults (Arnold & Bailey, 2009; Kubicek et al., 2013). However, there has been limited quantitative examination of the involvement of the broader class of NPAs in the interpersonal networks of SMMY, which limits the generalizability of findings.

Moreover, just as relationships with parents and peers are multifaceted and can promote positive or negative functioning, it stands to reason that NPAs can likewise exhibit both positive and negative behaviors in relationships with young people. For example, NPAs involved in risky or illegal behavior themselves are linked to poorer outcomes among adolescents and emerging adults, such as lower rates of academic achievement and aspirations, lower self-esteem, and higher rates of misconduct (Farruggia et al., 2006; Farruggia & Sorkin, 2009; Haddad et al., 2011; Hurd, Zimmerman & Xue, 2009). Among SMMY specifically, having older sexual partners is linked to an increased risk of HIV transmission (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2012; Mustanski & Newcomb, 2013; Newcomb & Mustanski, 2013). The extent to which relationships with NPAs are purely social exchanges or also involve witnessing NPAs

engage in health risk behaviors, or engaging in those behaviors with NPAs, has been understudied among adolescents in general, and within the SMMY population in particular.

While NPAs may be involved in the interpersonal networks of many SMMY, the extent and nature of that involvement may be related to social and demographic factors. Both African American (Hines & Boyd-Frankin, 2005; Tyler, Boykin, Miller, & Hurlley, 2006) and Latino (Cardoso & Thompson, 2010; Reyes & Elias, 2011) cultures historically have emphasized the importance of interpersonal relationships with individuals outside of the nuclear family, including extended family members and fictive kin. Consistent with this idea, studies of relationships with NPAs have found that ethnic minority adolescents report higher numbers of NPAs, as well as closer relationships with NPAs, compared to White adolescents (Hirsch, Mickus, & Boerger, 2002; Pallock & Lamborn, 2006). In addition, a growing literature suggests that ethnic minority SMMY are less likely than White SMMY to disclose their sexual orientation to parents and that they experience more rejection and less acceptance from their families than White SMMY (Carpintero, Kubicek, Weiss, Iverson, & Kipke, 2008; Dubé & Savin-Williams, 1999; Mustanski, Newcom, & Garofalo, 2011). Lower rates of disclosure to parents and parental acceptance may mean that ethnic minority SMMY are more likely to seek out and form relationships with NPAs.

Another potential influence on SMMY–NPA relationships is the degree to which SMMY and NPAs match each other demographically, including whether they are of the same ethnicity, gender identity, and/or sexual orientation. In general, perceived overall similarity has been linked to greater relationship satisfaction in formal mentoring relationships (Ensher, Grant-Vallone, & Marelich, 2002; Ensher & Murphy, 1997). Race/ethnicity and gender similarity, specifically, have been examined to a limited extent in the broad NPA literature, in part due to unequal group sizes of same- versus cross-matched relationships with regard to race/ethnicity and gender. However, the work that has been conducted highlights that, overall, youth tend to nominate individuals as significant NPAs who match them according to race/ethnicity and gender (Greenberger, Chen, & Beam, 1998; Hurd, Varner, & Rowley, 2013; Sanchez & Colon, 2005; Sanchez & Reyes, 1999). However, whether relationships with same-ethnicity or same-gender NPAs are associated with stronger or higher quality relationships has not been clearly described in the literature. Relationships with same-ethnicity mentors have been perceived by adolescents and young adults to be more credible and to involve greater ease of conversation (Blake-Beard, Bayne, Crosby, & Muller, 2011; Rhodes, Reddy, Grossman, & Lee, 2002; Santos & Reigadas, 2002). In contrast, other work has demonstrated that matching neither by ethnicity/race (Eby et al., 2013; Rhodes et al., 2002) nor by gender identity (Eby et al., 2013; Flores & Obasi, 2005; Kanchewa, Rhodes, Schwartz, & Olsho, 2014) is associated with youth–NPA relationship quality. Support of youth by NPAs of the same sexual orientation has received scant attention in the broad NPA literature. However, a recent qualitative examination of relationships between sexual minority young men and important NPAs indicated that the feature of NPAs that was most important to the participants was the provision of social support, regardless of whether the NPAs were also sexual minorities (Torres et al., 2012).

The current project is the first to our knowledge to quantitatively examine the presence of NPAs in the interpersonal networks of SMMY. Such quantitative findings would begin to provide information that is relevant to the larger population of SMMY and can eventually be harnessed toward the involvement of NPAs in ecologically-based, culturally-responsive prevention and intervention programs targeting SMMY. The study has a two-fold purpose. The first, given the potential for NPAs to impact adolescent and emerging adult psychosocial functioning and health behaviors, is to document and characterize the presence of NPAs in the social and risk behavior networks of SMMY. The second purpose is to examine correlates of number of and closeness to NPAs. Based on the literature reviewed above, we predict, consistent with the extant NPA literature, that SMMY will report a higher

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