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Minority stress, perceived burdensomeness, and depressive symptoms among sexual minority youth

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ABSTRACT

Although studies have shown links between minority stress and mental health (e.g., Meyer, 2003), there is little research explaining this association. Research has suggested that adequate coping skills might protect youth from the negative impact of stress (Compas et al., 2017). Thus, we aimed to examine: 1) whether associations between minority stress and depressive symptoms occurred through mechanisms of perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness, and 2) whether these associations were dependent on level of problem-solving coping (moderated mediation). Using an online survey of 267 sexual minority youth from the Netherlands (16–22 years; 28.8% male), the results show an indirect relationship of sexual orientation victimization and internalized homophobia with depressive symptoms occurring through perceived burdensomeness; for both males and females. Problem-solving coping skills did not significantly moderate the aforementioned indirect relationships. These results have implications for prevention and intervention work that currently focuses on social isolation rather than perceived burdensomeness.

The experience of stress associated with being a sexual minority (minority stress) has been related to poor mental health and is often considered as an explanation for the mental health disparities between sexual minority and non-sexual minority individuals, particularly related to depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Meyer, 2003). The mechanisms by which the internalization of sexual minority stress affects mental health, however, is just beginning to receive research attention. Drawing from interpersonal-psychological theory of suicide (Joiner et al., 2009), recent empirical work has identified the experience of thwarted belongingness and the perception of being a burden to others as an important explanation for the relationship between minority stress and mental health (Baams, Russell, & Grossman, 2015; Plöderl et al., 2014). Sexual minority youth are thought to be particularly prone to a thwarted sense of belonging and the perception of being a burden to others, in response to minority stressors (Baams et al., 2015). At the same time, adolescents and young adults with optimal coping skills process and handle stressful situations in more functional ways and are not affected by stressors to the same extent as those with lower levels of these skills (Compas et al., 2017; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 1993). Thus, having a high level of problem-solving coping skills is thought to protect against the development of depression (Seiffge-Krenke & Klessinger, 2000) and may be an important resource among sexual minority youth who experience minority stress. Research during adolescence (10–19 years old) and young adulthood (18–35 years old) is critical because

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during this time youth often start to disclose their sexual orientation to others (Martos, Nezhad, & Meyer, 2015), and developments during this period can have negative consequences for long-term mental health disparities (Mustanski, 2015). The present research was designed to test: (1) the indirect relationship between three aspects of minority stress (sexual orientation victimization; expected rejection; internalized homophobia) and depressive symptoms, through thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness, and (2) whether these indirect associations were dependent on level of problem-solving coping skills.

1. Minority stress and the interpersonal-psychological theory

Sexual minority individuals can experience stressors related to their minority status. These unique, often chronic, stressors are called minority stressors. Meyer (2003) uses the distal-proximal distinction as a means to characterize different processes of minority stress. Distal processes such as prejudice and victimization are external to the individual but depend on proximal processes involving the individual's subjective appraisal of the situation. Meyer (2003) delineated three processes of minority stress related to sexual minorities that range from the distal to proximal: external, objective stressful events and conditions, expectations of and vigilance for such events, and internalization of negative societal attitudes.

Experienced prejudice and victimization directed at sexual minority youth's (presumed) sexual identity is common (Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine, 2005) and related to mental health problems (e.g., Burton, Marshal, Chisolm, Sucato, & Friedman, 2013). Sexual orientation victimization has been conceptualized as experiences with, for example, verbal and physical violence because the youth was lesbian, gay, or bisexual, or someone thought they were (D'Augelli, 2002; D'Augelli et al., 2006; Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995). More proximal stressors are also found to relate to sexual minority youth's health. For example, the expectation of rejection and the vigilance that may follow has been related to anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Kelleher, 2009). Further, internalized homophobia, defined as “the [...] person's direction of negative social attitudes toward the self, leading to a devaluation of the self and resultant internal conflicts and poor self-regard” (Meyer & Dean, 1998, p. 161), is related to higher levels of depression and anxiety (see Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010 for a review). Although these stressors have been related to negative (mental) health outcomes such as depression and suicidality (Meyer, 2003; Russell & Fish, 2016), until recently there has been little attention for explanatory mechanisms of these associations. One proposed mechanism comes from the interpersonal-psychological theory, which has been applied to both depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation (Baams et al., 2015).

In the interpersonal-psychological theory, two factors are identified that are important in the development of depression, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behavior: perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness (Joiner et al., 2009). First, perceived burdensomeness is defined as the perception of being a burden to friends and family. This perception is thought to develop when the need for social competence is unmet (Van Orden, Cukrowicz, Witte, & Joiner, 2012). Feeling like a burden has long been suggested to be prevalent among sexual minority youth and (young) adults (e.g., Diaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne, & Marin, 2001; Oswald, 1999) and may develop in response to others' negative reactions to “coming out” experiences (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011). Second, thwarted belongingness or a sense of social isolation has also been shown to be prevalent among sexual minority individuals and can develop as a function of rejection and victimization (e.g., Baams et al., 2015). Thwarted belongingness is described as a psychological state that develops when the need to belong is unmet, this may refer to a lack of connectedness to one's family, community, and society more broadly (Van Orden et al., 2012). Thwarted belongingness and social isolation have also been related to mental health problems (Diaz et al., 2001; Hatzenbuehler, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Dovidio, 2009).

To our knowledge there are currently three studies that combine the interpersonal-psychological theory and the minority stress framework to understand sexual minority mental health. One study among a sample of Bavarian sexual minority adults showed that internalized homophobia was related to perceived burdensomeness, and perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness were associated with higher levels of depression (Plöderl et al., 2014). A study among college students in the United States showed that the association of perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness with suicidal ideation was conditional on the level of perceived or anticipated rejection due to sexual identity (Hill & Pettit, 2012). These first two studies highlight the link between perceived burdensomeness and mental health outcomes for sexual minorities, and the importance of minority stress in these relations.

To our knowledge, only one study has used the interpersonal-psychological theory to examine the mechanism behind the associations between minority stress and mental health (Baams et al., 2015), with results pointing to an important role of perceived burdensomeness as a key mechanism. This study of LGB self-identified youth (ages 15–21) in the United States assessed two minority stressors: sexual orientation victimization and stress around coming-out experiences. The results showed that the association between sexual orientation victimization with depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation could be explained by higher levels of perceived burdensomeness. Further, for girls, the relation between coming-out stress and depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation could be explained by higher levels of perceived burdensomeness. Thus, this recent study shows the importance of a minority stressor such as victimization for both boys and girls, and the role that perceived burdensomeness plays in relation to depression and suicidal ideation. Further, coming-out stress was found to function similarly, but only for girls (Baams et al., 2015).

2. Problem-focused coping skills

After decades of research on minority stress and mental health, and the now growing field of research on mechanisms in these associations, there is still little attention for individual factors that may moderate the impact of minority stress. Particularly problem-focused coping has been found to help regulate stressful responses and reduce negative feelings related to stressful or prejudice events (Allport, 1954; Clarke, 2006; Gonzales, Tein, Sandler, & Friedman, 2001; Silk, Steinberg, & Morris, 2003), and thus the associations between minority stress and health outcomes may be dependent on problem-focused coping skills. Problem-focused coping is a form

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