Journal of Adolescence 37 (2014) 1293–1302

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Adolescence

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jado

How a romantic relationship can protect same-sex attracted youth and young adults from the impact of expected rejection

Laura Baams [a, *], Henny M.W. Bos [b], Kai J. Jonas [c]

[a] Developmental Psychology, Utrecht University, Heidelberglaan 1, 3584 CS Utrecht, The Netherlands
[b] Child Development and Education, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Prinsengracht 130, 1018 VZ Amsterdam, The Netherlands
[c] Social Psychology, University of Amsterdam, Weesperplein 4, 1018 XA Amsterdam, The Netherlands

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 4 October 2014

Keywords:
Same-sex attracted
LGB
Romantic relationship
Minority stress
Adolescents and young adults

ABSTRACT

Same-sex attracted youth's well-being is jeopardized by components of minority stress, but this stress can be buffered by social support. What is unknown is whether a romantic relationship can also serve as a buffer. With an online survey we examined the link between components of minority stress, psychological well-being, and its moderated relation by romantic relationship status among 309 Dutch same-sex attracted youth (16–24 years old, 52.9% female). The results showed that minority stress components (internalized homophobia, expected rejection, and meta-stereotyping) were negatively related to psychological well-being. Moderation analyses revealed that only the impact of "expected rejection" on psychological well-being was buffered for those involved in a romantic relationship. This shows the particular functional link of romantic support in rejection contexts.

Romantic relationships during adolescence and young adulthood support the development of interpersonal skills, and promote a sense of identity (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Yet, for same-sex attracted (SSA) youth and young adults (aged 16–24 years old) the picture is less clear. They may be confronted with stressors that are related to a minority group membership or being involved in a same-sex romantic relationship (Meyer, 2003). For example, the internalization of negative ideas about homosexuality has been related to relationship problems and depression (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Otis, Rostosky, Riggle, & Hamrin, 2006). It is evident from literature on protective factors in the lives of SSA youth and young adults that support from family, friends, and school can act as a buffer against the negative impact of stressors on well-being (e.g., Baiocco, Laghi, Di Pomponio, & Nigito, 2012; Mustanski, Birkett, Greene, Hatzenbuehler, & Newcomb, 2014; Poteat, Sinclair, DiGiovanni, Koenig, & Russell, 2013; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010). However, whether being involved in a romantic relationship can offer the same protection from minority stress is currently unknown. The present study therefore examines the relation between specific types of minority stress and psychological well-being, and assesses whether a romantic relationship buffers the impact of minority stress.

Minority stress among LGB youth and young adults

Since there is little research on SSA youth and young adults that makes use of the minority stress concept, we mostly draw on research on lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals (LGB), to develop our argument. The unique stressors LGB individuals are

* Corresponding author. Heidelberglaan 1, 3584 CS Utrecht, The Netherlands. Tel.: +31 30 2539242.
E-mail address: l.baams@uu.nl (L. Baams).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2014.09.006
0140-1971/

confronted with are described as “minority stress” (Meyer, 2003). Minority stress contains several components. Above and beyond general experiences of negative reactions due to the sexual minority status, the unique stressors include the following: expected rejection, meta-stereotyping, internalized homophobia, and in-group blame. Worries about being rejected based on one's sexual orientation (expected rejection), and the feeling that most heterosexual individuals have negative attitudes towards homosexuality (meta-stereotyping) are also aspects of minority stress (Meyer, 2003; Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998). LGB individuals may also internalize the negative attitudes toward homosexuality in society, leading to being less positive about one's own sexual orientation (internalized homophobia) or being less positive about other same-sex attracted individuals (in-group blame) (Sandfort, 1997).

Stressors such as those described in the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003) have been shown to impact psychological well-being (e.g., Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Hatzenbuehler, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Dovidio, 2009; Kelleher, 2009; Marshal et al., 2013). Minority stress may, in part, operate through deficits in emotion-regulation strategies such as social isolation and rumination (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2009). What is currently missing is the investigation of the differential impact of minority stress components and potential protective factors (Hatzenbuehler, 2009).

Positive factors in the lives of SSA youth and young adults

Social support can play an important role in same-sex attracted adolescent's development (Wright & Perry, 2006). A recent review of the current literature by Kwon (2013) showed that having a social network that affirms one's sexual orientation and same-sex relationships may be particularly important for LGB adolescents. Social support has also been shown to buffer minority stress. For example in a study among LGB youth, support for coping with their sexuality buffered the impact of sexuality stress on emotional distress (Doty, Willoughby, Lindahl, & Malik, 2010).

Adolescence and young adulthood is a time when many sexual minority youth experience notable milestones such as same-sex attraction, sexual identity development, and disclosing one's orientation to others (Floyd & Stein, 2002; Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2006). At the same time, peers groups are often the main source of social support for youth (Wentzel, 2011). Thus, it is not surprising that friends are seen as an important buffer against the effects of victimization (Baiocco et al., 2012; D'Augelli, 2003). For example, research has shown that cross-gender and cross-orientation friendships may offer support or a “safer” perception of contact with cross-gender and −orientation individuals (Baiocco et al., 2014).

In addition to the role of friends, the family (e.g., Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995) and school-context (e.g., Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Ryan et al., 2010) have also been found to have implications for LGB youth. In previous research, family acceptance was shown to protect LGBT adolescents against depression, substance use, and suicidal ideation (Ryan et al., 2010) and sexual minority adolescents that have access to LGB support groups in school, were found to report less victimization and suicide attempts (Goodenow et al., 2006). Protection from minority stress may also come in the form of support from the LGB community—connectedness in the LGB community is related to higher self-esteem and lower internalized homophobia, and even predicts increased psychological and social well-being (Frost & Meyer, 2012).

There are only a few studies that consider the role of a romantic partner (e.g., Bauermeister et al., 2010; D'Augelli, Rendina, Sinclair, & Grossman, 2007; Frost, 2012; Frost & Meyer, 2009). For example, it has been suggested that being involved in a same-sex relationship can help affirm one's sexual identity (Savin-Williams, 1996). A study by Frost (2012) examined the pursuit of intimacy goals amongst LGB and heterosexual individuals. No differences were found between LGB and heterosexual individuals in regard to their intimacy goals. However, the results did show that LGB individuals experienced more devaluation and barriers to achieving those intimacy goals than heterosexuals—LGB individuals reported experiencing minority stressors that were specific to their relational pursuits (Frost, 2012). In other words, although the potentially positive role of a romantic relationship is thought to be similar across sexual orientations, the barriers that people face may be different. To our knowledge, no studies tested the specific link between the components of minority stress and well-being, buffered by being involved in a romantic relationship.

Romantic relationships as a buffer

Throughout adolescence, the formation of romantic relationships is an important developmental task (Floyd & Stein, 2002; Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, & Tellegen, 2004). Being involved in a romantic relationship gives youth opportunities to gain skills in the expression and regulation of emotions, empathy and intimacy (Collins, 2003; O'Sullivan & Thompson, 2013). Romantic relationships can offer a different kind and level of intimacy in comparison to friendships (Sternberg, 1987), and as adolescents grow into young adults romantic partners fulfill different roles than friends. For example, young adults are more likely to seek proximity from a romantic partner than from their friends (Markiewicz, Lawford, Doyle, & Haggart, 2006). Further, romantic relationships offer forms of support and quality of interaction that other relations (e.g., friends, parents) may cease to offer (e.g., Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Furman & Shomaker, 2008; Sharabany, Gershoni, & Hofman, 1981; Zimmer-Gembeck, 2002). However, as same-sex attracted adolescents are less likely to find like-minded peers in their proximal environment they are also suggested to have fewer opportunities to find romantic partners (Mustanski et al., 2014). In addition, being involved in a same-sex relationship may