



Understanding suicide among sexual minority youth in America: An ecological systems analysis

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A B S T R A C T

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This article examines major risk factors for suicide among sexual minority youth using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Although suicidal behavior among sexual minority youth is a major public concern in the United States, understanding of this phenomenon has been limited since the majority of empirical research studies have addressed individual level characteristics without much consideration to the larger environmental contexts. This review integrates past and current empirical findings on suicidal behaviors of sexual minority youth within the context of *micro*-, *meso*-, *exo*-, *macro*-, and *chrono*-systems levels. Finally, it draws implications for assessment, prevention, and intervention strategies.

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Suicide among sexual minority youth is a major public health concern. A number of studies have reported high rates of suicide attempts among sexual minority youth (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1995; D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 2005; Paul et al., 2002; Safren & Heimberg, 1999); and these youth were significantly more likely to be at risk of suicidal behavior than youth in the general population (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Remafedi, 2002; Ramafedi, French, Story, Resnick, & Blum, 1998). Child Welfare League of America (2009) found that in 2005, 45 percent of gay, lesbian, or bisexual youth attempted suicide, compared with eight percent of heterosexual youth. These findings highlight a major need to understand the configurations of risk factors for suicidal behavior among sexual minority youth. It is important to note, however, that sexual orientation and gender identity alone are not necessarily risk factors for youth suicide (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Sexual minority youth frequently struggle with rejection from their parents, peers, and teachers, as well as homophobia in society, which put them at risk for depression that can lead to self-destructive behavior such as suicide.

Individual, family, peer, and school level risk factors for suicide among sexual minority youth have been examined by a number of researchers (e.g., Russell, 2003). While subjective warning signs allow for the assessment of more immediate suicide risk (Rudd et al., 2006), demographic risk factors point to risk for psychological perturbation, which increases suicide risk (Kral & Sakinofsky, 1994). Unfortunately, studies have not considered other ecological factors (e.g., beliefs) that are inherently relevant to suicidal behavior among sexual minority youth – ones that can enhance our understanding of contexts.

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Effective assessment, prevention, and intervention efforts require a thorough examination of sexual minority youth suicide within the multiple levels of the ecological systems. The focus of this article is to examine the risk factors for suicidal behavior among sexual minority youth within the context of the Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems theory. This discussion is followed by ecologically-based strategies for parents, teachers, school officials, and practitioners in suicide assessment and intervention.

Ecological systems theory

Ecological systems theory, which facilitates a broader understanding of suicide among sexual minority youth, is important. Developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, this theory conceptualizes the ecological environment or the context in which a social phenomenon occurs, as a set of 'nested structures' (Eamon, 2001). Social phenomenon is influenced by interactions within the *micro*-, *meso*-, *exo*-, *macro*-, and *chrono*-system levels. Identifying and understanding the ecological risk and protective factors can also inform intervention and prevention efforts (Gorman-Smith, Tolan, & Henry, 2000). The following section examines the risk factor for sexual minority youth suicide within micro-systems (youth characteristics, parental support, peer relations, and school), meso-systems (lack of teacher and school staff support, and lack of professional support), exo-systems (lack of social support for parents), macro-systems (societal homophobia and traditional, conservative values and beliefs), and chrono-systems (abuse during childhood).

Micro-systems

The most direct influences in suicidal behavior among sexual minority youth are within the micro-system level, which is composed of individuals and groups of individuals with whom the individual interact. Urie Bronfenbrenner (1994) describes micro-systems as a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the individual in a given direct setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that would invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with the immediate environment. Micro-systems level interactions and settings constantly influence the individual. Relevant micro-systems level factors in this analysis include youth characteristics, parental support, peer relations, and school.

Youth characteristics

Individual characteristics such as membership in demographic groups are examples of micro-systems which directly affect the individual. Because sexual minority youth report more frequent suicidal thoughts and attempts than their heterosexual peers (Bagley & Tremblay, 1997; Garofalo, Wolf, Wissow, Woods, & Goodman, 1999; Russell & Joyner, 2001), it is necessary to examine the demographic characteristics of these youth such as gender and race. Although the suicide rates for both male and female sexual minority youth are higher than for heterosexual male and female youth, researchers have not examined the differences in suicide behavior between male and female sexual minority youth.

Garofalo, Wolf, Wissow, Woods, and Goodman (1999) however found that risk factors for suicide among lesbian and bisexual female youth are not solely associated with sexual orientation but other factors such as gender, race/ethnicity, and level of engagement in risky behaviors (e.g., substance abuse). For example, Poteat, Aragon, Espelage, and Koenig (2009) examined interactions between sexual orientation (LGB, questioning/less certain, heterosexual), race, and gender among 14,439 adolescents in their self-reported substance use, and depressed/suicidal thoughts. The majority of the adolescents were classified as heterosexual (77.0%), followed by LGB (7.4%), questioning/less certain (6.5%), and 'not classified' (9.1%). A significant three-way interaction emerged for substance use. Victimization and psychosocial concerns (e.g., depression/suicidal thoughts) in general were higher for LGB and questioning/less certain youth compared with heterosexual youth. However, the most substance use was reported by questioning/less certain youth, followed by LGB youth and then heterosexual youth. An exception to this was among racial minority boys and girls; differences between gay/bisexual and heterosexual racial minority boys were not significant, nor were differences between lesbian/bisexual, and questioning/less certain racial minority girls. However, the most substantial difference across sexual orientation was noted among racial minority boys because of elevated substance use scores among questioning/less certain racial minority boys. Effect sizes across sexual orientation were moderate for White boys but low among White girls. Differences between Whites and racial minorities on the basis of sexual orientation and gender were significant among only heterosexual boys and questioning/less certain boys. Racial minority boys reported slightly higher levels of substance use than did White boys in both groups. Gender differences on the basis of race and sexual orientation were significant in each group, with the exception of White and racial minority LGB youth. Boys reported higher levels than did girls across subgroups.

A significant three-way interaction (sexual orientation, race, gender) was also found for depressed/suicidal thoughts. Questioning/less certain youth reported the highest levels of depressed/suicidal thoughts, with the exception of racial minority girls, for whom no significant difference was documented between questioning/less certain and lesbian/bisexual youth. The largest difference across sexual orientation groups was among White girls. Unlike with substance use, the only significant difference between LGB and heterosexual students was among White girls. Also, differences between Whites and racial minorities regarding depression/suicidal thoughts were significant only for heterosexual girls. In contrast, gender differences were significant across all subgroups. Girls reported significantly higher levels of depression/suicidal thoughts than did boys. Effect sizes ranged from small to moderate (racial minority questioning/less certain youth).

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