



Minority stress, psychological distress, and alcohol misuse among sexual minority young adults: A resiliency-based conditional process analysis



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We found support for the existence of latent personality trait configurations among sexual minority young adults that are associated with differential risk for psychological distress and alcohol misuse in the context of minority stress.
- We found support for psychological distress (i.e., depression and anxiety symptoms) as a partial mediator of the relationship between minority stress and alcohol misuse among sexual minority young adults.
- Results of moderated mediation tests suggest that the direct and indirect (mediated) relationship between minority stress and alcohol misuse is conditional upon individuals' personality trait profile. That is, these relationships held for individuals classified as *at-risk* (higher neuroticism, lower extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience), but not among those classified as *adaptive* on the basis of their Five Factor personality trait profile.

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ABSTRACT

Background: Sexual minority young adults experience elevated rates of distal stress (discrimination, victimization), and related psychological distress and alcohol misuse. However, few studies have examined the degree to which personality trait differences confer risk/resilience among sexual minority young adults. We hypothesized that psychological distress would mediate the relationship between distal stress and alcohol misuse, but that these relationships would be moderated by personality trait differences.

Method: Sexual minority young adults ($N = 412$) were recruited nationally. Survey measures included demographic questions, minority stressors, Five Factor personality traits, and current psychological distress and alcohol misuse symptoms. We used a data-driven two-stage cluster analytic technique to empirically derive personality trait profiles, and conducted mediation and moderated mediation analyses using a regression-based approach.

Results: Our results supported a two-group personality profile solution. Relative to *at-risk* individuals, those classified as *adaptive* scored lower on neuroticism, and higher on agreeableness, extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. As predicted, psychological distress mediated the relationship between distal stress and alcohol misuse. However, personality moderated these relationships to the degree that they did not exist among individuals classified as *adaptive*.

Discussion: In the current study, we found that personality moderated the established relationships between distal stress, psychological distress, and alcohol misuse among sexual minority young adults. Future research is needed to further explicate these relationships, and in order to develop tailored interventions for sexual minority young adults at risk.

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Young adults experience elevated rates of psychological distress and report higher rates of alcohol misuse relative to the general population (Adams, Knopf, & Park, 2014). However, rates of distress and alcohol misuse are even higher among young adults who also identify as a sexual minority (e.g., lesbian, gay, and bisexual; Rosario et al., 2014;

Brewster & Tillman, 2012; Lindley, Walsemann, & Carter, 2012; Meyer, 2003). These disparities are related to the fact that sexual minority individuals experience higher rates of discrimination and victimization (*distal stress*; Meyer, 2003), which are associated with greater psychological distress (Szymanski, Dunn, & Ickler, 2014; Burton, Marshal, Chisolm, Sucato, & Friedman, 2013; Hatzenbuehler, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Erickson, 2008), anxiety and depression (Eldahan et al., 2016; Burns, Kamen, Lehman, & Beach, 2012; McCarthy, Fisher, Irwin, Coleman, & Pelster, 2014), and alcohol misuse (Hatzenbuehler, Corbin, & Fromme,

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2011; Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Lehavot & Simoni, 2011; Livingston, Oost, Heck, & Cochran, 2015a). Implicit in these findings, and documented elsewhere (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Hatzenbuehler, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Dovidio, 2009; Swim, Johnston, & Pearson, 2009), is the notion that distal stress predicts psychological distress, which activates psychological processes that lead to alcohol misuse (e.g., coping motives; Hatzenbuehler, 2009). Unfortunately, less is currently known regarding the mediating role of psychological distress, specifically, or whether there are other moderating factors conferring risk/resilience for sexual minority young adults who experience minority stress.

Researchers have begun addressing these knowledge gaps by shifting toward the identification of factors conferring *resilience* in the face of minority stress experiences (Meyer, 2015). An important but oft-overlooked source of resilience is personality (Waaktaar & Torgersen, 2010; Nakaya, Oshio, & Kaneko, 2006; Bernard, Hutchison, Lavin, & Pennington, 1996). For instance, Five Factor Theory postulates the existence of five personality traits that give rise to our characteristic adaptations and behaviors, which confer risk and/or resilience in the face of adversity (McCrae & Costa, 2008). These traits include neuroticism (emotional instability, negative affect), extraversion (sociability, sensation seeking, positivity), conscientiousness (self-discipline, success-orientation), agreeableness (warmth, care and trust-oriented), and openness to experience (novel/cultural pursuit orientation; McCrae & Costa, 2008).

These traits share strong and consistent links with mental health outcomes and alcohol misuse. For example, Five Factor traits (McCrae & Costa, 2008) have been shown to differentiate between “healthy controls” and those diagnosed with anxiety, depression, and alcohol use disorders (Bienvenu et al., 2004; Kotov, Gamez, Schmidt, & Watson, 2010), as well as predict alcohol misuse among undiagnosed populations (Ruiz, Pincus, & Dickenson, 2005; Livingston et al., 2015a). According to meta-analytic research, individuals diagnosed with a current substance use disorder had higher neuroticism, and lower extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience, relative to undiagnosed individuals (Kotov et al., 2010). Importantly, these traits are also associated with many of the psychological processes shown to mediate the relationship between distal stress and alcohol misuse (e.g., rumination [Roelofs, Huijbers, Peeters, & Arntz, 2008], alcohol use expectancies [Read & O'Connor, 2006], and motives [Theakston, Stewart, Dawson, Knowlden-Loewen, & Lehman, 2004]).

To date, most research linking personality to mental health and alcohol misuse utilize “variable-centered” analysis (Donnellan & Robins, 2010). This approach highlights the effects of single traits by statistically controlling for the others within a given statistical model. Unfortunately, this obscures researchers' ability to investigate personality trait *configuration* effects, which is arguably a more “person-centered” approach to analysis (Asendorpf, 2015). We utilize the latter approach, which allows for analysis of personality trait effects without losing important information about how traits operate in concert (Donnellan & Robins, 2010).

In sum, the relationship between distal stress and alcohol misuse is firmly established. However, less is currently known regarding the mediating role of psychological distress, and even less is understood regarding the role of personality in conferring risk/resilience for sexual minority young adults. We hypothesized that psychological distress would mediate the relationship between distal stress and alcohol misuse. We further hypothesized that these relationships would be moderated by individuals' personality trait configuration, such that some would evidence lower risk for psychological distress and alcohol misuse than others.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

The 412 participants in this study represent the young adult subset (18–25, $M = 20.77$, $SD = 2.05$) of a larger, nation-wide study of

individuals who completed a one-time online survey. Inclusion criteria specified anyone who reported a current sexual or gender minority identity (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer), or who self-identified as “heterosexual” but denied being exclusively heterosexual currently. Each self-identified transgender ($n = 28$) and “other”-identified gender individual (e.g., gender queer; $N = 58$) also denied being exclusively heterosexual currently and, thus, was retained in the current study. That is, all participants were classified as a “sexual minority” in the current study based on either self-report of sexual minority status, or denial of being exclusively heterosexual currently on a Likert-scale measure of sexual orientation.

After removing individuals who identified as being “exclusively heterosexual,” 29% of the analytic sample identified as male ($n = 120$), 50% as female ($n = 206$), 6.7% as transgender ($n = 28$), and 14% as “other” ($n = 58$; gender queer, fluid, non-binary). Bisexual (29.6%; $n = 122$) and “other” (30.3%; $n = 125$; e.g., queer) identities comprised the majority of the sample; 24.5% identified as gay ($n = 101$) and 18.6% identified as lesbian ($n = 77$). The majority of our sample identified as White (83.5%; $n = 344$), followed by multiple ethnicities/biracial (4.6%; $n = 19$), Hispanic (3.3%; $n = 14$), Asian (2.1%; $n = 9$), African American (1.9%; $n = 8$), and Native American/Alaskan Native (1.2%; $n = 5$). All participants indicated living in the United States currently. Consistent with U.S. Census classifications, approximately 26.29% reported living in the Northeast, 34.77% in the South, 18.78% in the Midwest, and 20.05% reported living in the Western region of the United States.

1.2. Procedure

The Institutional Review Board at the University of Montana approved the study procedures. Participants for this study were recruited electronically from university-based LGBTQ student groups and community-based organizations (i.e., PFLAG groups and LGBTQ community centers), within each state of the United States, via hardcopy recruitment flyers and distribution of online recruitment messages posted to organizations' Facebook walls. Online recruitment messages advertised an “online survey designed to answer some important questions regarding the LGBTQ experience”, outlined inclusion criteria, provided a link to the survey, and indicated that participants would be eligible to participate in a raffle to win one of 10 \$20 gift cards.

1.3. Measures

In addition to providing basic demographic information regarding age, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, respondents were also asked to report their current sexual orientation on a 1 (exclusively heterosexual) to 7 (exclusively homosexual) scale.

1.3.1. Personality

Personality traits were measured using the 44-item Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999). Included in this measure are five subscales corresponding to each Five-Factor personality trait: extraversion (e.g., “is outgoing, sociable”; $\alpha = 0.90$), neuroticism (e.g., “can be moody”; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$), agreeableness (e.g., “is considerate and kind to almost everyone”; $\alpha = 0.77$), conscientiousness (e.g., “makes plans and follows through with them”; $\alpha = 0.84$), and openness to experience (e.g., “is curious about many different things”; $\alpha = 0.76$). Response options ranged from 1 (disagree strongly) to 5 (agree strongly).

1.3.2. Distal stress

Lifetime *Discrimination* was indexed using the Schedule for Heterosexist Events (Selvidge, 2000). Response options for this measure ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). Cronbach's α for the current study was 0.93. Our *Victimization* measure queried participants about victimization experienced throughout life on the basis of their LGBTQ status (Herek & Berrill, 1992). This measure asks respondents to report

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