Exploring the Strengths and Resiliencies of Lesbian and Bisexual Females Who Experienced Dating Violence in a Same-Gender Relationship During Adolescence

Paper based on a program presented at the 2015 American Counseling Association Conference, March 15, 2015, Orlando, FL.

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Abstract

This phenomenological study was conducted to explore the strength and resiliency factors that helped lesbian and bisexual females to overcome experiences of adolescent dating violence with a same-sex/same-gender partner. Individual interviews were held in which participants were asked open-ended questions related to their past experiences. Six themes emerged from the data; five were related to strengths and resiliency factors and the sixth theme was related to challenges to accessing resources. The themes found were a) goals, b) support/trust, c) validation/relating to others, d) self as priority/boundaries, e) values, and f) lack of cultural competence/marginalization.

Keywords: LGBT, strength, strength-based, resiliency, cultural competence, adolescent, dating violence.

The Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC) endorsed competencies for counselors to provide counseling that
is affirmative of lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, intersex, and questioning (LGBQIQ) people and their relationships (ALGBTIC, 2013). Within these competencies are comprehensive guidelines for training, practice, advocacy, and research that are LGBQIQ affirmative. Following these guidelines, the researcher sought to explore lesbian and bisexual females’ experiences of adolescent dating violence through an affirmative and strengths-based lens, focusing on the strengths and resiliencies that helped them to overcome their experiences of dating violence. Additionally, the researcher included discussion of the challenges experienced by the participants when they attempted to access resources.

Literature Review

Dating violence (DV) is encompassed within the category of intimate partner violence (IPV), which is a public health concern that may affect as many as 4.8 million women in the United States each year (Stevens, Korchmaros, & Miller, 2010). IPV is defined as violence within a romantic relationship, which may include physical, sexual, or emotional/psychological violence (Draucker & Martolf, 2010; Raiford, Wingood, & DiClemente, 2007; Stephenson, Martolf, & Draucker, 2011). This issue is crucial to professional counselors because of the wide range of negative outcomes associated with DV, including depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation (Stephenson et al., 2011). When DV occurs in adolescence, the effects may be more significant because of the enhanced vulnerability associated with that developmental stage.

Adolescent Development

Adolescence is a unique stage of development estimated to range from as early as age 11 to as late as age 24. It is divided into three categories: (a) early adolescence (11–13), (b) middle adolescence (14–18), and (c) late adolescence (19–24; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). During this developmental period, adolescents cope with the physical challenges of puberty, cognitive and emotional changes, and changing social roles and expectations. Therefore, adolescents are at an increased risk for psychological distress (Dixon, Scheidegger, & McWhirter, 2009). Additionally, psychological, emotional, and behavioral problems might be especially detrimental during this stage of life because of changes in societal expectations, the increased intimacy in peer relationships, and the process of identity formation (Akos & Ellis, 2008).

Identity development is the “foremost task” of adolescence (Dixon et al., 2009, p. 303). Parents, peers, non-parental adults (e.g., mentors and teachers), and the community interact to influence the different elements of identity development, including emotional regulation, conflict resolution, self-concept, self-representation, vocational exploration, explorations in commitment making, and a sense of belonging or mattering (Akos & Ellis, 2008; Beyers & Goossens, 2008; Dixon et al., 2009). On a cognitive level, adolescents are also developing advanced decision-making skills, moral reasoning, critical thinking skills, and an awareness of racism, discrimination, and inequality (Akos & Ellis, 2008). All of these changes can make adolescence a chaotic and confusing time for some, and events that occur during adolescence can have a lifelong effect because of the impact on identity development.
LGBT Adolescents

Davis, Williamson, and Lambie (2006) reported that LGBT adolescents are the largest minority group within many schools, and that LGBT adolescents face even more negative issues than adults who are a part of the LGBT community. Moreover, LGBT adolescents are more likely to attempt suicide, commit suicide, be victimized by bullying, skip school because of fears about their safety, experience depression, and experience substance abuse compared to their heterosexual peers (Craig, 2013; Davis et al., 2006). Additionally, LGBT adolescents have a higher risk of academic difficulties, homelessness, running away, social isolation, sexually transmitted diseases, and interpersonal difficulties with peers (Craig, 2013; Davis et al., 2006). However, Davis et al. (2006) stressed the importance of recognizing that most LGBT adolescents become healthy adults despite these documented risks. Though not all LGBT adolescents will experience these challenges, several of the risk factors mentioned above (past victimization, depression, substance abuse) have also been associated with adolescent dating violence, and dating violence victimization may compound the effects of the negative stressors that LGBT adolescents already experience (Akers, Yonas, Burke, & Chang, 2010; Stephenson et al., 2011; Stevens et al., 2010).

Craig (2013) explored the challenges of LGBT adolescents through a minority stress theory, suggesting that experiences of discrimination lead to increased risks and that this may be compounded for LGBT adolescents of color who experience racism and ethnic discrimination. According to this model, the adolescent’s sense of self is in conflict with the expectations of society, and the resulting stress puts the adolescent at risk for mental health issues such as depression. LGBT adolescents of color may experience this conflict and stress from multiple different sources (Craig, 2013). Craig provided a theoretical framework for a strengths-based affirmative approach for working with LGBT adolescents with dual or multiple minority statuses in a school-based counseling group. Craig’s model emphasized social justice, an affirmative stance, and a focus on the strengths and resiliencies of adolescents, their communities, and their cultures that may foster empowerment and lower the risk for negative mental health outcomes caused by minority stress.

LGBT Dating Violence

Murray, Mobley, Buford, and Seaman-DeJohn (2007) conducted a review of the existing literature on IPV within same-gender relationships and provided implications for counseling professionals. They discussed the challenge of recruiting participants for research in this area and refer to the “double closet” that victims of IPV in same-gender relationships may experience, which may lead potential participants to be hesitant to share their stories with researchers and even to seek help or speak about their experiences with clinicians. This poses a significant issue for professional counselors given that Murray and colleagues (2007) found prevalence rates of IPV ranging from one quarter to one half of all same-gender relationships. Yet, they did not find research on the outcomes of treatment approaches or models for same-gender IPV while conducting their literature review, further highlighting this need in clinical services literature.

It is important for counselors to examine adolescent DV among same-gender couples because of the potential impact on psychosocial development and well-being. Adolescents who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning may already have
more challenges in terms of identity development and interpersonal relationship development compared to heterosexual adolescents because of stigma and discrimination. Additionally, LGBT adolescents may be less likely to report dating violence victimization if it comes with the added impact of coming out to friends, family, or non-parental adults in order to seek help or advice. Therefore, culturally appropriate research is needed to help develop prevention and intervention strategies for this population based on strengths and resiliencies.

**Methodology**

This study was designed using a phenomenological approach. In phenomenological research, researchers seek to understand the common themes, or essence, of the participants’ experiences related to a specific phenomenon. Rather than explaining why a phenomenon occurs, phenomenological research is conducted to explore what occurred and how it occurred in an effort to better understand the participants’ lived experiences and the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). This strengths-based approach allowed those who lived through the phenomenon to explain “what” and “how” in their own words.

**Participants**

Participants determined independently upon viewing recruitment materials that they qualified as participants for the study and contacted the researcher directly to participate in the study. These qualifications, as listed on the materials, were as follows: (a) participants identified as female, (b) participants identified as lesbian or bisexual, and (c) participants believed that they experienced dating violence as an adolescent perpetrated by a partner who was also female. Two participants were interviewed for this study. Both participants identified their gender as female and indicated that they were in a violent or abusive relationship with another female during adolescence. At the time of the interview, participants were over the age of 18 and were currently enrolled in a university; one participant was 21 years old, the other declined to share her age but indicated she was over 18. One participant self-identified as lesbian and one identified as bisexual. Participant 1 self-identified her race/ethnicity Caucasian. Participant 2 self-identified her race/ethnicity as White/Native American and Hispanic/Latina.

Both participants disclosed that they were in an abusive relationship during their final year of high school. Participant 1 ended the relationship with her past partner when she moved away for college, and Participant 2 ended the relationship with her past partner shortly after moving for college. Participant 1 stated that she had experienced emotional abuse, and Participant 2 did not specify the type of abuse experienced. To protect the participants from possible distress, and to keep the focus of this study on strengths and resiliencies utilized to overcome the past trauma, the specific details of what happened in the abusive relationships were not explored in depth.

**Instrumentation**

Participants were interviewed individually using a semi-structured format. Questions were open-ended, including those on the self-report demographic form, which
allowed participants to provide preferred identifiers rather than checking boxes for pre-conceived categories of age, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.

Interview questions were developed to examine strengths, resiliencies, and cultural implications. Questions were designed to elicit information primarily regarding the positive influence of parents, peers, non-parental adults, community, and culture due to the influence these factors have on adolescent identity development (Akos & Ellis, 2008; Beyers & Goossens, 2008; Dixon et al., 2009). If participants discussed challenges to gaining support in any of these areas, those challenges were explored. Follow-up questions regarding challenges maintained a strength-based approach, and participants were asked what others could have done to be more understanding and supportive. They were also asked to discuss how they found support in dealing with these challenges.

In line with phenomenological methodology, the researcher engaged in the process of “bracketing” beliefs and biases based on past experiences through conversation and reflection (Creswell, 2007). The interview questions developed were presented to a mixed-level research team comprised of master’s and doctoral students in counselor education and one counselor educator. The researcher created and adapted interview questions several times based on reflection and feedback.

**Procedures**

This study was conducted on campus at a large university in the Southeastern United States. Participants (n = 2) were recruited through an on-campus LGBT student affairs office. Fliers were posted at the office of LGBT affairs, and a recruitment e-mail was sent through a listserv maintained by the office of LGBT affairs and through the listserv for the counselor education program. Participants were asked to contact the researcher directly, either by e-mail or phone, if they were interested in participating in the study. It was explicitly stated that participants had to be at least 18 years old to be involved in the study. A $25 gift card was offered to participants to thank them for their time. To assess for the potential of emotional or psychological distress as a result of participation in this study, screening questions were asked to determine whether participants were currently involved in an abusive relationship; both participants stated that they were not.

**Data Analysis**

Participants were interviewed individually using the predetermined interview questions and follow-up questions. After the completion of the interviews, the recordings were transcribed for analysis. The researcher read through the verbatim transcripts several times to identify significant statements, as per phenomenological methodology (Creswell, 2007). The significant statements were categorized into meaning units, or themes, that were common to all participants. The transcripts, themes, and significant statements were independently reviewed by a second researcher. Participants were invited to a follow-up interview to review the themes for the purpose of member-checking or respondent validation (Creswell, 2007). One participant chose to meet with the researcher and agreed with the themes and the significant statements.
Results

Six themes were found related to strengths and resiliencies and one theme was identified related to challenges in receiving support or services. The themes related to strengths and resiliencies were a) goals, b) support/trust, c) validation/relating to others, d) self as a priority/boundaries, and e) values. The theme for challenges was lack of cultural competence/marginalization.

Goals

The first theme, goals, is related to the resiliency that participants found in thinking about their academic achievements and plans. While talking about removing herself from an abusive situation, Participant 1 stated: “It was like a realization that it isn’t worth it, I have school to focus on.” Participant 2 shared her experience with finding strength in future plans and academic goals:

I did have teachers that encouraged me to apply to college and be more academically accomplished. And those relationships that I had prior [to the abusive relationship] kind of helped ground me . . . and ultimately I was able to move away and to go to school away from . . . that whole situation.

Support and encouragement from others was also reported as being beneficial, in that it related to the development of future plans and goals. One participant stated,

The societal pressure just to be academically successful and go to college kind of helped, but it was more the pressure from my high school teachers and mentors to push through that. I never really had a plan to pursue a bachelor’s degree before I had those teachers.

Support/Trust

The second theme was related to the reactions from others when learning about the abusive relationship or discussing the impact it had on them. The participants were able to feel safe and to trust people who offered encouragement and support. Participant 1 described how her parents helped her to recognize the situation she was in and to cope with the end of the relationship. She stated,

She [my mother] kind of guided me towards the idea, and then I realized I was kind of being taken advantage of and it was making me sad all the time, and that kind of helped pull me out of that. . . . My parents were really helpful. My mom was especially. . . . She wasn’t like, ‘I told you so.’ She was really caring.

The participant further expressed, “I think it meant the most that my parents were there, because even though they didn’t like her from the get-go, they weren’t throwing it in my face . . . that was probably the most beneficial, to put everything back in perspective.”

Participant 2 discussed how her teachers in high school provided a safe space for her when she needed encouragement but was not yet ready to discuss the abusive relationship: “I didn’t have to be so careful about what I shared because there were obvious student-teacher boundaries that needed to be respected and rules that I knew how to follow.” Furthermore, she expressed how she was able to receive support and encouragement from peers in college once she was removed from the abusive situation,
particularly those peers from her own cultural background and from the LGBT community. She stated,

Peer support definitely helped at that point. I was able to compare what was bad and what was good in my relationships, and when I came to college it was really stressed—by various sources, by mentorship programs, by orientation, and a lot of the freshman introductory sources, the resources they have on campus—it was stressed that, you need to network, you need to expand. It sort of gave me just a reason to push myself out there into areas I’m not comfortable with and I just sort of went with it until something clicked.

When asked what characteristics come to mind in relation to the most helpful or supportive people during this time, Participant 1 stated,

They were really considerate and compassionate, and if I didn't want to talk about it and wanted to talk about something else, they were totally open to letting me get my mind off of it. And, you know, just enjoying everything else. We'd go out places, we'd do these things. They kept me active.

A subtheme of the support and trust theme, nurturing environment, was related to daily interactions with others in various environments (e.g., school, work, home). Participant 2 described how relationships with people she met at work, school, and in her dorm helped her to recognize that her past experience had been abusive in nature:

My college roommate helped a lot . . . and I found a job when I moved away and I confided in my supervisor. I wasn’t completely open with anyone, but those two helped me put the puzzle pieces together. . . . It just made sense for me to channel it through different people to see if it was abuse, because, you know, I never told my family, I never explained anything . . . that wasn’t possible. Away from my surroundings, and with supportive people who were around me in a structured format, that really helped me realize exactly what I had gone through. . . . I had my dorm, I knew that was my new home. . . . That structure I had created for myself outside of where I grew up really helped me realize just what issues I had been hiding.

Being around new people in a new environment also helped the participant to recognize different relational dynamics. She stated, “It’s just, you see yourself in different people, you see how different relationships are.” Participant 1 also discussed how her environment and supportive people who lived in close proximity helped her both to recognize that her relationship was abusive and to cope with the relationship ending:

I sent a text to my roommates and my closest friends. Most of them came right over. After I was off the phone with my mom they were already there, so that was really nice. They were all really understanding and it was great having people to talk to immediately after, or at least have them in proximity and not talking about it.

She also expressed the importance of living in an environment that was nurturing and accepting of her sexual identity. She commented, “I’ve met a lot of people that either don’t care or are just super-allies. . . . I feel like I’ve been really lucky.”
Validation/Relating to Others

Another resiliency factor that emerged from the data was validation of the experience and having other people who could relate to similar experiences. Participant 1 found support in her current romantic relationship: “It’s really nice that [my current partner] can understand that I was in a crappy relationship and that [they were] also treated horribly and we both balance that whole situation.” This validation or ability to relate wasn’t only in regard to dating violence. Participant 2 discussed how her best friend provided her strength while coping with the effects of past trauma, and social and systemic marginalization related to race, class, and sexuality:

My first college friend... I opened up to her a lot and it that was really nice to be able to talk it out. . . . She wasn't as shocked because she came from a very similar background. . . . It really gave me the opportunity to finally be open with things that I had just been pushing back.

Self as a Priority/Boundaries

The fourth theme is related to how the participants interact with others in their current relationships. The participants had an awareness of relationship dynamics due to their past experiences and recognized that they wanted to put themselves as a priority in their lives and to maintain healthy boundaries. Participant 1 stated:

I don't ever let [people] take advantage of me. I'm still giving, but it's to a point... I don't want to be expected to drop everything. . . . But I still hold to that I will go to my friend's side. . . . I'm always there for my [partner], and [they are] always there for me.

Participant 2 discussed putting herself as a priority and the importance of enforcing her own boundaries as she reflected on what she would share with her younger self. She remarked,

It's okay to prioritize myself first. . . . It's okay to be open with yourself about what you need and just be diligent and follow through with whatever you can, forgive yourself for what you can't do.

She also shared how the freedom of choice and the flexibility provided to her by a mentorship program helped her to grow and find support during her time in college. She commented:

The relationship dynamics for mentorship wasn't structured... so that really helped. . . . I could approach them for anything I wanted to. . . . Everyone needs their own tailored resources, and the only way you can tailor resources is just to allow them to just talk to their mentor and go at their own pace about what they need. . . . Being able to have a choice to be myself was really helpful.

Values

The final strengths and resiliencies theme, values, encompassed personal, familial, and cultural values that were consistent for the participants before, during, and after the abusive relationships. These values seemed to ground the participants in their sense of self as separate from the violence or abuse, thus serving a resiliency role related to their identities and self-concepts. One participant stated as a positive aspect of herself,
“I think I’m really giving,” and went on to describe how the abusive relationship did not take this value from her. She stated,

I still try to see people in the most positive way that I can, especially if I don't know them, there's no reason for me to think otherwise. ... I'm still a cheerful person, I don't act much different. ... I feel like I went in the same person I am now, and initially came out pretty horrible, like always upset, and I definitely have gone back to almost exactly the same person that I was when I went in. So I feel like I'm more me now, I'm me again. ... I think I'm in a good place.

She explained how she learned the values of kindness from her family. She stated, “I do believe in being kind to people ... going out of my way to be kind. ... My parents, they're both really considerate ... and when I need them they're always there, so I think I learned that a lot from my family.”

Participant 2 expressed the value of honesty in terms of communicating her knowledge of relationship dynamics to those she cares about. She shared, “I won't censor myself from giving my opinion ... a lot of people would turn a blind eye and ignore that. ... If I see any abuse ... I definitely try to make [it] known.” Furthermore, she shared the importance of family and how it influences her life and her identity, which in turn influences her future plans and goals for herself, “Not only did I have to prove myself but I had to prove something of my family to the world, validate their struggle.”

Lack of Cultural Competence/Marginalization

The final theme emerged in discussions related to accessing resources. Both participants expressed the importance of having a culturally competent counselor, and the participant who identified as White/Native American and Hispanic/Latina shared her insights related to lack of cultural competence and marginalization throughout her university.

Participant 1 did not attempt to access counseling resources; however, she stated that she would have sought counseling if she did not have her support system or if they had been unavailable or physically distant while she was coping with the experience. She explained the process she would use to find a counselor should she ever choose to do so, highlighting the importance of cultural competence and affirmative counseling. She stated,

I'd have to really extensively, like, find a psychologist that understands gay relationships, and then make sure that they have good reviews online from people that have already gone to them for gay related things—that they understand what they're talking about. While I don't think lesbian relationships are much different, I don't want to be at a person [who would] ignorantly advise me to not be in a same-sex relationship.

Participant 2 explained how she did seek counseling services, and she believed that it was more harmful than helpful due to lack of cultural competence. She stated,

One of the first counselors I saw there ... totally blew past my family issues and was like “You should just be open to them,” and I was like “You're not culturally competent at all.” There's not really a lot of help going to the counseling center if you know you can't always get in. ... There's just, you know, there's a lot of
things that compound on each other, and it's those little things that just nick away at the independence that I've developed . . . it just sort of made me feel like I was reverting back . . . when I was finally able to be open with my best friend it just helped me to breathe a lot easier . . . There are a lot of financial barriers . . . they opened everything up for me, but . . . the obstacles were really there too, you know, to completely heal myself . . . this isn't even just counseling, but across the board. You know, being a culturally competent person will just help you deal with things better . . . When I came here, I also had to become culturally competent in how the university culture works. And they're really good at training you how to be culturally competent in how to deal with them because they have a lot of programs, it's just like, how to be a great [university] student, be a student leader, but they don't teach it in reverse, you know, how to reciprocate that action.

She described her experiences of marginalization within the university culture in general, and provided her insights on the detrimental effect that lack of cultural competence in a counselor can have on the clients they serve. She stated:

It's not nice being a brown woman and not straight on game day. It's very hostile, and if you're by yourself it's incredibly traumatizing and scary. . . . I'm automatically othered and that was another challenge. When I have someone like yelling slurs at me, it just kind of reminds me of just how culturally incompetent some of my partners were in the relationships I had with them . . . for the time I was attending [university] [it] definitely didn't help because there were no people like me that were succeeding . . . It would be a lot nicer if there were a lot more prominent people of my background throughout [university.] It's very difficult separating yourself from “the other” here, and that sort of compounds getting over other issues when you are the other because no one knows how to approach you, which is the issue I had with my first counselor.

**Discussion**

The researcher’s aim in conducting this study was to address a gap in the literature related to adolescent dating violence in female same-gender relationships, while also providing a unique strengths-based perspective through a focus on strengths and resiliencies. The aspects related to cultural competence and marginalization were included in the results to highlight the importance of understanding the intersection of multiple identities and to give a richer view of the context. This is part of an important conversation for professional counselors related to the role of intersectionality in cultural competence.

**Implications for Counselors**

This study has implications for LGBT affirmative counseling, multicultural counseling, and counseling with people who have experienced dating violence. The importance of trust and safety were present throughout the results as factors that were helpful to the participants. This has implications for the counseling relationship and may support that bringing supportive friends and family into the counseling process can create a more comfortable environment for the client, compared to a traditional, one-on-one counseling session. This is supported by assertions by Craig (2013) who recommended
working with youth in a group setting and creatively engaging families in the process. Furthermore, the communal nature of the themes and the importance of cultural competence may suggest that counselors who are both culturally competent and visible public advocates for LGBT people will be better able to establish a strong therapeutic bond grounded in support, encouragement, and trust. The importance of understanding the intersectionality of identities and culture is also necessary for counselors to consider when working with clients. The strengths and resiliencies that were beneficial to these participants may also act as protective factors for people who experienced dating violence in adolescence regardless of their gender or sexual orientation, but further research is needed.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to this study. The researcher sought to investigate strengths and resiliencies identified by participants who left abusive relationships, but it is not known whether these factors buffered the negative effects often associated with adolescent dating violence. Another important limitation to note is that the participants were not specifically asked how their experiences might be different from those of straight/heterosexual identifying females who experienced adolescent dating violence. The reflective nature may be a limitation since the participants were interviewed several years after the experience of dating violence occurred. Finally, a limitation of this study is that there were only two participants. Although a five participant minimum would have been ideal, the sensitive nature of the topic lead to challenges in recruiting participants. However, the insights provided by these participants can lead to pathways for future research studies.

Recommendations for Future Research

In the future, researchers may want to conduct similar research studies with a larger group of participants, as well as with participants from many different cultural backgrounds. It could be important to explore this experience through the lens of the minority stress model and how multiple minority identities interact with the “double closet” of being both LGB and a survivor of dating violence (Craig, 2013; Murray et al., 2007). Moreover, researchers may want to include people who identify as male, transgender, or non-binary in future studies. It may be helpful in future research to ask specifically about the negative outcomes typically associated with adolescent dating violence and whether those effects were mediated or eliminated once the protective factors were introduced.

Conclusion

In summary, it appears that a combination of multiple protective factors offered support to the participants in their process of overcoming dating violence experienced during adolescence. Though qualitative research is not generalizable, the themes that emerged are a starting point for understanding the phenomenon of strengths and resiliencies that can help lesbian and bisexual females overcome adolescent dating violence. It was not surprising that the importance of cultural competence emerged, as this is a core competency for professional counselors. Further research on strengths,
resiliencies, intersectionality, and affirmative counseling can help advance the field as one that supports a paradigm of social justice and cultural competence.

References


*Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/vistas*