

ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION: Psychological Adjustment of Sexual Minority Youth from Rural and Non-rural Areas

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Bronfenbrenner (2001) proposes that individual development is based on reciprocal interactions between personal variables, social interactions and the environment. If exposed to a non-accepting environment, individuals are assumed to have poorer adjustment as compared to those in accepting environments. Once exposed to a more accepting environment, psychosocial adjustment is expected to increase. D'Augelli (1994b) also sees sexual identity development as influenced by interpersonal interactions occurring in one's environment. Sexual minority adolescents have high rates of depression, suicidality and victimization, and lower levels of self-esteem and social support. Methodological issues, including recruitment and inclusion of only those who are "out", have potentially inflated previous results regarding psychosocial maladjustment. Therefore, the current study was designed to address those methodological flaws. A sample consisting of 286 sexual minority college students completed the following measures: demographics questionnaire, Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale, Suicidal Behavior Questionnaire-Revised, Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale, The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, and victimization questionnaires. It was hypothesized that when controlling for social support, rural participants would report higher rates of psychological

maladjustment (depression, suicidality, self-esteem) and victimization (in person and electronic), as compared to non-rural participants; males would have higher rates of suicidality and victimization as compared to females, whereas females were expected to have higher levels of depression and lower self-esteem as compared to males; and sexual minorities spending more time in an accepting macrosystem (greater than two years in college) were expected to have lower levels of psychological maladjustment and victimization than those spending less time in an accepting macrosystem (less than two years in college). It was also hypothesized that participants would report higher rates of victimization prior to college, as compared to when in college. Results showed that psychological maladjustment did not differ based on gender, environment or time spent in college. However, rates of psychological maladjustment were found to be lower than previous studies reported. This may indicate that previous research is skewed due to using a non representative sample. Rates of victimization were higher for participants prior to entering college, as compared to when in college, and were higher for men than women. No differences were found between rates of victimization between environments, however. These results may indicate different things. It is plausible that persons in rural environments are more accepting of sexual minorities than has been noted in the past. This may be due to the increased exposure of sexual minority issues in the media and the internet. However, rates of perceived social support were high for the current sample, and essentially the same between those from rural and non-rural areas. Such results may confirm Bronfenbrenner's assertion that microsystemic processes combat psychological maladjustment.