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Strategies Used by Gay and Bisexual Young Men to Cope with Heterosexism

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Abstract

Although the pervasiveness of heterosexism in the lives of gay and bisexual youth is well established, little is known about the strategies these youth use to cope with stigma and discrimination based on their sexual minority status. In this qualitative study, the authors present findings and implications for clinical practice based on interviews with 43 gay and bisexual young men. Respondents' coping strategies are discussed in relation to current theory and research on coping with stigma, as well as the emerging field of emotion regulation. The narratives from the current study suggest that the emotion regulation paradigm is well suited to understanding the functions of strategies for coping with heterosexism and similar types of stigma.

Keywords

Coping; emotion regulation; heterosexism; homophobia; stigma; youth; adolescents; gay; bisexual

Gay and bisexual youth face an array of unique challenges in addition to many of the developmental stressors facing heterosexual adolescents. To assist youth to cope successfully and thrive, service providers need a thorough understanding of the challenges they face, how they cope with them, and which coping strategies or combinations of strategies may be best suited to a particular stressor or situation. One of the most daunting stressors gay and bisexual youth face is heterosexism, the ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community (Herek, 1990). The experience of being stigmatized is at the root of a range of psychosocial health problems faced by sexual minority adolescents (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1993; Rotheram-Borus & Fernandez, 1995), including increased depression, suicidality, and other mental health disorders (Meyer, 2003). Few researchers have examined the emotional consequences of day-to-day encounters with heterosexism, but many have noted the challenge of maintaining a positive sense of self in the face of chronic negative feedback based in heterosexist attitudes (e.g., Dean et al., 2000; Williamson, 2000). Recent research has revealed elevated levels of social anxiety in sexual minority adolescents (Safren & Pantalone, 2006), as well as associations between social anxiety and increased sexual risk behavior in this population (Hart & Heimberg, 2005).

Social workers and counselors are often advised to assess personal resources for coping with heterosexism when evaluating the needs of lesbian and gay youth and developing appropriate case management plans (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). In fact, 'coping resources' are mentioned throughout the literature on sexual minority youth, and variations in coping styles are often considered an important factor in health outcomes within this population (Hunter, 1999; Perrin et al., 2004; Safren & Heimberg, 1999). However, little is known about the actual strategies that gay and bisexual youth use to cope with stigmatization and heterosexism.

Until recently, most research related to coping with heterosexism has focused on how gays and lesbians decide whether to disclose their sexual identity (e.g., Chung, 2001; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). In his seminal text on stigma, Goffman (1963) also emphasized choices around disclosure by developing the concepts of "passing," or hiding a stigmatized characteristic, and "covering," or minimizing its outward signs. More recent qualitative studies have begun to describe the range of strategies used by individuals to cope with heterosexism in a variety of contexts. Decisions regarding disclosure (e.g. when or how to come out) have continued to be important themes (Adams, Cahill, & Ackerlind, 2005; Wilson & Miller, 2002). However, additional dimensions of coping have also emerged, such as seeking support or challenging heterosexist assumptions (Wilson & Miller, 2002). Other studies have focused on the experiential aspects of facing heterosexism, such as feelings of alienation or isolation, and states of self-reflection or inner conflict (Flowers & Buston, 2001). Such feelings may be particularly relevant to coping with heterosexism, since, unlike racism and many other types of stigma, heterosexism is often overtly reinforced by the stigmatized person's own family members (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1989). Thus, while victims of racism can sometimes turn to family members for anti-racist support, sexual minorities often lack such support. Heterosexism, like infertility stigma and other types of stigma that are often reinforced by family members, may therefore increase distance in relationships with key members of an individual's familial social support network and create further isolation (LaSala, 1998; Remennick, 2000).

Little published research on coping with heterosexism has attempted to compare heterosexism with similar types of stigma, or to relate findings from qualitative studies to theoretical models of stigma, emotion regulation or coping. One reason for this gap may be that most systems for categorizing coping behavior have been developed to apply to a wide range of stressors, which may not always fit well with individuals' descriptions of how they cope with a particular stressor (for an overview, see Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003). Abstract categories of coping may be particularly problematic when applied to coping with stigma. For instance, some of the studies cited above suggest that coping with heterosexism can involve selective avoidance of heterosexist individuals or situations (Chung, 2001; LaSala, 1998; Wilson & Miller, 2002). However, some models of coping do not distinguish between selective avoidance (such as avoiding heterosexist individuals) and other types of avoidance (such as total social withdrawal or emotional escape). Rather, all of the above behaviors are often broadly grouped as "avoidant" coping, a category that has been associated primarily with negative mental and physical health outcomes (Herman-Stahl, Stemmler, & Petersen, 1995; Martin, Pryce, & Leeper, 2005; Penley, Tomaka, & Wiebe, 2002; Seiffge-Krenke & Klessinger, 2000). Furthermore, the broad and abstract nature of such categories can make them difficult to apply to intervention design and service strategies, as some researchers have suggested (e.g., Costa, Somerfield, & McCrae, 1996, p. 56).

No research to date has examined experiences of heterosexism using the lens of emotion regulation. This field explores how people influence their emotions and manage situations that can lead to the experience of various emotions. A process-oriented model of emotion regulation proposed by Gross (1998) can be used to facilitate better connections between descriptive research on managing heterosexism and formal theory about managing emotions. Gross's

process model of emotion regulation describes the ways individuals might behave before, during, and after an emotional response. The first four categories include ways individuals regulate emotions before the emotions have been aroused, and include: *situation selection*, *situation modification*, *attentional deployment*, and *cognitive change*. The fifth category, *response modulation*, describes how individuals diminish, intensify, or otherwise modify emotions after they have been aroused.

The primary aim of the present study is to describe some of the key ways in which an ethnically diverse sample of gay and bisexual young men cope with heterosexism, and to examine the function of those strategies within the paradigm of emotion regulation. Using a grounded theory approach, this study explores the diverse ways these young men have dealt with heterosexist attitudes and comments at home, school, in religious contexts, and other settings.

METHODOLOGY

Setting and Recruitment

Data presented in this paper were collected in 2004 during the formative phase of the Healthy Young Men's (HYM) Study, a longitudinal research project conducted in Los Angeles, California to examine risk and protective factors for substance use and HIV. Recruitment was conducted at gay-identified bars, clubs, and youth programs throughout Los Angeles County, as well as through an online advertisement for the study. Men who responded to the online advertisement participated in a brief telephone screening to assess eligibility. In venues, recruiters approached men who appeared to be in the target population and administered the same screening instrument. Eligible respondents were male, 18–22 years old, gay or bisexual, and of African American, Mexican, Filipino, or white descent. Ethnic stratification of the sample was achieved by stopping recruitment of each ethnic group after ten men of that ethnicity had completed the series of two semi-structured interviews. Thus, of the 74 young men who qualified, 40 completed both interviews. Three additional participants completed only the first interview. The other 31 who qualified declined to participate in the study or did not respond to attempts to schedule an appointment. Of the 43 respondents, 11 were African American, 10 were of Mexican descent, 10 were of Filipino descent, and 12 were white.

Qualitative Interviews

Interviews were conducted in the project offices as well as at cafes and coffee shops that were convenient for the participant, and where privacy could be maintained. The interviews lasted approximately two hours each, and respondents received \$35 cash per interview. All qualitative interviews were audio-recorded, professionally transcribed and cleaned to ensure accuracy. Actual names were not included in transcripts, and only pseudonyms appear in this article.

Discussion guides were designed to contextualize and refine key constructs to be further examined in the main phase of the HYM study. These constructs included family support, social support, connectedness to communities, racism, heterosexism, and partner relationship dynamics. Respondents were asked a range of questions related to coping with heterosexism. For example, one section focused on the two most stressful events (determined by the respondents) that had occurred in their families. Respondents were asked what, if anything, they did to deal with the stressful experiences, and how much support they were able to obtain from friends and family during the experiences. Subject areas that also elicited responses related to coping included questions about respondents' sexual identities, benefits or challenges related to sexual orientation, family and friends' attitudes toward gays and bisexuals, and the impact of those attitudes on relations with family members and friends.

Analysis of Qualitative Interviews

Members of the research team reviewed an initial sample of interviews to identify key themes, which formed the basis of project codebooks. Six members of the research team coded the interviews. Inter-coder reliability was assessed by double coding 10% of the interviews. Differences in coding were discussed and resolved by the team. Qualitative analysis procedures were guided by grounded theory, which entails the simultaneous process of data collection, analysis and theory construction (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this process, interview data are analyzed for patterns and themes using a “constant comparative” approach to discover categories related to a given topic, such as coping, as well as any theoretical implications that may emerge. Coded transcripts were entered into QSR-N6, a software program developed to manage qualitative data. For coding purposes, *coping* was broadly defined as “ways that respondents dealt with difficult or stressful experiences.” Coping with heterosexism became a key theme due to the abundance of data on this topic that emerged during the initial coding process. Respondents’ coping experiences were compared with one another to discover patterns of coping behavior across the sample. The open coding process included ongoing refinement of codes and repeated validation of the categories of coping that we identified against actual descriptions of experiences by respondents.

After categories of coping behavior had been inductively derived from the data, a review of the literature was conducted to identify the theoretical frameworks that best fit these categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The authors explored paradigms from literature on stigma, coping, and emotion regulation. While each field of research provided useful conceptual tools for understanding the strategies that respondents described, Gross’s process model of emotion regulation fit especially well with the categories derived from respondents’ descriptions of their experiences. Gross’s theory accounted for the function of strategies described in the model in ways that were similar to youths’ own explanations of their coping behavior. Furthermore, the categories of the emotion regulation model encompassed a wider range of the coping behaviors described by these young men than those of any other framework. Where names occur, pseudonyms have been used to identify respondents.

FINDINGS

Nearly all of the respondents in each ethnic group spoke of experiencing some sort of heterosexist stigma, and of using multiple strategies to cope with heterosexism, often in a single situation. However, the particular form of heterosexist experiences varied widely, ranging from casual anti-gay remarks to severe physical violence or total social exclusion. Youth encountered heterosexism in diverse settings, including home, school, church, parks, and in the street. Sources of heterosexism were equally wide-ranging, including family members, schoolmates, friends, and religious leaders. Heterosexist attitudes by family appeared to be especially stressful for respondents, in part due to these youths’ emotional and financial dependence on their families. Respondents in this sample did not associate teachers, counselors or social workers with heterosexist attitudes. For some participants, such individuals were the only adult source of gay-affirmative support. One young man, however, described an experience of being assaulted with a crowbar in a high school bathroom, after which the school’s administration took no action. Although few stories were as physically intense as this, a high degree of emotional intensity was common, as reflected by respondents’ descriptions of their emotional states, and as implied by the far-reaching personal consequences of actions taken in response to heterosexism. Most of the coping strategies described by these young men fit well into one of the five classes of emotion regulatory behavior: situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, or response modulation.

Situation Selection Strategies

Situation selection refers to approaching or avoiding situations on the basis of their anticipated emotional impact. Respondents commonly sought out and developed relationships with people who affirmed and valued their gay or bisexual identities. Such support could come from a variety of sources, including peers, teachers, and counselors, as well as both immediate and extended family. Simultaneously, many youth made active efforts to avoid circumstances that could lead to feeling stigmatized, including encounters with heterosexual individuals as well as physical locations, such as certain schools, towns or churches.

Seeking gay-affirmative support—Respondents made special efforts to obtain gay-affirmative support when peers or key family members were strongly heterosexual. In the case of the following young man, seeking gay-affirmative support was a means of replacing family support that was not available due to their heterosexual attitude. At the time of the interview, he spoke of feeling “depressed” and “lost,” due to confusion about whether his homosexuality was innate or the result of spending too much time with gay friends. His parents had forbidden him to have gay friends, believing that if he avoided them, he would cease to be gay. However, the respondent persisted in meeting gay peers, whose perspectives helped him to see “the other side of the situation.” Thus, in addition to being an example of situation selection, seeking gay-affirmative support put him in contact with people who helped him think about his situation differently, a form of cognitive change:

I'm starting to doubt myself, if [homosexuality] should really be that way or it's something that's not normal. It's something that [my parents] are so against that I just feel so lost that I can't really find any support from them... So what I try to do is talk to other people, gay people, so I can somewhat look at the other side, look at the other side of the situation.

For this respondent, the “other side of the situation” included seeking perspectives that affirmed that being gay is acceptable, as well as obtaining information about gay sex. In addition, visiting gay clubs with friends enabled him to feel “open and carefree” because “I don’t have to hide anything from them.”

Seeking material support—Material support may be especially critical for youth whose relationships with key family members are threatened or severed due to their sexual minority status. The following respondent’s parents reacted negatively when he came out to them as gay, so he sought both material and emotional support from his best friend:

I would talk to him about anything. He even said, "If you want, we can live in one of the apartments that my grandparents own, me and you, so you can be away from your parents". Stuff like that. He talked to me, he told me, "Things will get better."

Friends as gay-affirmative family—Some respondents viewed non-biologically-related members of their support networks as family. The following participant from the Midwest met several friends whom he came to consider his “surrogate sisters.” One in particular helped him to value his gay identity and feel less isolated. Her support was critical to him at a time when his relationship with his biological mother was at its most strained. He had recently come out to his mother as gay, and she reacted by threatening to disown him, causing him to attempt suicide. Soon afterward she sent him to a state mental hospital, where he met his first “surrogate sister,” a young lesbian. After being released, they maintained their friendship, and she became closer to him than his biological family. He felt this was largely because he could talk with her about topics his mother felt uncomfortable discussing, such as boyfriends, sexual behavior and gay social activities.

She's this girl who came from a real similar home as me, you know, parents fighting and everything. And she is a lesbian and she made me feel that it was okay to be who I was instead of always worrying about if other people accept me or that I had to hide myself from other people. She was really the first one to help me—that it was "okay" to be homosexual and be accepted for it. And also, before that point, I never really knew there were any gay people, other than in San Francisco or in Los Angeles or New York.

Obtaining support through the Internet—For many respondents, the Internet served as a means of locating gay-affirmative support that might otherwise have been difficult to obtain. One individual posted poetry about his experiences on a website and received feedback that helped him to increase his sense of self-esteem and reduce feelings of isolation. For this respondent, the process of writing poetry had other benefits as well, including cognitively reframing his predicament (cognitive change), and venting (response modulation). The following respondent, whose parents kicked him out of the house the day he came out to them, sought online support from people who “saw things the same way I did.”

That was my thing. I just ended up going online. And that's where I met a few people. They introduced me to other friends, other guys, and that's how I started talking more to everybody. And I became more social...In under two months, I got all the support I needed, I got all the friends I needed, and I didn't really have a problem with it afterwards.

Seeking informational support—Respondents also described using ideas to counteract stigmatizing concepts. For these respondents, support-seeking and cognitive-change strategies worked hand-in-hand. The following respondent obtained informational support by taking a college class. Gay-affirmative and essentialist ideas helped him to rethink his perspective on gay identity and thus improve his own sense of self-worth:

I actually took a class in college that actually made me feel a lot better about being gay...It made me realize that it's not a choice. Because she actually showed us the brain in a gay person. And a gay guy is different in the brain than a regular guy. We have different hormone levels. You know? Different, like, genetics that are different and, like she said that we're smarter than straight guys. We score higher on standardized tests than they do. We are on average paid more than they are. We have better jobs than they do. And I think that being gay and being different makes you more open to different things.

Setting boundaries—Respondents engaged in a variety of behaviors intended to protect themselves from heterosexism or avoid encounters with heterosexist individuals. Although the coping literature makes widespread use of the term avoidance, this term did not fit well with study respondents' descriptions of their experiences. *Avoidance* is commonly used to denote a wide range of behaviors, many of which respondents did not describe as their strategies for coping with being stigmatized, such as indiscriminate self-isolation and palliative behavior (i.e., action that fails to address the cause of stress). Rather, these young men described active and calculated avoidance of selected situations and individuals that were the cause of potential distress. For the purpose of this study, the term “boundary setting” was adopted to describe such behaviors. A common example of such a strategy involved avoiding individuals who expressed heterosexist attitudes. Respondents might stop talking to such a person, or take other active measures to avoid having to encounter them, even if they had formerly been friends:

When you least expect it or you are talking to someone and they say something like: “You are so smart, you are so cool, let's be friends.” And later on that day or the next day or week, they'd say something like: “I can't stand faggots; I hope they all die,” it

just shocks you. You don't know what people's beliefs are until they say something. (Interviewer: How do you deal with incidents like that?) Where I found out later? I just dropped people. I just dropped them; when they call me I don't answer. If they try to reach me I don't answer because I don't want that negativity around me.

While most respondents expressed confidence in the importance of avoiding heterosexist people, some of their narratives suggested that such strategies could leave them vulnerable to additional psychological, physical and material challenges. Leaving home without obtaining alternative sources of support appeared to be a particularly risky means of coping. One respondent left his small-town home for Los Angeles due to pervasive heterosexism and anti-gay violence he encountered there. He left with only enough money for train fare and a few essential items, a situation that might have been precarious had he not been able to rely on an aunt living in Los Angeles. He moved in with her and greatly appreciated her support, saying "At least I have one family member that was behind me. But that was the only one." Another participant who left home for similar reasons had no money whatsoever, but was able to earn income as a go-go dancer in bars. A third respondent, whose brother regularly beat him and called him a "fag," coped by living at friends' homes most of the time. He conveyed well the insecurity of such a living situation:

When you live with your friends, you have to keep in mind "well, what if they're not your friend tomorrow!"...And it was getting to the point where I wasn't really getting along with those friends.

A fourth respondent, whose parents beat him severely and refused to accept his homosexuality, ran away and was homeless for several years:

I was back and forth going from San Francisco to Sacramento because I was running away from home, back and forth. Because my mom didn't get along for one point, and because the whole sexuality thing was going, that was changing for me. And she didn't like that... One time she woke me up with a gun and, but the gun was broken... I had like these tight jeans on with this tight shirt. And like she said, what the fuck are you? Are you a faggot? Are you a mother fucking faggot? Wake the fuck up because I'm not going to allow your little brother to grow up to be like somebody like you.

He described being introduced to crystal meth while he was homeless, as well as many situations in which he was offered money for sex. Like many respondents, he felt good about being able to avoid drug use, sex for money, and other potential pitfalls of such precarious circumstances, saying, "Everybody was on it. It was always around. I was right next to the person snorting and doing crystal in my face, but I never did it."

Situation Modification Strategies

Situation modification refers to individuals' attempts to actively alter a situation. Such strategies were typically employed in circumstances where encounters with heterosexism were unavoidable, but in which the personal impact of heterosexism could be moderated. These might include settings where attendance was mandatory, such as school, or encounters with people from whom they could not afford to be estranged, most often family. The majority of these strategies could be categorized within Goffman's (1963) stigma paradigm as either *passing* or *covering*.

Passing by avoiding the topic of sexual orientation—Family gatherings were one setting in which heterosexist people were particularly difficult to avoid. In such circumstances, the effectiveness of passing often depended on respondents and family members mutually avoiding the topic of sexual orientation.

Even though my parents didn't know about me—or if they did know about me—I never told them otherwise. Nobody ever asked me if I was straight or gay, and I never told them.

Although respondents typically perceived their strategies as self-protective, feelings of guilt, shame, or frustration could result when respondents hid their sexual identity from close family or friends. For this respondent, lying to his girlfriend felt like the most painful deception of all, in part because it involved actively lying rather than merely passing, but also because her feelings were likely to be hurt:

When it came down to [my ex-girlfriend], I was flat out lying, [by saying] "I like girls, and this is my girlfriend." It felt wrong. It felt very wrong. And it felt even worse lying to her, because she would tell me that she loved me and I would tell her back. And I didn't. I loved her, but I wasn't "in love" with her. I love her like a friend.

Passing by telling half-truths—When youth could not avoid the topics that might lead to exposure of their sexual orientation, they often hid their sexual orientation by a careful use of half-truths. For these youth, passing often involved steering a middle course between overt lying and social or familial rejection:

I'm trying to live a lie; I try not to lie. For example, they say, "Do you have a girlfriend? Do you like girls?" "No [I reply], I don't have no girl that I have my eye on *right now*," or whatever. It's like I'm telling the truth, but I'm not saying: "Okay, the reason why I'm not having [a girlfriend] is because I'm gay." Because it's like telling the truth but not letting everything out. Basically it's like it's still stressing me right now.

Passing by keeping a low profile in heterosexist environments—Respondents often encountered heterosexist messages in religious settings. Rather than avoid such settings entirely, many respondents continued to attend church, while remaining closeted in that particular environment. In this way, respondents felt they were able to derive benefits from such experiences in spite of hearing heterosexist messages. This was explained by one respondent, who said that he continued to attend church in spite of his discomfort because he valued his relationship with God. Another respondent utilized passing to minimize the embarrassment he and a gay friend would otherwise experience in church when straight men stared at their stereotypically gay attire:

We always feel stares coming out at us, so we always get embarrassed...We like [to wear] bright colors and a lot of guys don't...At church I have to extra dress down. Like, I just have to try to look straight...I just go to church and I sit there and I listen to what's going on and that's it, we leave, it's like another hour that I have to hide, I guess.

Covering sexual orientation—Some youth who had fully disclosed their sexual orientation nevertheless adopted strategies to minimize its obviousness. Respondents whose families discouraged them from disclosing their sexual orientation to others sometimes used covering as a compromise between their families' wishes and their own. The following respondent recounts an argument in which his parents insisted that he keep his sexual orientation a secret at school:

Once I realized that I wasn't gonna win the conversation, I just kind of said okay. Just kept my mouth shut and let them say what they wanted to say, and just said, "Okay, I'm not gonna promise you anything but I'll just try to keep it from being too obvious to everybody."

Education—Youth sometimes educated important members of their support network in an attempt to change supporters' attitudes regarding sexual minorities. By doing this, respondents often hoped to reduce the intensity of heterosexist comments and discrimination they experienced. In some cases, education changed formerly heterosexist antagonists into gay-affirmative supporters. The following respondent attempted to educate his sister after she made derogatory comments about a gay professor:

One day, I broke it down for her. I'm like, "Who are you to pass judgment on someone?" ...And then she was quiet. I'm like, "How does their sexuality have anything to do with them as a person?" --because she made a joke about one of her teachers, like how he was a fag. And I'm just like, "How does that have anything to do with him as a teacher? You have bad teachers regardless—straight or gay. That has nothing to do with it. So why should you even bring it up?"

Attentional Deployment Strategies

Attentional deployment refers to shifting one's focus to non-emotional aspects of a situation, or moving attention away from the immediate situation altogether. This approach was most frequently used in situations the respondent could neither avoid nor modify. A common situation involved encounters with heterosexist individuals that respondents both could not avoid and could not afford to alienate, such as primary caregivers. Such circumstances could be particularly challenging for respondents who were perceived to be gay regardless of whether they attempted to hide their sexual identity. Attentional deployment was also used when respondents were required to spend time in places where heterosexist messages were heard, such as school or church.

Listening selectively in stigmatizing environments—Respondents often used attentional deployment strategies in religious settings, sometimes by simply ignoring anti-gay messages when they were expressed in church. In order to ignore such heterosexist messages, youth first had to listen to and critically evaluate the ideas they were hearing. The following respondent's comment illustrates this thought process:

I choose not to listen to everything I hear 'cause in every religion...there is some part where *someone* could point out to where it says homosexuality is a bad thing. So I choose not to listen to that and just believe that God loves me, and so I just talk to him by myself.

Ignoring provocations—Respondents who encountered prejudicial statements directed at them often opted to ignore them. The following respondent reported that when he was younger his mother and sister often said things to him that made him "not feel good about myself". He described that he "used to go so crazy, I yelled at them... like knocked over the TV and stereo, knocked over the whole house". As he got older, he learned to ignore provocations and this helped him to avoid yelling and acting out violently at home. He also stated that he usually uses a similar strategy when encountering prejudice in public settings:

One time I was walking out of a store and I was having a good day, I was talking to my friend. It was an okay day. I was exiting a store and I just hear, "Faggot!" I wasn't expecting it; I hadn't heard that for a while and it just shocked me. Usually I would ignore it.

Cognitive Change Strategies

'Cognitive change' consists of efforts to reinterpret the meaning of a situation in ways that lead to more desirable emotions. Respondents engaged in cognitive change by reframing heterosexist attitudes expressed by parents and other close members of their support networks.

Notably, cognitive change was the only category associated with a particular ethnic group, as African American respondents described the use of this approach more often than members of other ethnic groups in the sample.

Cognitively reframing heterosexist attitudes—Reinterpreting the meaning of stigmatizing situations allowed respondents to maintain key relationships while limiting the emotional impact of heterosexist attitudes. One respondent rationalized his mother's heterosexist attitude by thinking of it as part of her process of adjustment to his coming out:

I have to put myself in her shoes, like, to try to understand where she's coming from. Like, she wants her son to be straight and have kids and have a girlfriend, a pretty girlfriend, like. Because for her, it's a process for her also too with her friends...I know I can say, like, I'm gay, but for her, she's like, "Well, my son's gay." So it's the same thing for her, she has to go through certain things too.

Deconstructing heterosexist assumptions—In addition to reinterpreting people's attitudes, respondents critically evaluated the validity and significance of heterosexist ideas. This strategy enabled respondents to reject ideas that might otherwise have undermined their overall sense of self-worth. Doing so seems to have helped prevent negative feelings that might otherwise have resulted from a heterosexist idea or stereotype. The following respondent described his thought process for deconstructing heterosexist messages he had heard in church:

This is the way I am naturally. Why would God create something that is wrong? God is infallible. He's perfect. So, if I'm made in God's image, that there must be a part of me that's like God. So how could I be wrong for being gay? Fifty years ago it wasn't "right" to be black. We weren't people, we were animals. We were cattle. We were just second to white people. And people used to preach *that* in church.

Adopting a self-reliant attitude—Some respondents coped with heterosexism by increasing their personal sense of self-reliance. By cognitively reframing their own circumstances, respondents were able to partially avoid the negative feelings associated with experiences of heterosexist rejection. This process seemed to depend on minimizing the personal relevance of the heterosexist person by discounting the necessity of any support they may previously have provided:

If everybody in Hungary knew that I was gay, I didn't care... 'Cause no matter how close I am to my parents or my sister, my friends or anybody—it sounds kind of selfish—but the most important person to me is myself. I'm the first person; I'm the only person that will definitely be there always until the day I die. And so if I'm not happy with myself or I'm trying to hide from myself or hide myself from others, then I just don't feel good about myself.

Using media images to support cognitive change—Some youth derived a sense of validation from seeing people on television or in print who shared their sexual minority status. One respondent described feeling more "normal" after seeing gay people represented on television and in magazines. For him, such images included the gay and lesbian television program, *Queer as Folk*, and Matthew Shepard who, though murdered for being gay, is also one of very few nationally-known gay adolescents.

In high school, I was introduced to certain shows that like was gay-orientated and I guess I just felt more like, "Hey, I'm part of society. I feel normal!" Instead of being gay and everybody else being straight. I felt like there's other people out there. So I felt like, "Yeah, I guess this is okay for me to be gay". I saw magazines, I read up on

magazines, the thing about Matthew Shepard, stuff like that... Late at night when everybody would be sleeping, I would go and watch my *Queer as Folk*.

Response Modulation Strategies

The fifth type of emotion regulatory behavior is *response modulation*, an attempt to alter the qualities of an emotion after the emotion has already been generated. Response modulation strategies include a variety of behaviors that may affect the duration, intensity, or qualities of an emotional experience, such as suppression or substance use in some cases. Respondents used a range of strategies to intensify, diminish or otherwise modulate their emotions. While few directly associated response modulation behavior with experiences of heterosexism, many articulated the ways in which encounters with heterosexism caused them to feel angry, isolated, depressed, or ashamed. For example, one respondent whose mother reacted with disappointment when he came out said he felt “ashamed for breaking her hopes and dreams that she had for me.” Several respondents who described such negative feelings spoke of coping with them by engaging in venting, suppression, or substance use.

Venting feelings—Expressing emotions by talking or crying was especially important for youth who felt socially isolated, as in the case of one young man, who said, “To deal with sadness, I cried a lot. That relieves the pressure that you have inside.” Several respondents also spoke of dealing with strong emotions through creative expression, such as by drawing pictures or writing letters, stories, or poems that conveyed their emotional states. In addition to providing a sense of relief, this strategy enabled respondents to gain insight into their feelings, thus facilitating better cognitive change strategies, as the following respondent described:

I write. I put it on paper and I read over it and then I'm like "Oh my God." ...It helps me because then I can see it. And if I write it in a character that I'm writing in a story, then I'm seeing [it in] their life. And it's like "Oh my God, I did that too. Oh my God, that's why I wrote it". Not to be psycho like that, you know, but just then I'm seeing that and I'm mentally fixing it: if it's causing that mental distortion or either that anguish or hurt or whatever it's doing in my heart. Or even if it's happiness and I'm overwhelmed and I got the glow with the big smile when I'm walking down the street —then I go home and I write that too.

Suppression—Some respondents spoke of coping with negative emotions by regulating or limiting expression of those emotions. One respondent, who experienced persistent feelings of sadness, described an encounter in which his best friend confronted him about his suppressive attitude, telling him, “You never express your emotions!” This confrontation resulted in the respondent sharing more of his negative feelings with his friend. At the time of the interview, he continued to use a range of strategies to both diminish negative feelings and avoid expressing them. Describing the period when his suppressive behavior was most intense, he said, “I just partied more and more and more. Hung out with my friends more and more. Anything. Went to college. Did everything. Anything not to talk about it.”

Substance use—When evaluating whether a particular description of substance use might qualify as response modulation, the key consideration is whether the function of the behavior is to regulate emotional experiences that are already present. Youth in the present study used drugs to both diminish and intensify emotions (to “let everything out,” as one respondent described his use of LSD). Some respondents also spoke of using substances to cope with feeling isolated, as in the following respondent’s case:

I was using drugs, and even more so maybe during that time because I had no one to talk to. So it was just me. It was always in my car and I would go somewhere, do drugs and do something.

The same respondent articulated multiple ways in which his isolation led to an increase in both substance use and sexual activity. For him, these behaviors served as a means of “keeping busy” and preventing himself from thinking about his isolation. In addition, having lost his only friend at the time meant that no one was present to help him question his behaviors:

When you do drugs, you're doing drugs because you...don't want to think about something. If I was doing drugs and doing something at the same time I really wasn't thinking about what I didn't want to think about. It is dangerous because when you have a friend like [name] he's always like: "Where are you, what are you doing?" And when someone is not calling you it's like nobody knows where you are. I remember that year a lot like going to Elysian Park, Griffith Park [public sex areas]. It's hard, like nasty places just because I was on drugs and I wanted to have sex. I was constantly all day going places and meeting people and doing stuff 'cause it kept me busy.

Using Multiple Strategies to Cope with Heterosexism

Many respondents described a process of experimenting with different coping strategies or adopting multiple approaches based on a range of factors, including the particular form of heterosexism encountered, its setting, its source, or the consequences of using a given strategy. Sometimes youth adopted a new strategy when the first approach proved ineffective. These youths' coping processes evolved from one set of strategies to another as they discovered new approaches or identified which ones were most effective for their particular circumstances. One especially common combination of strategies involved 1) critically appraising one's current support network, 2) setting boundaries to avoid heterosexist influences, and 3) seeking sources of gay-affirmative social support.

The process of exploring and using a range of coping strategies simultaneously is well illustrated by Guillermo, a gay respondent of Puerto Rican and Mexican descent who had developed a strong awareness of his own need for gay-affirming social support. He described a range of strategies that he used to cope with heterosexist attitudes from his family and a church he had recently left. These experiences included being forced by his grandmother to read a bible in which anti-homosexual portions had been highlighted, as well as hearing numerous comments by family members that left him feeling guilty for bringing shame to the family by being gay, “like everything is my fault, I'm ruining everybody's life.”

Guillermo said that he had left his former church because it undermined his ability to value himself as gay. His decision reflects the complex process of weighing alternatives faced by many of the participants: while he liked the vision of god the church offered, he felt frustrated by the anti-gay messages he heard there. His process of seeking a new church may be thought of as involving two types of situation selection: setting a boundary to avoid the heterosexist church, and seeking support by finding a gay-friendly church:

I was going to a church called Church of Christ, and that church really helped a lot to kind of see God as a loving God. But they also helped [me] hate myself more, in the sense of that I hated the gay part of me... I decided I was going to love myself no matter what—fully. I had to find somewhere that I could be myself fully, so I started to look for other churches.

Guillermo's personal decision to love himself unconditionally represents a form of cognitive change. This approach was mentioned by other respondents as well, and parallels observations made by Wilson and Miller (2002) that African-American gay and bisexual men coped with heterosexism by deciding to love themselves fully. Eventually Guillermo began seeing a counselor. She helped him to develop further cognitive change strategies to manage his feelings of shame and depression by analyzing the ways in which his family had affected him:

In the couple of years that I was with her in counseling I learned so much about myself, about my family, about how I see them, how I interpret their actions. She helped me a lot and that's why right now I am able to just tell you this.

Guillermo's family expected him to eventually marry a woman, as they reminded him repeatedly. In those situations, he adopted an attentional deployment strategy of placing his attention elsewhere. As he put it, "I'm gay, so hello, [marrying a woman] is not going to happen, so I didn't pay attention when they talk about that." By seeking alternative sources of support and developing effective boundaries and cognitive strategies, Guillermo was able to create a strong support network and begin to value both his sexual identity and ethnic heritage:

These past three summers, they've been, they have been amazing for me because I've done things and gone places and seen things like I never would have thought I'd ever see. I came to the gay Pride, I've gone, I met gay friends that aren't from bad, bad, backgrounds that I had...I have all this church family that are gay, and I spend time with them and I go clubbing, and I'm going to Culinary Art School and I love who I am, I love being gay, I love being Latin, I love being Puerto Rican-Mexican...I mean it's been awesome for me these past couple of years.

DISCUSSION

This study differs from much previous research on heterosexism in that it focuses on youth as active agents facing recurrent decisions about how and when to confront, deflect or avoid stigma in its various forms, rather than simply documenting the prevalence of heterosexism in their lives. By focusing on respondents' own strategies, this research contributes to a shift in focus, from one that has historically emphasized victimhood and at-risk status when youth are confronted with abusive or rejecting family environments, to a more balanced approach that also emphasizes youths' own sense of agency (Hyde, 2005). In addition, the sample included an approximately equal number of youth from four different ethnic groups, in contrast to most existing studies on sexual prejudice, whose respondents have mainly been white.

The findings point to a range of strategies that sexual minority youth use to protect themselves from the detrimental effects of heterosexism. The process model of emotion regulation provided a useful lens for understanding how respondents coped with heterosexism, as it clarified the function of youths' anticipation, selection, and modification of circumstances leading to heterosexist stigmatization, in addition to accounting for their attempts to modulate their emotions after those emotions were aroused. This model also accommodates the particular characteristics of heterosexism as a stressor. Its focus on anticipating circumstances that may arouse certain emotions is well suited to the chronic nature of heterosexism. The model's emphasis on emotions highlights the emotional aspects of coping with heterosexism, in particular the feelings of shame, anxiety and depression that respondents in the present study associated with being stigmatized, as well as the guilt and loneliness that sometimes resulted from hiding their true identities. However, attempting to locate actual behaviors within a single emotion regulation category could occasionally be problematic. For instance, for the respondent who coped by writing a poem and posting it on the Internet, that single behavior could have multiple functions, including situation selection, cognitive change, and response modulation.

Although it is beyond the scope of this study to indicate which strategies may be best for a given situation, previous research has demonstrated that family support is linked to reduced substance use and sexual risk behavior (Flaherty & Richman, 1986; Kobak & Sceery, 1988; Perrino, González-Soldevilla, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2000; Sarason, Pierce, A., & Sarason, 1993; Wills, Resko, Ainette, & Mendoza, 2004). Many respondents set careful boundaries to avoid heterosexism within their families or communities, and considered this a valuable

strategy for dealing with this particular stressor. However, individuals who engage in indiscriminate social withdrawal as a result of being traumatized by heterosexism may face negative outcomes. Several respondents spoke of leaving home because of their families' heterosexist attitudes or violence. Among sexual minority young men, being forced out of one's home due to sexual orientation is associated with significantly increased drug use and HIV risk behaviors (Kipke, Weiss, & Wong, in press). Service providers working with sexual minority youth should therefore help them to weigh the potential costs of avoiding heterosexist individuals against the negative effects of ongoing stigmatization on their self-esteem and overall emotional health. In addition, early interventions with parents and families of sexual minority youth might help reduce heterosexism in the home environment, and therefore limit the physical or emotional violence that may force youth to isolate themselves or leave home.

The present findings suggest that coping with heterosexism often involves the use of multiple strategies simultaneously or as an evolving process of experimentation with different approaches. Clinicians evaluating youths' coping behaviors may wish to encourage them to strategically compensate for the negative outcomes of a particular strategy by employing a complementary strategy. For instance, youth who avoided heterosexist family members often compensated for a lack of support by seeking out gay-affirming individuals or organizations. Because several respondents spoke of seeking support through the Internet, this medium may prove to be a valuable tool for delivering interventions to reduce the detrimental impacts of heterosexism, as it has been used to improve other mental health outcomes, from body-image satisfaction to posttraumatic stress (Ritterband et al., 2003).

Service providers might also suggest beneficial cognitive-change or response-modulation strategies, such as creative expression, which may help individuals vent feelings and gain insight, and is associated with a range of physical and psychological benefits (Smyth, 1998). Cognitive change strategies, such as deconstructing heterosexist assumptions, constitute basic tools of gay-affirmative counseling (Lebolt, 1999), and offering education about heterosexism is considered an important therapeutic strategy for supporting the emotional well being of sexual minority youth (Johnson & Chernin, 2002). In addition, cultural theorists have asserted that it is psychologically beneficial for stigmatized people to develop a "critical eye" to understand how racism, sexism, heterosexism and other forms of stigma operate and affect their daily lives (hooks, 1992). The observation that African American youth were more likely to utilize cognitive change strategies may support a contention by Wilson and Miller (2002) that African American gay and bisexual men generalize strategies for coping with racism to coping with heterosexism. Much of the overlap between coping methods for these two stressors consists of cognitive change strategies, especially strategies for deconstructing racist or heterosexist assumptions. Future research should explore such connections in greater depth.

There are several limitations to the present study. Although many questions in the interviews focused on relevant topics, the data used in this analysis were part of a larger study, and not collected for the express purpose of studying coping with heterosexism. If respondents had been specifically asked about this topic, more detail might have been elicited regarding their strategies, particularly strategies used for managing emotional responses to heterosexism. Because this research is based on self-report data, it is possible that respondents minimized or avoided revealing coping behaviors they perceived as less socially desirable. Because the majority of recruitment was conducted at gay-identified bars and clubs, this study's sample may have a greater-than-average connection to gay communities. Youth with such connections may be more likely to have sought gay-affirmative support. Stronger gay-affirmative support networks might also enable youth to set more extensive boundaries with heterosexist individuals. Thus, research focusing on youth with less connection to gay communities might reveal different patterns of coping. In addition, future research should explore coping strategies by other sexual minorities, including lesbian and transgender youth.

Future studies could also examine similarities and differences between heterosexism and other types of stigma, including those based on race, gender, giftedness, obesity, illness, or infertility. The emotion regulation model could be particularly useful as a lens for understanding types of stigma that have much in common with heterosexism, such as infertility. Like homosexuality, infertility is immutable, concealable, and often opposed by family. It is a personal circumstance that one discovers with time, placing the stigmatized individual at odds with ideologically-based reproductive norms. Researchers focusing on infertility stigma have already identified many coping strategies that are similar to those used by youth coping with heterosexism, including various forms of strategic avoidance and efforts at deconstructing oppressive norms (Remennick, 2000; Riessman, 2000).

Respondents in the present study perceived most of their coping behaviors as both necessary and self-protective, with the notable exception of substance use and suppression. Future longitudinal research might identify risk and protective outcomes associated with particular strategies, as well as how strategies may change over time. Such a study could provide information on relationships between adolescent developmental trajectories and youths' evolving coping strategies. In addition, a prospective study could test the appropriateness of the emotion regulation paradigm more effectively than the exploratory approach used in the current study, in which the theoretical model was applied after the data were gathered.

Because respondents in the current study utilized a variety of strategies to avoid encounters with stigma—some of which they perceived as self-protective and others that they viewed as harmful—future research should draw careful distinctions between strategies that might otherwise be broadly grouped as avoidant coping. In particular, indiscriminate avoidance strategies should be differentiated from boundary-setting strategies intended to protect the target of prejudice from encounters with stigmatization. Indiscriminate avoidance might include such behaviors as total self-isolation or strategies that do not affect the cause of the stress, such as using substances to moderate feelings of anxiety or shame. Boundary setting would emphasize efforts at strategic avoidance of selected heterosexist individuals or settings. Further research regarding this aspect of how gay and bisexual youth cope with heterosexism is likely to shed additional light on their heroic determination to be themselves in an often unwelcoming world.

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