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Non-Parental Adults in the Social and Risk Behavior Networks of Sexual Minority Male Youth

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Abstract

The presence of non-parental adults (NPAs), or adults outside of caregivers (e.g., extended family, natural mentors), in the lives of adolescents and emerging adults has received a rapidly expanding amount of empirical attention in the last decade. Sexual minority male youth (SMMY) face disproportionate risks of abuse and victimization in relationships with parents and peers. Yet, despite the fact that this group, therefore, may be both potentially vulnerable to negative interpersonal influences but also poised to benefit from additional relationships, NPA involvement in the lives of SMMY is currently not well understood in the extant literature. This study sought to examine and characterize the involvement of NPAs in the social and risk networks of SMMY ($n = 175$; 54% African American, 21% Hispanic/Latino, 14% Caucasian; ages 17–23). Most SMMY identified at least one NPA, such as friends and grandparents, in their networks. Three categories of relationships were identified, Strictly Social, which only involved social interactions; Complex, which were both social and involved substance use and/or sexual activity; and Risky, which purely consisted of substance use or sexual activity. Relationships were rated as emotionally “closer” among ethnic minority SMMY, although, racial/ethnic similarity between SMMY and NPAs was not associated with relationship closeness. In addition, relationships involving female and heterosexual NPAs were also rated as stronger. These findings suggest the potential usefulness of considering multiple types of relationships between SMMY and NPAs when designing intervention and prevention efforts. Moreover, African American and Latino SMMY, who represent the most vulnerable sub-groups of SMMY in terms of HIV-risk, may be particularly poised to benefit from positive NPA relationships.

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Keywords

sexual minority; young males; non-parental adults; social networks

Introduction

A broad literature base demonstrates that non-parental adults (NPA), or adults other than parents and significant others (e.g., mentors, extended family members), can help promote positive functioning among adolescents and emerging adults (e.g., Farruggia, Greenberger, Chen, & Heckhausen, 2006; Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010; Sterrett, Jones, McKee, & Kincaid, 2011). Relationships with prosocial NPAs are associated with lower rates of psychological symptoms, substance use, and risky sexual behavior (e.g., Farruggia, et al., 2006; Haddad, Chen & Greenberger, 2011; Rishel, Sales, & Koeske, 2005) as well as with higher levels of positive adjustment, such as self-esteem (e.g., Bowers, Geldhof, Schmid, Napolitano, Minor, & Lerner, 2012; Sterrett, et al., 2011; Schwartz, Rhodes, Spencer, & Grossman, 2013). NPAs are often salient figures during late adolescence and emerging adulthood (spanning ages 17 to 25; Arnett, 2007) as this developmental stage is commonly characterized by a diversification of interpersonal resources to promote adaptive functioning (Spear, 2003; Steinberg, 2008). More specifically, according to socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1991; Wrzus, Hanel, Wagner, & Neyer, 2013), during adolescence and early adulthood, individuals put more emphasis on whether they can receive useful information when deciding whether to form a relationship with a person compared to in middle adulthood, when the ability of a potential acquaintance to satisfy emotional needs for companionship or validation is prioritized more highly. Young people may perceive NPAs to have more experience than peers but to be less likely to judge or punish them than parents (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; Haddad et al., 2011), and, thus, seek out advice and guidance from them about a variety of topics, such as romantic relationships and school difficulties (Greenberger, Chen, & Beam, 1998).

While understanding the roles of NPAs as a typical part of development is an important endeavor, there is some evidence these roles may have particular significance within specific sub-groups of adolescents and emerging adults (Farruggia et al., 2006; Sanchez, Esparza, & Colon, 2008; Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2006). Considering the involvement of NPAs in the lives of particular sub-groups of adolescents and emerging adults allows for a culturally-nuanced conceptualization of their involvement and influence. One sub-group of youth and emerging adults currently understudied in terms of relationships with NPAs but for whom the concept of NPAs may be particularly salient are sexual minority male youth.

Sexual Minority Male Youth as a Sub-group within which to Study NPAs

Sexual minority male youth (SMMY) face disproportionately high rates of problematic relationships with parents and peers. It has been estimated that 26% of LGBTQ youth are kicked out of their homes after coming out to their parents (APA, 2013). In addition, LGBTQ youth are more likely to experience distant relationships with parents (Wilson, Zeng, & Blackburn, 2011) and parental physical abuse (see Friedman et al., 2011 for a meta-analysis) than non-sexual minority youth. Sexual minority youth are also more likely to be

the victims of physical assault at school and to miss school because of fear (see Friedman et al., 2011, for a meta-analysis). Given their heightened risk for fractured or abusive relationships with parents and peers, it is imperative that we expand our understanding of the interpersonal contexts surrounding SMMY, particularly by including potentially protective factors (Herrick, Stall, Goldhammer, Egan, & Mayer, 2013). Moreover, according to resilience theory and retrospective empirical work with resilient adults (Masten, 2007; Werner, 1995), one way in which young people are able to overcome environmental and interpersonal risk is through forming relationships with adults outside of parents.

Consistent with this idea, theoretical and qualitative work specifically with sexual minority individuals is beginning to elucidate the involvement of individuals in their interpersonal networks who are not biologically related to them, but instead are part of a “chosen” or “found” family (Allen, Bliesner, & Roberto, 2011; Kuvalanka, 2012). The creation of “found families” is thought to occur in part to compensate for disruptions or lack of support in their family relationships as well as societal stigma and oppression. Two recent qualitative examinations of LGBT adolescents highlights the significance of NPAs who are affirming of their sexual and gender identity, and provide them with social support (Davis, Saltzburg, & Locke, 2009; Torres, Harper, Sanchez, Fernandez, & The Adolescent Medicine Trials Network for HIV/AIDS Interventions, 2012). A related line of research is that on the House and Ball scene, or close-knit social networks usually consisting of African American and Latino sexual minority men and transgendered individuals who act as both chosen families and teams during dance and gender expression competitions (Arnold & Bailey, 2009; Kubicek, Beyer, McNelley, Weiss, Omni & Kipke, 2013). Qualitative studies have begun to document the social support provided by “House parents,” often adults in their 20s, 30s and 40s, to “House kids,” who typically are adolescents or emerging adults (Arnold & Bailey, 2009; Kubicek et al., 2013). However, there has been limited quantitative examination of the involvement of the broader class of NPAs in the interpersonal networks of SMMY, which limits the generalizability of findings.

Moreover, just as relationships with parents and peers are multifaceted and can promote positive or negative functioning, it stands to reason that NPAs can likewise exhibit both positive and negative behaviors in relationships with young people. For example, NPAs involved in risky or illegal behavior themselves are linked to poorer outcomes among adolescents and emerging adults, such as lower rates of academic achievement and aspirations, lower self-esteem, and higher rates of misconduct (Farruggia et al., 2006; Farruggia & Sorkin, 2009; Haddad et al., 2011; Hurd, Zimmerman & Xue, 2009). Among SMMY specifically, having older sexual partners is linked to an increased risk for HIV transmission (Arrington-Sanders, Leonard, Brooks, et al., 2013; Mustanski & Newcomb, 2013; Newcomb & Mustanski, 2013). The extent to which relationships with NPAs are purely social exchanges or also involve witnessing NPAs engage in health risk behaviors, or engaging in those behaviors with NPAs, has been understudied among adolescents in general, and within the SMMY population in particular.

While NPAs may be involved in the interpersonal networks of many SMMY, the extent and nature of that involvement may be related to social and demographic factors. Both African American (Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1982; Tyler, Boykin, Miller, & Hurley, 2006) and

Latino (Cardoso & Thompson, 2010; Reyes & Elias, 2011) cultures historically have emphasized the importance of interpersonal relationships with individuals outside of the nuclear family, including extended family members and fictive kin. Consistent with this idea, studies of relationships with NPAs have found that ethnic minority adolescents report higher numbers of NPAs, as well as closer relationships with NPAs, compared to White adolescents (Hirsch, Mickus, & Boerger, 2002; Pallock & Lamborn, 2006). In addition, a growing literature suggests that ethnic minority SMMY are less likely than White SMMY to disclose their sexual orientation to parents and that they experience more rejection and less acceptance from their families than White SMMY (Carpineto, Kubicek, Weiss, Iverson, & Kipke, 2008; Dubé & Savin-Williams, 1999; Mustanski, Newcomb, & Garofalo, 2011). Lower rates of disclosure to parents and parental acceptance may mean that ethnic minority SMMY are more likely to seek out and form relationships with NPAs.

Another potential influence on SMMY-NPA relationships is the degree to which SMMY and NPAs match each other demographically, including whether they are of the same ethnicity, gender identity, and/or sexual orientation. In general, perceived overall similarity has been linked to greater relationship satisfaction in formal mentoring relationships (Ensher, Grant-Vallone, & Marelich, 2002; Ensher & Murphy, 1997). Race/ethnicity and gender similarity, specifically, have been examined to a limited extent in the broad NPA literature, in part due to unequal group sizes of same-versus cross-matched relationships with regard to race/ethnicity and gender. However, the work that has been conducted highlights that, overall, youth tend to nominate individuals as significant NPAs who match them according to race/ethnicity and gender (Greenberger, Chen, & Beam, 1998; Hurd, Varner, & Rowley, 2013; Sanchez & Colon, 2005; Sanchez & Reyes, 1999). However, whether relationships with same-ethnicity or same-gender NPAs are associated with stronger or higher quality relationships has not been clearly described in the literature. Relationships with same-ethnicity mentors have been perceived by adolescents and young adults to be more credible and to involve greater ease of conversation (Blake-Beard, Bayne, Crosby & Muller, 2011; Rhodes, Reddy, Grossma, & Lee, 2002; Santos & Reigadas, 2000). In contrast, other work has demonstrated that neither matching by ethnicity/race (Eby et al., 2013; Rhodes et al., 2002) nor by gender identity (Eby et al., 2013; Flores & Obasi, 2000; Kanchewa, Rhodes, Schwartz, & Olsho, 2014) is associated with youth-NPA relationship quality. Support of youth by NPAs of the same sexual orientation has received scant attention in the broad NPA literature. However, a recent qualitative examination of relationships between sexual minority young men and important NPAs indicated that the feature of NPAs that was most important to the participants was the provision of social support, regardless of whether the NPAs were also sexual minorities (Torres et al., 2012).

The current project is the first to our knowledge to quantitatively examine the presence of NPAs in the interpersonal networks of SMMY. Such quantitative findings would begin to provide information that is relevant to the larger population of SMMY, and can eventually be harnessed toward the involvement of NPAs in ecologically-based, culturally-responsive prevention and intervention programs targeting SMMY. The study has a two-fold purpose. The first, given the potential for NPAs to impact adolescent and emerging adult psychosocial functioning and health behaviors, is to document and characterize the presence of NPAs in the social and risk behavior networks of SMMY. The second purpose is to

examine correlates of number of and closeness to NPAs. Based on the literature reviewed above, we predict, consistent with the extant NPA literature, that SMMY will report a higher prevalence of NPAs who match them by race/ethnicity and gender (i.e., male). We also predict that relationships with NPAs will be stronger among ethnic minority SMMY, regardless of the demographic characteristics of the NPAs. On the other hand, given mixed findings and limited prior research, we make no a priori hypotheses related to relationship closeness and SMMY-NPA concordance with regard to race/ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation.

Methods

This study entails analysis of network data collected in the course of a longitudinal study of HIV risk among SMMY living in Chicago. The purpose of the network component of this study was to characterize the structure of the social and risk behavior networks of a sub-sample of participants. The current paper focuses on the involvement of non-parental adults (NPAs) in these networks.

Recruitment—The research team used a modified form of respondent-driven sampling to enroll SMMY between ages 16 and 20 into the main study. This process involved recruiting initial participants through outreach to community and school organizations, as well as posting flyers in community settings frequented by the target population. Initial recruits were given an additional \$15 for each eligible peer who enrolled, up to three referrals. Participants were interviewed in-person every six months for up to three years in an office at either a university or a community center. Participants were invited to participate in the network sub-study at either the 12- or 24-month follow-up visits (i.e., at the 24-month visit if the 12-month visit had already been completed during the period of sub-study). The research team chose this time point to capitalize on the prior relationship built with the respondent through multiple research data collection sessions to facilitate collection of sensitive network-based information.

Participants—The participants in the network sub-study ranged in age from 17 to 23 ($M = 20.12$, $SD = 1.32$), and were from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including 54% African American, 21% Hispanic/Latino, 14% Caucasian. The majority, 66%, of participants identified as gay/homosexual, followed by mostly gay, 22%, and bisexual, 22% (see Table 1).

Procedures

The data collection procedures in this study consisted of three processes: (1) asking respondents, called egos in the social network literature (Borgatti & Foster, 2003), to enumerate all persons with whom they had a certain type of connection; (2) to describe characteristics of individuals in their networks, called alters (Borgatti & Foster, 2003); and (3) to describe ties between alters. Interviewers asked a structured list of questions, called a name generator and name interpreter, to complete a pre-numbered list form to list alters and capture alter attributes. They then worked with participants to draw a sociogram, or a diagram that captured interactions between alters (Hogan, Carrasco, & Wellman, 2007). The

sociogram was then photographed and manually transcribed into matrix format for analysis (these two interviewer procedures are described in more detail below).

Measures

Name Generators and Interpreters—The name generators and alter characteristic questions and procedures were based on prior studies of populations at risk of HIV infection (Auerswald, Muth, Brown, Padian, & Ellen, 2006; Latkin & Knowlton, 2005). An interviewer elicited up to 40 alters for each ego, and each alter was assigned a unique identifying number linking him or her to the ego. The identification of alters using name generators is reliable for individuals with whom the ego has repeated and salient interactions (Freeman, Romney, & Freeman, 1987). The team elicited names of network members who provided emotional and/or instrumental support, such as, “Name the people you are closest to, that is people you see or talk to regularly and share your general thoughts and feeling with,” and “Can you think of other people who would give time and energy to help you?” Interviewers then asked whether the ego had ever had sex or used substances with the alter.

An additional goal was to identify substance-using and sexual partners, or alters in the respondent’s risk behavior networks, who were not in the respondent’s social network. Therefore, interviewers also asked whether or not the respondent had used substances (e.g., alcohol, marijuana, ecstasy) or had sex with any additional individuals not already listed.

The interviewers then used a structured guide, or name interpreter, to determine demographic and behavioral characteristics of alters. The characteristics collected in the follow-up questions for each alter included: strength of the relationship between ego and each alter (0 = not at all close, 1 = somewhat close, 2 = very close), type of relationship between ego and alter (e.g., family member, friend, co-worker), estimated age, race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Sociogram—After the name generator and name interpreters were completed, each respondent completed a sociogram to identify connections between alters. Alter first names and last initial were transferred to numbered “write-on” magnets (i.e., pre-numbered with the corresponding alter identification number on the name generator) and placed on the whiteboard. Following Hogan’s method (Hogan et al. 2007), interviewers instructed respondents to draw a line between any two alters or a circle around groups of three or more alters who know each other well. A digital photograph of this social network sociogram was taken, the whiteboard erased, and the same process completed for networks who used substances or had sex with each other.

Designation of an Alter as a Non-Parental Adult (NPA)—We re-coded the data entered for “type of relationship” to identify which alters were NPAs. The categorization of a network member as an NPA included the following criteria: (1) the individual was reported to have a role other than a caregiver (e.g., mother, father, stepparent, guardian) or significant other (e.g., boyfriend, girlfriend) and (2) the individual was reported to be at least seven years older than the SMMY. The decision to stipulate that NPAs not be caregivers or significant others is in keeping with the broad NPA literature, which often identifies NPAs as someone other than a parent, such as a teacher or extended family member (Beam et al.,

2002; Casey-Cannon et al., 2006; Sterrett et al., 2011). We also specified that an NPA would be at least seven years older than the SMMY to ensure that NPAs would be in a different developmental stage than the participants (e.g., a 24-year-old emerging adult NPA of a 17-year-old late adolescent SMMY; a 29-year-old young adult NPA of a 22-year-old emerging adult SMMY; Arnett, 2007; Steinberg, 2008). Requiring a significant age gap aided in reinforcing a conceptual boundary around NPAs as individuals who are not only adults but are in a more advanced stage of development than the SMMY participants.

NPAs were further categorized according to the extent to which their relationships with SMMY consisted of social interactions, engagement in risk behaviors or both. NPAs elicited in response to the social support network name generators and with whom SMMY did not have sex or use substances were designated as “Strictly Social NPAs.” NPAs in social networks, and therefore who had social relationships with SMMY, and who also were reported as having sex and/or using substances with the egos were called “Complex NPAs.” Finally, those nominated in response to the two name generators for membership in the risk behavior networks (i.e., substance use and sex partners), but who did not have social relationships with participants, were designated as “Risky NPAs.” Of note, sexual relationships with older individuals (i.e., a 20 year old and a 27 year old) are not in and of themselves risky, but the wide age gap suggests a potential power differential which has been associated with higher levels of HIV infection among ethnic minority SMMY (Feldman, 2010; Newcomb & Mustanski, 2013). This meant that “Strictly Social NPAs” and “Complex NPAs” were, by definition, in social networks due to their direct social ties to the SMMY egos. On the other hand, “Risky NPAs,” were not in social networks, although they may have had a tie to an alter in the social network (i.e., the NPA does not have a social tie to the ego, but the NPA has sex or uses drugs with the ego and also knows someone in the ego’s social network).

Results

Non-Parental Adults in SMMY Networks

Descriptive statistics pertaining to demographic characteristics of NPAs in SMMY networks are presented in Table 1. For overall context, the average social network degree, or number of individuals reported in social networks, of SMMY participants was about 15. Of the 175 SMMY, 137 (78%) reported that at least one NPA was in their personal networks. The mean number of NPAs in the networks of SMMY was 2.88 ($SD = 2.76$), with a range of 0 to 14. A total of 504 NPAs were identified across study participants, with NPAs ranging in age from 25 to 84 years old ($M = 39.86$, $SD = 12.93$). Across all NPAs, the mean level of closeness was 1.17 ($SD = .78$), roughly corresponding to “somewhat close.” In addition, 77% of NPAs had a tie to at least one other person in the social network. On average, NPAs had ties to 3.79 ($SD = 3.28$) other alters in the network.

Of participants reporting at least one NPA in their personal networks, 116 (84%) participants identified at least one NPA with whom they had a Strictly Social relationship, 60 (44%) identified at least one NPA with whom they had a Complex relationship, and 44 (32%) of the SMMY reported they had a Risky relationship with an NPA. There was a significant difference in the level of closeness to NPAs depending on NPA type, ($F(2, 501)$

= 36.24, $p = .00$), with average relationship closeness to Risky NPAs ($M = .49$, $SD = .65$), being lower than that of closeness to Strictly Social ($M = 1.29$, $SD = .73$) and Complex ($M = 1.26$, $SD = .76$) NPAs.

Characteristics of the Three Types of NPAs

Of the NPAs identified, 313 (62%) were Strictly Social NPAs. The largest percentage of Strictly Social NPAs were described as friends (19%), followed by grandparents (16%), and aunts (13%). Most (56%) Strictly Social NPAs were reported as interacting with SMMY on a regular basis, i.e., on a weekly or daily basis. In terms of ties to other members of social networks, 86% of social NPAs had ties to at least one other person in the social network. On average, Strictly Social NPAs had ties to about four other alters ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 3.28$). Figure 1 depicts examples of NPAs in social networks, including variations in number of NPAs, type of NPAs (Strictly Social, Complex, or Risky), whether NPAs were family members, and NPA ties to other members of social networks.

Of the NPAs identified, 121 (24%) were Complex NPAs. Of these, in addition to their social relationship, 105 (87%) used substances with the ego, 11 (9%) used substances and had sex with the ego, and 5 (4%) had sex with the ego. The largest percentage of Complex NPAs was described as friends (40%), followed by aunts (12%), and cousins (10%). Most Complex NPAs were reported as interacting with SMMY on a regular basis, with 29% reported as interacting on a weekly basis and 23% reported as interacting on a daily basis. Nineteen percent were reported as interacting at least a couple of times a month. Regarding ties to alters in social networks, 82% of Complex NPAs had ties to at least one other person in the social network. On average, Complex NPAs had ties to between three and four other alters in the social network ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 3.55$).

The smallest number, 70 (14%), of NPAs were identified as Risky NPAs. Of these, 64 (91%) had sex with the ego and 6 (9%) used substances with the ego. In addition, participants classified the role of Risky NPAs most often as casual sex partners (39%), friends (29%), and “exes” (14%). Risky NPAs were not reported as interacting frequently with SMMY, with 9% reported as interacting on a daily basis, 11% reported as interacting on a weekly basis, and 11% reported as interacting at least a couple of times a month. Regarding ties to alters in social networks, 39% of Risky NPAs had ties to at least one person in the social network of the participants. Risky NPAs had an average of about one tie to members of the social network ($M = 0.73$, $SD = 1.80$).

Demographic Similarity Between SMMY and NPAs

Consistent with predictions, SMMY were more likely to match NPAs with regard to race/ethnicity, with 67% of SMMY-NPA pairs being of the same race/ethnicity. Contrary to expectations, SMMY participants nominated a roughly equal percentage of female, 50%, and male, 48%, NPAs with 2% of NPAs being transgender. In addition, a higher percentage, 58%, of NPAs was heterosexual, compared to 33% who were gay/lesbian, 7% who were bisexual and 1% who were queer. There were some differences in the extent to which SMMY and NPAs matched each other demographically, depending on type of NPA. Specifically, regarding gender identity, 66% of Strictly Social NPAs were female compared

to 39% of Complex and 3% of Risky NPAs. In addition, 75% of Strictly Social NPAs were straight/heterosexual, compared to 41% of Complex and 9% of Risky NPAs. Numbers of NPAs who matched SMMY according to race/ethnicity were roughly equal across types of NPAs, with 69% of Strictly Social, 69% of Complex, and 60% of Risky NPAs being of the same race/ethnicity as SMMY.

Influence of SMMY Demographic Variables on Relationships with NPAs

Besides identifying ties to NPAs in the networks of SMMY, an additional purpose of this study was to examine associations between SMMY characteristics and number of NPAs in networks, as well as the closeness of relationships with NPAs. When examining all types of NPAs together, SMMY ethnicity was not related to number of NPAs in networks ($F(5, 168) = .83, p = n.s.$) (see Table 2). However, a significant difference emerged when looking at each type of NPA separately. For relationships with Risky NPAs, there were significant differences across ethnic groups ($F(5, 168) = 2.49, p < .05$), with Latino SMMY reporting the highest number of Risky NPAs (see Table 2). SMMY ethnicity was not related to the number of either Strictly Social ($F(5, 168) = 1.30, p = n.s.$) or Complex ($F(5, 168) = .19, p = n.s.$) NPAs in networks.

Regarding strength of relationships, when combining all three types of NPAs, ANOVA tests revealed ratings of relationship strength varied based on SMMY ethnicity ($F(5, 168) = 3.84, p < .01$) (see Table 3). The mean ratings for average closeness to NPAs was highest among Black/African-American SMMY, followed by Hispanic/Latino SMMY, and then Caucasian SMMY. In addition, just within Strictly Social relationships, ANOVA tests revealed differences in closeness ($F(5, 108) = 3.29, p < .01$), with Black and Latino SMMY reporting higher average levels of closeness than Caucasian SMMY. There were no differences in average closeness in the other two types of SMMY-NPA relationships associated with SMMY ethnicity.

Influence of SMMY-NPA Demographic Match on Relationship Closeness

The associations between SMMY-NPA match on demographic variables and relationship closeness was also examined (see Table 4). Among all NPAs as a group, there was no difference in relationship closeness based on whether SMMY and NPAs were of the same race/ethnicity ($t = .11, p = n.s.$). On the other hand, relationships with female NPAs were rated as stronger than relationships with male NPAs ($t = 7.78, p < .01$). In addition, relationship closeness with sexual minority NPAs was rated lower than for relationships with straight/heterosexual NPAs ($t = 6.60, p < .01$).

Examining types of NPAs separately, there was no association between NPA-SMMY racial/ethnic similarity and relationship closeness in relationships involving any NPA sub-types. In contrast, relationships involving female NPAs were rated closer than those involving male NPAs in both Strictly Social ($t = 3.77, p < .01$), and Complex ($t = 2.56, p < .05$), relationships (due to small sub-groups, no statistical tests were computed for female Risky NPAs.) Regarding sexual orientation, among Strictly Social NPAs, relationships with straight/heterosexual NPAs were rated as stronger than with sexual minority NPAs ($t = 3.80, p < .00$). On the other hand, there was no difference in relationship closeness associated with

sexual orientation in Complex relationships (due to small sub-groups, no statistical tests were conducted for sexual orientation among Risky NPAs.)

Post-Hoc Analyses

Post-hoc regression analyses were run examining the association between NPA gender and sexual orientation (i.e., in separate models), and relationship closeness after controlling for NPA status as a family member. These analyses were run to explore whether the significantly greater closeness to heterosexual and female NPAs was an artifact of their greater tendency, compared to sexual minority and male NPAs, to be family members. After controlling for status as a family member, relationships with female NPAs were still rated significantly closer than relationships with male NPAs, $\beta = -.23, p < .01$. Similarly, for NPA sexual orientation, relationships with sexual minority NPAs were still rated as significantly less close than relationships with heterosexual NPAs after controlling for status as a family member, $\beta = -.14, p < .01$.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to characterize the presence of non-parental adults (NPAs) in the personal networks of sexual minority male youth (SMMY), as well as to examine associations between NPA and SMMY demographic factors and relationship characteristics. The vast majority of SMMY in this study reported that an NPA was part of their personal networks. Two-thirds of the SMMY indicated there was an NPA with whom they had a Strictly Social relationship, about one-third of SMMY reported having at least one relationship with an NPA that was both social and entailed engagement in risk behaviors, or a Complex relationship, and one-fourth indicated a relationship with an NPA that just involved risk behaviors, or a Risky relationship. In addition, the majority of NPAs had ties to members of egos' social networks, although Strictly Social and Complex NPAs had more ties than Risky NPAs. Results suggest NPAs may be particularly influential among ethnic minority SMMY. Notably, relationships with NPAs who differed from the SMMY in terms of gender (i.e., female) or sexual orientation (i.e., heterosexual) were rated as closer than NPAs who matched SMMY on these variables. There were no significant differences in relationship closeness depending on racial/ethnic similarity between SMMY and NPAs.

The idea that ethnic minority SMMY may have closer relationships with NPAs is consistent with cultural theories outlining the historical salience of relationships with extended family members and fictive kin among African American and Latino individuals (Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1982; Cardoso & Thompson, 2010; Reyes & Elias, 2011). This finding emphasizes the natural strengths already present in the social ecologies of many ethnic minority SMMY. Future research should explore this further, by examining what types of non-parental adult social support (e.g., emotional, instrumental) are provided most often to SMMY, and also whether the types of support provided most often varies by SMMY ethnicity. In addition, consistent with previous literature (Hurd et al., 2013; Sanchez & Colon, 2005), SMMY were more likely to nominate individuals who matched them in terms of race/ethnicity as NPAs. Importantly, however, is the distinction that racial/ethnic concordance did not differentiate feelings of closeness between SMMY and NPAs. This finding is consistent with a broad

base of literature examining intergenerational relationships which has often found demographic similarity to not be associated with higher quality relationships (Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2012).

Related to NPA gender and sexual orientation, relationships with both female and heterosexual NPAs were rated as closer than those with male and sexual minority NPAs, even after controlling for status as a family member. One potential interpretation of this finding is that most relationships between SMMY and female NPAs are likely not fraught with romantic or sexual feelings, which, if feelings are one-sided, may complicate and depress the overall quality of the relationship. Another possible explanation is that because heterosexual females, on average, may be more accepting than heterosexual males of sexual minority males (LaMar & Kite, 1998; Whitley & Ægisodóttir, 2000), female NPAs may express more support and validation of SMMY leading to higher levels of closeness. A related potential explanation is that sexual minority males may anticipate experiencing discrimination or mistreatment from heterosexual males, and therefore may not invest as much energy in relationships with them. However, none of these possible factors mean that relationships with male NPAs demonstrating high levels of acceptance and support for the sexual orientation of SMMY would not be rated as strong. Future work should examine whether such variables as acceptance and support mediate the links between NPA gender and SMMY-NPA relationship strength. Regarding the relation with sexual orientation, it is possible that sexual minority young men come in contact with fewer sexual minority adult males in general, such that they may tolerate higher levels of interpersonal conflict or disappointment in exchange for a relationship with someone with whom they have sexual orientation in common. The potential complicated nature of the relationships may result in a lower overall level of closeness to them.

This study was the first to quantitatively examine different categories of NPAs defined by the nature of the relationship (i.e., as involving aspects of social and/or risk behavior engagement). This categorization emphasizes that not all relationships with NPAs are inherently beneficial, consistent with a small but growing literature (Farruggia et al., 2006; Haddad et al., 2011). Relationships with Strictly Social NPAs were rated as just as close as those with Complex NPAs. The emotional bond in Complex relationships make them a particularly important relationship to examine in future studies in that reducing risky behaviors in such relationships may be a particularly complicated process. For example, in studies of peer influence on risky behaviors, the influence of peers with whom adolescents have a reciprocally close relationship or who enjoy higher social status in peer groups is stronger than that of peers with whom adolescents have a less close relationship or who have less status (Fujimoto & Valente, 2012; Tucker, de la Haye, Kennedy, Green, & Pollard, 2014). Moreover, the categorization of SMMY-NPA relationships according to social functions and engagement in risk behaviors had implications for interpretation of findings. Specifically, Latino SMMY reported higher numbers of Risky NPAs than other ethnicities. This pattern possibly indicates that relationships with NPAs that involve substance use or sex may be an important intervention point, or at least consideration, in prevention and intervention efforts targeting Latino SMMY.

The findings of this study must be interpreted in the context of its limitations. First, this study consisted of secondary data analysis examining a construct, NPAs, which was not a focus of the original study or data collection interviews. Therefore, the participants did not collaborate with researchers in defining network members in this way. As a result, there may be some culturally-specific aspects of these relationships with SMMY that are not fully explored or interpreted in this paper. In addition, the focus of the social network interviews was on the structure of networks. This focus resulted in limited information being collected related to interactions between network members and egos. Future work should also examine the unfolding of these relationships longitudinally.

This study also possessed several strengths. It entailed secondary data analysis of a unique network dataset, which allowed for both visualization of NPAs in broader social networks as well as a calculation of number of ties between NPAs and other members of networks. It also examined relationships with NPAs in a more nuanced way than is typically done in NPA studies by examining both the provision of social support and also co-engagement in risk behaviors. Rather than viewing SMMY as a monolithic group, this study looked at differences among SMMY according to ethnicity and also examined differences in relationships based on SMMY-NPA similarity on demographic factors. In so doing, the findings of this study indicate that while the ethnicity of SMMY may impact number or strength of relationships with NPAs, SMMY-NPA concordance is less important or may be related in the opposite direction (i.e., dissimilarity associated with stronger relationships).

The results of the current study indicate that NPAs are part of the personal networks of the majority of SMMY. For the most part, they are involved in social relationships with NPAs, although some relationships also involved engagement in risk behaviors. Thus, positive NPAs may be able to be recruited into intervention and prevention efforts designed to increase well-being and decrease risky behavior among SMMY. The finding that ethnic minority SMMY had the closest relationships with NPAs has particularly noteworthy implications. Among SMMY ages 13 to 29, African American and Latino evidence disproportionately high rates of HIV infection (Prejean, et al., 2011). Therefore, NPAs may be particularly promising as intervention agents or supports for the young men in the United States at highest risk for contracting HIV. For example, SMMY in general, and especially those who are African American or Latino, may be particularly receptive to interventions involving informal mentors. Adults in service oriented professions, such as teachers and advisors of extracurricular activities, could be provided with psycho-education on ways to be supportive of SMMY in general, and ethnic minority SMMY in particular. Moreover, it will be important for intervention developers to consider the particular stressors facing youth who identify as both ethnic minorities and sexual minorities, and ways to help them overcome the dual oppression or biases they may face (e.g., as both an African American male and a gay male). Importantly, it is possible that NPAs may be able to influence SMMY health behaviors directly, as well as indirectly by encouraging multiple members of a network to engage in healthy behaviors which may shore up the ability of any one individual in the network to do so. On the other hand, however, when conceptualizing individuals involved in risk behaviors with SMMY, it is important to consider that some SMMY are engaging in risky behaviors with NPAs. This consideration is particularly critical as NPAs are by definition older and may consequently have more resources and experience than

SMMY, which may make them influential in the decisions of SMMY to engage in such behaviors. Thus, continued detailed attention to relationships between SMMY and NPAs will contribute to our understanding of their contribution to risk behaviors as well as, on the other hand, to the tailored involvement of positive NPAs to bolster, enhance, and increase the sustainability of prevention and intervention efforts targeting SMMY.

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Highlights

- We examine non-parental adults in personal networks of sexual minority male youth
- Most youth identify at least one non-parental adult in their network
- Social, risky, and complex relationships with non-parental adults were identified
- Relationships were emotionally closer among ethnic minority youth
- Multiple types of relationships with adults should be considered in interventions

Figure 1.

Examples of non-parental adults involvement in the social networks of sexual minority male youth

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Sexual Minority Male Youth (SMMY) Participants (N = 175) and Non-Parental Adults (NPAs) Identified in their Networks (N = 504)

Variable	M or N (%)	SD	Range
SMMY Ethnicity			
American Indian or Alaska Native	2 (1.1%)		
Asian	4 (3.3%)		
Black or African American	94 (53.7%)		
Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	37 (21.1%)		
Caucasian	24 (13.7%)		
Other	14 (8%)		
SMMY Age	20.1	1.38	17.1 – 23.1
SMMY Sexual Orientation			
Only gay/homosexual	106 (60.6%)		
Mostly gay/homosexual	39 (22.3%)		
Bisexual	23 (13.1%)		
Mostly heterosexual	3 (1.7%)		
Other	4 (2.3%)		
NPA Age	39.86	12.93	25–84
NPA Formal Role			
Friend	128 (25.4%)		
Other (e.g., “gay mother,” “mentor”)	63 (12.5%)		
Aunt	55 (11%)		
Grandparent	53 (10.5%)		
Acquaintance/Associate	23 (4.6%)		
Uncle	22 (4.4%)		
Cousin	22 (4.3%)		
Coworker/Colleague	17 (3.4%)		
Other family	16 (3.2%)		
Teacher/Professor	14 (2.8%)		
Sister	13 (2.6%)		
Brother	10 (2.0%)		
Total Number of NPAs	2.88	2.76	0–14
Number of Strictly Social NPAs in Networks	1.79	2.09	0–14
Number of Complex NPAs in Networks	.69	1.32	0–10
Number of Risky NPAs in Networks	.40	.84	0–6

Table 2
Means and ANOVA Analyses of Associations Between SMMY Ethnicity and Number of NPAs in Personal Networks.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
<u>All NPAs</u>					
SMMY ethnicity			5, 168	.83	.53
Black/African American	3.07	2.66			
Hispanic/Latino	2.70	2.91			
Caucasian	2.33	2.55			
Other	3.54	3.82			
<u>Strictly Social NPAs</u>					
SMMY ethnicity			5, 168	1.30	.27
Black/African American	2.10	2.04			
Hispanic/Latino	1.22	1.67			
Caucasian	1.46	1.77			
Other	1.92	3.75			
<u>Complex NPAs</u>					
SMMY ethnicity			5, 168	.19	.97
Black/African American	.65	1.10			
Hispanic/Latino	.78	1.89			
Caucasian	.75	1.36			
Other	.85	1.14			
<u>Risky NPAs</u>					
SMMY ethnicity			5, 168	2.49	.03
Black/African American	.33	.69			
Hispanic/Latino	.70	1.24			
Caucasian	.13	.34			
Other	.77	.93			

Note. SMMY = sexual minority male youth, NPA = non-parental adult

Table 3

Means and ANOVA Analyses of Associations Between SMMY Ethnicity and Average SMMY-NPA Relationship Closeness (Range of 0–2).

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
<u>All NPAs</u>					
SMMY ethnicity			5, 168	3.84	.00
Black/African American	1.02	.69			
Hispanic/Latino	.77	.63			
Caucasian	.55	.58			
Other					
<u>Strictly Social NPAs</u>					
SMMY ethnicity			5, 108	3.29	.01
Black/African American	1.35	.56			
Hispanic/Latino	1.30	.74			
Caucasian	.80	.50			
Other	1.77	.37			
<u>Complex NPAs</u>					
SMMY ethnicity			5, 54	.77	.58
Black/African American	1.25	.72			
Hispanic/Latino	1.35	.72			
Caucasian	1.22	.76			
Other	1.81	.31			
<u>Risky NPAs</u>					
SMMY ethnicity			3, 38	1.99	.13
Black/African American	.57	.58			
Hispanic/Latino	.39	.52			
Caucasian	.00	.00			
Other	1.00	.89			

Note. SMMY = sexual minority male youth, NPA = non-parental adult

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics and T-Tests of Associations Between NPA Gender, Sexual Orientation and NPA-SMMY Ethnic Concordance and SMMY-NPA Relationship Closeness (Range of 0–2).

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<u>All NPAs</u>				
NPA Gender			7.82	.00
Female	1.43	.67		
Male	.91	.80		
NPA Sexual Orientation			6.76	.00
Heterosexual	1.36	.70		
Sexual Minority	.90	.80		
NPA and SMMY Ethnicity			.11	.92
Same	1.17	.78		
Different	1.18	.77		
<u>Strictly Social NPAs</u>				
NPA Gender			3.99	.00
Female	1.41	.67		
Male	1.07	.79		
NPA Sexual Orientation			3.90	.00
Heterosexual	1.37	.70		
Sexual minority	1.00	.77		
NPA and SMMY Ethnicity			-.20	.84
Same	1.30	.74		
Different	1.29	.72		
<u>Complex NPAs</u>				
NPA Gender			2.56	.01
Female	1.47	.69		
Male	1.11	.78		
NPA Sexual Orientation			1.16	.25
Heterosexual	1.36	.72		
Sexual Minority	1.20	.79		
NPA and SMMY Ethnicity			.50	.62
Same	1.24	.76		
Different	1.32	.77		
<u>Risky NPAs^a</u>				
NPA and SMMY Ethnicity			1.66	.10
Same	.38	.58		
Different	.64	.73		

Note. SMMY = sexual minority male youth, NPA = non-parental adult,

^a *t*-tests were not run for NPA gender and sexual orientation because the group sizes were significantly unequal