

“I Call on the Ancestors, Throw on My
Music, and Do My ‘Freedom Dance’”:
Lessons from Resilience
Research with Black LGBTs

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& Research Gaps & Opportunities

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Overview

- Define resilience;
- Highlight findings from my research on resilience with Black LGBTs;
- Highlight problems with resilience research;
- Identify gaps & questions in resilience research in general & for LGBTs

Defining Resilience

(Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Masten, 2001)

- “Good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development” (Masten, 2001, p. 228)
- 2 conditions for identifying resilience:
 - Presence of a significant threat (racism, poverty, etc.) or exposure to severe adversity;
 - Determination of positive adaptation in the face of the adversity
- Resilience is not a personality trait

Research on LGBs & Resilience @ A Glance

- White & Latino LGBs with no or low rates of family rejection significantly less likely than those with high rates to report suicide attempts, high levels of depression, illegal drug use & unprotected sex (Ryan et al., 2007)
- Test of conceptual model of active coping among Black lesbians demonstrated support for the model of internal (self-esteem, race & lesbian identification) & external (social support & perceived available LGBT resources) factors. Only lesbian identification significantly predicted active coping when all other variables controlled for (Bowleg et al., 2004)

Research on LGBs & Resilience @ A Glance

- Homeless adolescents (36% were LGBT; 61% White) who perceived themselves as resilient, were less lonely, less hopeless, and engaged in fewer life threatening behaviors than those who perceived themselves as not being resilient (Rew et al., 2001).
- Factor analysis of predominantly White LGBT Pride sample in CO identified 5 resilience factors related to the campaign for an antigay referendum: LGBT movement perspective, confronting internalized homophobia, expression of affect, successful witnessing, LGB community (Russell et al., 2003)
- Predominantly White sample of gay male youth with more social support from LGBT friends & family had positive self-esteem & internal locus of control (Anderson, 1988)

Qualitative Research on Resilience & Black LGBTs

- Multiple minority stress & resilience in Black lesbian & bisexual women at Black lesbian retreat in Los Angeles, CA (Bowleg et al., 2003; 2004)
 - Surveys ($N = 92$): ages 18 to 68 ($M = 38.41$, $SD = 9.17$); Income range: <\$5-\$100K or more ($M = \$45,137$, $SD = \$21,856$).
 - Interviews: ($N = 19$), age 26-68 ($M = 45$, $SD = 10.58$); Income range: < \$5-\$8K to \$80-\$90K ($M = \$40$ - $\$49.9K$)
- Multiple minority stress & resilience among Black LGBTs in Washington, DC (Bowleg, 2000)
 - Interviews ($N = 28$): ages 20 to 52 ($M = 34.5$, $SD = 8.00$)
 - Sexual identity: Women: Lesbian ($n=7$), Bisexual ($n=3$), Heterosexual ($n=1$), Other ($n=1$); Men: Gay ($n=9$), Bisexual ($n=2$), Other ($n=1$); Transgender: Gay ($n=2$), Heterosexual ($n=2$)
 - Income range: <\$9.9K to \$80-\$90K ($M = \$20K$ - $\$29,9K$)

Themes from My Qualitative Resilience Research with Black LGBTs

(Bowleg et al., 2003, 2004; Bowleg, 2000)

- Social support;
- Religion & spirituality;
- Identity pride: intersection of Black & LGBT identities;
- Self-acceptance & confidence;
- Challenges can strengthen you;

More Themes ...

- Persistence in the face of adversity;
- Freedom of the margins;
- Realistic assessment & acceptance of what you can & can't change;
- Appreciate life despite troubles;
- Culturally congruent strategies;

Social Support: A Snapshot

- “I’ve been blessed by having some really incredible friends. . . . And I’ve been blessed with a partner who accepts me absolutely and supports me, in all of my realities. . . . I don’t have a lot of support [from my family or in this community], but I have some real solid pieces and it makes a difference when things are incredibly hard or you’re met with silence or just simple challenges of dealing as a lesbian, a Black lesbian woman in this world. (Candace, 31 year old lesbian; Bowleg et al., 2003)

Religion & Spirituality: A Snapshot

- “I used to use substances, now I’ve become more spiritual. I pray about it. If I can’t trust that my Creator will work it out, there’s no point [in stressing out]. Those things that cause me stress, I put them in His hands, and I leave it there.” (Jimmy, 42 year old gay man; Bowleg, 2000)

Self Acceptance: A Snapshot

- “Life is good and all you can ever do is be yourself. And never let anyone tell you that who you are, never let anyone tell you who you are to begin with. And never let anyone tell you that who you are is less than what you feel. Valuing yourself and loving yourself above all ... is one of the best things you can do. I think especially so if you have someone out there like me, just trust in yourself. If you believe that, and you feel comfortable with who you are and with your thoughts then don't let anyone else take that away from you. I guess I tell a lot of friends that all the time, when they have doubts or let others influence them. [I ask them:] ‘Are they living your life?’ Live your own life and trust yourself.” (Karen, 24 year old bisexual woman; Bowleg, 2000)

Freedom From The Margins: A Snapshot

- “Speaking for me, being transgender is a sense of freedom that I have inside. Regardless of discrimination or whatever happens, it’s how I feel that makes me comfortable. In being Black and transgender, I try not to reflect too much on that... I just want to feel as comfortable with me and accept me as much as possible.” (Tracey, 28 year old transgender woman; Bowleg, 2000)

Culturally-Focused Coping: A Snapshot

- “I’ll sit and think about it, light my candles, meditate, call on the ancestors ... listen to music. And I’m a frustrated dancer. I’ve always liked dance. So I’ll throw on the music and just call it my “freedom dance” and just, move to... whatever way I move to just let the stress flow out of me. ... And when I do that it either opens me up ... [and let’s me say] ‘I’m, okay NOW.’ ” (Michael, 37 year old gay man; Bowleg, 2000)

Problems with Research on Resilience

- Children & adolescents typically the focus;
- Social discrimination & structural contexts often absent;
- Focus is often on singular variables (well-being, coping, etc.) rather than resilience as a global construct;
- Numerous & varying definitions of resilience;
- Lack of cultural-specificity;
- Little focus on physical health; and
- Few studies focused on LGBT youth or adults.

What Researchers Still Don't Know About Resilience

- How is resilience associated with physical health outcomes (e.g., HIV risk, etc.)?
- How is resilience in one health dimension (e.g., mental) associated with other dimensions (e.g., physical)?
- How to foster resilience in LGBT youth in spite of factors such as family rejection, bullying, non-supportive school policies?

What Researchers Still Don't Know About Resilience

- How do contextual factors such as SES, geography (e.g., urban vs. rural), political (antidiscrimination policies, etc.) influence resilience?
- What are some of the cultural-specific factors that promote resilience in diverse LGBT groups? (Utsey et al., 2007)
- What does resilience look like for different LGBT populations (e.g., low income, ethnic minority, out/non-out) & under-researched groups such as bisexual & transgender people?

What Researchers Still Don't Know About Resilience

- What does LGBT resilience look like at the population-level?
- How might resilience strategies honed from resilient adaption with one or more kind of discrimination (e.g., racism) relate to others (Greene, 1995)?
- What are the most important dimensions of resilience for LGBTs (social support)?
- What are the limits of resilience in the face of mundane & persistent adversity?

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