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Centering the Voices of Queer Youth in Defining Resilience

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Scholars have investigated the myriad ways that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other (LGBTQ+) youth display resilience but rarely incorporate youth's explicit definition of the concept. In this paper, we analyze the definitions of resilience used by LGBTQ+ youth from South Texas who were mostly Black and Latinx. We argue that centering the voices of LGBTQ+ youth is critical to the scholarly understanding of resilience. The LGBTQ+ youth in this project defined resilience as self-sufficiency/awareness, collective resilience, rebelliousness, and as logistical resilience. These definitions challenge the ways that scholars have typically operationalized resilience for LGBTQ+ youth, particularly youth of color. By incorporating youth's definitions, resilience research can take rebelliousness more seriously and consider the corresponding desired positive impact on their communities as a form of resilience.

Keywords: queer | youth | LGBTQ | race | resilience

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other (LGBTQ+) youth, ages 15 to 24 years old, are often the subject of research on resilience conducted by adult researchers (e.g., de Lira & de Morais, 2018; Follins et al., 2014; Grossman et al., 2011; Kubicek et al., 2009; Singh, 2013; Singh et al., 2014). This research often investigates the conditions of queer life that require resilience and the strategies that youth use to overcome these conditions. The typical focus of these studies on protective factors or healthy behaviors that youth engage in may not align with how youth define health, or being resilient (Asakura, 2019). These studies also rarely consider the role of racism in the lives of resilient LGBTQ+ youth (Asakura, 2019).

In this paper, we argue that centering the voices of LGBTQ+ youth in the discussion of resilience is critical to the scholarly understanding of the topic. Scholars have investigated the

myriad ways youth display resilience but often fail to incorporate youth’s explicit definition of the concept. By incorporating youth’s understanding of resilience, the concept of resilience is expanded to include things that matter to youth, including contributions to the community and rebellion against hetero-cis-normativity. We put the voices of LGBTQ+ youth at the center of this analysis. This study is conducted and analyzed by youth researchers who are part of a community-based research project, Strengthening Colors of Pride (SCoP). We conducted interviews and surveys to understand how community members define and enact resilience. The youth we interviewed, mostly Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ people in South Texas, live with unique and compounding forms of structural violence, which are disproportionate compared to Whites, and that shapes their understanding of resilience.

Resilience for LGBTQ+ Youth

There are many structural reasons why LGBTQ+ youth may need to develop resilience, including early childhood experiences, family acceptance or rejection, and social marginalization in school (Asakura, 2019; Barton, 2012; Birkett et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2010; Shelton & Bond, 2017). Youth are exposed to institutions (e.g., schools, religion, sports) that reinforce heteronormativity and cisnormativity, and creating hostile environments for LGBTQ+ youth (Robinson, 2020). Research indicates a connection between gender identity and stressful life experiences for transgender youth, including verbal and physical abuse (Grossman et al., 2011). Systemic racism or racial discrimination and anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination profoundly and complexly affect the lives of the young Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ people as they live in the intersections of racism, heterosexism, and cissexism (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1990). According to the 2015 U.S. Trans Survey (USTS), transgender individuals are more than twice as likely to be impoverished compared to the general U.S. population, whereas Black and Latinx transgender people are more than three times as likely to be impoverished than the U.S. population (James et al., 2016). Furthermore, transgender individuals who are Black and Latinx suffer worse health outcomes than White transgender people (James et al., 2016).

In our 2019 survey of over 2000 LGBTQ+ people in South Texas, we documented patterns of discrimination, harassment, and mistreatment that LGBTQ+ people continue to experience in many arenas of their lives, personally and professionally, publicly and privately (Stone et al., 2020). Youth interviewees (i.e., 16-24 year olds) consistently reported the highest rates of anxiety, depression, homelessness, and struggle with family support compared to older LGBTQ+ people, and youth with unsupportive families were three times as likely to have experienced homelessness as a teenager or young adult than youth with supportive families. Additionally, there were profound racial disparities in mental health among LGBTQ+ youth in South Texas. Almost 60% of Latinx LGBTQ+ youth have been diagnosed with anxiety, depression, or both, and Black and Latinx youth report some of the highest rates of homelessness (26% and 18%, respectively). On a question related to their experiences as children or teens, 47% of LGBTQ+ South Texans reported feeling worried for their personal safety or housing insecurity based on their gender and/or sexuality that might be discovered by their family. Almost 20% of these interviewees felt worried about their safety and housing “often” or “always” (Stone et al., 2020). In addition, young Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ people sometimes encounter both anti-LGBTQ+ prejudice from individuals within their own racial and ethnic communities, and racial prejudice from other members of the LGBTQ+ community. These young people must cope with prejudice

from those closest to them while simultaneously responding to the effects of systemic societal marginalization.

To counter the effects of this pervasive instability, individuals with marginalized identities must equip themselves with strategies to ensure their survival. Resilience becomes critical for the survival of vulnerable populations, particularly for those within the LGBTQ+ community.

The Study of Resilience in LGBTQ+ Youth

Like other resilience scholars, we approach the study of resilience as an “intersectional embodied human experience” that is “embedded in the racialized, gendered, and classed structures that enhance and/or obstruct people’s responses to suffering” (Atallah et al., 2019, p. 14). We take an approach to resilience that emphasizes the construction and definition of resilience by participants, rather than strictly seeing it as health despite adversity (Masten, 2015). A constructionist approach to resilience sees it as “chaotic, complex, relative, and contextual” (Ungar, 2004, p. 342). The intersections of race, ethnicity, age, gender, and sexuality inform how youth understand resilience.

Our approach to resilience is more attentive to power and agency in everyday social situations (e.g., Atallah et al., 2019; Ungar, 2010; Wilkinson & Kleinman, 2016). This definition of resilience is a response to scholarly critiques of resilience as being rooted in neoliberalism and putting the onus for social change on the individual (Cretney, 2014). Definitions of resiliency often ironically lack a sense of agency (Cretney, 2014).

We join research on critical resilience theorists to argue that there is indeed something worth redeeming in resilience. Resilience can “sustain alternative practices” (DeVerteuil & Golubchikov, 2016, p. 146), including the articulation of a new status quo rather than “bouncing back” to a previous state. Resilience is also not passive, it is “internally produced...adaptive, and capacity-building” (DeVerteuil & Golubchikov, 2016, p. 147). Resilience may set the stage for resistance and social change rather than just being a coping mechanism (DeVerteuil & Golubchikov, 2016).

Much research on the resilience of LGBTQ+ youth follows the standard overemphasis on resilience as a process that mediates between adversity and positive outcomes, identifying the most common traits or attitudes that lead to a more positive outcome (Van Breda, 2018). Much of this literature focuses on protective factors or “resilience resources” (Asakura, 2019, p.269): self-advocacy (Li et al., 2017), healthy behaviors like emotion-oriented coping (Grossman et al., 2011), learning to cope (Stieglitz, 2010), and community connectedness (Testa et al., 2015). These protective factors are often operationalized at the start of research rather than developed inductively through the meaning systems of youth themselves, with a few exceptions (e.g., Asakura, 2017, 2019; Singh, 2013; Singh et al., 2014).

Many of these measures focus on learning to cope and being emotionally positive or optimistic about negative life experiences. In the literature on lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) resilience, the focus on individual characteristics “can minimize the importance of the social environment and hold individuals accountable only for their (own) success, disregarding the role of social, political, economic, and cultural forces that can promote or even inhibit the processes of resilience” (de Lira & de Moraes, 2018, p. 278). In the study of LGBTQ+ youth, resilience studies may support a tendency within resilience theory to cast off “needy people...under the critical pretense that they are ostensibly resilient” (Andres & Round, 2015; DeVerteuil &

Golubchikov, 2016, p. 145). This focus on individual characteristics and measures of success is not culturally sensitive.

Our work fits within longstanding critiques that resilience as a concept is not culturally sensitive and rarely includes definitions of what the target group define as resilience (Mohaupt, 2009), particularly that theories about youth and children should include how they define resilience (Gallagher et al., 2017; Howard et al., 1999). By *centering the margins* of youth who are Black, Latinx, and LGBTQ+, we can develop a stronger understanding of what resilience is and why it may be important (Atallah et al., 2019). In qualitative studies that use grounded theory to access the meaning systems of LGBTQ+ youth, new meanings of resilience have emerged. Qualitative accounts of resilience are more likely to mention personal agency as an important part of LGBTQ+ youth's resilience (Shelton et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2014). These accounts also locate youth's healthy behaviors within the broader context of mental health challenges experienced by youth (Asakura, 2019; Singh et al., 2014). Rather than focusing on accessing the social support of family members, LGBTQ+ youth may define resilience as the ability to control these relationships with friends and family members (Singh et al., 2014) or emphasize the importance of adult role models (Bird et al., 2012). Role modeling by supportive adults in the lives of LGBTQ+ youth helped reduce the impact of stigma and shield them from negative health risks (Bird et al., 2012).

Overall, youth's description of their own resilience does not mirror adults' understanding of their resilience (Asakura, 2019). Asakura's work on Canadian lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) youth is one of the few to analyze how LGBTQ youth understand the concept of, and the social meanings they ascribe to "doing well." Youth interviewees asserted that "doing well" was context-dependent. They rejected typical measures of positive adaptation like academic success and lack of psychological issues. Instead, they saw "doing well" as always happening within the context of a person's struggle. Normative ideas of health were less relevant for these youth (Asakura, 2019). A constructivist approach to resilience examines youth's definitions of resilience carefully as part of embracing a plurality of meaning about resilience and what health is, rather than relying on white, adult, and middle-class centric understandings of health and resilience. In the current study, we extended this research to analyze the meanings crafted by a racially diverse group of LGBTQ+ youth in South Texas.

Method

The research question motivating this project was "what are the individual, interpersonal, and community components of LGBTQ+ resilience?" Strengthening Colors of Pride is a community-based participatory research (CBPR) project aimed at better understanding the development and activation of resilience among LGBTQ+ individuals living in South Texas (for info on CBPR, see Minkler & Wallerstein, 2011; Satcher, 2005; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). This CBPR project included shared leadership between academic and community leaders and a community advisory board that guided research question development, data collection, and dissemination. The project was approved by the IRB of Trinity University and funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. All data for Phase I was collected in San Antonio, Texas.

Participants

The current study analyzed interviews with LGBTQ+ youth that were part of the 2018 Strengthening Colors of Pride Phase I Study.

Table 1

Interviewees’ Demographics including age, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and highest degree earned

Interviewee	Age	Race	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Highest Degree
Ryan	21	White	Transgender	Bisexual	Some college
Shawn	22	Black; American Indian	Man; Transgender	Panromantic Asexual	Some college
Clarise	16	Black; White	Non-binary	Queer	High school student
Alex	22	White; American Indian	Transgender	Bisexual	Some high school
Donna	22	White; American Indian	Transgender	Pansexual	High school degree
Jackson	22	Black	Transgender; Non-Binary	Queer	College degree
Stephanie	21	Latinx	Transgender	Queer	College degree
Timor	21	Latinx	Transgender	Bisexual	College student
Sebastian	20	Latinx	Transgender	Bisexual	College student
Marco	23	Latinx; White	Man; Transgender	Bisexual	College degree
Devon	20	White	Man	Gay	College degree
Rob	25	White	Gender Non-Conforming	Gay	High school diploma
Eddy	23	Latinx	Man	Gay	College degree
Alejandra	23	Latinx	Woman	Lesbian	College Degree
Camila	22	Latinx	Woman	Lesbian	College Degree
Becky	23	White	Woman	Pansexual	College degree
Imani	20	Black	Woman	Queer	-
Raven	-	Black; Latinx	Woman	Lesbian	Some college

The 17 youth in the present study range in age from 16 to 24 years old, with an average age of 21 years old. All youth interviewed were assigned female at birth. Four identify as cisgender women, eight as transgender men, and three as non-binary or gender non-conforming people.

The remaining two interviewees, Devon and Eddy, identify exclusively as men, not transgender men. Youth identified their sexual orientation as bisexual or pansexual (8), queer (4), gay (2), lesbian (2), or pansexual aromantic (1). Six youth interviewees identified as Latinx, and three of the youth interviewees identified as non-Hispanic White. The rest of the interviewees identified as African-American or Black (2), African-American and White (1), African-American and American Indian (1), White and American Indian (2), Latinx and White (1). One interviewee was enrolled in college at the time of their interview and eight youth have a college degree. One youth was in high school, and another had less than a high school degree. The other interviewees had some college or a high school degree. Fourteen of the youth interviewees made less than \$20,000 a year, and the remaining three interviewees made less than \$40,000 a year. The average ACEs score of interviewees is 4 (out of a possible 10 points), a score considered “high.”

The study was conducted in San Antonio, Texas, a Hispanic-majority city with a high poverty rate and a thriving LGBTQ+ community. Based on Census data (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/sanantoniocitytexas>): 64% of San Antonio residents identify as Hispanic, 25% identify as non-Hispanic White, 7% identify as Black or African American, and .7% identify as American Indian. The poverty rate is 18.6% and the median household income is ‘low’ (\$53,000). The city has a history of gay and lesbian bar culture, political organizing, and public visibility in the city which dates back to the 1950s (Gohlke, 2012). San Antonio has limited protections against discrimination in public accommodations, employment, and housing, and those protections that are in place were not passed until 2013.

The youth in this study were part of a larger interview study of LGBTQ+ youth and adults that was part of a broader mixed methods study (Stone et al., 2020) We used interviews as our method to understand the constructions of resilience by LGBTQ+ people in South Texas, because this qualitative method allows researchers to understand the social meanings and general life-world of the interviewee (Kvale, 1983; Rinaldo & Guhin, 2019; Taylor et al., 2015; Weiss, 1995). The general qualitative approach to this project was focused on meaning systems and lived experiences (e.g., Weiss, 1995).

We wanted to recruit a diverse sample (i.e., gender, race) of LGBTQ+ adults and youth living in San Antonio, Texas. We began our recruitment by distributing an online screening survey that was shared through social media, via mailing lists, and in person at Pride events in June 2018. Over 600 LGBTQ+ people took the screening survey. Interviewees were selected based on race and gender demographics, a moderate or high score on the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS), along with either having a personal income of less than \$30,000 a year or an Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) score of four or more (Cronholm et al., 2015; Felitti et al., 1998; Finkelhor et al., 2015). In our initial recruitment, we did use existing definitions of resilience, including the BRS, which features questions like “I have a hard time making it through stressful events” and “I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times” (Smith et al., 2008). We broadly operationalized resilience as answering at least two of the six statements positively (i.e., Agree or Strongly Agree), a minor use of the BRS measure. We then used the interviews to develop how interviewees defined resilience themselves. These interviews captured a sample of LGBTQ+ individuals who expressed both resilience and had either economic or childhood trauma.

Interviews

The interviews conducted for this study were semi-structured qualitative interviews that focused on the development of information (Weiss, 1995). All interviews lasted between 45 and

120 minutes and were conducted in person with one or two youth research team members. These youth interviewers were undergraduate research assistants between the ages of 19 and 21 years old who were trained by the principal investigator for the study. Two youth interviewers identified as Latina bisexual women and two youth interviewers identified as an Anglo gay man or lesbian. Participants received a \$40 VISA card to compensate them for their time. All youth interviews were conducted in English.

All interviewers used the same interview guide, which included questions about resilience with an emphasis on how different factors facilitate resilience during hard times. Most of the responses used in this article came from the questions “Some people have life challenges but are able to move past these challenges and cope in a healthy way. Do you have any role models or people in your life who are resilient like this?” and “When you think of this quality, of being able to move past challenges and be resilient, what other kinds of things come to mind?” In our data analysis, we examined how resilience is defined directly by our interviewees rather than sort these individuals’ responses into predetermined categories.

We also began to recognize, through a careful reading of our interview data, that our interviewees frequently defined resilience both individually and in relation to their role models. In other words, while interviewees gave coherent stand-alone definitions of resilience, they also defined it by describing their role models’ personalities and experiences. We have analyzed this data on relational definitions of resilience, again, careful to reflect the substance of our responses. Our effort to stay true to the language and meanings of our interviewees is illustrated in our data analysis and in the interpretive themes of our findings.

Coding

All data was transcribed by a professional transcriptionist and edited by youth interviewers for any inaccuracies or spelling errors. Youth interviewers also went through each interview to create pseudonyms for all participants and obscure any identifying information (e.g., name of the person’s college or neighborhood) to preserve confidentiality. All transcripts were then entered into Nvivo.

Initially, a graduate research assistant coded all data into major themes using flexible coding strategies (Deterding & Waters, 2018) that included broad codes for *Definition of Resiliency* and *Models for Resilience*. A dataset of only youth interviewees was made in Nvivo. Authors 1 and 2 coded responses from the *Definitions of Resiliency* theme. Interviewees’ definitions of resilience were descriptively grouped using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). For instance, if a respondent defined resilience primarily as rebelling against heteronormativity and anti-LGBTQ+ people, their response was coded in the *Rebelling* node. Author 3 annotated the responses in each of the nodes and shared their notes with authors 1 and 2. Next, all the authors constructed their discussion of interviewees’ definitions of resilience.

In this paper, the *Models for Resilience* theme was analyzed as a kind of foil for interviewees’ definitions of resilience. This theme had already been coded by a graduate research assistant into categories based on which family members were mentioned in the interview, such as aunt, both parents, father, or grandmother. The authors of this paper analyzed themes under this code carefully to triangulate themes developed in the analysis of *Definitions of Resiliency*.

Results

Many of the resilience strategies utilized by LGBTQ+ youth to navigate and overcome circumstances of adversity have been articulated in existing literature. In the current study, we assert that centering the voices of LGBTQ+ youth is critical to the scholarly understanding of the resilience. The youth interviewed here defined resilience as: self-sufficiency and awareness, collective, rebelliousness, and logistical.

Many of our interviewees alluded to harmful and distressing experiences in their lives that prompted them to develop a strong sense of emotional intelligence and self-awareness, a process which often began at a young age. Our interviewees represented multiple marginalized identities across racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual boundaries. Interviewees recounted experiencing traumatic discrimination events on both interpersonal and institutional levels that also resulted in complex stress and mental health conditions including self-harm and suicidal ideation. Most of the youth in our sample displayed a great amount of emotional intelligence and self-awareness in the wake of such trying circumstances. In fact, such traits are in themselves forms of resilience for our interviewees, as they helped them to overcome harmful experiences and circumstances. To better understand these traits and how they relate to resilience, we considered how youth themselves define and understand resilience.

Self-Sufficiency and Self-Awareness

When asked about resilience, Raven suggested that those who are resilient are often those, “who always remember that things have the possibility of being better.” Raven also pointed out that resilient people are “mentally tough” during trying circumstances, which helps them avoid breaking down. As an Afro-Latinx lesbian, Raven faced sexual and racial discrimination early on in her life, which encouraged her to develop practices of resilience. In addition to knowing that things always have the possibility to be better, Raven called resilience “being honest with yourself” as well as “having the ability to be alone and be comfortable.” Developing this unique sense of self-awareness and emotional independence was Raven’s protective strategy to combat structural marginalization.

Stephanie, a Latinx transgender woman, echoes Raven’s sentiment that independence and resilience are closely tied together. Stephanie notes that resilient people must take charge over their own emotions to best manage their lives. Stephanie recalls her mom saying, “you need to take care of your shit and you’ll be okay.” Thinking back to those words, Stephanie considered how resilience, to her, is the ability to put her emotions “on the backburner” and to focus her energy on hard work. She calls these strategies “pragmatic” and emphasizes that it took a certain amount of self-awareness and acceptance following adversity to feasibly work towards her goals.

Interviewees often defined resilience by discussing specific models of resilience in their own lives, including individuals who also experienced social and socioeconomic precarity, discrimination, and abuse. Interviewees stressed that role models become resilient as they coped with these adverse experiences. These individuals’ ability to respond to adversity healthily and effectively was what made them an example to others. These role models are people who have the emotional and material capacity to help others, despite the physical, emotional, and structural violence they have experienced (and may still be experiencing).

Many of our interviewees defined resilience by characterizing resilient people. These resilient people are comfortable with themselves, able to regulate their emotions, and are self-

sufficient. Raven, a Black cisgender queer woman, felt that honesty with oneself is a crucial aspect of resilience. In her words, resilient people have the “ability to be comfortable alone” and are inherently optimistic. Raven was not alone in her description of resilience as embodied by positive, emotionally honest, and secure individuals. The young people we interviewed often emphasized how self-aware, confident, and positive models of resilience helped LGBTQ+ individuals and communities thrive. Most of our interviewees felt that collective resilience often emerged from capable individuals helping others build their confidence, and interviewees who championed a collective definition of resilience discussed the role secure and helpful individuals played in creating a resilient, supportive community.

Connecting Personal and Collective Resilience

Youth interviewees were deeply invested in contributing back to their communities as part of their own resilience. At the start of their interview Eddy, a Latinx transgender man, stated firmly that “I’ve just got to do whatever it takes to get something done and take care of myself and other people.” Although resilience is typically perceived as an individual trait, five of our participants highlighted the importance of honing resilience to benefit more than just themselves, speaking to larger ideas of collective resilience.

Becky, a White cisgender woman, defined resilience as being able to get back up after being “pushed down and oppressed,” a definition reflecting conventional understandings of personal resilience. Yet Becky diverged from traditional conceptions of resilience by adding the notion of “taking those negative feelings and turning them into something positive to make an impact on the community,” reflecting understandings of a broader sense of community resilience. Alex, a White transgender man, also centers community impact in his definition of resilience. Alex began by saying that resilience may start off as personal, but often leads to “find[ing] your community and then [bringing] each other together and [to] make it one big movement.” Alex connects the notion of self-love to personal resilience by asserting that resilience must be found in oneself before making a larger impact on the community. Both Becky and Alex emphasize that resilience is composed of both the ability to overcome adversity as an individual *and* supporting their wider community. The assertion that personal resilience must be cultivated to positively impact a community was reflected in statements by other participants, like Timor.

Getting up each day is ... it is an act of resilience, and it is an act of bravery, because you choose to stand and accept and continue forward. And some people don't. I've known a few people, not too many, that have taken their lives because they ... the pressure was just too much for them. But for me, I want to live, and I want to impact, and I want to advocate, and be a hero to somebody.

Timor’s definition of resilience, which includes advocating for, and positively impacting others, is predicated on the necessary condition of survival. This comment alludes to the fact that, compared to cisgender and heterosexual youth, LGBTQ+ youth are at significantly higher risk for depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and attempted suicide (Bostwick et al., 2014; Lehavot & Simpson, 2014; Mustanski & Liu, 2013). Timor alludes to the fact that part of the importance of staying alive is to ensure that he can help others who are struggling. Timor’s definition illustrates how members of marginalized communities tailor their perception of resilience based on their lived experiences.

Resilience, then, becomes something more than bouncing back after hard times: resilience involves a larger community effort, or the determination to survive to positively impact others.

For example, Don, a White and American Indian transgender, bisexual man, described one of his role models as a “bad biotch”. Don is 22 years old and lives in a homeless shelter for LGBTQ+ youth. His role model was among the leadership of the shelter. Don recounts that his role model was institutionalized as a child because of her sexuality and that her abusive childhood motivated her to create an alternative housing organization for LGBTQ+ youth.

She actually has the same kind of story as me, where when she came out as gay at a very young age, which back in that time was a no-no, they threw her in psych hospitals for her entire childhood. So I learned from her that *you can make something good out of living in hell*, and she started this program for all of us, for people that just threw us away, that we would have a safe place.

Don’s role model, who was pathologized and institutionalized from a young age, now has an attitude of extreme confidence and eagerly advocates for the shelter residents’ needs, including Don’s. When Don was beaten by a transphobic man at the center, his role model unabashedly reported the abuse to higher-ups and had the man removed from the shelter and banned from all other shelters in San Antonio. Don’s description of his role model’s past experiences with abuse and her current supportive community leadership is exemplary of the development arc described by many of our interviewees. Resilient individuals have survived a diverse array of adverse experiences, developed a sense of pride among their LGBTQ+ family, friends, and role models, and now support others in their LGBTQ+ communities.

Rebellion Against Dominant Hetero-cis-normativity

Another important element of resilience for queer youth is being vocal and celebratory about LGBTQ+, Black, and Latinx identities in response to systemic and interpersonal prejudice and marginalization. In general, this rejection of hetero-cis-normativity involves the continual, explicit affirmation of the validity and celebration of one’s LGBTQ+ identity. Jackson, a Black non-binary youth, explained this rebelliousness

I think one thing is just being unapologetically themselves, which is just beautiful to see. And then, I don't know. I guess that's like the big thing just because, it's like not only just owning who you are, but it's also just not taking shit from other people if they're, I don't know, just not really receptive to who you are or accepting.

When asked about their definition of resilience, Jackson began to talk about how they found themselves wishing they could “just be normal,” going on to say how being straight and cisgender was often what was perceived as normal. Jackson considers themselves to be resilient by refusing to compromise who they are despite the pressures to conform to hetero-cis-normativity. Jackson regards their ability to live authentically themselves as critical, “even if it’s just in a super small way, to like one person, it’s still needed.” Jackson’s ability to embrace and accept their identity as a non-binary Black person makes them resilient. However, Jackson does not simply consider how self-acceptance impacts them, but also works to help others do the same, again echoing the importance of collectivity for queer youths’ understanding of resilience. Because they identify as non-cisgender and non-heterosexual, not only are they building resilience for themselves, but they are also hoping to build it for others who may not fit within the confines of hetero-cis-normativity.

For Alex, resilience is rebellion against oppressive hetero-cis-normativity. Alex describes his rainbow and transgender symbol tattoos as embodiments of resilience against those who are not accepting of LGBTQ+ people. Just as Timor spoke of survival as a form of resilience, Alex

also connects resilience back to surviving, asserting that the way he sees resilience is “unless they off us, they really have no control over our lives.” Alex believes survival is not only an act of resilience, but one of rebellion against the homophobia and transphobia of dominant ideology. Alex connects the individual act of survival to a larger collective movement of combating ignorance and hate.

Jackson and Alex authentically express themselves by rejecting hetero-cis-normativity and embracing their queer identities. Both Jackson and Alex identify as transgender and/or non-binary, highlighting the intersectional importance of being rebelliously queer.

When Jackson spoke about resilience and its relationship to authenticity, they confessed to having wished to be seen as “normal,” defining normality as straight and cisgender. Yet Jackson ultimately rejects socially defined normality by asserting their authentic, queer identity. Not only does Jackson see this rejection as empowering to themselves, but helpful for other LGBTQ+ individuals who may feel the same urge to conform to heteronormativity as a means to feel accepted.

Alex actively pushes back on the notion of adhering to respectable queerness, highlighting his differences to the straight, cis norm rather than muting them. He cites boldly displaying his transgender tattoos and the risk they pose in Texas, which Alex implies is unaccepting of queer identities. Alex makes no mention of wanting to be accepted by the straight, cisgender majority, but believes resilience can be found in surviving the challenges that come with being unaccepted.

For Alex and Jackson, resilience can be found in authenticity and rebellion against the norm. Notably, they both highlight the collective aspects of resilience through rebellion. Even when speaking about their own conceptions of resilience, they reach outside of themselves and loop in the community element. Jackson speaks about how their own authenticity may help someone else as they struggle with their own identity. Alex highlights a larger movement behind rebellion rather than describing it as his own personal experience. Therefore, these definitions of resilience among our interviewees cannot be thought of separately but should be seen as interdependent and inseparable.

Logistical Resilience

For Alejandra, a gay Latinx woman, resilience is to be open-minded and adaptive to new situations because, as she recounts, those who are not resilient are “often fixed in one way or another.” In addition, those she views as resilient often have concrete goals and knowledge that there are different paths towards achieving them. She grew up witnessing this type of resilience in her mom, a single parent to her and her younger brothers. By observing her mom work to sustain herself and her family while facing significant socioeconomic disadvantages as a single parent, Alejandra saw how her mom learned to adapt to life and work towards her goals despite her poverty. When she entered college, Alejandra saw these same resilient traits in herself and other non-traditional college students who were classmates as they worked towards their goals despite not fitting the mold of societal expectations. She mentioned that individuals such as mothers, working-class students, and those with little to no family support are resilient in the same ways as her mom—they “keep going no matter what gets in their way.”

Youth interviewees also discussed how they witnessed others modeling resilience by utilizing material or logistical strategies to navigate periods of financial hardship, family issues, stress, and mental health concerns. Sebastian, a Latinx transgender man, was raised by his single mother following his parents’ divorce. After the divorce, Sebastian’s mother, his older sister, and

younger brother lived with their maternal grandmother, but when the family could afford to live on their own, they moved to a house on the Northside of San Antonio, a more affluent area of town. According to Sebastian, his mother moved to the “little house on the Northside because she wanted us to have the best education we could get.” Sebastian’s mother worked long hours both in, and outside of, the home to meet her family’s needs. Her children were involved in extracurricular activities, despite the expense and time commitment, because Sebastian’s mother prioritized their childhood. She remained a model of resilience for Sebastian because of her perseverance and commitment to the wellbeing of her family. When Sebastian was asked to reflect on how to describe his mother’s resilience and what it meant to him, he said:

She still found a way to pick us up from practices, from school, from everything. She found a way for me to play club basketball when I was younger, too. *That is resilience to me, like keep going even if you're not sure it's going to work out, you just got to keep going.*

Sebastian’s mother shaped his definition of resilience by modeling behavior that emphasized determination and a commitment to the family’s collective wellbeing, even in the face of socioeconomic marginalization and uncertain outcomes. According to Sebastian, she “found a way” in the face of great odds.

Discussion

For the LGBTQ+ youth in this study, resilience was about self-sufficiency and awareness, about helping out the collective, rebelliousness against hetero-cis-normativity, and cultivating logistical resilience. Youth’s definitions focused on both cultivating one’s self and the community. Understanding the way youth define and experience resilience is important for resilience literature.

The emphasis on helping others as an integral part of resilience resonates with some of the literature on community resilience. Collective resilience refers to the development of a network that links various resources and adaptive strategies to ensure the wellness of an entire population (Norris et al., 2008). The goal of collective resilience is to reduce risk and resource inequities within a population by providing a network of social support (Norris et al., 2008). Community resilience is a concept within collective resilience that refers to the communal mechanisms marginalized groups use to resist oppressive systems. Individuals from marginalized groups come together to strategize about how to protect what is valued and necessary for group survival (Sonn & Fisher, 1998). Community resilience can be observed in a variety of group gatherings, such as church groups, family networks, and political organizing (Sonn & Fisher, 1998). Collective resilience is often discussed in the context of mass emergencies and disasters, exceptional times during which people come together for group support and recovery (Drury et al., 2009). In the current study, however, LGBTQ+ youth discussed collective resilience in both every day, and exceptional circumstances. This collective resilience in everyday life is important because it offers communities of LGBTQ+ youth the opportunity to connect and validate each other during seemingly mundane activities. A sense of connectedness and belonging can foster a sense of solidarity among members of the LGBTQ+ youth community, which affirms visibility while promoting acceptance and a sense of community (Battle et al., 2017). In addition, these youth aspire to be heroes and help someone else, just like Don’s role model who works at the shelter.

Although conventional understandings of resilience tend to prioritize an individualistic lens over a collective one, our young queer interviewees overwhelmingly show that their understanding of resilience encompasses more than just the self. Although literature on the importance of collective resilience exists, there is not nearly enough about the necessity of community resilience outside of the context of mass disasters. Our study considers the role of community in resilience for marginalized groups who disproportionately face discrimination and structural inequity, particularly queer youth. Many of our interviewees hold marginalized identities that make them susceptible to physical, social, and emotional harm, particularly those who identify as both LGBTQ+ and Black or Latinx. These individuals often find solace and comfort in others who also face similar challenges, choosing to come together as a community and uplift one another rather than facing hardship alone. All five of our interviewees who discussed collective resilience (i.e., Becky, Alex, Jackson, Timor, Sebastian, Eddy) highlighted its necessity because of negative external factors affecting the LGBTQ+ community.

Similarly, LGBTQ+ youth in this study approached the concept of resilience from a perspective that was influenced by their intersecting identities. Young queer, transgender, and non-binary people of color often experience racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic prejudice, discrimination, and precarity (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1990). To truly understand the nuances of LGBTQ+ resilience strategies, it is important to recognize the forces of adversity that sexual- and gender-marginalized youth face on institutional levels. Our interviewees' identities and inequalities operate intersectionally rather than additively, merging their experiences together through expressions and social realities that vary greatly (Ghabrial, 2017).

One important factor for LGBTQ+ community validation was the experience of seeing others being out and proud, including for those who sometimes conceal their LGBTQ+ identity (Reed & Valenti, 2012). Identity management for LGBTQ+ individuals includes strategies like passing, identity broadcasting, or showing pride (Reed & Valenti, 2012). We argue that this identity broadcasting may include visible rebelliousness towards, and rejection of, dominant heteronormativity. Other authors have identified LGBTQ+ individuals' rebellious resilience as cognitive reframing that legitimizes people's gender and sexual identities (Reed & Valenti, 2012).

Historically, coalitions within the LGBTQ+ movement have chosen to conform to the straight, cisgender-dominated world to achieve societal acceptance. Such coalitions believed downplaying differences was the way to achieve sexual and gender equality. Respectability politics has been operationalized by the LGBTQ+ movement, as well as the Civil Rights Movement striving for racial equality. In the context of the queer movement, Yuvraj Joshi (2011) refers to this strategy as "respectable queerness," which is the performance of a social identity that makes queerness palatable as it mutes differences between queer and straight identities. However, not all queer coalitions and individuals have opted for sameness to effectively navigate the world. Countermovements have challenged respectability politics, choosing to reject heteronormative practices and ideals through actions like undermining conventional relationship conceptions found in heterosexual relationships by establishing new and more egalitarian models such as non-monogamous relationship practices (Lamont, 2017).

Not only do transgender and non-binary youth like Jackson and Alex battle the heteronormative world, but they must also grapple with cisnormativity both within and outside of the LGBTQ+ community (Worthen, 2016). Unlike cisgender-identified queer individuals, Jackson and Alex must face the unique challenge of battling transphobia and its accompanying ignorance and rejection, even within their own queer community. Many of the young, queer

people in our sample explicitly rejected the notion of respectable queerness, albeit Jackson noted that they found it tempting.

Conclusion

It is important to understand the ways that LGBTQ+ youth define resilience. Scholars and community members have criticized resilience as being a concept that is developed using existing dominant systems of power. For example, resilience “has become a guiding rationale within state institutions, nonprofits, and the private sector” (Bonds, 2018, p. 1286). Resilience, as a concept, may reflect and reinforce social norms developed in predominately white cisgender and heteronormative environments. This article offers an alternative conceptualization of resilience. Specifically, LGBTQ+ youth describe rebellion against dominant hetero-cis-normativity as a kind of resilience. Rebellious behavior may otherwise be coded as an unhealthy behavior by adult researchers.

Analyzing carefully youth’s definitions of resilience also highlighted the importance of mentors and family members as models of resilience. Whereas other scholars have only focused on the role of mentors in LGBTQ+ youth’s resilience. Positive social support networks have been shown to provide youth with models of resilience as they offer stability, purpose, belonging, security, and messages of self-worth—all of which reduce psychological afflictions and increase motivation to care for one’s self (Graham et al., 2014). These role models are great references for LGBTQ+ youth as they provide windows to the future, exhibit positive behavior, and display adaptive techniques for youth to foster self-resilience and feel supported (Bryant & Zimmerman, 2016).

This research has implications for youth-serving programs and staff members. Programs may want to counterintuitively cultivate rebellion and resistance in the LGBTQ+ youth they serve, including emphasizing historical and contemporary role models of resistance. In addition to the existing rhetoric about the importance of self-care, programs and staff members may want to emphasize the importance of collective care and resilience. Resilience for LGBTQ+ youth is a collective experience, and engaging in supporting one another may cultivate individual resilience and resistance.

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