Suicide Ideation Protective Factors for Sexual/Gender Minority Young Adults

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INTRODUCTION

Individuals who identify as a sexual and/or gender minority (SGM) report significantly higher levels of suicide ideation than heterosexuals and cis-gendered individuals (Stone et al., 2014). Identifying factors that may lead to, or protect against, this discrepancy in risk is important for protecting SGM youth and preventing suicide in this population. Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003) argues that individuals in minority groups often face more hostile and stressful social environments which may contribute to the development of mental health problems and potentially increase risk for suicide. The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (ITS; Joiner, 2005) argues that suicide ideation emerges from experiences of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness. The hostile social environments (e.g., minority stress) some SGM individuals encounter may contribute to higher levels of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness; thus, explaining some of the elevated rates of suicidal ideation in this population (e.g., Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014).

The large majority of studies regarding suicidal ideation among SGM focus on understanding risk factors, and very few look at protective factors. Of the few studies examining potential protective factors, it appears that SGM individuals who have increased self-esteem (Lim, 2015) or who have experienced SGM-positive environments, like having a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) in one’s high school or cities, have reduced rates of suicidal thinking and attempts (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014). Given there is some evidence that GSA participation and feelings of empowerment/self-esteem are associated with reduced suicidal thinking, we aimed to expand existing research by examining whether both GSA-participation and self-esteem in one’s high school and feelings of empowerment would act as protective factors on the experience of thwarted belongingness or perceived burdensomeness thereby indirectly lowering suicidal thinking.

HYPOTHESES

We hypothesized that both GSA-participation and a sense of personal empowerment would moderate the relationship between minority stress (e.g., SGM-based discriminatory experiences = expectation of rejection) and feelings of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness in a moderated mediational model predicting worst point suicidal ideation.

METHODS

Participants included 347 undergraduate students (Mage = 20.03, SD = 3.99; 87.3% White) identifying with non-heterosexual orientations or as gender non-binary recruited from study boards hosted by the psychology department at two midwestern undergraduate universities. Interested participants accessed the study link, provided informed consent, and completed an anonymous survey. Two items related to a GSA Alliance and asked: a) if they participated in a GSA Alliance/advocacy group in their school, and b) if the existence of the GSA group improved the school climate for SGM individuals. Additional measures included: Interpersonal Needs Questionnaire (Bur克莱t al., 2012), Empowerment Scale (Rogers et al., 1997), Expectation of Rejection Scale (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2008), Schedule of Sexually Discriminating Events (Moue et al., 2007), and Suicide Ideation Items from the STB1 (Nock et al., 2007).

RESULTS

Two linear regression models using PROCESS with 5,000 bootstrapped re-samplings indicated that empowerment was a significant moderator between minority stress and perceived burdensomeness (F = 13.47, p < .001; see top two Figures). Inspection of the interaction showed that when empowerment was low, the relationship between minority stress and perceived burdensomeness was non-significant (t = 0.55, p = .58) but was significant when empowerment was at low or average levels. Although empowerment moderated the relationship between minority stress and perceived burdensomeness, the effect was not powerful enough to moderate the mediation pathway. Perceived burdensomeness was a significant mediator of the relationship between minority stress and suicidal ideation (R²=0.2194, F=39.48, p<.01).

Empowerment was not a significant moderator of minority stress and thwarted belonging (t = -1.76, p = .08). The full mediation model was significant (R²=0.2116, F=38.12, p<.01).

GSA participation was not a significant moderator between minority stress and either perceived burdensomeness (t = 1.16, p = .25) or thwarted belongingness (t = -0.84, p = .40) on suicidal ideation (see bottom two figures). However, the full mediational models remained significant for both the perceived burdensomeness (R²=0.2052, F=34.72, p<.01) and thwarted belonging models (R²=0.1877, F=31.44, p<.01).

The main effect of minority stress on perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belonging were significant in three of the four models. In all four models, the main effects for minority stress, thwarted belongingness, and perceived burdensomeness on suicidal ideation were significant (see Figures).

DISCUSSION

The current results found that a sense of personal empowerment may be a protective factor lessening perceptions of perceived burdensomeness, and thus weakening the possibility of experienced suicidal ideation. Given that most of the suicide research focusing on SGM individuals focuses on risk factors, these findings provide important data for suicide prevention suggesting that prevention efforts may want to consider including a focus on strengthening a sense of empowerment. Contrary to other studies (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014), GSA participation and presence in the school did not act as a protective factor against experiences of perceived burdensomeness or thwarted belonging. It may be that GSAs help to reduce suicide thinking through other avenues than affecting ITS constructs.

Limitations to our study include the homogenous (e.g., age & race) sample and our combining gender minority status with non-heterosexual orientation status to create our sexual/gender minority group. The use of self-report measures also carries limitations such as response bias.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the results indicate that prevention efforts may want to focus on helping SGM persons internalize a sense of self-efficacy and self-valuing in order to buffer the development of interpersonal processes believed to increase suicidal thinking.

Further research is needed to replicate these results, examine other protective factors, and explore both protective and risk factors in a longitudinal framework.