

JUST SIX  
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH  
SUMMARY



# Paving Pathways Through the Pain: A Grounded Theory of Resilience Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer Youth

## Key Details

### KEY WORDS

LGBTQ Youth, Grounded Theory of Resilience

### POPULATION GROUPS

LGBTQ Youth; Youth Workers

### STEPPING UP THEMES

Strong, Supportive Friends & Families  
Diversity, Social Inclusion & Safety

### RESEARCH ORIGIN

Ontario

### SOURCE

Academic

**“Resilience research builds on risk-focused research to identify factors and processes that can assist LGBTQ youth in overcoming or more effectively coping with social marginalization and exclusion” (p. 521).**

### 1. What is the research about?

This research is based on a small study in which the researchers interviewed 19 lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) youth and 16 service providers, to explore what building resilience looks like among LGBTQ youth.

LGBTQ youth are vulnerable to specific forms of discrimination, directed towards them because of their gender expression and sexual orientation. Strategies building resilience offer pathways to overcome or more effectively cope with emotional pain, social marginalization and exclusion. Factors such as school connectedness, family support and knowing caring adults build resilience in youth across orientation, race and socio-economic background. LGBTQ youth use these tools in addition to using strategies which are unique to them.

### 2. Where did the research take place?

The study took place in Toronto, Canada. Data was collected between December 2013 and September 2014. The study included interviews with service providers and LGBTQ youth. Service providers were recruited from various social service, health care and educational organizations, whereas participating youth were recruited based on recommendations provided by service providers and through peer recommendations. The study participants focused on services and resources available to youth in Canada’s largest city. Similar resources may not be available for LGBTQ youth outside well-resourced urban settings.

### 3. Who is this research about?

The study focused on gaining an understanding of resilience processes among LGBTQ youth. It explored how LGBTQ youth interact with their social environments in efforts to navigate adversities and how they access resources in ways that enhance or sustain wellbeing.

### 4. How was the research done?

The study used Grounded Theory, a qualitative methodology which theorizes social processes by exploring individuals’ subjective and collective experiences and how people make meaning of experiences. The researchers theorized resilience in LGBTQ youth through analyzing interviews carried out with LGBTQ youth and service providers working with them.

Data was collected in two phases using qualitative methods. In the first round, service providers (recruited from various Toronto-based LGBTQ organizations) were interviewed. Ongoing sampling and interview strategies were revised and modified based on themes and issues which came out of interviews. Service providers shared their understanding of common challenges faced by LGBTQ youth. For the second phase, service providers were asked to nominate resilient LGBTQ youth who had

experienced significant challenges but were “doing well”. Additionally, participating youth were also invited to nominate peers for participation. While service providers received no compensation for participating in the study, youth were given \$20 honourariums. The risk for sampling bias was high for this study, given the small sample pool and how participants were selected. Additionally, the recruitment process excluded key groups, such as youth who don’t access agencies. Notably, no Black or Indigenous service providers or youth participated in the study.

### 5. What are the key findings?

The study found that resilience isn’t something that automatically occurs in a “resilient person”. Rather, resilience develops as a mix of intentional efforts and having the right supports. Researchers found that youth were carrying deep emotional pain. Resilient LGBTQ youth were able to build on their pain to carve pathways forward.

The study found that LGBTQ youth coped with challenges and navigated their way to wellbeing using these strategies:

- **Navigating safety across contexts**

In the face of multiple challenges, resilient youth were able to assess safety in different contexts and develop strategies to navigate these contexts. For example, youth negotiated when to “come out” and how to seek out safer spaces.

- **Asserting personal agency**

LGBTQ youth who have experienced control and abuse from others because of their identity and orientation learn to capitalize on their personal agency. They put a spotlight on their own needs and take ownership of the decisions they are making. The study found that the degree of ownership youth had over such decisions played a resilience-promoting role. This strategy helped youth to navigate their way to wellbeing.

- **Seeking and cultivating meaningful relationships**

The study found that youth benefited from relationships where they are seen as valuable. Resilient LGBTQ youth are those who cultivated relationships with LGBTQ adults and peers and others regardless of sexual orientation who gave youth the physical and emotional supports they needed.

- **Un-silencing marginalized identities**

The study found that emotional pain was inflicted when youths’ important social identities were silenced or denied. Resilient LGBTQ youth looked for resources to “un-silence” and embrace who they are. However, service providers noted that to successfully know their identities, youth needed to know how and when to do so. The study also found that LGBTQ communities also reproduce social hierarchies and harms present in the larger society (e.g. anti-Black racism). This can make it hard for some youth to un-silence their marginalization.

- **Engaging in collective healing and action**

Resilient youth are able to identify and name systems that put them at risk, instead of continually blaming themselves for struggling. This outlook helped youth to see healing as necessary at both the individual and collective levels.

### 6. Why does it matter for youth work?

This study supports the social ecological theory of resilience, which says resilience is a product of culture and context. Youth workers can support LGBTQ youth by contributing to the development of social climates where resilience-building resources are accessible for youth. They can play an important role in actualizing environments that pave smoother pathways forward for LGBTQ youth.



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