Examining the Role of Peer and Family Belongingness in the Mental Health of Black LGBTQ+ Youth

"There is a dearth of literature examining the unique mental health experiences of Black LGBTQ youth situated at the intersection of racial, sexual, and/or gender minority identities, and particularly with regard to their experiences of social connection. ...belonging to multiple minority groups may be associated with unique stressors and experiences of discrimination" (p. 3).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research explores the mental health challenges faced by Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) youth, emphasizing how their intersecting marginalized identities contribute to unique stressors. Black LGBTQ+ youth experience compounded discrimination in environments that are simultaneously racist, homophobic, and transphobic that contribute to mental health difficulties. Racism contributes to anxiety and depression, and anti-Black racism is "a common form of trauma" (p. 3) experienced by Black youth.

The **minority stress model** and **gender minority stress and resilience model** provide frameworks explaining how gender and sexually diverse youth anticipate and experience discrimination, internalize negative attitudes, and encounter rejection upon identity disclosure – all factors that compromise mental health and wellbeing.

The research addresses a significant gap in literature by examining the relationship between mental health outcomes and protective factors, specifically peer and family belongingness, among Black LGBTQ+ youth in the United States and Canada.

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

The study was led by American and Canadian researchers, based on data collected from LGBTQ+ youth in the United States and Canada. The study captures perspectives from urban, suburban, and rural youth.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

The research focuses on a sample of 181 Black LGBTQ+ youth, ages 14 to 29, with an average age of 18.1 years. Most of the participants (85%) were from the United States (8% living in a rural area, 47% in towns, and 45% in cities), and 14% were from Canada (8% living in a rural area, 27% in towns, and 62% in cities). These youth were primarily living with family, including with at least one parent (65%), siblings (23%), or extended family (9.4%); 9.4% reported living alone or with friends/roommates. In terms of gender, 39% identified as trans women, 34% as trans men, and 24% as nonbinary. Sexual orientations included pansexual (31%), queer (24%), bisexual (22%), lesbian (17%), and gay (14%).

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

The research data was taken from a larger sample collected for *Project #Queery*, a cross-sectional, mixed-methods online survey on LGBTQ+ youth conducted between March and July 2016. Participants were asked to complete assessments that measured various factors, including peer support, family cohesion, and mental health outcomes (depression and anxiety).

Researchers analyzed the sample with different measures to specifically understand **peer belongingness, family belongingness, depression, anxiety,** and **self-rated mental health**.

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

The study revealed that **supportive social connections** can play a critical role in in the mental health of Black LGBTQ+ youth. Youth in this study had moderate levels of family belongingness; higher peer and family belongingness were associated with lower levels of depression, and family belongingness, which includes identity acceptance, was also linked to higher self-rated mental health. However, neither peer nor family belongingness showed a significant relationship with anxiety, indicating that the manifestation of depression may be rooted in relationships.

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

This research is critical for youth workers because it highlights the **intersectional challenges** faced by Black LGBTQ+ youth. The findings emphasize the importance of **fostering safe** and **inclusive spaces** where youth feel a **strong sense of belonging within both families and communities.**

Key takeaways for youth workers include the importance of:
- Recognizing **diversity** within Black families and developing **culturally responsive engagement strategies** that promote acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities.
- Implementing **intersectional approaches** that simultaneously address experiences of racial and LGBTQ+ identities.
- Developing **mental health interventions** that acknowledge multiple forms of discrimination, including racism, homophobia, and transphobia.
- Designing **targeted support programs** that strengthen both family and peer connections while addressing anxiety through specialized interventions.

This research provides essential insights for practitioners working with Black LGBTQ+ youth by highlighting how the **complex interplay between racial and sexual/gender identities** affect mental health outcomes. Youth workers must create **affirming environments that validate both racial and LGBTQ+ identities** while designing interventions that address the **unique challenges these youth face.** By focusing on strengthening belongingness in both peer and family contexts, practitioners can help mitigate depression and improve overall mental health outcomes for this vulnerable population.

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