

ABSTRACT

GRAHAM, BROOKE ERIN. Queer-ly Unequal: LGBT+ Students' Experiences with Social Support and Resiliency in Education (Under direction of Steven McDonald).

Sociological research has illuminated the importance of social support, especially in regard to student success within education. However, there is little research about queer students' experiences with social support and resiliency in regard to education. In an effort to expand the literature on queer students experiences I conducted in-depth interviews with queer identified undergraduate students at a large university in the Southeast United States. Using these interviews, I examined respondents' perception of their social exclusion, coping through resiliency, and prosocial behavior to others. I found that being openly queer posed an identity based risk, which decreased their access to social support, paradoxically this risk increased their perception of resiliency and prosocial behavior.

Queer-ly Unequal: LGBT+ Students' Experiences with Social Support and Resiliency in
Education

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INTRODUCTION

The queer community encompasses a variety of individuals who do not comply with the heteronormative standards of mainstream society, due to gender and/or sexuality identities that are non-conformist, this is often stated as the LGBT(QIA)+ community. In an effort to include all members of the queer community, both folks that 'out' and not, scholars use the + symbol to indicate the various other identities not included within the acronym. The embodiment of one's identity as a member of the queer community alters the lived experiences of queer students within social institutions. Queer students, like other structurally disadvantaged groups, often employ coping strategies to 'fit' the institution of higher education (Chica 2019).

Although there is little research about queer students' specific experiences with social support and education, researchers have studied social support and resiliency among other marginalized populations. These studies have examined the ways in which material deficit risk (i.e., lacking material resources) poses challenges for successful developmental outcomes (Larson 2006; Lerner et al 2003). Identity has been far less examined sociologically in relation to the risk of unsuccessful developmental outcomes- such as accessing higher education. Research by race scholars highlights the psychological responses to isolation due to identity categories, such as the 'go it alone' attitude among working class Black folks (Hochschild 1995).

For queer students what is the relationship between social isolation and resilience in the context of identity based risk? In order to pursue this research question I examined the experiences of students who are part of the queer community on a college campus. I conducted in-depth interviews with queer identified undergraduate students at a large university in the Southeast United States. Applying grounded theory to analyze interview transcripts, I examined respondents' perception of their social exclusion, resiliency, and prosocial behavior through

mentoring others. Resiliency is examined as the process through which one faces and/or recovers from difficulty. Prosocial behaviors are positive actions toward others, such as volunteering or helping others. Risk is defined as the likelihood of having negative developmental outcomes, such as not obtaining a formal education. I found that being openly queer posed an identity based risk (risk due to one's identity) leading students to take on an attitude of individualism. Paradoxically this risk prompted their resiliency and prosocial behavior.

LITERATURE REVIEW

LGBT+ Students' and Queer History

Queer students are any non-heteronormative students. The queer community is comprised of gay, lesbian, trans, demisexual, bisexual, agender, aromantic, and many other identities. The queer community encompasses a vast group of individuals who do not 'fit' the heteronormative standards of society, due to non-conforming gender and/or sexuality identities. This changes their life experiences within social institutions. *A Queer History of the United States* author Bronski states that although LGBT people have always been in the US, they have also been continually oppressed, silenced, and murdered (2011). Indigenous individuals living on North America were embracing gender and sexual diversity prior to colonization and the imposition of the western binary (Bronski 2011). Until 1973 in the United States 'homosexuality' was regarded a mental illness (Mogul et al 2011). Today trans folks continue to be arrested and murdered at alarming rates due to the historic legacy of the criminalization of LGBT folks in the United States (Mogul et al 2011). Although some LGBT partnerships have been able to legally marry and/or adopt children, it is still incredibly difficult for most queer folks to start a legal family due to the long history of discrimination and criminalization- continuing to impact peoples' lives today (Bronski 2011; Mogul et al 2011). Queer students are also subjected to this history of

discrimination and criminalization, which could pose an identity based risk toward positive developmental outcomes.

In order to succeed within the institution of education many queer students must alter themselves through coping strategies to fit the standards of higher education sets upon them (Chica 2019). Through embodying their queer identity, LGBT+ students exist outside of the norms of higher education, which is founded in the binary roots of western society. Queer students are inherently at a disadvantage within the institution of education due to their at-risk identity. Relatively little is known about how queer students cope with these disadvantages and remain resilient in their educational pursuits.

Resiliency: Support or Isolation

Social support and strong community ties are common between members of minority communities (Mulcahy et al. 2016). Research has shown that resiliency to cope with struggles and barriers in life comes from connections to community and family members (DuBois and Silverthorn 2005; Ungar 2004). Resiliency is especially important for disadvantaged students, as they face far more barriers and structural discrimination than their more privileged peers. Maintaining strong ties to parents and community members is the primary factor in determining resiliency of adolescents and young adults (Werner et al. 1971; Ungar 2004). Social support can be highly effective for marginalized groups because it helps them develop resilience in the face of numerous obstacles to positive developmental outcomes (Larson 2006; Lerner et al 2003; Werner et al 1971).

One example of social support that is particularly prominent in education are mentoring relationships. Mentorship is a resource that helps students do better in school overall (DuBois and Silverthorn 2005). “Very important nonparental adults” have strong mentoring influences on

youths' ability to access higher education (Beam et al. 2002). Nonparental adult mentor relationships are also associated with higher academic scores and healthier social ties with family, friends, and classmates (Beam et al. 2002; DuBois and Silverthorn 2005; Farruggia et al. 2013). The benefits of mentoring relationships are numerous, with mentors often providing professional, personal, and/or emotional resources (Anderson and Shannon 1988).

Mentoring benefits are especially notable for at-risk students in education. The system of education is founded on middle and upper class behaviors, values, and norms that are rewarded within schools. Teachers tend to have higher expectations resulting in differential treatment for students from middle class backgrounds than low income students, even from optical judgements alone (Rist 1970). The behaviors expected of students in the institution of education requires traits of middle or upper-class childhood socialization, causing working class and poor students to find barriers within behavior, communication, and relationship-building (Jack 2016; Stanton-Salazar 2011). Additionally the social networks relied on for educational and professional connections serves to reproduce race and class inequalities (Royster 2003). Among students from families that lack 'standard' social norms, mentorship often proves even more effective in obtaining higher educational outcomes (Erickson et al. 2009). Mentoring relationships can evolve out of students' communities, gained through early childhood socialization (Parcel and Hendrix 2014). Students who come from low-income families or belong to a minority racial or ethnic group tend to rely more on mentorships to access and navigate institutions of higher education than other more privileged students (Duntley-Matos 2014). Similar racial identity between mentor and mentee can greatly increase relationship success (Thomas 2005; Hurd and Sellers 2013; Noy and Ray 2012; Ortiz-Walters and Gilson 2005). Structured mentoring

relationships are often built into programs at universities, especially for disadvantaged racial/ethnic groups (Gaddis 2012).

However, students of color, first generation students, and female students are still less likely to have successful professional mentorships within both undergraduate and graduate school (Katz and Harnett, 1976:8; Noy and Ray 2012; Reskin 1979). Intersecting oppressions- such as being a person of color and a woman- create less supportive advising situations than privileged students (Noy and Ray 2012; Strayhorn et al. 2008). Forms of dissatisfaction and exclusion in mentorship often occur along racial lines. Students of color report advisors being less respectful of their ideas than white students, lending to the marginalization of the contributions of scholars of color (Morris 2017; Padilla and Chavez 1995; Turner and Myers 2000). Black and Latinx students have a shortage of mentors of similar backgrounds due to systematic exclusion from these institutions (Ortiz-Walters and Gilson 2005; Santos and Reigadas 2005; Schueths and Carranza 2012).

Just as with other identities examined in the literature on mentorship, LGBT youth benefit from social support, and mentoring relationships- especially one between a LGBT mentor and LGBT mentee- are the most successful (Bird et al. 2011; Russell and Horne 2009). When a queer student attempts to forge a mentoring relationship without knowledge of the mentor's identity, they often "test the waters" though mentioning LGBT political issues in order to read the potential for success within the relationship, an act of emotional labor the queer folks must often utilize in their daily lives (Mulcahy et al. 2016).

Current research illuminates the understanding that having a supportive figure of a similar background to the student increases the student's views of the relationship and relationship success (Hurd and Sellers 2013; Noy and Ray 2012). There is a shortage of queer

allies within education. Due to the small size of the openly queer community, it is important for students to locate supportive relationships that are queer-positive, even if they do not personally identify within the community (Russell and Horne 2009). Involvement within the queer community is beneficial to all students, regardless of their personal identification (Nicol 2011), thus supporting the inclusion of allies into safe spaces and queer positive conversations within higher education (Moore 2015). The development of increased social knowledge on issues of structurally disadvantaged communities would aid in increasing mentorship, and changes within the structure of higher education itself to better incorporate the needs of queer students (Blonshine 2014; Duntley-Matos 2014).

An increased risk of *not* achieving positive developmental outcomes has previously been conceptualized through material based deficits, such as coming from a low income background. Socioeconomic status is as an at-risk status leading typically to lower levels of resiliency, dependent upon support from family, peers, and community (Ungar 2004). However risk may also be tied to identity, under the assumption that having a marginalized identity poses additional barriers for students- making it more difficult for them to access resources, information, and social networks.

METHODS

Recruitment and Data Collection

For this project I collected 10 in-depth and semi-structured interviews with students who identify as queer at a public university in the Southeast United States. The initial participant was contacted at the university's center for LGBT+ students. From there, collecting the sample came to fruition through respondent driven sampling.

Participants had to be undergraduate students, identify as queer, and be 18 years of age or older. Interviews were conducted from September 2018 to November 2018, and generally lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour. Participants were asked about their experiences both before and after entering the university, social support, mentorship, and their identity in the queer community in an anti-categorical manner in line with queer theoretical approaches (Brim and Ghaziani 2016; Browne and Nash 2016; McDonald 2015; 2017; Valocchi 2005). See appendix two for more information on queer theory and qualitative methodology. All data were anonymized and participants were given a pseudonym.

Sample

Through open ended questions the ten undergraduate student respondents identified as: 4 cis-gender women (pronouns: she/her), 3 cis-gender men (pronouns: he/him), and 3 folks whose gender is not bounded by the gender/sex binary: gender fluid (pronouns: they/them), agender (pronouns: they/them), transgender man (pronouns: he/him). As self identified, the participants' age ranged from 19 to 22 years old, and their sexualities included gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, demisexual, and queer. Sixty percent of the sample was white, with ten percent being African American, and twenty percent identifying as multiracial. Using their parents' highest level of education and their perceived social class participants were coded as poor, working, lower middle, middle, or upper middle class. See Table 1 in the appendix for details on the sample.

Analysis

The ten interviews all took place in a conference room on the university's campus, and the interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder. Shortly after the interview, the recording was transcribed. Open and focused coding took place through a grounded theory approach to

explore patterns within the data through analysis of the respondents' lived experiences as recounted in the interview transcripts (Charmaz 2014). Utilizing the inductive process posited by grounded theory there was a reflexive process between data collection and analysis, with each influencing the other. In order to expand on the codes found within the data exploration into themes and patterns took place through memo writing, which allowed me to identify patterns in queer students' social support, agency and individualism, resiliency, and prosocial behavior. This project applies the lens of queer theory (Brim and Ghaziani 2016; Brown 2016; McDonald 2015), a critical framework where both data collection and analysis are done in an anticategorical manner, focusing on the lived experiences of the respondents and their perceptions of the social world.

RESULTS

Barriers to Social Support

When reflecting back on their social support within education many participants thought of their social isolation during their teenage years. During the interviews respondents often reflected on how after coming out they did not have the same levels of social support that their heteronormative peers were able to access. Anne (they/them) recounted the experience of high school as a lonely period of time in their life:

“High school was kind of like a lonely time and I didn't confide much in my parents because I was going through some mental health stuff. I didn't want them to worry about it, or know about it, you know... I mean I had a support system through my friends, somewhat. All of my friends, well most of my friends, were straight and Catholic, so it was difficult to talk about a lot of the things that were bothering me with them because they just either didn't care or didn't get it, so, high school was fairly lonely.”

Anne felt lonely for much of high school. They felt that they could not confide in their parents and found it difficult to talk about issues that bothered them with their friends because their

friends either “didn’t care or didn’t get it.” Anne was not alone, though. Anita, a Black woman, said she also “had a tough time in high school, not just personally, academically.”

A participant with a fellow queer sibling, Mars, who is non-binary, is out to all the facets of their life except for their parents. Coming from an upper middle class family with a non-binary sibling they still did not feel ready to come out to their parents quite yet. Mars’ sibling Jamie has recently come out and Mars recounted Jamie’s transition to their new name and pronouns saying,

“The new name has been difficult and the pronouns are definitely a struggle, and both of my parents were raised by english teachers so it’s like “they is plural” ...My parents were having a really difficult time with my younger sibling’s new name and I went out to breakfast with my mom and she was talking to me about it, and she was like “it’s such a challenging thing.” And I think one reason I haven’t come out is because my parents confide in me all the struggles of like having a kid that is a nonbinary assigned female kid that likes women and came to terms with all of that at like age 12. So they’ve been out forever, and recently decided they’d like to go by “Jamie” but my parents took it really personally because both of our names have a lot of meaning and blah blah blah.”

Mars has not come out to their parents yet, but they are able to “test the waters” by observing their sibling Jamie’s coming out process. Mar’s sibling came out as non-binary and their parents have had a difficult time adjusting to their new name and pronouns. Mars feels that one of the reasons they haven’t come out to their family is because their parents confide in them and take their child’s transition personally, especially changing their name. Even with a fellow trans sibling Mars was not able to receive all of the social support they desire from their parents.

I asked Anita, a bisexual Black woman, who comes from a low income background, how her relationship with her family was, to which she replied,

“we just don’t talk about it [her sexuality]. It’s a weird thing, but nobody brings it up... I mean I brought it up a long time ago, we talked about it then, so there’s no need to talk about it again. But that’s my apprehension to what I’ve had my mom say honestly. She’s the one who’s had me turned off to talking about it.”

Anita did not feel she could even discuss her sexuality with her family in any way, because past attempts she had made were quickly shut down by her mother. Similarly to Mars, this barrier to social support limited Anita's ability to connect with her family, as they did not accept her sexuality.

Social Isolation & Resiliency

Queer identified students would be expected to have fewer mentoring relationships than their heteronormative peers. Seventy four percent of youth were found to have mentoring relationships in Erickson et al's (2009) study utilizing a representative national data source. However, within this project only two of the ten respondents were able to recall a mentor (any adult who provided social, professional, or academic support) before entering college. Not surprisingly overall, people of color, women, and low income folks are less likely to have access to the social networks that heteronormative white men can (Damaske 2009). Mentoring relationships are often not accessible through the social networks of marginalized students. Disadvantaged students are unable to utilize these resources of social support in order to "catch up" to their advantaged peers. This also seems to hold true for the queer identified students that I interviewed.

Queer students from upper middle class or had parents who obtained a graduate degree were the only respondents to have informal mentoring relationships during their high school experiences as well as the opportunity to be open and 'out' about their queer identit(ies) since they have identified themselves as queer. Higher income queer students identified informal mentorships while low income queer students were not able to identify any mentorships. These demographic differences support much of the sociological literature surrounding class and mentoring relationships (Erickson et al. 2009).

Many respondents felt this was due to their social isolation and limited access to social support in high school. Eli, who identifies as gender fluid as well as pansexual and demisexual, stated,

“I didn’t have anyone. I just kinda threw everything I had into school and ignored the rest of my life, so I didn’t realize I needed anything like that [a mentor] until I got here, then I was like ‘wow other people have like people to look up to, and have representation’ but it was just me. I don’t need anyone to look up to. Like I’ll mentor myself, because I’m wonderful. No, I look up to myself because I worked my ass off to get here and to like keep myself afloat.”

Eli came from a low income background, and they feel the salience of their status as a queer individual has more greatly influenced their experiences both before and during their time at the university than their social class. Here Eli, like many other respondents in this project, stated that their identity as a member of the queer community aided in their sense of resiliency, even while living with the risk of economic insecurity. Eli stated that they believe they were able to harness resiliency to cope with their lack of social support. Many students perceived that they overcame this deficiency in support and aid through their self reliance, independence, and resiliency. Eli’s comments- “I’ll mentor myself, because I’m wonderful. No, I look up to myself because I worked my ass off to get here and to like keep myself afloat”- reveal an attitude of self reliance in order to cope with their desire to achieve positive developmental outcomes (attending college) while facing the barrier of limited social support by placing agency on themselves.

Feeling isolated or socially limited from others due to their queer identity, many queer students felt unable to access social support that comes much more easily to their heteronormative peers. In turn, many respondents expressed agency and individualism, a ‘go at it alone’ attitude, in response to their social exclusion. Scholars have examined how folks with marginalized identities cope with their inability to achieve standard definitions of success

(Hochschild 1995; Lamont 2002; S. Smith 2007). Hochschild's 1995 book *Facing Up to the American Dream* details forms of rejection or refusal to comply with the "American Dream" within the low income Black community. This coping mechanism of placing agency on oneself has been documented as a refusal to work, participate politically, or comply with the dominant ideology as folks marginalized due to their Black identity recognize their inability to meet the white, middle class standards of the 'American Dream' (Hochschild 1995; S. Smith 2007). As just one example of why Black folks do these behaviors, according to child, is to cope with their inability to achieve traditional forms of success (Hochschild 1995). The queer community, similarly possesses an identity based risk, which alters their experiences with social support, resiliency, and prosocial behavior similarly to how previous research has illuminated this psychological response to isolation within marginalized populations such as low income folks and people of color (Hochschild 1995; S. Smith 2007).

Interestingly Ezera's experience deviated from many of the other queer identified students interviewed. Ezera identifies as a Latina bisexual cis-woman, and she did not go to college directly out of high school. Unlike almost all other participants, she did feel supported during most of high school. She recounted:

"It was stuff I had to figure out for myself... I could have gone straight to a four year university after I graduated but... I felt like at the time that financially it probably wasn't a good idea to go to a four year university. I could've tried to go for like scholarships but like that felt, it just felt like a lot of work and a lot of pressure."

Ezera recounted a mentor in high school, and did not attend college directly out of high school. Whereas other respondents without support did attend college directly after high school. The process of applying for financial aid seemed too daunting for Ezera at the time. The social support aided Ezera's sense of comfort and safety which contributed to her decision to transition

to community college before leaving for a four year institution. Even when Ezera left for college she considered proximity to family:

“I was going to community college when I was deciding to go to a four year university, and I just graduated with my associates in arts and I was like “alright I need to send out some applications to different schools” so I decided I’ll pick schools that I can get to easily. That are within driving distance so I don’t have to worry about being too far from home if I ever need to go back home.”

Ezera recounted social support in high school. However, in other parts of the interview she also recounted dealing with the majority of school paperwork, financial aid, and transitioning entirely alone. She stated that she didn’t need a mentor any longer, she just wanted to be close to home. This is not uncommon for Latina college students, as the intersections of gender and race indubitably impact experiences queer students have within the institution of higher education.

The resilience of making it through high school without social support was for some an empowering force for their decision to be open about their gender and sexual identities during all of their college experiences. Respondents expressed increased resiliency due to their lack of support. Eli stated,

“I didn’t have anyone, but I was also very very very hiding my entire self in the closet.. So I was just biding my time until I was 18 and I could tell my family. If they kicked me out, I would get to leave... I sorta was applying [to college] on like a hope and a prayer that I’d get in. But, um, I didn’t know how I was going to pay for it. Or how I was going to get here, or anything like that. I just knew I needed to like, get out of where I was. And this was far enough away.. With instate tuition... There was also that constant fear when I was doing it that I would be like, a token minority. My friends call me the diversity uniform because I fit so many boxes. But I couldn’t talk to anyone about it, cause I was, you know, hiding all of it from everyone [in their hometown].”

Many respondents discussed college as a space where they could get away from their hometown where they faced discrimination and lacked social support. They recalled a desire to live openly while at college, and not hide their identity any longer. Eli’s decision to come out was also

related to the timing of gaining social support on the university campus through diversity centers and peer mentoring other queer students. Eli stated,

“I wasn’t ready for any of my coming out process but when I got here [the university], you know, I didn’t want to lie about who I was anymore. I wanted to be me. It was something that I’d never been able to be.”

Eli expressed their desire to be ‘out,’ which was inaccessible to them in their hometown due to homophobia, discrimination, and fear of retribution- even dealing with the threat of getting kicked out of their childhood home. For many queer students, coming out before they are able to be financially independent poses a threat to their housing situation and familial relationships. In order to protect their safety most queer students are forced to stay in the metaphorical closet until they are in a space that seems safe, accepting, or at minimum non-violent toward queer folks (Ecker et al 2015).

Many respondents indicated that they did not need social support when isolated because they felt that they were able to navigate issues on their own, placing agency on themselves, as exemplified by Eli’s comments about how they “look up to myself.” This defensive behavior, which emphasizes individual agency is in response to students’ limited abilities to access resources, such as strong levels of social support. Resiliency then can be seen as a result of exclusion and social isolation based on the risk of embodying a queer identity, causing students to place agency on themselves in order to defend their attempts to achieve success while lacking the social support and inclusion their heteronormative peers have.

In contrast with the literature on resilience and life course development, respondents in this study claimed resiliency stemmed from their exclusion due to their queer identity. Previous research has supported the claim that having social support, such as family and community, aids the individual’s sense of resiliency (Ungar 2004; Werner 1971). Socioeconomic status is as an

at-risk status leading typically to lower levels of resiliency, dependent upon support from family, peers, and community (Ungar 2004). However, identifying as queer did not seem to associate with lower levels of resiliency in the students I interviewed. Respondents perceived that their resiliency developed due to their social isolation and exclusion. Additionally, the students interviewed perceived that this resiliency served to inspire prosocial behavior through mentoring other queer students. Therefore, their identity based risk alters the process of achieving positive developmental outcomes by allowing them to embrace an attitude of agency and individualism in order to cope with the social isolation of openly embodying an queer identity.

Institutional Support

Along with social support from peers and mentoring relationships, support from the educational institution is also important for students' success (Schueths and Carranza 2012). Institutional supports often aid low income students, and other marginalized identities, navigate education (Stanton-Salazar 2011). The need for institutional support was expressed by Amy, a working class lesbian, who discussed her coming out process and the isolation she faced,

“I had a lot of the opposite of support in my school system actually. I had a lot of different mental health issues that were going on; on top of that I was bullied, cause even though I wasn't out, people kind of assumed... I was bullied a lot in high school ... And I actually had to transfer high schools, so my last year of high school I went to [local arts college] they have a high school program, and that- I was very lucky to go there, and that, my mother definitely helped me go there and get out of the um, bad space that I was in for the first three years of high school... I loved it, it was definitely a safe haven, where before [at previous high school] I wasn't accepted. I was threatened emotionally, physically, and then I got to basically gay heaven. It was great... I definitely have those roles [mentors] with figures in the GLBT center so I found out about them before I came here. I wanted to make sure I went to a school that had a GLBT center, and I realized a lot of schools only have one diversity office [for all minority identities].”

After facing bullying for the first three years of high school, Amy was unable to stay at her school. The school that Amy transitioned to for her senior year of high school was an arts focused university that offered a dual enrollment program, which she felt caused there to be a

larger queer representation and acceptance. Amy had to move high schools in order to feel safe, and she wanted to avoid entering the same kind of dangerous and invalidating environment as her initial high school. Therefore, she did thorough research about the universities she applied to attend, and sought institutional support through the diversity centers.

Once inside the institution of higher education students identified informal support in the diversity centers on campus, but students also admitted fear of initially entering into those spaces and outing themselves on campus. The respondents found that at the LGBT center on campus they felt more comfortable and could live in an “unfiltered” way. Carmen, a white upper middle class bisexual woman, stated, “I use it [the LGBT center] mainly as a space to socialize, but it is nice, you know, to go in there and know that everyone there is like you or at least like accepting of bisexuality.” Queer students expressed feeling more safe both physically and socially in the LGBT center, and when respondents felt safe or supported they recalled being able to more fully embody their queer identity. Dylan, a white chronically ill queer transman, stated,

“I was the first person to come out as any flavor of queer... I started going to the GLBT center a lot. And that’s where I kinda like found my space on campus. I hung out at the center a lot to just talk to people, and that’s where I met a lot of people I hung out with freshmen year. Yeah, so those are the two groups I kinda hang out with... In the marching band- I have like one friend who is queer. He didn’t even do color guard he just like found his way into our friend group. But he and I are, it’s enough to like where they all are allies but are really chill about it- like they don’t make it about them. It was mostly queer people, because um, I don’t know, I like to hang out with people like me, you know?”

Many respondents found that only in the center were they not viewed as an anomaly. Feeling unsupported, and even at times unsafe, on campus queer students are able to utilize the center for gender and sexuality minorities in order to be with other queer students, both building community and validating their identity as a queer individual since this validation is not provided other places on the university campus.

In addition to the LGBT center, allies were mentioned as bringing forward a feeling of safety and identity validation on the university campus. The respondents' university offers an ally training that covers LGBT issues more generally and then advises university faculty, staff, and students to promote LGBT awareness and support across the campus. Carmen said, "I really like when professors have gone through the center's ally training... they'll put the little card [which indicates they have completed the training] up on their door so that people will know." Many stated that having policies that aided the recognition of queer students and their unique needs would be a helpful form of support, although they did also seek aid from a queer or ally mentor on a personal one-on-one level as well.

Queer individuals are often less visible within society, as sexuality and gender are not always aesthetically discernible, exemplifying the importance for inclusive/safe spaces (Hayfield et al. 2013). Efforts to create safe and inclusive spaces for queer individuals have bloomed dramatically in higher education. These queer student centers are often noted as the most supportive space on university campuses for queer students, where students can receive support and aid in their plans for the future (Ecker et al. 2015). Efforts at creating more diverse communities within education, where minority students feel safe and welcome, have become common, but these attempts are often merely a perpetuation of controlling forces against structurally disadvantaged groups throughout society (Berry 2015; Cohen 1997; Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017).

Prosocial Behavior: Peer Support

Both resiliency and prosocial behavior have previously been attributed to maintaining strong social connections with family and community members (DuBois and Silverthorn 2005; Staub 2004; Staub 2005; Ungar 2004; Werner et al. 1971). Having social support through parents,

peers, and role models encourages prosocial behavior (Batson 1991; Dodge et al. 1990; Piliavin and Callero 1991). However, this study identifies the process through which exclusion and isolation due to queer identity motivates individuals to enact prosocial behavior through mentoring and supporting others, especially disadvantaged students. Other scholars have noted how suffering or adverse life experiences can also enhance individuals' motivation to help others, most notably out-groups within society (Staub 2003; Vollhardt 2009), but the volume of this literature pales in comparison to the aforementioned literature, which credits prosocial behavior as an effect of positive life experiences.

The eight respondents who did not have a mentor themselves reported being peer support for other students in the queer community. Students positively recounted their experiences of prosocial behavior motivated by their deficit in support. These accounts revolved around their ability to work with marginalized populations such as disability services, the multicultural center, or the LGBT center on campus. Eli stated,

“Being here allowed me to work with some of the underexposed communities that I love... I actually, joined a club called The Allies for Students with Disabilities. I stepped into the mentor role for a lot of people. Um, and I started like volunteering at the GLBT center... I love the folks at the center; they're all wonderful.”

While recounting their own lack of social support Eli, like other respondents, steered the interview towards a discussion of the ways through which they attempt to prevent other queer students from facing the situations they have. Most respondents indicated that they volunteer, mentor, or support marginalized communities because they want to help or give back in ways they did not have access to. Most importantly, all but one respondent acknowledged the LGBT center or clubs supervised by the center as a source of affirmation on the college campus. These

respondents also hold leadership roles within the organizations, volunteered, or expressed other forms of prosocial behavior toward the queer and other marginalized communities.

Rickey, a Latinx Brazilian first generation US citizen and gay man, mentioned how crucial his work at the center was for his self development and how it satisfied his desire to help others develop their identities as well. Rickey is serving on the search committee for a new director of the center, and he has a leadership role in an organization sponsored through the center. Ezera served in a leadership role through a club associated with the diversity centers on campus. She reflected on her future career in teaching.

“It’s different being in a leadership role. I’m now trying to figure out what was missing from the year before that I would like to implement this year. I want to make sure it’s something that not only I can enjoy but other people can enjoy as well... When I do become a teacher I want to provide a space that I know I didn’t have in high school and create like a GSA [gender sexuality alliance] or something.”

Ezera spoke of the importance of reflecting on the needs of her students, in her future career as a teacher, and supporting them by providing a space for LBGTQIA+ students to feel safe and find a sense of community. For some respondents their decision to aid other members of the queer community began even before college in correspondence to the development of resiliency. When asked about his high school experiences Rickey spoke to his coming out process and starting an organization that would provide a safe space at his high school for other queer students,

“I was like ‘I’m gay’ and I’m just stepping out of the closet so I should start a GSA, then I was like ‘oh I like this.’ I like providing this presence and this space for students... By the time I was a junior that [his goal] shifted to helping people find their beginnings since I came in and I got involved, like not everyone does that, so how can I help students make the most of it, their time here. It shifted towards like trying to give back in a way that I would’ve benefited I guess.”

Rickey had a desire to help other students in ways he was not helped. He explains his desire to see how he could help “students make the most of it, their time here [in college].” Anita reported

benefiting from prosocial behavior such as informal peer mentorship, claiming that all of her support on the university campus was found in her primarily queer friend group found at the university center. Other members of the university campus looked down on queer students, and other marginalized identities, according to Anita, who emphasized the salience of her coexisting marginalized identities as a Black bisexual woman,

“You’re assumed not to know things just because of your ethnicity, your face, your gender, you’re just assumed to have this certain level of understanding and that’s it. For most of us it’s frustrating you know; you feel like you always gotta work ten times as hard to be taken as serious.”

As a Black woman Anita said that people often invoke the strong black woman stereotype, leaving her feeling “like I have on that invisibility cloak.” She explained that people often assume she is straight due to her ability to ‘pass.’ Anita felt that without the prosocial behavior from her queer peers, through mentorship, she would not be able to bare the struggles of having coexisting marginalized identities at the university. Most supportive relationships were due to the student’s involvement with a campus diversity center, as the university based LGBT center was noted as the hub of connection for all but one respondent. At the center, students felt that they could live more honestly and connect with other students, eventually forming peer mentoring and supportive, connecting relationships.

CONCLUSION

Sociological research has examined processes surrounding social support and at risk identities of students within education. In order to expand the literature on queer students’ social support and resiliency I studied mentoring relationships for LGBTQIA+ students- through in-depth interviews with queer identified undergraduate students at a large university in the Southeast United States.

The majority of the queer students interviewed were not able to identify a mentor in their life before entering college. I found that queer identified students within the sample recalled past experiences of social exclusion, noting their lack of social support during the transition from high school to higher education. Queer students possess an identity based risk, which according to the current understandings on resiliency (Ungar 2004; Werner 1971), should mean that such students would have a lower sense of resiliency than their peers. However, respondents in this project expressed that their identity as a member of the queer community aided in their sense of resiliency due to the aforementioned coping mechanisms. Coping through defensive individualism (S Smith 2007), many respondents expressed that they did not need mentoring relationships because they felt that they were able to navigate issues on their own, placing agency on themselves. Respondents perceived their resiliency as a result of exclusion based on identity, similarly to individualistic attitudes documented in other disadvantaged communities. The low income Black community, excluded on their identity as people of color, in response to their inability to achieve the American Dream often respond with hyper individualistic attitudes (Hochschild 1995).

In conclusion, this project found that being openly queer posed an identity based risk for students' ability to access social support within education, in turn this risk increased their perception of resiliency and prosocial behavior through embracing agency similar to the defensive individualism modeled in other disadvantaged communities in order to strive for positive developmental outcomes while navigating various social barriers. Ultimately queer students gave back to their community through the prosocial behavior of mentoring or supporting other queer students on the college campus in hopes of preventing other students from facing the struggles they did. Institutional support and prosocial behavior through peer mentoring

were both crucial to respondents' social support. Queer students expressed feeling more safe both physically and socially in the LGBT center, and when respondents felt safe or supported they recalled being able to more fully embody their queer identity. Furthermore, this study identifies the process through which exclusion and isolation due to queer identity serve to motivate individuals to enact prosocial behavior through mentoring others, this contributes to the literature on adverse life experiences as motivation for prosocial behavior for marginalized groups within society.

Limitations and Future Directions

The sample (n=10) was collected through a respondent driven sampling method, which began by contacting students at the university's center for LGBT+ students. Due to the location of initial recruitment the sample does contain many students who are well connected to the LGBT+ center on the university's campus. This limitation is important to note, as many of the queer students interviewed discussed their experiences with the diversity centers on campus, influenced simply through the recruitment method for the initial participant. The respondent driven sampling approach did lend itself to a sample more rooted in the diversity centers on campus than otherwise. This limitation may influence the relationship between risks students possess and the process of developing resiliency.

The sampling technique employed also allowed a more in depth look at the institutional supports at the university in a way that other methods of participant recruitment may not have allowed. Furthermore the LGBT center is well connected with other diversity and inclusion centers on the university's campus- including centers for Black students, Latinx students, disability services, and more. Due to these connections, my sample was relatively diverse given the small size. Future directions for study could continue to expand interviews of queer students

in order to better understand the dynamics of race, gender, ability, and other intersections of oppression or identity that may come to light during the research process.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Table 1: Sample Demographics

Pseudonym & Pronouns	Age	Gender	Sexuality	Race/Ethnicity	Parents' highest level of education	Socioeconomic Class
Eli (they/them)	21	Gender fluid	Pansexual, demisexual	White, Native American	GED	Poor/Working
Ezera (she/her)	22	Cis-female	Bisexual	Hispanic, White	Community College	Lower Middle
Dylan (he/him)	22	Male	Queer	White	Graduate School	Upper Middle
Rickey (he/him)	22	Man	Gay	Latinx	High School	Working
Mars (they/them)	21	Agender	Pansexual	White	Graduate School	Middle
Carmen (she/her)	20	Cis-female	Bisexual	White	Graduate School	Upper Middle
Cooper (he/him)	20	Cis-male	Gay	White	College	Middle
Oakley (he/him)	20	Male	Gay	White	High School	Working
Anita (she/her)	21	Cis-female	Bisexual	African American	High School	Working
Amy (she/her)	19	Cis-woman	Lesbian	White	College	Working

APPENDIX 2

Queer Theory as a Lens to Qualitative Methodology

Humans quite literally construct themselves and their identity through language, and the stable identity categories most identify with have arisen from dominant discourses, which can both constrain and influence behavior (Mostenbacher et al 2013). Gay and lesbian studies have done important work highlighting discrimination of those that identify with those categories, but traditional gay and lesbian scholarship has by and large not challenged binary logics of dimorphic sex.

While the use of identity categories can highlight imbalances in power, we must also question their origin and use, for these binaries tend to stabilize each other, precluding the possibility that anything exists outside them (Motschenbacher et al 2013). Queer theorists, on the other hand, wish to expose how the dominant language and culture create, reproduce, and maintain these modes of thinking in the first place. Though some call for it, it is not necessary to abolish identity categories in order to critique their use and origin (McDonald 2015). If categories of identity are socially constructed, however, there is no essential feature all share, and the borders and meanings of the categories themselves become blurry (Moi 2015).

Queer theory also highlights the way in which society is ordered in binaries/rigid categories and who this social ordering privileges (Browne 2016), challenging dominant discourses which shape the very ways in which we understand identity/identity categories. No matter the method employed by researchers, those adopting a queer theoretical lens should endeavor to examine how apparently stable meanings and categories result in real-world power differentials (Browne 2016) as well as deconstruct essentialist identity categories and bring to light how all categories such as class, sex, and race intersect.

Queer theory, unlike other sociological perspectives, rejects the general acceptance of categorical approaches to studying the social world. Instead, power between the perspective of the participants and the researcher is even, releasing preconceived ideas about the social world and the categories within because when one collects data with these preconceived ideas data is no longer bias free, as it is rooted in modern (and heteronormative) structures. As queer research methods question the origins and effects of concepts and categories rather than reify them, this study avoids assuming that social phenomena can only be examined in a generalizable variable-oriented paradigm because these categories often do not align with lived experiences (Brim and Ghaziani 2016). Unlike other methodological approaches, the queer lens functions similarly to grounded theory: understanding the social world from the respondents lived experiences, not taking preconceived notions into the approach.

Some sociologists of gender and sexuality have been attempting to apply a queer aware approach to studying issues of gender and sexuality; however, even with the rising presence of this- often intersectional- analysis, sociology is “not yet queer enough,” according to Valocchi (2005). Noting sexual minority individuals in studies, even if this does not significantly alter the analysis, serves as representation for queer individuals within society (Moore 2015); however, this study will apply a queer theory framework to both the methodology and analysis in order to view the respondents’ lived experiences with mentorship and education in a non-categorical manner rather than merely imposing categories (such as gender, race, class, ability) onto the analysis, allowing for a more holistic understanding of the respondents’ perception of their lived experiences surrounding mentoring relationships.