

What is the Relationship Between Identity and Psychological Distress Among Older Adults Who Identify as LGBTQ+?

Patrick Lovato
Department of Social Work



Abstract

- A secondary analysis of the Generations: A Study of the Life and Health of LGB People in a Changing Society, United States was conducted using cross-sectional study to examine the relationship between psychological distress and identity development of 476 participants, ages 50 years and older.
- Implications for future social work practice include modifying treatment models to meet the unique needs of older LGBTQ+ adults who may experience, grief and loss, generational trauma and fear of formal supportive services due to stigma and shame.

Introduction

Significance of Study:

- Older LGBTQ+ adults face a unique intersection of challenges including aging along with the stigma related to their sexual orientation; this unique social location is known as being twice hidden (Blando, 2011).
- Internalized feelings of homophobia and shame regarding one's own sexual orientation and gender identity are associated with poor mental health outcomes (Hendricks & Testa, 2012).

Purpose of Study:

- To increase knowledge related to LGBTQ+ older adult practice.
- To assess the relationship between psychological distress and identity among older adults who identify as LGBTQ.

Research Question:

What is the Relationship Between Identity and Psychological Distress Among Older Adults Who Identify as LGBTQ+?

Hypothesis:

It is hypothesized that identity and psychological distress will have an inverse relationship, such that when levels of identity increase, levels of psychological distress decrease.



Literature Review

Erikson's Stages of Development- Integrity vs Despair

During this stage, an individual has the opportunity to reflect on their life as they draw closer to death. The individuals who attain integrity are characterized by self-acceptance, tolerance of others, and feeling of life satisfaction. These individuals may have found meaning in their lives, achieved important goals, and have found peace prior to death (Goodcase & Love, 2016).

LGBTQ+ Older Adults and Societal Issues

- Researchers found that successful aging is connected to life satisfaction and social connectedness (Carver et al., 2017).
- Older LGBTQ+ adults of today have experienced social exclusion due to their sexual orientation, the medicalization of homosexuality, the rise of queer liberation, the epidemic of HIV/AIDS and other civil rights movements surrounding the fair treatment of transgender and non-binary individuals (Van Wagenen et al., 2017).
- Disconnection and isolation may lead them to develop self-disparaging relational images and internalized homophobia which can further contribute to poor physiological and mental health outcomes (Cetinkol, 2020).

Older LGBTQ+ Barriers to Mental Health Services

- Some LGBTQ+ persons report avoiding psychological services due to fear of discrimination due to their sexual orientation (Rispel et al., 2011).

Methods

Research Design:

- Secondary analysis using data from Generations: A Study of the Life and Health of LGB People in a Changing Society, United States, 2016-2019 (Meyer, 2020). Conducted at the Williams Institute of University of California, Los Angeles School of Law
- Cross-sectional study, data collected from baseline survey (wave 1)
- Focus on the relationship between psychological distress and identity.

Sampling Method:

- Final sample size was 476 LGBTQ+ older adults of the original study consisting of 1,345 eligible participants
- Individuals 50+ were considered for the secondary analysis

Measures:

- 190-item instrument (survey) was utilized to collect data from participants through self-administration.
- The independent variable, LGBTQ+ identity, was measured using 5 sexual identity centrality questions adapted from the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Scale.
- The dependent variable, psychological distress, was measured using the Kessler 6 Psychological Distress Scale.
- All statistical analyses were conducted utilizing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences.

Results

- The results indicated a marginally statistically significant and positive relationship between psychological distress and LGBTQ+ identity, $r(474) = .072, p = .058$.
- The strength of the correlation was weak.
- Higher levels of psychological distress were associated with higher levels of LGBTQ+ identity.
- Multiple linear regression analysis indicated that male participants who graduated college had higher LGBTQ+ identity scores, when compared to the rest of the population ($p < .05$).
- Age and minority status were not significant predictors of LGBTQ+ identity

Regression Model for LGBT Identity

Predictor	B	SE	β
Constant	2.577	1.340	
Age	.023	.024	.044
Sex at Birth*	-.230	.111	-.095
Non-Minority	-.015	.138	-.005
College Graduate*	.239	.114	.097
Psychological Distress	.020	.011	.083

Reference groups: Male, Minority, and Not a College Graduate. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Conclusion

- The data did not support the hypothesis and revealed that individuals who had high LGBT identity had increased psychological distress scores as well
- White males who had graduated college had higher LGBT identity scores than other participants. Individuals with more education could have taken on more external stimuli and internalized it as psychological distress.
- Individuals may have successfully resolved the previous stages of Erikson's Stages of Development and developed ego integrity.
- While older LGBTQ+ adults have endured generational trauma and discrimination, it is possible that some individuals display tremendous resilience and the ability to thrive despite adversity.
- The identification of protective factors among older adults who identify as LGBTQ+ is paramount to aging well and living longer, more meaningful lives. LGBTQ+ persons are more likely to rely on *families of choice*, or friends that they have gained from their community, as they may have severed ties with biological family due to their gender identity or sexual orientation (Grossman et al., 2010).
- Additionally, social workers may seek to develop new programs and interventions designed to aid these individuals with healing from trauma, aging well and finding meaning in their lives



References

- Blando, J. A. (2011). Twice hidden: Older gay and lesbian couples, friends, and intimacy. *Generations*, 25(2), 87-89. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44877611>
- Carver, L. F., Beamish, R., & Phillips, S. P. (2018). Successful aging: Illness and social connections. *Geriatrics*, 3(1), 3. <https://doi.org/10.3390/geriatrics3010003>
- Cetinkol, G., Bastug, G., & Ozel Kizil, E. T. (2020). Poor acceptance of the past is related to depressive symptoms in older adults. *Geropsych: The Journal of Gerontopsychology and Geriatric Psychiatry*, 33(4), 246-251. <https://doi.org/10.1024/1662-9647/a000227>
- Goodcase, E. T., & Love, H. A. (2017). From despair to integrity: Using narrative therapy for older individuals in Erikson's last stage of identity development. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 45(4), 354-363. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-016-0601-6>
- Hendricks, M. L., & Testa, R. J. (2012). A conceptual framework for clinical work with transgender and gender nonconforming clients: An adaptation of the minority stress model. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 43, 460-467. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029597>
- Rispel, L. C., Metcalf, C. A., Cloete, A., Moorman, J., & Reddy, V. (2011). You become afraid to tell them that you are gay: Health service utilization by men who have sex with men in South African cities. *Journal of Public Health Policy*, 32(Suppl. 1), S137-S151. <https://doi.org/10.1057/jphp.2011.29>
- Van Wagenen, A., Driskell, J., & Bradford, J. (2013). "I'm still raring to go": successful aging among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender older adults. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 27(1), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2012.09.001>