Reflecting Resiliency: Openness About Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identity and Its Relationship to Well-Being and Educational Outcomes for LGBT Students

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Abstract For lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth, coming out (i.e., disclosure of LGBT identity to others) can be a key developmental milestone, one that is associated with better psychological well-being. However, this greater visibility may come with increased risk of peer victimization. Being out, therefore, may reflect resilience and may unfold differently depending on ecological context as some spaces may be more or less supportive of LGBT youth than others. This article explores a model of risk and resilience for outness among LGBT youth, including whether it varies by community context. We tested our hypothesized model with a national dataset of 7,816 LGBT secondary school students using multi-group structural equation modeling. Consistent with our hypotheses, outness was related to higher victimization but also to higher self-esteem and lower depression. Greater victimization was related to negative academic outcomes directly and indirectly via diminished well-being. The increases in victimization associated with outness were larger for rural youth, and benefits to well-being partly compensated for their lower well-being overall. This article suggests that being out reflects resilience in the face of higher risk of victimization, in addition to promoting well-being in other ways. Nonetheless, contextual factors influence how this model operates among LGBT youth.

Keywords Gay · Lesbian · Bisexual · Transgender · Adolescence · Bullying

Introduction
Over the past several decades, research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth has expanded in scope as well as become more attentive to diversity within the population. Early studies focused primarily on risk, such as sexual practices, physical and psychological well-being, and the possibility of victimization in school (Talburt 2004). More recently, scholarship has brought attention to positive supports to development and well-being. Some research has incorporated these positive factors into a resilience framework (Mustanski et al. 2011; Saewyc 2011), which is often discussed in the literature both as reflecting an individual, personal quality (i.e., success in a certain domain despite the presence of potential obstacles) (e.g., Masten 2001), as well as a process involving factors that compensate for or protect against the negative effects of risk and as such promote well-being (Fergus and Zimmerman 2005; Lerner 2006; Ungar 2011). This study adopts a resilience framework to understand the relationship between youths’ outness about their LGBT identity and psychological and academic outcomes, recognizing that any model of resilience must be understood contextually (see Ungar 2011).

For LGBT youth, identity development typically involves awareness of one’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity that differs from what one perceives to be the norm; labeling oneself as LGBT; and disclosing LGBT identity to other people (D’Augelli et al. 1998; Diamond 1998; Rosario et al. 2008, 2009; Russell and Van Campen 2011). Although this process unfolds differently for all LGBT people, it typically takes place during adolescence, with recent studies finding initial disclosure occurring around age 14 or 15 (Ryan et al. 2009). For adolescents in general, understanding one’s multiple identities and integrating them into a coherent...
whole are associated with a range of positive outcomes, including better well-being and better relationships with others (Benson et al. 2007; Erikson 1959, 1968; Marcia 1966, 1980). This might particularly be true for LGBT youth who have some positive supports and who have more commonly received positive reactions from peers in school. Research revealing associations between disclosure and higher self-esteem and academic performance and lower anxiety and depression (D’Augelli et al. 2005; Jordan and Deluty 1998; Ueno 2005; Vincke and Van Heeringen 2002) indicates possible benefits of being out to well-being. However, given the presence of anti-LGBT remarks and victimization in school, outness can be accompanied by increased harassment and victimization (Kosciw et al. 2012; Russell et al. 2001a, b). Thus, being out may reflect, as well as promote, resilience within this population. No studies to date have examined these varying associations—including both risk and resilience associated with identity disclosure—in the context of one another. Additionally, studies typically have not examined any associations between the number of people that a youth is out to—what is described in this paper as “outness”—and measures of risk and resilience. Work by Legate et al. (2012) suggests that it is important to consider selectivity (greater variability at the individual level) in outness vis-à-vis the effect on individual well-being.

Studies of LGBT youth have also begun to acknowledge that developmental processes and experiences vary substantially with respect to cultural and contextual factors (Harper and Schneider 2003; Horn et al. 2009; Saewyc 2011; see also Bronfenbrenner 1979). For example, scholars have explored how race and ethnicity influence the process of disclosure (Chung and Katayama 1998; McCready 2010; Ryan 2002; Singh 2012; Dubé and Savin-Williams 1999; Mustanski et al. 2011; Rosario et al. 2008; Ryan et al. 2009) and how family factors—such as parental attitudes (Ryan et al. 2010), religion, and socioeconomic status (Newman and Muzzonigro 1993; Rowatt et al. 2009)—affect the process and timing of identity development and disclosure. More recently, scholars have begun to examine how geographic/locale factors might influence both access to LGBT-related resources as well as the experiences of LGBT youth (e.g., Gray 2009). Urban areas typically have more resources and populations with more favorable attitudes towards LGBT issues (Dillon and Savage 2006; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2003), and perhaps as a result, LGBT youth in these areas tend to have better school experiences overall than those in suburban and rural areas, where support for LGBT students might be less available (Palmer et al. 2012).

This paper acknowledges that LGBT identity development, and particularly disclosure, is a complex process that involves risks and, as such, the decision to disclose may reflect an already present resilience, or individual quality or personal characteristic. In addition, outness may promote further benefits due to its associations with better psychological well-being, reflecting an ongoing, protective process. Although an examination of a resilience perspective is warranted in the literature, it is important to balance this need with recognition that victimization is still an everyday experience for many LGBT youth, and identity exploration and disclosure occurs in the context of risk. Additionally, these everyday school experiences for LGBT youth with their accompanying risks and benefits are also embedded within larger community contexts that can reflect a wide range of attitudes and acceptance of LGBT youth. Using survey data from more than 8,000 LGBT youth, this paper examines a model of outness as both risk and resilience, accounting for LGBT youth’s interpersonal experiences in school and the community context (i.e., locale and geographic settings) in which they occur.

**Background**

**Victimization**

LGBT youth attend schools and live in a society that produces and reproduces heterosexuality as the only “normal” and viable option (Chesir-Teran and Hughes 2009; Kehily 2002) while simultaneously reinforcing rigid gender norms that marginalize those who do not conform to the binary system of gender (Connell 1996). As a result, LGBT youth, who fall outside these normative constructs, are often subject to violence, discrimination, and marginalization, including sexual harassment and physical assault (Kosciw et al. 2012). Research on the school experiences of LGBT youth has consistently revealed higher rates of victimization compared to their non-LGBT peers (e.g., Pilkington and D’Augelli 1995; D’Augelli et al. 2002; Harris Interactive and GLSEN 2005).

**Effects of Victimization**

Experiences of harassment in school can interfere with an LGBT youth’s academic achievement, connection to the school community, and psychological well-being (Kosciw et al. 2012; Murdock and Bolch 2005; Poteat and Espelage 2007; Russell et al. 2011). Research among the general student population has demonstrated that those who experience or perceive their school climate as hostile or unsafe are less likely to feel a sense of connection or belonging to the school community and environment (Juvonen et al. 2000; Eisenberg et al. 2003), which may in turn contribute to lower positive academic and psychological health.
outcomes (Roeser et al. 1996; Anderman 2002). Similar relationships among indicators of school climate, a student’s connection to the school environment, and academic and psychological health outcomes have been observed in studies of LGBT youth (Kosciw et al. 2012; Murdock and Bolch 2005). School-based victimization of LGBT youth has been linked directly to a number of academic outcomes, such as lower GPAs (Kosciw et al. 2012; Rostosky et al. 2003; Russell et al. 2001), lower aspirations to pursue post-secondary education (Kosciw et al. 2012), and truancy (Massachusetts Department of Education 2006; Seelman et al. 2012). It is likely that negative school experiences explain why LGB youth, compared to their non-LGB peers, report more mental health problems (D’Augelli 2002), suicidal ideation and behavior (Garofalo et al. 2006; Robin et al. 2002), substance use (Bontempo and D’Augelli 2002; Faulkner and Cranston 1998; Garofalo et al. 1998), and sexual risk-taking behaviors (Garofalo et al. 1998; Goodenow et al. 2002).

Contextual Factors Associated with Victimization

Experiences of victimization or isolation may be especially pronounced for LGBT youth in certain schools or communities. Although attitudes toward LGBT issues have improved in recent years, there remain substantial discrepancies in support based on both region and locale (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2003, 2012). Therefore, in certain schools or community contexts, being LGBT may be associated with greater risks. For instance, Palmer et al. (2012) found in a national study of LGBT youth that those in schools in rural areas experienced more frequent anti-LGBT language and greater levels of victimization than students in suburban and urban schools. Hatzenbuehler (2011) has additionally documented how the supportiveness of the local community of LGBT issues mediates the relationship between victimization and suicidality among LGBT youth. Thus, the effects of victimization on well-being are better understood by accounting for the influence of the surrounding context.

Identity Disclosure

Harter (1990, 1998) suggests that for youth in general, the use of labels during identity development helps adolescents view different facets of themselves as part of a coherent whole; thus, labeling oneself as LGBT could promote well-being through the important developmental process of identity consolidation (Erikson 1968). Along with awareness, confusion, labeling, and integration, disclosure of LGBT identity to others (i.e., coming out) and being out in general are commonly acknowledged hallmarks of LGBT identity development (D’Augelli et al. 1998; Diamond 1998; Rosario et al. 2008; Russell and Van Campen 2011). However, due to heteronormativity and the prominence of the gender binary in most schools, youth are generally expected to be both heterosexual and conform to gender norms. As such, many LGBT youth may feel discouraged from telling people about being LGBT and/or delay coming out (Ryan and Diaz 2005). In addition, many LGBT youth report fearing a loss of social support and experiences of victimization upon coming out (Anhalt and Morris 2004; Corrigan and Matthews 2003; D’Augelli et al. 1998; Diamond and Lucas 2004; Katz-Wise and Hyde 2012; Kosciw et al. 2012). Moreover, many LGBT youth may not voluntarily disclose their identities, but may be outed by other people without their permission or be assumed to be LGBT based on their personal characteristics.

Outness and Victimization

Much of the research on LGBT youth has measured being out as a dichotomous variable (out to anyone vs. not being out at all) and does not account for the effects of degree of openness about sexual orientation and/or gender identity (i.e., outness) on examined outcomes. As a result, relatively little is known about the relationship between outness and experiences of victimization. Findings from some of our previous research as well as from other scholarship have suggested that as LGBT students are more out to school peers and staff, experiences of school-based victimization increase as well (Chesir-Teran and Hughes 2009; D’Augelli et al. 2002; Kosciw et al. 2010). A national sample of LGBT secondary school students (Kosciw et al. 2010) reported more experiences of victimization based on sexual orientation and gender expression the more out they were to peers in their school. Similarly, in their analysis of a national internet survey of LGBQ high school students, Chesir-Teran and Hughes (2009) found that outness was significantly related to scores on measures of perceived harassment, and that LGBQ students who were out reported more experiences of victimization compared to those who were not out.

Outness and Positive Well-Being

Youth typically disclose their LGBT identities first to another LGBT person, then to close friends who may or may not be LGBT, then to other peers, adults, and finally to family members (D’Augelli et al. 1998; Diamond 1998; Rosario et al. 2008), which may reflect a continuum from lowest to highest risk, and the weighing of support to possible loss of resources. Being out to others, such as family and peers, has been found to relate to better psychological well-being, including higher self-esteem and lower depression (Kosciw et al. 2010). In addition, being
out has been found to increase satisfaction with the support that sexual minority youth receive from their social networks (Grossman and Kerner 1998). The particular details of disclosure, including recipient as well as reaction and whether disclosure was voluntary, may be related to well-being in unique ways. More accepting reactions from others upon disclosure has been found to buffer the effects of negative reactions from others on increased alcohol use (Rosario et al. 2009), and family support has been found to buffer the effects of sexual orientation-based victimization (Hershberger and D’Augelli 1995) and contribute to greater identity integration (Rosario et al. 2008).

Nonetheless, outness is accompanied by negative experiences for many LGBT youth, which in turn, and may be associated with negative health outcomes for some youth. Some research suggests that stigma against LGBT people explains, in part, the relationships between being out and the negative psychosocial outcomes that some LGBT youth experience, revealing complex associations between outness and psychosocial health. For example, a study of 156 LGB youth in Indiana (Wright and Perry 2006) found that being more out to one’s social network was related to lower levels of sexual identity distress (i.e., negative feelings about one’s LGB identity). Conversely, Rosario et al. (2001) found that the disclosure of sexual orientation to others and greater involvement in gay and lesbian activities were associated with higher levels of anxiety and conduct problems. Negative parental reactions to disclosure of sexual orientation may also contribute to greater psychological health problems among disclosing youth (D’Augelli 2002; Ryan et al. 2009), and negative reactions to disclosure in general have been found to be associated with increases in alcohol and drug use among LGB youth, though many of these risk factors have been found to decrease over time as youth identify supportive resources and become more comfortable with their identities (Rosario et al. 2009).

Outness and Community Context

Adding a layer of complexity to LGBT identity development and disclosure is the recognition that the process occurs in an ecological context and at the intersection of multiple identities and cultures. Although LGBT youth may inherently consider risks in disclosure, as evidenced by disclosure timelines that typically progress from close friends to parents some time later, other elements, such as community context, may factor into decisions as well. Legate et al. (2012) found that youth were more likely to disclose in supportive contexts, and Kosciw et al. (2010) have found LGBT youth more likely to be out to their school peers when they rate them as more accepting. In certain locales—such as some small town and rural areas of the country (Dillon and Savage 2006; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2003)—there may be more prevalent negative attitudes about homosexuality which may discourage youth in these contexts from coming out. However, results from another large national study of LGBT youth show similar rates of outness across locales (GLSEN et al. 2013), suggesting that many LGBT youth are undoubtedly coming out in community contexts that are not supportive.

Objectives and Research Questions

Given that youth face a range of reactions and possible consequences to being out at school, it is important to understand how identifying as LGBT affects the educational experience. This article explores simultaneously the potential benefits and consequences of disclosure of LGBT identity among LGBT youth in school settings. In addition, it examines how this model of resilience may vary by community context (i.e., urbanicity). Two research questions are:

1. Does outness in school reflect qualities of resilience?
2. Does this concept of outness as resilience apply equally well across community contexts?

We hypothesized that outness would be related to higher victimization but also to higher self-esteem and lower levels of depression. Furthermore, we hypothesized that outness would be indirectly associated with academic outcomes, negatively via victimization and positively through greater self-esteem and well-being. In addition, we hypothesized that although the model would fit across contexts, the strength of some paths would differ by locale.

Methods

Sampling

Data came from a larger study on the school-related experiences of LGBT secondary school students (Kosciw et al. 2012). To obtain a more representative sample of LGBT youth, we used multiple recruitment methods. Notices and announcements of the survey, which were available online, were sent through GLSEN’s email and chapter networks as well as through national, regional, and local organizations that provide services to or advocate on behalf of LGBT youth. In addition, a paper version of the survey was made available via local LGBT community groups given that some LGBT youth may be less likely to participate via the Internet (resulting in 139 completed paper surveys)—some youth may not have Internet access.
at home or at school and some youth may have access but might feel uncomfortable using those computers to access an LGBT-related survey or website. To ensure representation of transgender youth, youth of color, and youth in rural communities, special outreach efforts were made to notify groups and organizations that work predominantly with these populations about the survey. Contacting participants only through LGBT youth-serving groups and organizations would have limited our ability to reach LGBT students who were not connected to LGBT communities in some way. Thus, in order to broaden our reach to LGBT students who may not have had such connections, we conducted targeted advertising on social media sites. Notices about the survey were shown to users between 13 and 18 years of age who gave some indication on their profile that they were lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Data collection occurred between April and August, 2011. Participants were provided a written informed consent/assent briefing—the first page of both Internet and paper surveys contained information about the nature of the study, and youth indicated whether they agreed or declined to participate in the survey before proceeding. Youth were excluded from the study if they were not in a K–12 school at some point during the 2010–2011 school year, were not in school in the United States, or identified as heterosexual (except for those who were also transgender). Given the nature of the survey method and in order to protect the anonymity of the respondents (see Mustanski 2011), documentation of informed consent/assent and parental consent were waived by GLSEN’s Research Ethics Review Committee. Given that many LGBT youth in the sample may not be out to their parents or peers, requiring such documentation would potentially expose them to increased risk of harm or deter them from participating in the study.

The final sample, after listwise deletion, consisted of a total of 7,816 students between the ages of 13 and 20 (M = 16.0 years) from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The sample of students represented 3,094 school districts, with a mean of 2.42 students per school district represented in the study, and a median and mode of one student per district. In considering the possibility of duplicate responses, we chose not to include cookies that would restrict one response from a single IP address because that might restrict students at the same school, library, or community center from taking the survey. Although it is possible that a student could take the survey more than once, given the length of the survey, it would seem highly unlikely. We do, however, exclude participants with a pattern of incomplete and illogical responses, and we also ask respondents to verify their age at two different time points during the survey. About two-thirds of the sample (67.9 %) was White. Half (49.6 %) was female, 35.2 % was male, 8.3 % was transgender, and 7.0 % another gender (e.g., genderqueer). Nearly two-thirds identified as gay or lesbian (61.3 %); 27.2 % identified as bisexual; and 11.6 % identified as queer, questioning, or another sexual orientation. Respondents were fairly evenly split across urban (28.3 %), suburban (42.1 %), and rural (29.5 %) locales, and were 16.0 years old on average. Descriptive statistics for variables used in analysis are shown in Tables 1 and 2. Bivariate correlations among variables are shown in Table 3.

Measures

Outness

Two items measured the degree to which students were out: “Which of the following best describes how ‘out’ you are to [other students/to teachers and other school staff] at your school about your being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning or queer?” (0 = out to none; 1 = out to only a few; 2 = out to most; 3 = out to all).

Victimization

Participants were asked about the frequency of experiencing verbal harassment, physical harassment, and physical assault in school in the past school year due to their sexual orientation or gender expression using a five-point response scale (0 = never; 1 = rarely; 2 = sometimes; 3 = often; 4 = frequently). In order to assess youths’ overall victimization for sexual orientation and for gender expression, weighted variables were created using the frequency of victimization across the three severity levels (verbal harassment, physical harassment, and physical assault), giving more weight to physical harassment (×1.5) and, in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Frequencies of outness by community context</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>Overall (N = 7,816)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outness to peers (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A few</td>
<td>29.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>36.3</td>
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</table>

Outness to school staff (%) |
| None | 35.5 | 34.1 | 36.9 | 35.0 |
| A few | 27.9 | 26.7 | 29.3 | 27.0 |
| Most | 13.9 | 14.5 | 13.6 | 13.9 |
| All | 22.7 | 24.7 | 20.2 | 24.1 |
turn, physical assault (×3) because of their relative severity. One reason for creating these weighted variables was that types of victimization across severity levels were correlated moderately to highly. For both victimization related to sexual orientation and victimization related to gender expression, physical harassment was highly correlated with verbal harassment (r = .64 for sexual orientation and .61 for gender expression) and physical assault (r’s = .74 and .71, respectively), and verbal harassment and physical assault were moderately correlated (r = .46 and .42, respectively). Additionally, more severe types of victimization occurred less frequently. Therefore, we believe that the weighted variables provide better estimates of overall victimization.

Well-Being

We used two key indicators of psychological well-being: self-esteem and depression. Participants completed the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg 1989). RSE items ask respondents how much they agree with statements regarding their global self-worth using a 4-point Likert scale (0 = strongly disagree; 3 = strongly agree). This measure has demonstrated considerable reliability and validity among general adolescent samples in several studies (Demo 1985; Hagborg 1996), and for our LGBT adolescent sample, the scale also had high internal reliability (Cronbach’s α = .94). Mean total scores, with higher scores indicating more positive self-esteem, were computed. Depression was measured using the 20-item Likert-type Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale (CES-D; Radloff 1977). Scale items were summed (range 0–60), with higher scores indicating greater depressive symptoms; the scale demonstrated high internal reliability (Cronbach’s α = .93).

Academic Outcomes

Missing school: To assess education access, we asked participants how many days in the prior month they had missed school because of feeling uncomfortable or unsafe (0 = 0 times; 1 = 1 day; 2 = 2 or 3 days; 3 = 4 or

| Table 2 | Means of independent and dependent variables by community context (standard deviation of full sample in parentheses) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Variable (range) | Overall (N = 7,816) | Urban (n = 2,215) | Suburban (n = 3,293) | Rural (n = 2,308) | Test of difference (F<sub>2,7813</sub>) |
| Outness to peers (0–3)<sup>a</sup> | 1.91 (.98) | 1.93 | 1.86 | 1.96 | 7.59** |
| Outness to staff (0–3)<sup>a</sup> | 1.24 (1.16) | 1.30 | 1.17 | 1.27 | 9.45*** |
| Victimization SO (0–22)<sup>b</sup> | 4.14 (5.03) | 3.85 | 3.76 | 4.97 | 44.91*** |
| Victimization GE (0–22)<sup>b</sup> | 2.98 (4.43) | 2.87 | 2.72 | 3.44 | 18.86*** |
| Depression (0–60)<sup>b</sup> | 25.45 (14.22) | 24.94 | 24.98 | 26.49 | 9.39* |
| Self-esteem (0–3)<sup>b</sup> | 1.57 (.71) | 1.58 | 1.58 | 1.54 | 3.02* |
| GPA (0–4)<sup>b</sup> | 3.08 (.87) | 3.05 | 3.09 | 3.10 | 1.48 |
| Missed days of school (0–4)<sup>b</sup> | .71 (1.20) | .69 | .66 | .79 | 8.70*** |

SO sexual orientation, GE gender expression
<sup>a</sup> Post-hoc tests indicated that suburban youth were significantly different from urban and rural youth
<sup>b</sup> Post-hoc tests indicated that only rural youth were significantly different from urban and suburban youth

| Table 3 | Correlations among independent and dependent variables |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Vict SO | Vict GE | Out peers | Out staff | Depression | Self-est | GPA | Miss Sch |
| 1 | .75 | .18 | .17 | .41 | −.26 | −.21 | .46 |
| Vict GE | 1 | .09 | .11 | .37 | −.22 | −.18 | .40 |
| Outness to peers | 1 | .75 | −.07 | .13 | −.10 | .00NS |
| Outness to staff | 1 | −.09 | .16 | −.09 | .00NS |
| Depression | 1 | −.73 | −.25 | .44 |
| Self-esteem | 1 | .27 | −.30 |
| GPA | 1 | −.29 |
| Missed days of school | 1 |

All correlations significant at p < .001 unless indicated by NS

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001
Participants were asked to describe the grades they had received in school in the 2010–2011 school year and these were then coded to correspond to a traditional 4-point scale (4 = mostly As; 3.5 = As and Bs; 3 = mostly Bs and Cs; 2 = mostly Cs; 1.5 = Cs and Ds; 1 = mostly Ds; 0 = mostly Fs). A recent meta-analysis of self-reported GPA suggests high reliability between actual and self-reported GPAs (90% credibility intervals between .74 and .90) for high school students (Kuncel et al. 2005).

Community Context

School context (urban, suburban, and small town/rural) was created by matching the school district name and/or zip code provided by the participants with school district locale information from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The NCES’s 12-category locale classification, ranging from remote rural area to large urban areas, was collapsed into three categories for the purposes of this article. For respondents who did not provide this information, respondents’ own reports of their school’s locale were used.

Analysis

We tested our hypothesized model using multi-group structural equation modeling, as depicted in Fig. 1. Results for the full sample are indicated in the figure; differences in the strength of path coefficients by community context are indicated below the figure.

Results

As shown in Table 1, the vast majority of youth in the study were out to at least one peer in school, and nearly two-thirds reported that they were out to most or all of their peers at school. Whereas the majority of youth also reported being out to at least one school staff person, only about a third reported being out to most or all staff.

Results from the SEM support that our hypotheses that outness would be related to higher school-based victimization. Fit statistics from the SEM indicated that our hypothesized model fit the data well for the entire sample: the comparative fit index (CFI) was 0.989, and the root-mean-
Table 4  Fit statistics for structural equation modeling

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<th></th>
<th>Overall (N = 7,816)</th>
<th>Urban (n = 2,215)</th>
<th>Suburban (n = 3,293)</th>
<th>Rural (n = 2,308)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$\chi^2$ (df)</td>
<td>279.801 (11)</td>
<td>85.089 (11)</td>
<td>137.738 (11)</td>
<td>84.238 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRMR</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>.030</td>
<td>.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMSEA</td>
<td>.056</td>
<td>.055</td>
<td>.059</td>
<td>.054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNFI</td>
<td>.973</td>
<td>.973</td>
<td>.969</td>
<td>.975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFI</td>
<td>.989</td>
<td>.989</td>
<td>.988</td>
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Squared error of approximation (RMSEA) was .056 (see Table 4). Although a significant Chi square test [$\chi^2(df = 11, n = 7,816) = 279.801, p < .001$] can indicate model mis-specification, the model has a good fit given that the other fit indices are within acceptable ranges (e.g., RMSEA = .06; CFI > .95. See Hu and Bentler 1995; Kline 2005) and given the Chi square test’s sensitivity to large sample sizes. The model fit similarly well across locale groups, with the RMSEA for each locale below the .06 cutoff frequently used to indicate good model fit.

Consistent with our hypotheses, we found that, for LGBT youth overall, higher outness to both students and staff was related to higher reports of in-school victimization, but also with higher self-esteem and decreased depression. Greater victimization was related to negative academic outcomes directly and indirectly via diminished well-being. Outness also had a positive indirect contribution to GPA via higher self-esteem and lower depression, and was associated with fewer missed days of school via lower depression.

We observed some differences in the model by community context. As shown in Table 2, results from analyses of variance indicated that rural youth were not less likely to be out, but these youth exhibited lower well-being and academic success. Comparisons of the models across community contexts indicate that the increases in victimization associated with outness were substantially larger for rural youth than for urban and suburban youth (.26 vs. .16 and .16, respectively; $t$ using pooled standard errors = 3.358 and 3.383). In addition, the path between depression and missed days of school was larger for rural than urban students (.32 vs. .25, $t = 2.121$), and the path between depression and GPA revealed a similar, albeit only marginally significant, relationship ($-.09$ vs. $-.01$, $t = 1.767$). In addition, the direct path from victimization to missing school was stronger for urban students than for rural and suburban LGBT students (.41 vs. .35 and .34, respectively; $t = 2.169$ and $2.326$).

Differences in path coefficients across models were also associated with varying overall effects of outness on academic outcomes. Although the negative effects of outness via victimization totaled -.049, when the positive effects of outness via better well-being were considered, the overall effect was essentially null, at .005. Given the weaker relationship between outness and victimization for urban students, and the lack of a relationship for them between depression and GPA, outness for them was actually a net positive .011 for GPA; outness was associated with a slight increase in missed days of school for urban students (.039). Although outness was associated with enhanced well-being for rural youth as well as other youth, the indirect path from outness to GPA via victimization and depression may contribute to more negative outcomes among rural LGBT youth than for other LGBT youth. The overall relationship between outness and GPA was essentially a net null for rural students: -.006; outness was associated with greater missed days of school for rural students (.071), as it was for urban and suburban students.

Discussion

Our findings show that for LGBT youth in today’s middle schools and high schools in the United States, being open about one’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity can have negative effects with regard to the peer-to-peer social environment of schools. Yet it has potentially protective benefits that may promote well-being and school success as well. Nonetheless, results show that LGBT students in different school and community contexts experience outness differently. They may experience differential effects of being out on victimization, as well as respond to incidents of victimization differently. For instance, urban students revealed lower levels of victimization overall and smaller increases in victimization with outness compared to rural students, which may reflect generally more positive school climates in urban areas. When victimization does occur, however, urban students may be more likely to cope with school-related problems by seeking to avoid the school environment.

The model revealed a slightly different picture for LGBT students in rural schools. They demonstrated a much stronger relationship between outness and victimization, but similar paths from outness to well-being. Furthermore, the relationships between depression and negative academic outcomes were generally stronger for rural students than for urban students. Thus, rural students may see more of the negative effects of being out, and this heightened negative contribution may not necessarily be offset by the positive effects of being out, in that the paths between outness and the two well-being indicators did not vary in strength by community context. We would caution the reader not to presume that such findings should in any way reflect or support the attitude that students in such communities should not come out. The positive effects of outness through
well-being greatly reduced the negative effects via victimization. In addition, outness may be associated with a host of other benefits not examined here, and may promote better well-being over the lifecourse than simply the academic outcomes assessed in this study. Nonetheless, this research indicates that the decision to come out may be preceded by an analysis of its risks and rewards, and thus contribute differently toward resilience for some youth.

It is important to consider the various characteristics of and interaction with contexts and how they might support or reflect resilience. Rural youth are more likely to face contexts and how they might support differently toward resilience for some youth. An analysis of its risks and rewards, and thus contribute to the school environment, differences in the strength or pattern of relationships between rural youth and their non-rural peers did not emerge. Thus, rural youth may interact with their environments (and vice versa) in different ways compared to their peers, but in ways that do not alter their underlying psychological experiences. Future research may need to consider psychological attachment to school to explore this possibility further.

Limitations

The data presented here were cross-sectional, which introduced an assumption in the SEM that variables were static over time. This assumption may be less tenable for some predictors, such as victimization and self-esteem, than for others, which may have resulted in over- or underestimated paths among predictors and outcomes. Similarly, the paths are assumed to flow in the direction in which they are depicted. This article, as with SEM in general, offers a plausible explanation of the relations observed among the data. However, alternative and sometimes equivalent models are possible (Kline 2005; Lee and Hershberger 1990; MacCallum and Austin 2000). It is possible, for instance, that the causal paths examined in this study actually flow in the reverse direction; however, these potential equivalent models are generally less theoretically plausible. Although it is conceivable that students with high levels of self-esteem (and/or low levels of depression) would be more likely to report positive experiences, it is less plausible that such factors would influence their assessment of how out they are.

The sample consists of youth who already define themselves as LGBT and therefore may exclude youth who will eventually identify as LGBT but may not yet do so; likewise, it includes youth who currently identify as LGBT but may not in the future. Of note, this study does not account for time since disclosure, which likely has substantial effects on one’s exposure to victimization as well as the trajectory of one’s psychosocial well-being. It also does not ask separate items about outness regarding transgender status and sexual orientation for transgender youth, who may exhibit different levels of outness about these identities. In addition, this study examines only outness in the school context, which may or may not correspond to outness to parents, and thus may or may not preclude parental support. Additional factors, including peer and parental support, could help further contextualize the effects of disclosure and their possible relation to resilience. This study also likely contains few youth who are early in the stages of disclosure, as the average age of respondents was 16 and as youth were far enough along in their identity as LGBT to learn about and participate in the study expressly for LGBT youth. As such, it may reveal a more resilient sample. A greater concentration of youth at earlier developmental stages might reveal different relationships among disclosure, well-being and academic outcomes.

We cannot know how well our sample represents the general LGBT youth population because there are no national statistics on the demographic breakdown of LGBT-identified youth. For example, the youth in our study were almost universally out to other students, but fewer were out to school staff. Given there are no known parameters about LGBT youth outness, we cannot know whether our sample reflects the population or is more or less out than average. However, numerous outreach
strategies were employed to obtain as diverse a sample, and as similar to the US secondary student population, as possible. Finally, this study assumes a homogeneity of experiences within the three types of communities examined here; it is likely that the experiences of LGBT youth were more complex than were permitted by analysis here.

Conclusion and Implications

This article examined a model of outness and finds that despite higher levels of victimization associated with being out, the large majority of LGBT youth in this sample are indeed out. Given that outness is often accompanied by victimization, outness does suggest an element of resilience in LGBT youth, perhaps especially because it is also associated with improved well-being in the face of considerable risks. Nonetheless, contextual factors influence how this model of resilience operates among LGBT youth. This article thus contributes to a fuller understanding of development, resilience, and well-being among LGBT youth.

Schools, particularly those in areas less supportive of LGBT students, have a responsibility to increase resources for these students to help them thrive. Nevertheless, this responsibility does not rest solely with educators and administrators. As attitudes about LGBT people are changing and laws becoming more inclusive, the negative relationships between outness and victimization may weaken over time. However, in the mean time, advocates and allies for LGBT youth can work toward affecting change in curricular and policy standards regarding LGBT inclusion and safety, and districts can continue to implement and enforce policies that prohibit anti-LGBT bullying and encourage reporting of victimization; and parents and peers can intervene when necessary and intentionally demonstrate support.

References


