

## Contextualizing LGBQ Youths' Experiences with Victimization and Negative Outcomes

R&PD Project Description for Deeanna M. Button, Ph.D

### Aims and Objectives of the Project

I am requesting a stipend so I can allocate time to work on a qualitative research article during summer 2014. The goal of the project is to use interview data from 20 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning (LGBQ) young adults to more fully understand LGBQ youths' interrelated experiences with victimization and negative outcomes. I will integrate sociological perspectives of sexuality with criminology's general strain theory (GST) to better understand the experiences that LGBQ youth have with multiple forms of victimization and how these experiences are related to multiple negative outcomes.

Compared to heterosexual youth, LGBQ youth experience general peer victimization and victimization related to anti-gay harassment at greater rates.<sup>i</sup> The victimization that many LGBQ youth experience increases the risk for multiple negative outcomes, including substance use and considering, planning, and/or attempting suicide.<sup>ii</sup> While the link between victimization and negative outcomes for LGBQ youth has been clearly established, most studies examining these relationships are quantitative and narrowly focus on problematic behaviors at the individual level rather than the larger *processes* in which these problems emerge and develop.<sup>iii</sup> In particular, this research overlooks the social process of stigmatization that supports ideologies of heterosexuality as natural and normal (heteronormativity), denigrates non-heterosexual behavior/identities (heterosexism), and permits prejudice directed at non-heterosexual behavior/identities (homophobia). Much of this research also neglects processes of youth resiliency by overlooking the ways that LGBQ youth successfully navigate victimization experiences and LGBQ youths' own understandings of how victimization is related to subsequent negative outcomes.

Research from the fields of sociology and criminology examine these processes independently, but the findings remain largely disjointed. Drawing on sexuality research to frame this approach can be helpful in that these scholars examine the influence of overarching cultural influences, like the normalization of heterosexuality and the problematizing of homosexuality on social interactions, such as victimization. This particular body of scholarship demonstrates the influence of these macro level processes on LGBQ youth through the devaluation of non-heterosexual behaviors/identities that permit and encourage victimization of LGBQ youth.<sup>iv</sup> Similarly, GST from criminology has been used to examine the connection between interactional experiences, like victimization, and individual outcomes, including substance use and suicidality. According to this theory, strain or stress is a central cause of crime and other negative behaviors. Strain results when an individual is not being treated as she or he would like to be treated. Subsequent negative emotions arise and serve as a catalyst to negative, criminal behaviors.<sup>v</sup> Couched in an integrated theoretical framework, the analysis of interview data from young adults who identify as LGBQ will help further clarify the relationship between victimization and negative outcomes by examining the interconnected processes that occur at the macro level, including stigmatization; interactional level, such as victimization; and individual level, like negative outcomes. A qualitative methodological approach that employs the use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews is an ideal way to capture the context that accompanies these experiences as well as the perceptions of the youth involved.<sup>vi</sup>

R&PD funding would support the production of a qualitative research article that links theoretical perspectives from sociology and criminology to better understand LGTQ youths' interrelated experiences with victimization and negative outcomes. Using previously collected dissertation data, I will examine

1. LGBQ youths' experiences with victimization and analyze how LGBQ youth explain and understand the victimization they experience;
2. LGBQ youths' experiences with negative outcomes and analyze how LGBQ youth explain and understand these experiences;
3. LGBQ youths' resiliency in coping with victimization and negative outcomes.

### Background Work Already Accomplished

I have already completed some work on the proposed study, which stems from my dissertation: *Understanding the Experiences of LGBQ Youth: A Mixed Methods Approach to Examining the Interrelationships between General Peer Victimization, Negative Outcomes, and Social Support*. I will

prepare and extend analyses completed in Chapter 6 (*Contextualizing LGBQ Youths' Experiences with Victimization and Negative Outcomes*) for publication. The proposed study can build off the in-depth review of the literature on LGBQ victimization and outcomes related to victimization (Chapter 2). My dissertation includes an explanation of and review of the literature on GST (Chapter 3) as well as a detailed discussion of the data and methodological approach (Chapter 4) that will be used in the proposed study. RSC IRB approval for this study has already been granted. Additionally, I completed and submitted a quantitative research article, titled *Understanding the Effects of Victimization: Applying General Strain Theory to the Experiences of LGBQ Youth*, for publication.<sup>vii</sup> The proposed study builds on this recently submitted work by using qualitative data to contextualize the relationship between LGBQ youths' victimization and negative outcome experiences in larger, macro level ideological systems of heteronormativity, heterosexism, and homophobia. The proposed study further elucidates the theoretical links between macro, interactional, and individual level processes that contribute to the victimization and negative outcomes experienced by many LGBQ youth.

### **Procedures and Methodology**

A summer stipend will allow time to work on the manuscript. This study will focus on respondents' understandings of their interconnected experiences with macro level processes of stigmatization; interactional level experiences, including general peer victimization; and individual level experiences with negative outcomes, namely substance use and mental health problems. This study uses interview data from 20 LGBQ young adults. Although quantitative studies depend heavily on large numbers of participants, qualitative research relies more on achieving saturation, the point at which no new information arises.<sup>viii</sup> By interviewing 20 LGBQ young adults, the researcher was able to reach saturation. Data collection via in-depth interviews was considered complete at 20 interviews because the last several interviews did not generate new or unique information.

While a good proportion of work (i.e., the initial literature review, recruiting and interviewing of participants, transcription, and initial data analysis) is complete, much work remains. I need to include newly published literature on LGBQ victimization, negative outcomes, and GST, and I need to complete additional analyses. Furthermore, I need to prepare and edit the manuscript for publication. My timeline to complete this work is as follows:

- July: Complete additional qualitative analysis using Atlas.Ti software. Although all the data are coded, I need to review the transcripts to ensure that all relevant data have been included. This builds off Chapter 6 of my dissertation.
- August: Write up additional analyses and update the literature on LGBQ victimization, outcomes related to victimization, and studies related to GST. Because this manuscript builds off my recently submitted article,<sup>ix</sup> the update will include a review of my own work and the work of other recently published scholars. This step uses Chapters 2 and 3 of my dissertation.
- September: Finalize the Introduction section and prepare the Methodology section of the article. The Methodology section is based on Chapter 4 of my dissertation.
- October: Write the Discussion section of the article with a strong emphasis on the theoretical and policy implications of the study.
- November to December: Finalize the article for publication. This includes revising/editing the manuscript and formatting it to journal specifications. I would like to submit the manuscript for publication by the end of 2014.

### **Importance and Value**

This project is important for several reasons. First, it offers major theoretical advancements to the fields of sociology of sexuality and criminology. Integrating theoretical constructs from the sociology of sexuality and GST provides context to the empirical relationships between victimization and negative outcomes. Previous research has clearly established a connection between each of these constructs, but it fails to explain why and how they are related. The use of rich qualitative interview data allows for an

examination of the processes that connect LGBQ youths' experiences with victimization and negative outcomes by exploring how LGBQ youth themselves make sense of, understand, and explain the interrelationships between victimization and negative outcomes. With an integrated theoretical framework that considers macro, interactional, and individual level processes, we are better able to theorize the experiences of LGBQ youth.

Second, this study extends the current state of criminological research by focusing on sexuality and the experiences of LGBQ youth. Criminologists often overlook sexuality as a factor that shapes experiences related to crime and delinquency. The proposed study is groundbreaking in that it recognizes that LGBQ youth have unique experiences based on their sexual identity. Additionally, it is one of few studies that employs a mainstream criminological theory to understand the marginalized experiences of LGBQ youth. Mainstream criminological theories are criticized for their assertions of theoretical generalizability to all groups/populations, particularly marginalized ones.<sup>x</sup> This study will empirically assess the ability of GST to account for LGBQ youths' interrelated experiences of victimization and negative outcomes. In essence, this research helps contribute to the "queering of criminology," a pursuit that has recently been noticed by well-known theoretical journals, like *Critical Criminology: An International Journal*.

Third, this study is among limited research that acknowledges LGBQ youth resiliency. Rather than just concentrating on victimization and subsequent consequences, the current study highlights youth resiliency by focusing on their responses and survival strategies used to navigate victimization experiences. GST recognizes that coping with strain may involve deleterious methods, including substance use or self-harm.<sup>xi</sup> Although such mechanisms may not be conventional, normal, or healthy, they nonetheless allow individuals to manage and survive the strain that they experience. This is a particularly important contribution as it helps reframe the current discussion on LGBQ youth. Findings from earlier studies typically portray LGBQ youth as a vulnerable population that often lacks resiliency.<sup>xii</sup> LGBQ researcher Savin-Williams<sup>xiii</sup> implores scholars to examine and acknowledge both the vulnerability and resiliency that LGBQ youth present in their experiences with victimization. The data from the present study contribute to this discussion by not only emphasizing the heightened vulnerability of victimization and negative outcomes that LGBQ youth face, but they also underscore LGBQ youths' resiliency in surviving these experiences.

Finally, the findings from these studies have the potential to help guide policy and programmatic initiatives. More closely examining the interrelationships between victimization and negative from LGBQ youths' perspectives will surely aid policymakers in creating enhanced prevention and intervention mechanisms.

### **Further Research**

The current study is another step in maintaining a productive research agenda. After the submission of this article, I will continue preparing my dissertation findings for publication. The next step in this endeavor is exploring the unique conceptualization of social support by LGBQ youth. Additionally, I am simultaneously engaged with an international project that assesses global attitudes toward sexuality. For this project, I am in the process of entering, cleaning, and merging data collected from four U.S. universities and four Chinese universities. My overarching goal is to understand LGBQ youths' experiences with victimization, negative outcomes, and social support from a global perspective. Given that our social interactions are becoming increasingly globalized, it would be a useful undertaking to understand the experiences of LGBQ youth from a global perspective.

### **Outcomes**

I will submit the article for publication. Potential journal outlets include *Critical Criminology: An International Journal*, *Feminist Criminology*, and *Youth and Violence*. In addition to the articles, I will submit a proposal to participate in RSC's Day of Scholarship 2015 and present my findings at the annual meetings of the American Society of Criminology 2015.