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Do We Belong? Promoting a Sense of Belonging in LGBTQ Youth Through Artistic Community Engagement: A Literature Review

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Abstract

This literature review examines the potential of collaborative art making as a tool to foster a sense of belonging in today's gender and sexual minority youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ). Living with a unique layer of minority stress, LGBTQ youth are at high risk for developing mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation due to ostracization and rejection from their families and communities. By reviewing the implementation of collaborative art making to bring together other marginalized groups across cultural backgrounds as well as the use of art making with LGBTQ youth for purposes such as political activism, community outreach and self advocacy, it is concluded that collaborative art making could be a useful method to combat thwarted belongingness and diminish resulting mental health issues.

Key words: LGBTQ youth, thwarted belongingness, collaborative art

The author is a queer white millenial woman living in north eastern United States of America.

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Introduction

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) youth don't belong anywhere- at

least, this is how it feels for many who don't have support from their communities and don't see

themselves reflected in society. The effects of minority stress and a thwarted sense of belonging

on the mental health of youth who identify as LGBTQ have received considerable attention. Less

attention has been given to a variety of methods to counteract minority stress and foster

belonging as a route to improve mental health of LGBTQ youth.

In recent years, there have been several studies discussing the lived experiences of the

youth of this marginalized community. It is common for young LGBTQ identified individuals to

experience bullying and ostracization within many social settings including within their own

families, schools, local neighborhoods, and broader society through media and institutional

norms. Youth who experience minority stressors such as interpersonal prejudice and

discrimination are at greater risk for mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and

suicide. Baams et al.(2015) define more specifically the stressors experienced by LGBTQ youth

as experiences of prejudice events, expectations of rejection of and discrimination towards one

based on their identity, concealment of one's identity, and internalized homophobia. Dealing with

minority stress, LGBTQ youth coincidentally face barriers to a sense of belongingness, the

experience of personal involvement and integration within a system or environment to the extent

that the person feels they play a special role in that system or environment (MacLaren et al.,

2015). Many studies support and reiterate the connection between thwarted belongingness and negative, stressful experiences lived by LGBTQ youth and higher levels of mental health issues.

The resulting mental health issues have been extensively studied. Less attention has been paid to how to reduce the causes of these issues. How can the risk of developing mental health issues due to minority stress and a thwarted sense of belonging be minimized for LGBTQ youth? Are there ways to reduce minority stress and improve the sense of belongingness among LGBTQ youth? Some studies have focused on the effects of increasing awareness and acceptance of sexual minorities. This has been executed through gay-straight alliances for students as examined by McLaren et al. (2015), country-wide advocacy organizations such as the Human Rights Campain, Parents and Families of Lesbians and Gays, and local resource centers and adult initiated, youth lead community outreach projects. While many of these groups and organizations secondarily bring together individuals with common interests or experiences, research primarily focuses on the effects of resource availability for LGBTQ youth on their mental health. More in-depth analysis is needed on which specific methods used by these resources, their impacts on isolated psychological needs such as feeling a sense of belongingness, and the resulting mental health improvements for LGBTQ youth.

In this literary review, the effects of thwarted belongingness on the mental health of LGBTQ youth are examined and the potential effectiveness of existing strategies for helping these youth develop a sense of belonging and decrease the risk of them developing mental health issues is explored. Most existing strategies do not incorporate collaborative art making as a method to create a sense of belonging in LGBTQ youth but collaborative art making has been used to enable the fulfillment of important needs such as autonomy, community, and voice to

express their needs. It has also been used as a method to invoke a sense of community within groups of differing backgrounds dealing with similar struggles. When considering the benefits of collaborative art making within other communities and the power that art making has in fulfilling other needs of LGBTQ youth, it is hypothesized that collaborative artmaking among LGBTQ youth and thier communities would have a positive effect on their sense of belongingness.

Such a strategy could involve facilitating an opportunity for young members of the LGBTQ community to engage in art making with older LGBTQ adults, peers, and family members. LGBTQ youth could have an opportunity to see examples of how others like themselves can belong within their local community and greater society, connect with others facing the same struggles as they are, and find new ways to self advocate and communicate with their personal families and communities. With the intent of increasing a sense of belongingness and decreasing the chances of mental health issues developing in LGBTQ youth, this approach could hopefully give the participants time to see themselves reflected in their surroundings and find ways in which they belong within their local and greater community.

Method

The search for information on the experiences and mental health states of LGBTQ youth in the United States, and even other countries around the world, was abundant with information. Primarily, peer-reviewed information was found using databases accessible through the Lesley University Library and other information was found through well-known, reliable websites for organizations that focus on LGBTQ issues including the Human Rights Campaign, Parents and Families of Lesbians and Gays, and searching for other local organizations that work with LGBTQ populations. A multitude of researchers have invested their time and interest in this

particular population, replicating studies and reporting frequently coinciding results and connections. Again and again, authors discuss the detrimental effects an uninformed society with biases supporting a heteronormative and cisgender perspective can have on the mental health and adult life of LGBTQ youth.

Searches including "mental health", "lgbtq youth", yielded articles focusing on the poor state of mental health in LGBTQ youth. Articles were chosen and organized based on what primary issues were found the most, including high suicidality, depression, anxiety, and homelessness. Results included studies that examined the antecedents to mental health issues in LGBTQ youth and correlations between improved mental health and other factors. Further searches for "LGBTQ", "minority stress", "thwarted belongingness" included more detailed analysis of the causes of poor mental health in LGBTQ individuals. Some search results addressed the use of methods to improve mental health in LGBTQ youth and included mindfulness, pro-lgbtq clubs in school settings, and activism. Searching keywords "art making", "LGBTQ youth" and "community" presented examples of using art in a way that brought together LGBTQ youth to advocate for themselves and find like-minded individuals. Furthermore, searching for "community", "collaborative", "art making" and "belongingness" came up with examples of research conducted to bring together other populations, but little was found on the direct use of community art making as a method to foster belonging particularly for LGBTQ youth. With this gap in the literature began the pursuit of more direct methods using creative arts in groups of LGBTQ youth to create, foster, and renew a sense of belonging for participants.

Literature Review

Historical Context and Addressing Mental Health Deficits

As this literary review has been written during the year 2022, there have been great

strides in the acceptance, inclusion, and advocacy for the rights and safety of LGBTQ individuals

in the United States of America. One might infer then that this would promote a sufficient sense

of belonging as well as an ever-decreasing rate of mental illness in the youth within this

population. However, the improvement in mental health may not be as quick to follow as one

would predict. Fish et al. (2019) observes in writing about the overrepresentation of LGBTQ

youth in foster care that,

"Despite assumptions that sexual minority youth today are better off than in previous

generations, a recent but robust literature demonstrates that today's sexual minority youth

continue to experience similar rates of disproportionate mental (Peter et al., 2017) and behavioral

health burdens (Fish, Watson, Porta, Russell, & Saewyc, 2017; Watson, Lewis, Fish, &

Goodenow, 2018) when compared to sexual minority youth from a decade ago." pg. 9

There have been little to no improvements then, even after a decade of political and social

change, regarding the poor mental health of LGBTQ youth.

Delays in Widespread Improvements

An important factor in this potential misconception of the current LGBTQ experience

may be the great variability around the country regarding legal protections and cultural

acceptance. There have been striking differences in the lived experiences of LGBTQ residents of

less populated and rural areas of the United States of America and LGBTQ residents of more

populous, urban regions. When compared to LGBTQ residents of populous regions, rurally

residing individuals of the LGBTQ community face more social stigma, fear, and invisibility and

are typically offered fewer legal protections against housing and employment discrimination,

fewer resources catering specifically towards sexual and gender minorities. Within less

populated areas, the lack of visibility, advocacy, resources, and legal protections tend to lead not

only to worse mental health for LGBTQ residents but also physical health when considering

heightened risk of having HIV and eating disorders (Griffin et al., 2018).

Shortage of Competent Professionals

Providers of healthcare and institutions uphold biases towards sexual and gender

minorities, reinforcing blatant disparities in care due to the nonexistence of explicitly protective

policies, scarcity of knowledgeable providers or training for providers in a system that prioritizes

heterosexual-oriented values (Griffin et al., 2018). LGBTQ youth don't receive competent care

or fair and safe treatment, they must deal with worsening health as it goes unattended. LGBTQ

individuals become aware of these biases, whether it's through personal experiences or through

hearing the anecdotes of others like them, and they often develop a lack of trust in those who

formerly were believed to have been there to help them. With this distrust comes the tendency to

delay health care and continue to leave their physical and mental health issues to worsen as noted

in a recent University of California at Los Angeles study (Lai, 2018). Alessi (2013) organized a

review of resource articles written to address the incompetence within the professional

community regarding LGBTQ treatment. He points out, as a social worker, the continued

importance for therapists and counselors to have specialized knowledge of current and past

difficulties faced by sexual minority youth, how to support clients with a range of sexual and

gender identities, how families react and understand sexualities, how to appropriately and sensitively work with LGBTQ clients, and of how their own sexual orientation affects the treatment of their clients. He states that treatment and topics related to LGBTQ clients should no longer be a niche topic but a topic covered alongside multicultural competency.

Familial Rejection and Homelessness

In addition to a lack of knowledgeable people in important community roles, there is still a dangerous level of parents and families who prioritize heterosexual-oriented values and lack sufficient knowledge about LGBTQ identifying youth. McDermott et al. (2019) highlights the importance of family support, resources, and contact for adolescents who are at a pivotal point in their lives. However, as reported by Forge et al. (2017) LGBTQ youth not only have difficulties obtaining basic necessities, they experience significant levels of abandonment, victimization, exclusion, and homelessness. For the youth experiencing homelessness alongside their queer identity, this intersection in minority status has reportedly increased the likelihood of exclusion from queer spaces or community centers because of their homelessness as well as exclusion from services and community centers because of their sexual orientations and gender identities. Shelton et al. (2017) emphasizes that the root of worse mental and physical health and longer durations of homelessness as compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers is often due to the oppession and discrimination experienced by these queer youth in a homophobic and transphobic society. Even with many studies highlighting the higher prevalence of queer adolescents experiencing homelessness, and other studies discussing the high prevalence of their placement into the child welfare system, there is little to be found in regards to a standard quality of care, institutional guidelines, or empirically supported practices to aid those who work with

sexual minority youth. When there is such an overrepresentation of LGBTQ youth in the care of child welfare, it is clear that many of these young people are not receiving this important support McDermott describes. Instead they are often deprived of such support, rejected by their families due to hostility towards their sexual or gender identies. Familial rejection in particular can have devastatingly harmful effects on LGBTQ youth and emerging adults due to the potential loss of material and social-emotional support when they are going through a critical development period (Parra et al., 2018).

Unfavorable Conditions for Development

Without the opportunity to process emotions in a supportive and healthy family environment, these adolescents are sent into a potentially hostile society struggling both emotionally and materialistically. Lacking the skills for emotional management, their presentation can appear to many adults to be typical of adolescents who act "disorderly" because they are going through hormonal changes, something that is broadly considered "normal" and temporary before reaching the maturity of adulthood. Without factoring in the uniquely stressful experience of LGBTQ adolescents, their mental health struggles are overlooked alongside their heterosexual peers without considering what may be externally influencing their behavior. Often the disparities in mental health which emerge at a young age in sexual minority individuals continue throughout adulthood (Griffin et al., 2018).

While fundamental psychological theories often focus on developmental stages and how critical they are regarding motor skills and brain development during early childhood it is important to not neglect the critical development that occurs during adolescence. Primarily, it is a period of developing important social, emotional and relational skills that will carry them

through adulthood. Adolescence is a highly dynamic time and developing these skills is compoundingly delicate as it depends on environmental factors in addition to biological ones. Youth experiencing bodily changes are also experiencing great changes in the way that the adults in their lives treat them, especially parents.

Consider the changes in parent-child relationships during adolescence and how treating children with warmth can over time tend towards distance and a struggle for control and autonomy. When adolescents become more aware of a gender or sexual identity of their own that is part of the minority, this adds to the complexities dealt with within the parent-child dynamic. Studies have found that negative parenting which includes criticism, harshness, and psychological control has a significant impact on adolescents' emotional regulation skills (Herd et al., 2021). It is common for parents to criticize their adolescents' abilities and approaches to self-identification and expression. Sometimes families of LGBTQ adolescents will attempt to manipulate and control how they think and express their identities through methods as typical as limiting adolescents' interaction and access to queer resources and influences. Sometimes families will resort to sending their LGBTQ adolescents to conversion therapy or camps that focus on religious indocterination. As an attempt to control the way adolescents interpret and react to their self-perception and emotional reactions, this negative approach to parenting has a direct impact on adolescents' emotional regulation. Autonomy for youth and adolescents in particular is extremely valuable. As young individuals who are less experienced in life than their adult counterparts, and at the mercy of the leadership of said adults, it is often the case that youth and adolescents are not given much credit for their abilities and are underestimated and doubted. Even as adults, LGBTQ people face the same marginalization from general society as youth do,

yet youth are also dismissed by and marginalized by adults. Marshall et al. (2019) discuss the disconnect between LGBTQ individuals of differing generations which are as much influenced by temporal cultural changes as they are by age. Dismissive attitudes from anyone ends up feeling like rejection and shuts out young people from the rest of society which deems itself more mature leaving youth to feel like they do not belong. This not only negatively impacts the youths' sense of belonging, it also impacts the way in which adults perceive the behaviors and mental health of young people as described by McDermott et al. (2019). The temporalization of adolescent emotions and behaviors, believing they are part of a temporary phase, causes a rift between adults and adolescents and can cause misinterpretations of the emotions and behaviors being dismissed and not taken seriously. Adolescents can, as a result, have difficulty modifying their experiences and expressing their emotions in a contextually appropriate way.

Difficulties with emotional regulation could lead to adolescents not being able to appropriately interpret and understand emotions, have poor impulse control, and develop emotional management skills that are only successful in the short term rather than having long term effects (Herd et al., 2021). This lack of important relational skills and level of exclusion from so many people and resources can be difficult to cope with. Adding to it all, in order to cope with their intense feelings of marginalization, isolation, depression, and chronic stress, LGBTQ youth often have a higher occurance of substance use than their heterosexual, cisgender peers (Robinson, 2018).

Legal Obstacles

When considering how fragile and dynamic the adolescent experience is and the crucial development that occurs at this age, many of the social and legal obstacles that have existed and

still exist during the adolescence of these youth could be impeding the ability to more broadly

consider the mental well-being among young LGBTQ people to be improving with the times.

Many young LGBTQ individuals were born much earlier than their safety and rights have been

protected by federal and local governments, and still there are many legal and social disputes

working to determine the way in which LGBTQ individuals are socially and legally permitted to

live their lives, adding to the stress levels of these individuals. At the time this paper is written,

laws are being ratified for better and for worse in regards to the protection of LGBTQ youth.

According to the Human Rights Campaign, there have been 300 bills that would be discrimatory

against LGBTQ individuals introduced in states across the United States of America (Human

Rights Campaign, 2022). Many of these bills target transgender individuals creating barriers for

transgender youth and adults from participating in sports and accessing essential medical care.

There are bills being introduced and active disputes over whether educators in public schools are

permitted to speak of or teach about topics related to the LGBTQ community such as in Florida

where the Don't Say Gay bill, HB 1557, was passed (Luneau, 2022a). There is even a lack of

protection from state governments concerning school policies about bathroom use for

transgender students in states where schools police the use of bathrooms and locker rooms based

on students' sex assigned at birth. Alabama's state government passed HB 322 which would ban

students from using bathrooms or school facilities that align with their identities (Luneau,

2022b). LGBTQ youth are incessantly exposed to adults in their homes, schools, local

municipalities and governments debating over their basic rights all in addition to the tumultuous

and delicate process of growing up. This is to say, during this critical time in their development,

their experience is similar to heterosexual and cisgender peers, but they have the added stress
that comes with being queer.

Minority Stress

Stress experienced by LGBTQ youth, and adolescents can be categorized as a type of
minority stress. More specifically, it is an experience of chronic stress that is unique to those with
a sexual orientation or gender identity that is considered a minority within the broader
population. Sexual and gender minority stress can be viewed as a reflection of society's negative
reactions and attitudes towards LGBTQ people, highlighting these stressors as factors in
lowering levels of well-being and increasing levels of depression and suicidal ideation in the
LGBTQ population (Baams et al., 2015). Each identifier and queer experience comes with its
own set of factors that influence LGBTQ youths' minority stress as well. Bisexual identified
LGBTQ youth are subjected to stereotypes and ostrasization from both the heterosexual
community and the LGBTQ community. In examining bisexual-specific minority stress, Tavarez
(2020) surveyed some of the effects of this division in subgroups. Emerging adult bisexuals in
university were surveyed about their experiences with LGBTQ groups and negative experiences
were often reported. Compared to lesbian peers, bisexuals reported feeling further marginalized
in LGBTQ spaces, their voices, experiences and identity being unwelcome or excluded. The
bisexual individuals seeking connection and community with their queer peers were feeling
"othered", like they did not belong there any more than in heterosexual groups of peers (Tavarez,
2020). Acknoweledging this particular example of thwarted belongingness for bisexuals would
be essential in research exploring causes and effects of collaborative art making among mixed
groups of LGBTQ youth.

Gender and sexual identities are both only parts of individuals' complete identity and can often intersect with other aspects of ones' identity such as racial and ethnic identity, adding unique layers of minority stress. The majority of youth who face racial and ethnic minority stress experience this along with their families who share the same traits, and thus have a source to foster a sense of belongingness with. In contrast, youth who face gender and sexual minority stress are usually dealing with the stress alone because their family members usually do not share the same minority status. Since this difference in minority or majority status between LGBTQ youth and their family members is more common, family members are often contributors to the source of stress. Family conflict, a source of stress in the minority stress model, has been linked to young LGBTQ family members' diminished mental and physical health (Parra et al., 2018).

Thwarted Belongingness

With all of the aforementioned obstacles still encountered by LGBTQ individuals both young and old within society, many often suffer through an isolated existence. With this lack of community and a strong presence of biases and opposition to the acceptance of one's identity, a sense of belonging has been difficult to obtain for young LGBTQ people.

McLaren et al. (2015) references the definition of a sense of belonging according to Hagerty et al. (1992) as the experience of personal involvement and integration within a system or environment to the extent that a person feels they play a special role in that system or environment. Without this experience of integration and feeling as though one plays a special role in the community, the sense of belongingness is therefore thwarted as queer youth may feel as though they don't belong within the community, including friends and family. If people do not feel like they belong, they may not feel they have a purpose in the community and may not see

the significance of their existence. Without feeling like one has a meaningful role in a

community, there can be a feeling of burdensomeness as well. According to the

interpersonal-psychological theory of suicide, suicidal ideation results from a sense of

burdensomness and a thwarted sense of belongingness (Hill et al., 2017). This brings us to

understand reasons for why it is so common for LGBTQ youth to experience suicidal ideation.

Current Approaches

Advocacy, Activism, and Accessible Resources

As there are many detriments associated with a thwarted sense of belongingness, there

are numerous benefits to a gained sense of belongingness. While the mental health of LGBTQ

youth is so often poor, there are noticeable differences in the mental health of those afforded the

resources and community support seen in a growing number of settings that focus on creating

environments in which LGBTQ youth can more likely feel like they belong. These are often

organized subgroups within local communities such as support groups in schools for LGBTQ

youth.Youth who participate in supportive groups are more likely to present with fewer

depressive symptoms, as a result of developing a higher level of sense of belonging (Mclaren et

al., 2015). As supportive groups are established, LGBTQ youth are given the opportunity to

develop a sense of belonging as well as improved confidence and self-esteem as a result of this

increased social support. Studies have found that increased social support improved

companionship, intimacy, a sense of belonging, and reassurance- a significant contrast to the

previously noted issues that LGBTQ youth face when attempting to forge healthy relationships

(Montrose Center, 2017).These examples of efforts to foster a sense of belongingness in LGBTQ

youth focus primarily on the involvement of the youth themselves. It is also imperative to

engage the communities both local and broad in efforts to create accepting environments in which LGBTQ youth can thrive.

There are groups across the United States which aim to work with LGBTQ youth and these more influential community members mentioned. School settings often include Gay and Straight or Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSA). GSA's are usually student-led with an adult advisor allowing the students to decide on what needs they should focus on whether that is socialization, support, access to relevant resources, or advocacy and social equality in the local and broader community. While the number of GSA's has increased over the past three decades, they still only exist in 37 percent of high schools. This could be the result of the continued existence of resistance faced by those attempting to establish new GSA's in their own schools. The effects of the establishments of GSA chapters in schools have been found to be overarchingly positive but the groups themselves are not regulated in how they are conducted, what methods are used, and therefore the research of specific practices and their effects is limited (Poteat et al., 2017). Towns and cities have formed chapters of organizations like Parents and Families of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). Run by volunteers and elected board members across the United States of America, PFLAG has a set of resources provided to each chapter in order to uphold their mission "to build on a foundation of loving families united with LGBTQ+ people and allies who support one another, and to educate ourselves and our communities to speak up as advocates until all hearts and minds respect, value and affirm LGBTQ people" (pflag.org/mission, para. 2). Centers for LGBTQ youth have formed as well to provide residents with and refer them to supports such as social services, mental health care, physical healthcare and recreation. Localized organizations such as these have the ability to focus on more

personalized, direct methods to support the residents of the area and connect local youth to other

locals that they can look to for peer support as well as adults living within the community.

Centers like these can have a ripple effect on the surrounding community by advocating for the

youth they serve and leading training workshops for other adults and professionals who work

with LGBTQ youth. While organizations can have the same unified mission of supporting

LGBTQ youth in a myriad of ways, their priorities may differ. In communities of more socially

liberal areas where there are less legal obstacles and a more supportive and accepting population,

these groups may focus on individual therapies or recreational, networking activities. In

communities with more legal obstacles, advocacy and activism may be a higher priority when

young LGBTQ residents are at higher risk due to the legality of their mistreatment. In GSA's,

PFLAG chapters and other LGBTQ centers, observing the differences in priorities and how they

are addressed may be valuable in evaluating the effects of each groups' methods on a sense of

belongingness in the local youth involved.

  With the variation in how local and broad these organizations reach, there is also a

variation in how effective they can be. Hill et al. (2017) conducted research in order to identify

whether there are particular subsets of community which have the highest impact on the mental

health of young LGBTQ individuals when targeting a sense of belongingness. The research

found that, when considering any sense of belonging within all communities, the most impactful

communities were the families of participants and other members of the broader LGBTQ

community. Eisenhower et al. (2018) later examined the interconnectedness of different supports

for LGBTQ youth including interpersonal, organizational, community, and societal supports that

can include overlapping protective factors, according to social ecological theoretical frameworks,

against negative mental health developments. Each level of social and ecological support does not only have direct effects on the behavior, health and wellbeing of individuals, they can have indirect effects by interacting with other supports. By conducting a mixed-methods, multisite study of social influences on the health and wellbeing of LGBTQ youth Eisenhower (2018) found that the most profoundly influential support levels for LGBTQ youth were those that involved less people such as parents and their children as opposed to a public figure's influence on their audience.

Creative Arts Approaches to Fostering a Sense of Belongingness

As many researchers have noted, aiding communities to help them understand and destigmatize LGBTQ youth so as to create a more welcoming environment is a commonly used approach. Educating community members and promoting awareness of the experiences that LGBTQ youth live through, however, is only one approach to promoting a sense of belongingness among these young people. Art making has long been discussed as a means of building connections between individuals, groups, and societies. When applied to situations involving marginalized, misunderstood, or overlooked groups of individuals who deal with particularly high levels of stress and mental health risks, creating art with others from both similar and different backgrounds in order to improve mental health and form connections has been reported to produce promising results.

Silverman et al. (2013) studied a symposium which brought together people of different backgrounds to create artwork related to their unique yet shared experiences with suicide, participants seemed to benefit from a sense of empowerment, motivation, and connection. The act of creating art together gave the different groups an opportunity to open dialogue about a

topic as sensitive and taboo as suicide. The art itself worked as a tool to externalize their experiences and perspectives as well as a means to initiate communication in a way that could feel safer for the participants.

There have been other arts-based groups brought together in the name of advocacy for LGBTQ youth, however they focus more on other needs of this population, or simply on determining what the needs are. Some projects were conducted in order to unearth what in particular the needs of LGBTQ youth were, from the source. Forge et al. (2017) reviewed research conducted that involved young homeless individuals who participated in a photo-voice project in order to explore their needs as a marginalized group. Photo-voice participants were encouraged to choose and create images which they felt were relevant and relatable to their personal experiences. By doing this, participants were able to use photos to reflect upon and critically think about their experiences regarding their gender or sexual identities, identify factors that may have made their experiences more or less difficult, note the levels of visibility they had in their communities and choose ways in which they would prefer to be represented in their communities. This process was reported to empower the LGBTQ youth and bring to light the importance of listening to marginalized individuals when addressing their needs.

Other art making interventions were focused on civil action, voicing those needs and asking for them to be met by the broader community. Rhoades (2015) discusses the use of civil praxis and collective multimedia art making or "artivism" in an adult lead, youth driven programs such as Youth Video OUTreach. Essentially, youth involved were given the power to use art in order to create an impact on their communities, reaching broader audiences as well, through artistic collaboration. The approach taken by the adults initiating the artistic activism is

critically different from other approaches to the struggle of LGBTQ youth in that usually, the

experiences of these young individuals are presented in a negative light.

When autonomy is given to LGBTQ youth in deciding what they can and do tell the

broader community about their experiences, they focus on a more positive depiction, addressing

their need to show they belong and have much in common with the broader society. Both of

these methods using creative mediums like photographic postcards and video projects are

examples of efforts to bring together LGBTQ youth to form connections amongst themselves

and between them and other, sexual and gender majority, community members. When given the

agency and the opportunity to creatively collaborate using physical and digital mediums,

LGBTQ youth seek out ways to connect to each other and the broader community. They use the

opportunity to find ways to belong within the greater community that dismissed them previously.

Participants of civil praxis and artivism, as described by Rhoades (2015) who were given

opportunities to be autonomous in activist roles took control of the negative narrative that is

typically attributed to the LGBTQ experience and represented themselves to the community in

ways that they found to be important. Some reported that they "wanted to tell a story that did talk

about and deal with the complicated and difficult, lonely and really hard parts of being out and

young, but they also wanted to tell a story about the way they are pretty much just regular kids,

with regular problems" (Rhoades, 2015, pg. 321). They wanted to make it clear to their

communities that they are not as different as others may believe. Given the opportunity to create

community and voice their needs, when others in the community are willing to listen, young

LGBTQ people will do just that. Building these connections not only could empower individuals

as in these examples, the connections could play a key role in fostering, strengthening, or restoring a sense of belonging for young LGBTQ youth.

In these examples, art making is a key component in the participants' means of communication and connection as well as forming individual senses of identity. Used in a therapeutic space, LGBTQ individuals and adolescents have been able to benefit from the relational healing properties of creative arts therapies as a method of establishing another level of attunement between clients, mental health practitioners, and other group members. Since creative arts therapies emphasize non-verbal communication, this therapeutic approach establishes connections and attunement that is less dependent on words. Additionally, this strengthening of relational bonds in therapy can allow for applications outside of therapy in personal relationships complicated by relational trauma (MacWilliam et al., 2019). The utility of using art in this way is discussed by those who practice creative arts therapies as especially helpful for LGBTQ individuals and youth alike as populations that often struggle with self expression and identification. Open, verbal communication and expression can be difficult for LGBTQ youth in the current social climate in which their voices are silenced or discouraged. Artistic expression in a safer therapeutic space can be a way to circumvent this social obstacle to healthy development faced by these individuals. For LGBTQ youth, expressing themselves through a tangible medium like art can allow them to address numerous internal struggles including but not limited to feeling invisible, coming out, dealing with relational difficulties, seeking social support, wanting to feel like they belong, combating self-hate and fostering self-acceptance. The artistic processes and products of art therapy provide images that can communicate more than words alone, providing further opportunities for support and empowerment. By providing LGBTQ clients with

creative means to develop and construct their inner selves, art therapy has helped clients affirm their identities which in turn helped them strengthen their ties to other community members (Huerta, 2020). Through the use of art therapy interventions, LGBTQ youth can therefore use art as a tool to strengthen their sense of self, connect with others in a therapeutic environment, and apply this developed self confidence and relational skillset to connect with family, peers, and members of their broader communities.

Discussion

Progress towards improving the mental and physical health of LGBTQ youth in North America is, after decades of advocacy and political activism, still a work in progress. The current social climate, although more supportive of theLGBTQ population than decades prior, is still not as welcoming as it could be to LGBTQ individuals. Change is slow, but time was spent well on researching the mental health deficit of this young population. Studies have found with great consistency that queer youth continue to struggle under layers of minority stress as they deal with discrimination and rejection from their families, various social circles, and communities. This stress and ostracization impacts the mental health of young individuals, thwarting their sense of belongingness and resulting in issues such as depression, anxiety, suicide.

Far-reaching and locally focused organizations have formed in the past 40 years to bring together LGBTQ youth, queer adults, and their hetersexual and cisgender counterparts. These organizations have relied on methods of advocacy, political activism, competency training, and making resources accessible to community members. Bringing LGBTQ youth together to self-advocate has reinforced the importance of giving young people autonomy and a voice to access what they need for their personal development (Rhoades, 2015). In the case of LGBTQ

youth, there is a resounding need to feel that they belong and have the opportunity to connect with each other, their families, and their communities.

Collaborative art making has been successful in bringing together individuals and groups of differing backgrounds and giving them an opportunity to feel like they belong together. It has also been useful in helping LGBTQ youth gain a sense of autonomy and voice their needs to their communities (Forge, 2018; Rhoades, 2015).

If collaborative arts initiatives are conducted by community adults in order to enable such significant results in assisting LGBTQ youth in fulfilling important needs like having a sense of autonomy, community and voice to express their needs, then it would be hypothesized that collaborative arts among LGBTQ youth and their community would have a direct effect on their sense of belongingness. One could look at these needs as puzzle pieces or stepping stones towards building this sense of belonging. It would be beneficial for researchers to examine the specific connection between the element of making art with community members and whether the youths' sense of belongingness improves in the short and long term. If there is a direct connection found between the two variables, this information could increasingly be used in future approaches to improving the mental health of LGBTQ youth.

Considerations for future research

Existing literature on current approaches to improve the mental health of LGBTQ youth and research regarding the rifts that exist in the communities LGBTQ youth exist within has helped in identifying which groups to prioritize gathering together for a collaborative art project with LGBTQ youth.

Groups within the broader community including peers, older LGBTQ individuals, youth and adults in the social majority of gender and sexual identites in and out of school settings, and political leaders could become interconnected with LGBTQ youth through collaborative art projects. By reaching out to others via art making, everyone involved would be building a community in and of itself in which each member could feel a sense of belongingness. It is important to consider which groups and individuals would have the greatest impact on thwarted belongingness as participants in collaborative art making projects with LGBTQ youth. Groups involving individuals in the close and personal communities of LGBTQ youth have been revealed to have greater impact on mental health and thwarted belongingness. Bringing together LGBTQ youth and those in their families of origin would have one of the most significant impacts on their sense of belongingness. It would be helpful to consider ways to bring together smaller groups of more directly associated individuals to have a more profound influence on LGBTQ youths' sense of belongingness.

Another important consideration when studying a collaborative art project with LGBTQ youth is the cultural divides which exist among LGBTQ individuals. As with any culture there is a disconnect among different generations of LGBTQ individuals. There are also rifts between different groups of the LGBTQ community who feel more or less ostracized by both the majority and minority communities such as bisexual individuals and transgender individuals. Facilitating groups in which LGBTQ of varying backgrounds and identities can create art together would fortify a sense of belongingness among the participants by creating a unified piece of art, potentially combining the mediums and cultural experiences of each subgroup.

Existing Organizations to Study Effects on Thwarted Belongingness

Researchers could also examine the effects of existing arts groups for LGBTQ individuals accross generations and communities on the participants and their sense of belongingness as opposed to individuals who are not involved in similar organizations. In Long Island, New York there is an organization called the Arts Project of Cherry Grove. Their mission is to bring together LGBTQ individuals of differing backgrounds and generations through their theater arts programs. Surveying individuals who participate in this program for example could provide insight into the impacts it has on sense of belongingness. Methods and approaches of organizations which bring together LGBTQ youth and their families such as PFLAG could be examined as well. Comparisons of chapters of PFLAG that may use art as a means to connect members and their LGBTQ loved ones and those that may not use art could be assessed. Various GSA clubs could be observed in this way as well, taking into consideration the use of collaborative art and how this does or does not impact the sense of belongingness held by the youth involved.

Conclusion

The current social climate towards LGBTQ individuals, especially youth, is complex and nuanced depending on each individual's circumstances and environment. Regardless of some broader legal and social progress across the United States, LGBTQ youth continue to face significant barriers to healthy emotional, relational, and physical development due to the ostracization they are exposed to and the minority stressors they endure. It can be difficult for these youth to gain a sense of belonging after it has been thwarted, affecting their self-esteem, ability to build healthy relationships, and potential to thrive without mental health issues like

depression and anxiety. The need to improve upon the current approaches and develop new methods to support LGBTQ youth and provide them with opportunities to feel that they belong is apparent. There are opportunities to bring together LGBTQ youth and their communities in countless settings, with many combinations of participant identities within each community including family members, other LGBTQ youth, adults of the LGBTQ community, and people in other local and national community environments, yet they leave something to be desired. Collaborative art making as a means to counteract thwarted belongingness in LGBTQ youth is full of untapped potential and information that could help current and future generations combat mental health issues and thrive as society continues to learn to accept them completely.

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