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A Narrative Research Review of Interpersonal Trauma, Mental Health, and Substance Use Among LGBQ+ College Students



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Abstract

College is a critical time for LGBQ+ individuals due to sexual identity formation and trauma exposure. Studies have shown that heterosexism is manifested on college campuses through discrimination and cultural norms that devalue LGBQ+ individuals and perpetuate heterosexuality as normative and superior (Rankin et al., 2010). Additionally, there is a drastic increase in prevalence across different trauma types (i.e., sexual assault), as well as the continuation of risk behavior and psychological distress, including substance abuse (Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011) during this time period. The purpose of this narrative literature review is to shine light on related literature that explores the associations between intimate partner violence (i.e., IPV), childhood sexual abuse, physical assault and sexual assault on mental health and substance use among LGBQ+ college students. Additionally, this review will include limitations within these studies. Further, implications and future directions will highlight strengths and areas that will improve LGBQ+ college students' outcomes.

Background & Significance

- There is little to no recognition towards LGBQ+ college students with a history of interpersonal trauma and how it can lead to negative associations
- However, this review provides the importance of why we are specifically discussing LGBQ+ college students rather than adults
- LGBQ+ individuals tend to engage themselves in college communities as an opportunity to explore their sexual orientation, however, findings show identity abuse is evident within these relationships which leads to the development of mental health issues (e.g., depression, anxiety, PTSD)
- LGBQ+ individuals suffer from physical and sexual trauma more than heterosexual individuals
- Heterosexual individuals have lower anxiety levels than LGBQ+ individuals regardless of having a history of physical and sexual trauma
- The current literature review examines the associations between LGBQ+ college students with a history of interpersonal trauma (e.g., intimate partner violence, childhood sexual abuse, physical assault, and sexual assault) and how it affects their mental health and substance abuse

Childhood Sexual Abuse

- Arreola (2008) examined the association between a history of childhood abuse and suicidal behavior among LGBQ+ college students. Findings indicated that there were higher levels of psychological distress associated with greater endorsement of suicide ideation and childhood sexual abuse.
- Scheer (2019) hypothesized that exposure to traumatic events at a young age influenced negative emotions. Results showed that depression symptoms and feelings of shame were associated with childhood traumatic events among LGBQ+ individuals.
- Balsam (2010) assessed the effects of childhood sexual abuse in LGBQ+ college students. They found high levels of PTSD, anxiety, depression and perceived stress associated with childhood sexual abuse.

Adulthood Physical Assault

- Berenz (2019) examined differences in sexual orientation between LGBQ+ college students and heterosexual students. They found that LGBQ+ students were more likely to experience threatened physical and sexual assault.
- Berenz (2016) examined the association between a history of interpersonal trauma and current substance use. LGBQ+ college students who identified as a female were associated with higher levels of PTSD symptoms and those identified as male, were associated with greater alcohol use.
- Richardson (2018) suggested LGBQ+ college students are prone to experience physical assault and threatened sexual intercourse. They found that individuals exploring their sexual orientation have a greater chance at experiencing assault.

Adulthood IPV

- Charak (2019) examined the relationship between intimate partner violence and mental health in 288 emerging LGB adults. It was discovered that LGB adults that experienced IPV had elevated levels of depression and anxiety.
- Mitchell (2018) sought to identify patterns of lifetime of Intimate Partner Violence in LGB emerging adults. Findings showed that there was a detrimental effect of IPV on emotion regulation and mental health in LGBQ+ adults.
- Mason (2016) observed the correlation between physical violence among lesbians involved in same-sex relationships. Results showed that IPV was higher when combined with hazardous alcohol consumption and proximal minority stressor (i.e. acceptance concerns).

Adulthood Sexual Victimization

- Sigurvinsdottir (2015) observed the mental health of LGBQ+ women after reporting sexual assault. Results showed that LGBQ+ women reported higher rates of PTSD and mental health issues after being assaulted.
- Mustanski (2015) looked at the effects of cumulative victimization on LGBQ+ young adults mental health. LGBQ+ adults who have experienced continued victimization from childhood to birth are at a higher risk to develop PTSD or depression.
- Murchison (2017) wanted to predict whether minority stress influenced unwanted sexual encounters. There was a greater risk associated with unwanted sexual experiences and minority stress.

Discussion

- Overall, findings indicate that many LGBQ+ college students experience alcohol, substance, physical, and emotional abuse at twice the rate of a heterosexual college student.
- Additionally, these four types of interpersonal trauma predict higher levels of negative repercussions towards LGBQ+ college students and their mental health. However, there was less work on the effect of adulthood physical assault on substance use and mental health among LGBQ+ individuals.

Limitations/ Future directions

- Our findings were limited due to the limited information and research on LGBQ+ college students.
- For future research, examiners should look into other contributing factors such as ethnicity, income, and religion.

Implications and Recommendations

- More research should continue to be conducted on LGBQ+ college students because LGBQ+ people have become more visible in the last decade and as they become more accepted, more problems will arise.
- By addressing discrimination and stigma from the LGBQ+ community, we can lower levels of anxiety and distress towards individuals exploring their sexuality and decrease substance use.
- Additionally, it might be important for therapists to assess for trauma and stigma related to sexuality and the potential impact of these factors on mental health and substance use outcomes among LGBQ+ college students.

