Sexual and gender minority youth – strategies for resilience

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I have chosen to explore the idea of resilience in sexual and gender minority youth for a number of reasons. It is a topic which is close to my heart, it showcases the opportunities and challenges of the school system, it highlights the limitations of our constitutional dispensation, and it is a useful challenge to resilience theory, given societal attitudes towards difference and high levels of not only personal, but also institutional, prejudice.

When he opened the 13th out in Africa gay and lesbian film festival in 2007, the former Deputy Chief Justice, Dikgang Moseneke, outlined just why our new constitution set itself out to be a "rupture" from the past. The past had been characterised by colonial and racial oppressions, based on ideas of superiority, justifying the harms towards those who differed on the basis of an arbitrary and inherent quality, their skin colour, which is a proxy for race. He said that the new South Africa consciously rejected this idea and had extended it to people who were diverse around sexuality and gender because this too was an inherent part of a human being. He acknowledged the history of exclusion and harm to sexual and gender minorities, indicated that there was no longer an appetite to persecute these persons whose identities and practices harmed no one, spoke of the many and varying forms of family in South Africa, and committed the country to a rejection of patriarchy and its manifestations. This is an exciting set of ideas, not yet fully realised, but important as a philosophical starting point for the country, and for this paper.

Sexual and gender minorities are those individuals in all societies who vary in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. This may include people who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual, who may be intersex, or who fit somewhere on the transgender spectrum, either in terms of presentation of self or in terms of engaging with varying forms of body modification to align gender presentation with gender identity, in contrast to the sex assigned to that person at birth. As you can gather, this is a complex set of identities and practices and capturing all the nuances and variations is almost impossible, not to mention the fact that there are tensions between "western" ideas of sexuality and gender and indigenous ways of naming and understanding. The jury may be out on whether these things are more nature than nurture but in my view this question is irrelevant if we adopt a rights-based approach to life choices people make or which appear to be made for them.

On the matter of young people – and I am using "youth" to describe all young people up to the age of 21 – there are often considerable anxieties about whether it is the role of society and its proxies to steer young people away from homosexuality or gender variance, in the alleged interests of their mental or social health, or if their ways of being should simply be allowed to develop in a non-hostile environment. Part of this paradox is that we do, when it comes to other childhood challenges – anti-social behaviour for example – intervene quite aggressively to help that young person grow into a contributing member of society.

Perhaps the challenge remains in persuading adults that for a young person to show signs of variance around sexuality and gender does NOT mean they are defective or anti-social, but that they are, and can be, part of the rich fabric of diversity that exists everywhere.

Apart from religious, cultural and moral reservations about this approach – and it has to be said these run deep in South African communities – it is my view that resistance to accepting what might be called "queer" youth is underpinned by patriarchal anxiety, and this anxiety manifests in a series of policing and shaming strategies to bring these young people into line. After all, if we allow men and women to dress in "non-conforming" ways, or men to be with men or women with women, how can the male entitlements and control mechanisms of patriarchy be held onto?

Deevia Bhana has written widely about the ways in which these forms of policing happen in the South African school system. Her book, 'Under Pressure: The Regulation of Sexualities in South African Secondary Schools', is the first comprehensive study of its kind, drawing on surveys of learners and teachers and focus group interviews with learners, teachers, school management teams and parents.[i]

Bhana's surveys and interviews questioned participants broadly on their attitude towards homosexuality, including whether homosexual learners should be allowed at the school, whether a teacher or school manager would support homosexual learners, and whether a homosexual learner should be able to speak openly about his or her sexuality.

Here is a brief sample of findings:

- In rural schools, gay and lesbian pupils were linked to "evil spirits" by some pupils and homosexuals were also still viewed as vectors of disease, mainly HIV.
- Bhana's research found much more anxiety about homosexuality among male learners than female and "Male respondents tended to speak passionately about religion, the 'natural order' and traditional gender roles, and often positioned homosexual people (particularly gay males) as predatory and threatening."
- More than a few learners were quoted as fearing exposure to homosexual peers due to the belief that homosexuality is contagious, as per this learner: "Listen, if you [are] around *moffies* the whole day, [if] you grow up in an environment of *moffies*, you gonna be a *moffie*, because you think to yourself this is the way I should be."
- A culture of "compulsory heterosexuality" generally prevails at South African schools. Boys were expected to adhere to a particularly constrictive view of what constituted "masculine" behaviour, with any deviation from this – not liking rugby, being "quiet", etc. – being read and condemned as potential markers of homosexuality.
- A number of learners across schools proposed that there should exist separate schools and shops for gay people, although this was sometimes framed as stemming from a desire to protect them rather than isolate them.
- "Teachers at all schools indicated an awareness of the legal protections for same-sex relations", but it was also not uncommon for teachers to "position equality as something forced upon them by a government sympathetic to equal rights".

- Comments made by teachers when asked how they would deal with gay learners suggested a view of homosexual lives as incomprehensible and alien.
- There was a tendency to assume that Life Orientation teachers should shoulder the burden of dealing with such issues, while also noting that the Life Orientation guidelines do not specifically mention homosexuality.
- Some schools claimed, essentially, that because they had no gay learners, the issue did not arise. "The school managers' claim that they have not encountered lesbian or gay learners brings to light a crucial paradox regarding homosexuality in schools," writes Bhana. "Without strong policies and support mechanisms, learners are unlikely to publicly acknowledge their sexuality; without openly homosexual learners, many schools are unlikely to consider sexual diversity an issue of importance."
- Interestingly, "Not one learner was aware of a school policy or guideline that could assist and support a learner coming out or that speaks to tolerance and acceptance of sexual diversity."
- Parents at formerly white urban schools seemed to feel it was pointless not teaching their children about homosexuality when its portrayal was now so prevalent on TV, though this did not mean that they necessarily embraced the idea enthusiastically. One parent suggested such discussions should take place only from Grade 11.
- Another parent said: "We wouldn't want a lesbian or a gay to teach about it because they will, you know, encourage it."
- Amidst such evidence of entrenched prejudice, Bhana still believes there is "much potential" for addressing school-based homophobia. Over 80% of teachers indicated that they did not have an issue teaching homosexual learners, and over half were in favour of schools providing learning materials to teach about homosexuality. Teachers who had gone on workshops training them on how to deal with issues of sexuality reported feeling much more positive and better prepared.
- Beyond this, Bhana finds it positive that among all groups surveyed, there was an awareness of legislative rights governing sexual equality, even if this was not always joyously received.
- Among Bhana's recommendations are that the Department of Education should review teacher training and offer school management teams assistance in developing school policies to offer protection to gay learners.
- And finally, and unsurprisingly, she found that "homophobia and misogyny are interlinked and must be fought in tandem".

This is a distressing state of affairs and begs the question: if resilience in young people is already challenged by inequalities, poverty and social disarray, how much more difficult must it be for a young person who is variant around sexuality and gender to cope with all of that AND a homophobic or transphobic home, community and school? It seems almost impossible to imagine how this might be possible. But it is also an incredible opportunity because work around sexuality and gender frees EVERYONE from restricting norms and builds tolerance and the embracing of diversity, AND contributes to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

The research literature suggests a range of family, individual and peer factors that may confer resilience to children reared in high risk environments. These factors have included:

1. Intelligence and problem solving abilities, with resilient young people appearing to be characterized by higher intelligence or problem solving skills than their non-resilient peers.
2. Gender. Specifically, a number of studies of the effects of marital discord or divorce have suggested that females may be less reactive to family stress than males.
3. External interests and affiliations. A number of studies have suggested that children from high risk backgrounds who either develop strong interests outside the family or form attachments with a confiding adult outside their immediate family may be more resilient to the effects of family adversity.
4. Parental attachment and bonding. A further factor that may increase resilience in children from high risk backgrounds is the nature of parent/child relationships. Specifically, it has been suggested that the presence of warm, nurturant or supportive relationships with at least one parent may act to protect against or mitigate the effects of family adversity.
5. Early temperament and behaviour. There has also been some evidence to suggest that temperamental and behavioural factors may be associated with resilience to adversity.
6. Peer factors. A number of researchers have pointed to the fact that positive peer relationships may contribute to resilience.

In a 21-year longitudinal study to examine a series of issues relating to the topic of resilience to childhood adversity[ii], Fergusson and Horwood arrive at three general conclusions about the relationship between childhood adversity, adolescent outcomes and resilience factors.

First, there was clear evidence to suggest that with increasing exposure to childhood adversities there were marked increases in rates of both internalizing and externalizing problems in adolescence and young adulthood. However, not all of those exposed to high levels of adversity developed later externalizing or internalizing, suggesting the presence of resilience processes. Second, the effects of exposure to childhood adversity on later outcomes were modified by a series of factors that acted to mitigate or exacerbate these risks. Third, in all cases the data fitted main effects models, suggesting that the factors that contributed to resilience amongst those exposed to high levels of childhood adversity were equally beneficial for those not exposed to these adversities.

For the purposes of this paper, then, I am choosing to focus on the idea that it is a combination of individual, social and structural factors which is desirable to address resilience. The individual approach is at the level of intra-personal work, the social approach is to build on socially supportive factors (competent families, helpful beliefs, values and norms, and social cohesion and supportive institutional cultures) and the structural approach is to develop or popularise laws, policies and systems which are protective. This approach, when applied to young sexual and gender minority folk, argues for a complex, intersectional stance, not valuing one aspect over the other.

In an exploration of risk and resilience in transgender (or "trans") youth, Stieglitz[iii] notes that developing and integrating a positive identity is a developmental task for all adolescents but for trans youth there are personal, family and cultural dynamics in a complex interplay with having to deal with expectations of conforming to gendered expectations, when their own identities may be non-binary.

Among other challenges these young people face are questions of disclosure, managing discrimination and victimisation from peers, family, school, health care and future employment; they often lack role models and may suffer from low self esteem, depression and substance abuse. HIV risks in trans people are also often poorly understood and managed.

However, Stieglitz argues that much of the literature on trans youth focuses on risks rather than strengths, and that there is a need to explore more clearly what protective factors might be at play in these young people, and that this should be based on better research.

She argues, as a starting point, for recognition of the rights of this group of persons as well as good policies, with health care providers and teachers being key actors in this. Special attention needs to be paid to teasing out the extra identity challenges faced by trans youth at a life stage when all adolescents are grappling with this. Social support is clearly crucial – friendships, family counselling and support groups are all in the mix.

A review of resilience in a sample of distressed LGBT youth[iv] in the UK found that young people DID find ways to navigate various social harms. Firstly, they were able to draw on discourses of "natural sexual diversity" – what may sometimes be referred to as strategic essentialism (as opposed to more social constructionist views) that argues for a biological basis for sexual diversity. Secondly, the interviewees were able to take strength from resisting discrimination. Several spoke of "fighting back" when bullied and bolstering their sexual identity as a result. Finally, they also spoke of finding safe spaces and safe people – sometimes this involved a physical move to a city that was perceived to be more accepting or to seek out LGBT organisations, and in some cases, a tertiary space.

In a study of strategies used by sexual minority adolescents (SMAs) to cope with minority stress – defined as an array of unique and chronic psychosocial stressors affecting sexual minorities and contributing to negative behavioural health patterns – Goldbach and Gibbs[v] interviewed 48 racially and ethnically diverse SMAs and found that while coping patterns were similar to other adolescents, there were additional strategies in this population.

As suggested or implied in the previous study quoted, these included finding ways to affiliate with "LGBTQ community" and seeking out "LGBTQ role models". Given that SMA are generally not raised by sexual minority parents, they generally do not learn to cope with discriminatory stress in ways that other minority groups do. In his book *Far From the Tree* Andrew Solomon speaks of the need of certain groups of people (sexual minorities, the deaf) as needing to develop horizontal identities because they cannot find this identity from their parents. In the case of SMA, they may not be "out" to their parents or they may have experienced rejection already, making it difficult to get the assistance of their parents for this task.

Is it desirable that we should offer young people feedback that "it's good to be gay" to build their resilience? This echoes the sentiments of many gay prides around the globe, to present a different narrative.

I imagine this is very difficult for many if not most parents. In a study by Harper et al[vi], using in-depth qualitative interviews of gay or bisexual male adolescents, it was established that indeed these young men did use positive self affirmation as a coping strategy. They said that they valued sexual flexibility (being able to have partners of either sex), environmental flexibility (being able to find new and interesting places to socialise) and gender flexibility (being able to experiment with different gender roles).

They also said that feelings of connectedness (to young women who were experienced as supportive and open), and to the gay community (seen as being a community of survivors in the face of adversity), helped them cope with their minority status.

The researchers also identified 4 specific markers of resilience: these were self acceptance, self care, rejection of stereotypes and activism. Perhaps the answer to the question posed by this paper is YES we should help minority youth feel positive about themselves and to focus not only on risk and deficit but also on opportunity, stressing that being a minority may bring good things which are life long skills and assets. I suspect this will not find favour in many quarters, especially in South Africa, but I would argue this makes sense.

As Bhana suggests, there is much possibility in making schools safer and more affirming. I do concede this in an uphill battle – as the work of Dennis Francis et al has shown, illustrating major challenges with the Life Orientation Curriculum, the abilities, interests and values of the teachers of this subject, and resistance in the broader social context to anything that resembles acceptance of sexual and gender diversity. I would like to note here the recent publication – *Progressive Prudes* – by the Other Foundation, which found significant antipathy towards sexual and gender minorities in South Africa, but a window of opportunity in that many people did not favour harm coming to these persons.

One trend in recent times, echoing my own interest, is a move away from the idea of building individual resilience through, say, counselling and other strategies for young people in schools, towards the idea of building a more inclusive institutional school culture.

Stephen Russell's exploration of what this means[vii] is based on an understanding that in the US (and I believe here in South Africa) "contemporary school and youth cultures are characterised by rigid gender and sexuality norms (including homophobia and expectations regarding masculinity, femininity and heterosexuality) [and that] the well being of students who do not conform to or who challenge these norms is often undermined."

Russell says that a growing body of work indicates that the following strategies are associated with safer school climates for LGBT students: enumerated school non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies; teacher intervention when harassment takes place; availability of information and support about LGBT concerns for students; the presence of school-based support groups or clubs (often called "gay-straight alliances"); and curricular inclusion of LGBT people and issues.

To me, these should be part of a non-negotiable package of support and affirmation to sexual and gender minority youth – frankly we have let these young people down and I don't see a strong appetite for changing this, but there are glimmers of hope in a current

Department of Basic Education process to build teacher skills in addressing diversity in schools to make them more consciously inclusive.

Finally, some caveats and contestations.

Colpitts and Gahagan[viii] conducted a scoping review to explore strength-based approaches to LGBTQ health research and found, unsurprisingly, that the concept of resilience emerged as a key conceptual framework. Informed by this they set out to examine the utility of the concept of resilience.

Some interesting dilemmas emerged: they found there was no clearly-agreed upon definition of resilience; and the tendency for resilience to focus on individual-level factors or to be characterised as a set of inherent personal traits is concerning because this privileges the individual over the structural and the social, contributing to the invisibility of LGBTQ experiences (because they are not seen as affected by school systems). They argue for a broader definition of resilience to factor in the social and structural, consistent with ecological models of wellbeing and note the absence of baseline and longitudinal data on resilience.

In addition there is a need to recognise some of the unique challenges LGBTQ people face, moving away from heteronormative and cis-normative models of resilience. Context matters and part of this is a recognition that people do not live single-issue lives, and so an intersectional approach to sexual and gender minorities is critical. Oppressions intersect and there is no on simple way of viewing these minorities: race, class, education, location are all key intersecting factors.

Finally, and building on an intersectionality analysis, a provocative paper by Rob Cover[ix] argues that discourses of queer youth suicide regularly represent non-heterosexual young men either as vulnerable and victims who are inherently without strategies for coping with adversity, or as fundamentally resilient, as avid users of tools of resilience and community such as the internet. In the latter approach, protective factors are typically presented as specific to queer youth, therefore also minoritising and essentialising resilience.

Both approaches, he suggests, ignore the diversity of queer young lives and the capacity for a subject to be both vulnerable and resilient—concepts which need to be unpacked if we are to further our understanding of minority lives. Significantly, both approaches also ignore the fact that growing up occurs in a series of transitions, cultural encounters and circumstantial changes. Queer (LGBT) youth are neither all victims and vulnerable, nor are they all self-reliant and resilient.

Cover argues that resilience discourse presumes a unitary subject who exists prior to relationality and sociality, possibly eliding the fact that resilience exists IN RELATION TO adversity and that they may co-construct each other. He critiques the "It gets better" project – where video postings from queer adults who have survived school bullying and trauma are intended to offer "hope" – as failing to challenge the school as a site of institutionalised bullying and instead promoting individualized adaptation to a toxic space.

This notion of resilience fails to factor in the social and the structural. Furthermore, the spaces to which queer youth must escape are neoliberal, white and affluent, far away from the realities many marginalised queer youth face.

Perhaps, he argues, we need to adopt approaches which embrace the complexities of life journeys (not always achieving a "trauma-redemption" arc), which promote social diversity rather than individual change, and which refuse to call for a "regimentation of a queer life that must 'wait in hope' for a livability that may never come".

Endnotes

i http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-02-17-homosexuality-in-south-african-schools-still-largely-a-silent-taboo/#.WBbneJN941g

ii Fergusson DM, Horwood LJ. Resilience to childhood adversity: Results of a 21-year study. In: Resilience and Vulnerability: Adaptation in the Context of Childhood Adversities, ed. Suniya S Luthar. Cambridge University Press. 2003; pp.130- 155. © 2003 Cambridge University Press

iii Steiglitz, K. Development, Risk and Resilience of Transgender Youth. Journal of the Association of Nurses in AIDS Care. 2010.

iv Scourfield et al. LGBT young people's experiences of distress: resilience, ambivalence and self-destructive behaviour. Health and Social Care in the Community. (2008). 16(3), 329 - 336

v Goldbach, JT and Gibbs, JJ. 2015. Strategies employed by sexual minority adolescents to cope with minority stress. Psychol Sex Orientat Gend Divers September 2(3) 297 – 306

vi Harper et al. What's Good about Being Gay? Perspectives from Youth. Journal of LGBT Youth. 2012. 9(1) 22 – 41.

vii Russel, S. Challenging homophobia in schools: policies and programs for safe school climates. Educar em Revista, Curitiba, Brasil, n. 39, p. 123-138, jan./abr. 2011.

viii Colpitts, E and Gahagan, J. The utility of resilience as a conceptual framework for understanding and measuring LGBTQ health. Journal for Equity in Health (2016) 15:60.

ix Queer Youth Resilience: Critiquing the Discourse of Hope and Hopelessness in LGBT Suicide Representation (downloaded from http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/702)