Collaboration and Affirmation: Supporting Younger Lesbian and Bisexual Women and Transgender Youth in Small Cities and Rural Communities

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In recent years, socio-cultural differences have been factored into research on queer youth (Gray, 2009; Haskell & Burtch, 2010; Saewyc, 2011) and those with sexual identities other than gay, lesbian, and bisexual; as well, young people whose gender expression is other than male or female have been included (Taylor & Peter, 2011; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012). Yet intersectionality has rarely been adopted as a theoretical lens through which to understand the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, Two-Spirit (see McNeil-Seymour, this volume), intersex, queer, and/or questioning (LGBTTSIQ) youth (see Diamond & Buttersworth, 2008; Gray, 2009 for notable exceptions). Transgender, Two-Spirit, intersex, and questioning youth have not been well represented, and research pertaining to geographic location has not treated small cities as distinct from either rural or urban areas (Hulko & Hovanes, under review). Thus, research on the experiences of youth who identify as LGBTTSIQ that directly seeks their insights and focuses on the social contexts in which they live (i.e. small cities or rural communities) is a new area of scholarly inquiry. The research upon which this chapter is based sought to elicit the experiences and views of younger and older women[2] who

identify as sexual and/or gender minorities[3] and live in small cities and rural communities. Employing intersectionality, this chapter specifically highlights the experiences of younger lesbian and bisexual women, and transgender youth who identify as women.

Subsequent to presenting the theory and literature that informed the study and briefly describing the research design, the chapter presents findings on participants' experiences and insights into a variety of social supports in a small city, including high school and university student clubs, youth programs, the queer community, and social media. Analysis of their experiences highlights the significance of accessible and inclusive programming, and the importance of community collaboration to expand on these existing support services. The chapter concludes with recommendations that may assist service providers, educators, and members of the queer community to enhance the visibility or presence of younger lesbian and bisexual women and transgender youth, as well as assisting them in collaborative efforts to create more sources of support in small cities and rural communities.

Intersectionality

Theorists and researchers adopting an intersectional lens avoid isolating a particular aspect of a person's identity—such as gender expression— or prioritizing one form of oppression—like heterosexism—and instead consider various facets of a person's social location and treat oppressions (and privileges) as interactive and mutually reinforcing (Hulko, 2009). The connection between individual experiences and social structures is taken for granted in intersectional theorizing, which generally focuses on both structure and agency, or the micro and macro levels (see Hill Collins, 2000). This partly explains why intersectionality has become a key concept in social work practice, education, and research (Murphy, Hunt, Zajicek, Norris, & Hamilton, 2009), with naming of unearned privileges and sites of oppression occurring more often than in other scholarship (Hulko, 2009; Mehrotra, 2010; Murphy et al., 2009).

Sexual orientation was foregrounded in early writings on intersectionality (Combahee River Collective, 1977; Lorde, 2007), and women and queer people—as diverse, overlapping, or monolithic groups—have been the focus of much intersectionality research (Bowleg, 2008; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008). However, age and the ways in which it structures experiences of gender identity is addressed infrequently, as is geographic context (Hulko & Hovanes, under review). This study sought to fill a gap in intersectionality scholarship by investigating age and geographic context in relation to sexual orientation and gender expression.

Literature Review

While in the past, the voices and experiences of lesbians and bisexual women were less frequently sought or heard in research than those of gay and bisexual men (Diamond, 1998), it appears this pattern has shifted with respect to qualitative research based on convenience samples of youth (Elze, 2007). Queer research has expanded its focus beyond the "urban oasis" (Gray, 2009), yet qualitative studies of the experiences of LGBTTSIQ youth are not as common as large surveys. In British Columbia, surveys and needs assessments have highlighted the health concerns and service needs of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth living in rural and remote regions (Poon & Saewyc, 2009; Saewyc, Poon, Wang, Homma, Smith, & the McCreary Centre Society, 2007) and identified ways that service providers and First Nation communities can support Two-Spirit youth (Urban Native Youth Association, 2004). In their analysis of rural and urban differences related to sexual orientation in the 2003 BC Adolescent Health Survey, Poon and Saewyc (2009) argued that "lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents in rural communities may need additional support and services as they navigate adolescence" (p. 118). They recommended "informal help networks [linking] LGB adolescents with peers and LGB adults" (p. 122), as well as interventions focused specifically on mental health, substance abuse, and sexual education. However, these support services and networks are not always

available in small cities and rural areas where virtual communities may be the only sources of peer support and information about identity development and services (see Cohn & Hastings, 2010). Further, if programs for queer youth exist in rural settings, they may be staffed by one person tasked with serving a very large geographic area, necessitating the development of creative research/practice collaborations (Hulko, Bepple, Turco, & Clark, 2010).

The concept of community figures strongly in research on the role and impact of social networks on the lives of queer youth. These include family, friends, gay/straight alliances (GSAs), and other clubs that support their health and well-being (Gray, 2009; Poon & Saewyc, 2009; Saewyc, 2011; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Toomey et al., 2012; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010; Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009). For example, a comprehensive Canadian survey of queer high school students indicated homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia exist "in every class in every school" such that 64 percent of LGBTQ students and 61 percent of students with LGBTQ parents reported feeling unsafe at school. Findings also suggested female sexual minority and trans youth face worse situations than male sexual minority students (Taylor & Peter, 2011, pp. 8, 18; see also Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Haskell & Burtch, 2010; Meyers, 2009). An American survey with GLBTQ youth found that GSAs and the inclusion of LGBTQ issues in the curriculum made a positive difference in schools—whether or not LGBTQ youth were members (Walls et al., 2010).

Research Design

As noted, the purpose of this feminist anti-oppressive research was to explore experiences of women who identify as sexual and/or gender minorities and reside in small cities or rural communities. The study employed strategies to prioritize the voices of participants, and explicitly sought to change inequitable social relations (Brown & Strega, 2005). Additional features included a focus on social location and the practice of locating oneself in relation to the research participants

(Kirby, Greaves, & Reid, 2006). Consistent with feminist methodology, this research employed qualitative methods, namely focus groups and individual interviews. Three research questions guided the inquiry: self-identification, intersecting social identities, and geographic location. This chapter draws mostly on data generated from the third research question: "how does geographic location affect the identification of younger women and girls as sexual and/or gender minorities?"

Youth participants (n=13) were recruited through purposive sampling and consent was obtained directly from all participants, including those under the age of 16, maximizing queer youth participation. Data were collected through four individual interviews (two in person and two by email) and two focus groups (one with three younger lesbian women, another with six transgender and questioning youth), using a semi-structured interview guide. Subsequent to thematically analyzing the data and coding it, an intersectional lens was applied (see Bowleg, 2008; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Murphy et al., 2009). This chapter draws on findings coded under the categories of community, organizations, and media involvement. These are linked to Hulko and Hovanes's (under review) article, which includes further details on the methods, and presents an intersectional analysis of the experiences of LGBTQ youths who identify and find community.

The Small City Context

The small city where this research took place has a population of approximately 80,000 and serves as a transportation and service hub for rural communities and smaller cities surrounding it. The predominantly working-class residents have strong ties to resource industries, although this is changing due to the presence and growth of the university. Existing services and supports for queer youth include a group started in 1998 by a social service agency, and regular GSA meetings in at least two of five local high schools. Since 2011, Social Justice (SJ) 12, an elective course on understanding inequalities based on

sexual orientation, gender expression, and other aspects of difference (Ministry of Education, 2008), has been offered in one high school. In the mid-1990s, an on-campus queer student club was started by gay faculty, and later became an official student club with decreased faculty involvement.

Research Participants: Intersectional Dimensions

At the time of the research, two of the thirteen participants lived in rural communities, and eleven resided in the small city described above. Five participants had previously resided in larger cities (e.g. Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary) and six had lived only in small cities. When the data were collected in 2009, participants ranged in age from 15 to 25 years (with an average of 19.8 years). Two of the participants were Indigenous (First Nations and Métis), though neither identified as Two-Spirit; the rest were white anglo-Canadians. Four youth disclosed disability status (physical disability, mental illness, chronic health condition). Social class differences emerged when educational backgrounds, families of origin, and intersectionality were raised. Table 10.1 presents the area where the greatest diversity was seen: the gender identities/expressions and sexual orientations of the participants. Three of the five transgender participants identified as straight, while also identifying as belonging to the category of women or girls.

Table 10.1

Gender Identity/Expression	8 female, 5 transgender (3 female to male (FTM), 2 male to female (MTF))
Sexual Orientation	7 lesbian, 3 bisexual or pansexual, 3 straight (1 FTM, 2 MTF)

The following sections present and discuss the results of the data analysis relating to sources of support, starting with the views of the youth on safety and acceptance in the small city.

Safety and Acceptance in the Small City

Youth participants highlighted the degree to which their current, for-mer, and ideal places of residence could be considered safe and accept-ing of queer people (Hulko & Hovanes, under review). They identified specific places they chose to frequent and tried to avoid in the small city (see Hulko, in press). Generally, the unsafe spaces were public ("down-town core," "buses," "parks late at night") and safer ones more private areas ("in bed," "this room," "friend's house"). Social service agencies and gay-oriented public events or organizations featured prominently, as did the Internet. Yet, as one lesbian youth noted, "it's not necessarily where we would and wouldn't go, [rather] it's more what we would and wouldn't do there," for example, engage in public displays of affection. Similar to many LGBTQ high school students in large urban settings, those participants who were in high school at the time or had been identified as lesbian or bisexual while in high school shared stories of harassment and discrimination in educational settings. In contrast, universities were identified as safe places.

Key public spaces queer youth felt were unsafe or safe were high schools and universities, respectively. Transgender participants told stories of "training [themselves] not to go to the bathroom at school" and changing schools during transition, while other queer youth spoke to harassment in schools. A bisexual participant stated "it got out that I was bi and people were hissing at me in the hallways," and a lesbian participant spoke of being called names "mostly from bullies." The ubiquity of the expression "that's so gay" was noted by a transgender participant—"everyone in grade eight was 'that's so gay, blah, blah, blah'"—who indicated even queer youth repeat this saying without knowing the meaning.

Some participants viewed universities as places where growth and acceptance could potentially occur and where one could be free to be gay. For example, a young lesbian indicated, "I'd left high school. I was

starting something new and felt like I could start my life as being more of a gay person." Others asked if one had to be a student and/or 19 years or older to be a member of the campus pride club and to attend their events, seeking both peer support and opportunities to meet other queer youth.

Sources of Support for Queer Youth

In addition to peer-led clubs like GSAs and the campus student club, participants identified the queer youth group run by a social service agency, the local gay and lesbian association, and social media sites as sources of support.

The Queer Youth Group

Participants were extremely positive about the queer youth group run by a local social service agency: "You know there is someplace that you can go where you are not going to be judged." They highlighted the quality of their interactions with one another—"everybody's good to me, they are nice to me, they treat me right" —and the sense of belonging this engendered. This feeling of affinity and safety amongst the group members was carried into the community as they spent time with one another apart from the queer youth group and acknowledged one another at other events or places in the community. While participants also spoke positively of a weekly event sponsored by another youth agency, they noted that the heterosexual and gender-conformative youth who treated them well at this weekly event ignored them in other contexts: "Everybody is all friendly and they know my name and then I see them in town and they don't even give two shits that I am there."

The words of a transgender youth (FTM) who had recently moved to the small city attest to how the queer youth group enabled connection with other queer people, increased his knowledge of the language of gender identity and expression, and heightened his self- understanding:

> Oh wow, there's actually more and more people, not just the couple of people that I've just met randomly … they started to explain the words and I'm like "oh, that explains everything" because I didn't know what anything meant. I just knew [that] I wasn't who I was and that I felt at a young age that there was [a] huge problem [for other people] with me dressing in guy's clothes.

Another transgender youth (MTF) originally from a remote First Nations reserve, spoke of being confused and "trying new things and everything" before finding her way to the queer youth group and meeting youth dealing with similar issues. However, the move did not necessarily alleviate her confusion about her multiple identities—"I decided—I am like, I don't know who I am"—but it did provide her with a safe and supportive community of peers where she could explore her gender identity/expression and sexual orientation. Her continued confusion arose from being both First Nations and a sexual and gender minority, with this dual identity having led to her rejection by family and community, while providing a new community of peers.

Transgender participants felt it was very important to have a specific group "'cause gay issues and transgendered issues are completely different." This group, started by the queer youth group coordinator, consulted with the provincial transgender health program. Youth were observed to move between the two groups; for example, two lesbian youth attended the transgender youth group as well as the queer youth group when questioning their gender identity. The youth stressed the importance of having a member of the queer community as group facilitator, as they were "easier to relate [to]" and expanded the group in terms of size and opportunities.

The Local Gay and Lesbian Association

Another source of support was the local gay and lesbian association that held dances the majority of participants regularly attended; even the

bisexual women who were not out reported going to the dances and "not [being] embarrassed to tell people [including] my coworkers, my family, friends and even acquaintances." For most of the participants, attendance at the gay dances contributed to a sense of inclusion in the local queer community and, by extension, to greater self-acceptance. The words of one participant captured the relevance of the dances: "seeing people that didn't fit into the norms I think helped a lot to figure out that I could be myself." Unfortunately, these dances are infrequent and there is neither a gay bar nor café in this small city; further, regular "bars" in the small city were reported to be unsafe places (see Hulko, in press).

GSAs or Peer-Led Student Clubs

Although not all participants were involved in GSAs while in high school, those who were spoke of their current or past experiences. The majority of the older youth attended high school in small cities where there were no GSAs and/or they were not "out" in high school. One of the lesbian youth recounted watching news coverage of the controversy in Utah over the first GSA every night when she was in grade seven, wishing a student club like this existed in her hometown. Another lesbian in university who was a volunteer with a local GSA was surprised at the size and composition of the group: "there was like 15 people in this classroom and I was just so shocked, like they're all here, they're gay or supporting a gay friend."

Despite the value of GSAs, there were challenges, for example, inconsistent attendance and competing/dissimilar purpose and goals. Some youth felt that GSAs did not make a difference and wanted more "education" and "awareness" type activities, in addition to providing a meeting place. One participant, speaking to her unsuccessful efforts to start a GSA, pointed to the age and diverse interests of the attendees and the need for an authority figure (i.e. a teacher) as the reason for its failure: "It worked good for the first couple of months, but then it got run over by a bunch of grade eight [students] and they wouldn't listen to me 'cause they knew [that] I wasn't a teacher." The challenges of building

membership and maintaining a presence were also noted for the campus student club, with the lulls in activity and visibility being noted by at least one lesbian youth.

Social Media

Youth spoke of the importance of the Internet as a source of information and support, naming the specific social media sites Facebook, Pink Sofa, Gay.com, deviantart, Nexopia, Craigslist, and YouTube. One transgender (FTM) youth told us that he had started a forum on Nexopia called "transgeneration." A bisexual woman spoke of her pride in taking "a small step" toward being out when she accepted an invitation to join a local Facebook group:

> I think I stared at the computer for a good half hour debating whether or not to accept the invitation. Finally I decided I was being ridiculous and accepted. I know it is a small step, but I felt pretty proud of myself.

While most youth lauded the Internet, some expressed disappointment with social media sites:

> I have checked out [website] a couple times, but I can't navigate it very well and I don't really have a lot of time for online stuff and also it kind of depresses me a bit because they aren't real people, you know.

The limitations of existing sites that are "always dating oriented" were noted by another youth who wanted to find friends: "I just want to meet people that I can be friends with and stuff."

As noted, the Internet was a significant source of labels and information on the meaning of labels, especially for transgender youth exploring their gender identity. For example, one youth stated, "When I had

gender issues, I spent hours on the internet trying to find labels for myself because without labels, I feel like I cannot learn more about myself and I can't kind of grow as that person." Social media, coupled with the queer youth group, student clubs, and the gay and lesbian association, were all forms of support accessed by younger lesbian and bisexual women and transgender youth in the small city. While the Internet is considered even more relevant for queer youth in the small city because potential resources and supports are more limited (see Gray, 2009), this was not the focus of the recommendations youth made for making the small city a better or safer place.

Making the Small City Better for Queer Youth

Participants indicated several ways in which the small city could be made a better or safer place for all queer youth, particularly those who identify as women. Their suggestions focused on educational settings and the importance of building a queer community of younger and older women, some of whom could be role models.

Educational Settings

Educational settings were identified as sites through which to effect change, by "starting off at a younger grade [because] the future is the younger ones" and arranging "activities for the school, not just [a] lecture." Youth recommended the campus student club be "established more [with] more support around it" through greater involvement of queer faculty. They stressed the importance of doing outreach and creating visibility and support for queer youth through hosting public events in high schools in conjunction with Day of Silence (www.dayofsilence.org):

On International Day Against Homophobia [IDAH] there was this little tiny article in [free paper] and I was thinking why wasn't there something [bigger] … and then in the school there

was Day of Silence and I heard that there was only three or four people participating [but] I guess three is better than no one.

Clearly there is a need for allies within schools and the community to assist with creating and maintaining GSAs, organizing events associated with IDAH and Day of Silence, and ensuring that SJ 12 is offered as an elective in local high schools. This would help to build a larger and more visible community of support for queer youth in the small city.

Building a Community of Queer Women

Fearing exposure, many women who were not out or selectively disclosed their identities avoided queer gatherings. At the same time, some participants who were out and proud, yet perhaps not visibly recognized to be queer in the small city, had difficulties accessing a community of queer women (Hulko & Hovanes, under review; see Rich, 1980; Sperling, 2010). The need for a means of tapping into the community was linked to the absence of space for LGBTQ community members to gather. The need for a small group specifically for queer women was also identified by a bisexual woman who wanted "to talk about sexual orientation, gender expression, experiences, struggles we have with coming out … in a confidential and safe place." As one younger lesbian said, "I do think that having a community [is important] and … I think that community is dependent on space. I think that those things together would create stronger individuals and create a stronger community for everybody." Underpinning the youth's desire for a community of queer women was a longing to meet and learn from out lesbian and bisexual women (see Snively, 2004). For example, a lesbian youth highlighted the significance of meeting a lesbian woman with a career in social services, a partner, and a child: "it was just so shocking to meet someone that has kind of what I want to have one day." Dedicated space—accessible and identifiable—for the queer youth program would increase the visibility of the existing community, potentially drawing other lesbian women and transgender persons as role models.

Discussion and Recommendations

Despite the impression queer youth "out yonder" are in greater need of support than those in urban centres (Poon & Saewyc, 2009; Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009), the participants in this research identified a number of opportunities for support and affirmation available through youth programs, schools and universities, the queer community, and the Internet. Further, their experiences of feeling unsafe in high school appeared no different than those of urban queer youth (Haskell & Burtch, 2010; Taylor & Peter, 2011). There is little research into the lives of queer youth in small cities and rural areas, and much of what exists focuses on barriers, risks, and gaps in service (Cohn & Hastings, 2010; Elze, 2007; Saewyc et al., 2007). While there certainly is a need for more formal support services in non-urban centres, there may be sources of support that youth are using or have already created that can be strengthened or formalized, including collaboration between members of different communities and groups in the small city, like those that research participants identified as sources of support, belonging, and identity affirmation.

While the movement of students active with GSAs and/or who have taken SJ 12 from high school to university has and will continue to strengthen the campus student club and allow for connections between high school and university queer youth, there are particular challenges associated with the dearth of openly queer role models in high schools and on university campuses in smaller cities or rural communities. Their limited number demands "major personal investment" by faculty members, including the need to be out in potentially hostile environments (D'Augelli, 2006; Siebecker, 2004). The lack of positive queer role models understandably impacts the ability to assign queer staff to work with the queer youth group or to recruit volunteers.

Making the small city a safer and affirming place will help more lesbian and bisexual women to openly identify as queer, freeing them to serve as role models for younger queer women (see Sperling, 2010).

Finding space to facilitate a queer women's group, for example, could provide an informal help network (Poon & Saewyc, 2009) and a means to counter compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) and the policing of gender (Wilchins, 2004) in the context of inter-generational support (Snively, 2004). Another way of building more inter-generational support could be through the creation of an adult/youth GSA like Snively (2004) did in a rural area of the United States. A first step would be to bring together representatives of the support services identified by youth—the queer youth group, the student clubs, and the local gay and lesbian association—and to make use of social media to promote this collaborative venture and report on the outcome or next steps. When building such an alliance, it will be important to acknowledge differences amongst queer youth based on their diverse intersecting identities.

Recommendations for Future Practice and Research with Queer Youth in Small Cities

This research suggests a number of ways in which social service workers and educators can improve their ability to serve queer youth in small cities and rural communities through collaboration and affirmation. Practitioners and policy makers must focus more attention on and devote more resources toward community building, including creating opportunities for queer youth to meet in accessible and safe environments and to connect with older lesbian and bisexual women and transgender persons, who can serve as role models and mentors. Further, programs should seek to reflect the diversity of queer youth and determine how best to honour these differences while seeking affinities (see Saewyc, 2011). For example, youth services could recruit and/or match openly queer staff with the queer youth program and match the identities of role models with those of the queer youth caught between two cultures. It has been argued that interventions "need to be adapted for different regions and ethnic groups, for males and females, and perhaps even for specific

orientation groups" (Saewyc, 2011, p. 268). This research certainly indicates the need to offer trans-specific groups, and separate groups for lesbians and possibly also for bisexual women who are not out, in addition to women-only groups and groups for all queer youth. Additionally, youth programs could arrange training on sexual and gender diversity for their staff and offer workshops on being an ally for the youth who attend their programs. These steps might address the concerns younger lesbian, bisexual women, and transgender youth expressed about their participation in general youth programs.

GSAs should be created in more small cities and rural areas across Canada. Currently there are 100 GSAs registered on Egale Canada's website (Taylor & Peter, 2011), yet there are only two small cities in the interior of BC and two in the North listed as having GSAs (see educators.mygsa.ca/gsas-canada). In addition to assigning queer-positive teacher mentors to GSAs and stressing the critical role played by GSAs to parents, teachers, or straight students who question their existence (Walls et al., 2010), all high schools in BC should offer SJ 12 as an elective. This would mean encouraging teachers to take on the responsibility for SJ 12 and supporting those who do, while also encouraging students to enroll and celebrate their collective efforts toward achieving social justice. Anti-bullying policies in schools are required as well (Meyers, 2009; Poon & Saewyc, 2009), as "actions to promote LGBTQ inclusion in the formal discourses of schools … are among the strongest predictors of which schools are safer than others" (Toomey et al., 2012, p. 194). In order for these objectives to be achieved, boards of education, principals, and vice-principals need to demonstrate leadership by encouraging and supporting initiatives that seek to reduce heterosexism and homo/lesbo/trans/biphobia in schools.

Further, campus student clubs would benefit from assigned faculty mentors and a formal connection with both the GSAs in the area and the local gay and lesbian association. The latter could create a youth position on the board and sponsor community events other than dances.

In addition to more comprehensive studies on the experiences of queer youth in rural areas and small cities, future research needs to consider other dimensions of intersecting identities in greater depth, that is, to ensure that samples are diverse and that this diversity informs data analysis. Evaluative studies of the impact of support services and educational programs, including websites aimed at queer youth and the SJ 12 course in high schools, are also needed.

This chapter focuses on the challenges experienced by and supports available to queer youth who reside in small cities and rural communities, particularly those who identify as women. It demonstrates how geographic location impacts the lived experiences of LGBTQ youth and intersects with other social identity categories. The recommendations emphasize collaboration and affirmation that build on existing supports in the small city, while others speak to gaps that result from the socio-cultural context of the participants' lives as residents of small cities and rural communities. These recommendations, if adopted, can enhance the well-being of queer youth in the small city, as well as their much-needed sense of belonging and community.

Notes

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2. This chapter pertains only to the youth participants.
3. While the project focused on women and girls, both male to female and female to male transgender youth sought to participate. Three trans men—none of whom had transitioned—opted into the study, knowing the researchers were seeking "women and girls."

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