

The Causes of Attempted Suicide in LGBTQ Youth

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*I pledge on my honor that I have not given or received any unauthorized assistance in the completion of this assignment. All work contained herein is my own. All referenced work is cited correctly. –*

Attempted suicide is more common among adolescents who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LBGTQ). This is a serious problem because it can, and is intended, to result in death. The age levels I would like to focus on are 13 through 21, so high school and college level adolescents. I went to a high school that was accepting of different sexual orientations, the LGBTQ students felt safe there. Loyola University was a little different; it is a very hetero-normative place. The same applies worldwide; not every place is going to be completely accepting when it comes to sexual orientation. Many adolescents are subject to discriminatory treatment. And some adolescents have values that make them feel as if they are wrong. Due to reasons such as these, some are pushed to do drastic things, such as attempt suicide. My primary research question is why do LGBTQ youths have this feeling of vulnerability? I will also address a couple secondary questions: How large a role does bullying play in terms of vulnerability? How does the environment have an effect on the adolescent? I will organize my paragraphs by source and answer all the research questions under one source. I hypothesize that LGBTQ adolescents are more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts because they may feel vulnerable and more susceptible to violence and/or disapproval.

My first source is “Social Developmental Factors affecting Lesbian and Gay Youth: A Review of Cross-National Research Findings.” The authors are Ian Rivers and Daniel J. Carragher. It was published in November of 2003. This is credible because it is an article published in, *Children and Society*, a scholarly journal. Therefore, it was peer reviewed by other

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intellectuals. I chose this article because it goes over how LGBTQ youths are vulnerable, they have to worry about enduring harassment and discrimination, and how the adolescents often fear for their public safety. I found this source on Seeker. There were many aspects of this source that related to my hypothesis.

My primary research question is, why do LGBTQ youths have this feeling of vulnerability? Rivers and Carragher (2003) stated, “lesbian and gay youth are not only dealing with all the social and emotional turmoils common to all adolescents, they are also attempting to come to terms with their socially unacceptable identities, often without support” (p. 376). LGBTQ youths are dealing with twice the amount of stress than that of a heterosexual youth, under normal circumstances. This makes them more vulnerable to psychological distress. They are more likely to partake in risky activities. This leads into my second point:

59 percent... ‘cited their sexual orientation as the partial or the main reason for their substance abuse” (Rivers and Carragher, 2003, p. 377). Therefore, they are more likely to end up in dangerous situations. Among the list of risky activities, is attempting suicide and gay and lesbian youths are “three times more likely to reported attempting suicide. (p. 377)

Lastly, “lesbian, gay, or bisexual youth are five times more likely to miss school because of fears about their safety” (p. 378). One thing that can result in such feelings is bullying.

How large a role does bullying play in terms of vulnerability? This is one of my secondary research questions. Rivers and Carragher (2003) answer this question percentage-wise; “80 per cent of participants reported having been verbally abused, 39 per cent said they had been threatened with physical attack, 17 per cent had objects thrown at them, 13 per cent had

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been sexually assaulted, and 33 per cent had been threatened with disclosure of their gay identity” (p. 378). These contribute to the vulnerability faced by these adolescents. They are also vulnerable to feelings of “extremely low self-esteem and profound self-loathing” (Rivers and Carragher, 2003, p. 379) because of the taunting they face daily. This combination of victimization and low self-esteem can result in feelings of suicidality because it “heightens psychological distress” (p. 379). This kind of environment is unhealthy.

I believe the environment also has an effect on the vulnerability of LGBTQ youth. But the question is, how? It starts with parents and administrators. Rivers and Carragher (2003) state that, “35 per cent of their sample of gay youth indicated that their parents were either unhelpful or very unhelpful as sources of support, 27 per cent of their teachers were unhelpful or very unhelpful, and 43 per cent gave the same endorsement to their school counsellors” (p. 375-376). This makes the LGBTQ youth vulnerable to an unsafe environment. Their peers also have an impact on them, especially friends. Studies show that, “those youth who had lost friends were three times more likely to report attempting suicide” (p. 380). The environment and people the LGBTQ youth associate with certainly have effects on their vulnerability.

My second source is an article, titled “For Gay Kids, ‘It Will Get Better’ – But only if We Help.” It was written by Leonard Pitts in October 2011. It is a credible source that came from the *Baltimore Sun*. I chose this article because it uses a direct example of a gay teen who committed suicide. The boy was young, only fourteen years old. This is significant because, although it does fit into the age range I chose, it is at the lower spectrum of the bracket. It is a very important thing to note.

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I will begin in the same order: primary research question, first secondary research question, and then the second secondary research question. Why do LGBTQ youths have this feeling of vulnerability? This article is implying that there is vulnerability because so many people are hiding and afraid. Therefore, openly LGBTQ adolescents are the ones who face the ridicule, harassment, and bullying. If more people would openly come out there would be strength in numbers. Pitts says, “that is easier said than done. To hide in plain sight to protect yourself from rejection by those whose acceptance means everything” (Pitts, 2011, para 13). While it is extremely difficult, it still would be a change for the better; “it does not get better on its own” (Pitts, 2011, para 17).

How large a role does bullying play in terms of vulnerability? Jamey Rodemeyer “felt he could not take the bullying” (Pitts, 2011, para 4), so he took his own life. It plays a large role. There are many different forms of bullying, like cyber-bullying. Kids wrote cruel things about him on the internet like, “I wouldn’t care if you died...No one would” and “JAMEY IS STUPID, GAY, FAT, AND UGLY. HE MUST DIE!” (Pitts, 2011, para 5). The bullying continued after he died. Students would say they were glad that he was dead to his sister (Pitts, 2011, para 6). Bullying and environment are intertwined. When there are bullies, the environment is bad; where there are friendly, open-minded people, the environment is better for LGBTQ youth. For Jamey, the Internet served as a horrible environment.

My third source is another article called “A Matter of Life and Death.” It was written in 2011, a little under a year ago, and there is no author listed. However, it was written in the *Baltimore Sun*, and it covers local issues. I chose this article mainly for that reason. I did not originally plan to include information about Maryland. However, this article covers anti-bullying laws.

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“Suicide is the third leading cause of the death among all teenagers, but it is the No. 1 cause of death among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender teens” (“A Matter of Life and Death,” 2011, para 1). Why is it that these teens are more vulnerable? They are “driven to despair by the rejection of peers, parents, and other responsible adults” (2011, para 1). This is not something that their straight peers have to deal with – they are not going to be told that heterosexuality is wrong or sinful. There are policies enforced in the Maryland schools systems against such treatment; however, they are not properly enforced. This leaves LGBTQ students more vulnerable to bullying.

The environment and bullying are also intertwined in this article. Because the policies are not enforced well enough, that results in more bullying and an unsafe environment. The article states, “Maryland has adopted relatively tough policies against bullying and harassment, too often those rules haven’t translated into safe and secure environments for LGBT students in the classroom” (“A Matter of Life and Death,” 2011, para 1). There is a lack of enforced anti-bullying policies, gay straight alliance clubs, and antidiscrimination policies. These create a sense of safety and without them students feel vulnerable because of the lack of protection and community (2011, para 4). Also, “teachers who witness incidents of verbal and physical abuse have refused to reprimand those responsible or even blame the victim for the problem” (2011, para 2). This article shows how bullying and environment influence each other and how teachers’ obliviousness fuels the bullying. There is no punishment, therefore bullies continue to bully.

My fourth source is “Homophobia and the Acceptance of Stereotypes,” written by Michael J. Brown and Jennifer L. Groscup, in 2009. It is credible because one of the authors works in the Psychology Department at Brooklyn University – CUNY. It is also located in a

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scholarly journal; therefore it was peer reviewed. I chose it because I thought it would be interesting to include the relationship between homophobia and stereotypes.

This article was not a large part of my research findings, however it does have interesting points. In regards to vulnerability, the study found that “homophobia was associated with acceptance of negative, but not positive, stereotypes about gays and lesbians” (Brown, Groscup, 2009, p. 159). Therefore, if a homosexual adolescent exhibits a negative stereotype, (s)he is likely to be bullied for it. This study just shows that there a certain level of ignorance when it comes to homosexuality. Adolescents are vulnerable because a majority of the bullies are driven by ignorance.

My fifth source is entitled “The Closet: Psychological Issues of Being in and Coming Out.” It was written by Jack Drescher, in 2004. It is a scholarly journal, therefore it is credible. I thought it would be important to cover the LGBTQ youths who are not open about their sexuality, to see if the effect is any different.

Do these LGBTQ youths feel the same level or vulnerability? No, however because they are not accustomed to the ways of other LGBTQs, they will have more trouble in the future. Also, “For some gay men, hiding and passing as heterosexual becomes a lifelong moral hatred of the self; a maze of corruptions, petty lies, and half truths that spoil social relations in family and friends” (Drescher, 2004, p. 13). Therefore, although openly gay adolescents have a harder time outwardly, closeted individuals have a harder time inwardly and alone because they are not honest. Bullying does not apply to this source. Environmentally, “children who grow up gay rarely receive family support in dealing with antihomosexual prejudices” (Drescher, 2004, p 11).

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By the time they come out, they no longer live with their family, so they deal most likely deal with it alone.

My sixth source is a scholarly article called “Queer Presences and Absences: Citizenship, Community, Diversity – or Death.” It was written in 2011, by Yvette Taylor, and peer reviewed. I chose this article because it talks about the death of Tyler Clementi, however it did not focus on it, as I expected it to. I focused on the bullying done by adults in higher power that were quoted in the article.

In terms of vulnerability, this article talks about how Rutgers University is “extraordinarily proud of its diversity and the respect its members have for one another” (Taylor, 2011, p. 336). I thought this was ironic because of the fact that this was said in regards to Tyler Clementi, a student who jumped off the George Washington Bridge, after his roommate recorded him having sex with another male in their dorm. This quote does not seem to even be talking about the same subject. In terms of bullying, there are two important quotes. First, “Clint McCance, a school board member in Arkansas, commented on Facebook that ‘they want me to wear purple because five queer kids killed themselves. The only way Im[sic] wearin it for them is if they all commit suicide’ ” (Taylor, 2011, p. 340). And, “couldn’t ‘they’ all just go away now and let things get back to normal and all were included, of course” (Taylor, 2011, p. 336). These are both homophobic comments made by adults that could very well be persuading kids to stop bullying. This definitely has an impact on LGBTQ adolescents and results in a horrible environment. However, the US society is “ingrained heterosexual” (Taylor, 2011, p. 337); these things are expected.

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My final source is an interview. I decided last minute that I wanted to include the voice of an openly gay Loyola student. Albert Agar is a 19 year old freshman, who waited until college to come out. He felt that here he could start a new beginning. This is a credible source because the student is openly gay and he is telling me of his experiences at, and prior to coming to, Loyola.

Why do LGBTQ youth have this feeling of vulnerability? Agar (2012) says that, “the whole idea of being gay or a lesbian is sometimes unacceptable. I was unsure of who to trust because you don’t want to tell the wrong people” (personal communication). There is always uncertainty. You may think that certain people are trustworthy, but they may turn and become your biggest problem. Agar (2012) says, “I personally felt vulnerable because I went to an all-boys Catholic High School. I saw what happened to kids who were openly gay. Some go into depression. They think, ‘I’ll end my life before someone else does’ (in regards to hate crimes)” (personal communication). In terms of bullying, Agar (2012) says:

Verbal abuse is much worse than physical abuse – and more common – because you can’t stop it, especially with social media. You don’t have to have courage because people can say things anonymously, then you don’t have to deal with them in person” (personal communication).

Things cannot be done with violence, but verbal abuse often goes unpunished. In regards to environment he says, “If Loyola were full of close-minded people, I wouldn’t be who I am today. I can’t change who I am and I’m glad I don’t have to hide it here” (personal communication). Certain attitudes and views can change how you present yourself and whether or not you hide.

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A lot has been done to help LGBTQ youth. There are projects like the Trevor Project, it “is the leading national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth” (The Trevor Project, 2010). It is named after a “1994 Academy Award®-winning short film, Trevor, a comedy/drama about a gay 13-year-old boy who, when rejected by friends because of his sexuality, makes an attempt to take his life” (The Trevor Project, 2010). There is also the It Gets Better Project, which states “if they can just get through their teen years. The It Gets Better Project wants to remind teenagers in the LGBT community that they are not alone — and it WILL get better” (It Gets Better, 2010-2012). We are slowly moving towards a place where LGBTQ youth can feel safer.

In order to move at a quicker pace, to address this issue, we must improve many parts of society in America. My research topic was the relationship between suicide and LGBTQ youth. My primary research question is why do LGBTQ youths have this feeling of vulnerability? My secondary research questions: How large a role does bullying play in terms of vulnerability? How does the environment have an effect on the adolescent? My hypothesis was that LGBTQ youth were more likely to attempt suicide because they felt vulnerable and more susceptible to violence and/or disapproval. Through my research, I learned that my hypothesis was true, but more specifically bullying and negativity from their peers, resulted in this vulnerability. Questions arose during my research: why are the adult figures so oblivious to the behavior of their students/children and why is it so hard to stop? Possible solutions for this problem would be that every school has a gay straight alliance, the policies are enforced better, and programs like The Trevor Project and It Gets Better continue to grow.

## Annotated Bibliography

(2011, April 25). A matter of life and death. *Baltimore Sun*. Retrieved from

<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/opinion/editorial/bs-ed-gay-teens-20110425,0,2858356.story>

This source is about anti-bullying laws and how are not enforced well enough in the Maryland school system. This source worked well in my paper because it shows that there needs to be improved. It talks about what is being done and provides insight for the future.

Brown, M. J. , Groscup, J. L. (2009). Homophobia and Acceptance of Stereotypes About

Gays and Lesbians. *Individual Differences Research*, 7(3), 159-167.

This source connected homophobia to the acceptance of stereotypes. This source worked well with my paper because it shows the possible source of homophobia.

Carragher, D. J., Rivers, I. (2003). Social-Developmental Factors Affecting Lesbian and Gay

Youth: A Review of Cross-National Research Findings. *Children and Society*, 17, 374-385.

This source directly talks about how and why the LGBTQ youth feel vulnerable and exactly what they are more susceptible to. I feel that this helped with all my research questions.

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Drescher, J. (2004). *The Closet: Psychological Issues of Being In and Coming Out.*

*Psychiatric Times*, 21, 11-15.

This source helped to get into the minds of those who are hiding and living in secret. It is quite difficult to learn how closeted they are feeling if you don't know they are LGBTQ adolescents. Although, this source is older, it provides what insight there is on closeted youth.

Pitts, L. (2011, October 23). For gay kids, 'it will get better' – but only if we help. *Baltimore*

*Sun*. Retrieved from <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/opinion/oped/bs-ed-pitts-20111023,0,1836164.story>

This source speaks about a specific boy. I chose this because I wanted to use examples of real people, I thought it would evoke an emotional response from the readers.

Taylor, Y. (2011). Queer presences and absences: Citizenship, community, diversity – or death.

*Feminist Theory*, 12, 335-340.

This source provides homophobic attitudes shown by adults in higher positions and the effect it on the youth. I thought the quotes would be a very powerful way of directly showing homophobia.

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Hello Dr. Brizee,

I apologize for taking so long to get back to you. I realize I should have emailed you before, to let you know I was interested. However, I have finally gotten around to editing both papers. So, here they are. I'm completely fine with the papers having my name on them, despite the subject matter.

Thanks again! I really appreciate your interest in putting these on the Writing For Change page.

Have a great summer,

Keyana Sabbakhan