

LGBQ Resilience: A Thematic Meta-Synthesis of Qualitative Research

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Lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and queer (LGBQ) individuals face a range of well-known difficulties, ranging from slurs to legal exclusion and homophobic hate crimes. However, LGBQ individuals and communities often thrive. Thriving under adverse conditions is understood by psychology through the lens of resilience, i.e., one's ability to 'bounce back' after being faced with hardship. In this paper, we perform a thematic meta-synthesis of narrative studies on LGBQ resilience. Specifically, we have retrieved and performed thematic meta-analysis on 21 studies published over the last 20 years. The examination of this literature highlights the relational nature of resilience in extant research on this population. More precisely, we show that the same entities, such as family and peers, are often sources of resilience and hardship at the same time; that many LGBQ people experience hardship early in their lives, and thus cannot 'bounce back' to a previous positive state; and that extant psychological understandings of resilience are too individualistic for a field that needs to focus more on communities and relationships. We argue for the need to consider relational and community creativity, innovation and growth in understanding LGBQ resilience and not just the capacity of an individual to sustain themselves in the face of adversity.

Keywords: resilience; coping; homophobia; queer; qualitative review; thematic meta-synthesis.

Introduction

Lesbians, gay men, bisexual and queer (LGBQ)¹ people face much adversity, despite recent positive developments in some countries. In the UK, for example, 29,000 hate crimes motivated by sexuality were recorded in 2012-2015 (Home Office, 2015), the same period when marriage equality was legislated (Marriage [Same Sex Couples] Act 2013). On a more subtle level, LGBQ people have higher risks than their heterosexual peers for chronic diseases such as cancer and diabetes (Lick, Druso, & Johnson, 2013), for substance abuse (Marshall, Friedman, Stall, King, Miles, Gold et al., 2008), and for suicidal thoughts, plans, and attempts (King, Semlyen, Tai, Killaspy, Osborn, Popelyuk,

& Nazareth, 2008). Much research, often conducted within Meyer's (1995) Minority Stress Model, has repeatedly confirmed the role of societal exclusion in the poorer health outcomes of sexual minorities. As predicted by this model, large-scale prospective studies have found that experiences of prejudice and discrimination over time were related to worse physical health, even when controlling for other factors such as bereavement (Hatzenbuehler, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Erickson, 2008) or everyday stress (Frost, Levahot, & Meyer, 2015). Recently, some political campaigns and referenda about gay rights (esp. marriage equality) have also inadvertently led to further adverse effects (Frost & Fingerhut, 2016; Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, Keyes, & Hasin, 2010).

Despite the health, legal and social challenges, many LGBTQ individuals and communities thrive. More than this, LGBTQ people have also transformed the social world through the creative ways they have met these challenges and resisted their oppression (Seidman, 2002; Weeks, 2007). So, whilst some people will struggle to cope, others have found inventive ways to meet the challenges they face. This includes, for instance, the creation of 'families of choice' and of innovative relationship forms beyond the dyad in the face of oppression and minority stress (Barker & Langdridge, 2012; Weston, 1991), in which social and material support is extended and/or managed differently than within more traditional relational forms. Innovative practices of this kind have made LGBTQ responses to stressors – LGBTQ resilience, if you will - an important topic for psychology at large, as they may provide insights of value beyond this specific group (Moradi, Mohr, Worthington, & Fassinger, 2009).

Psychological resilience

Psychological resilience is largely understood today in both academic and lay discourse as the capacity of people to 'bounce back' following some setback or crisis (see, e.g.,

Zolli & Jealy, 2012). The notion of psychological resilience as ‘bouncing back’ stems from an understanding within the physical sciences of how resilient materials regain their initial shape after being put under physical stress (i.e., deformation). It has typically been defined as “relative resistance to environmental risk experiences” (Rutter, 2006, p. 1), with it framed as an interaction between the individual and their specific environmental stressors. There has been a rapid rise in studies exploring resilience in a very wide variety of psychological domains including studies on intimate partner violence (Munoz, Brady, & Brown, 2017), resilience in ‘left behind children’ in China (Wu, Zhai, Ding, Yang, Qian, Feng et al., 2017) and stress in later life (Ong, Bergeman, Bisconti, & Wallace, 2006). This is in addition to the extensive literatures on resilience in other fields from sporting achievement and nursing to the environment (see Ungar, 2012, for a slightly dated but well-balanced overview of the field). A full review of such a wide range of studies is beyond the scope of this article but this growing literature signals the growing importance and application of this area of research to an ever-broadening array of topics.

The original notion of material resilience is arguably not the best way of conceptualising human subjectivity (Gillard, 2016), and has resulted in considerable debate within the field (see e.g. Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000; Masten & Reed, 2005; Ungar, 2012). There is a particular tension within the psychological resilience literature between highly individualistic models of psychological resilience (e.g. Hou, Wang, Guo, Gaskin, Rost, & Wang, 2017) and perspectives that are more social and ecological (e.g., Singh & McKleroy, 2011). Studies focused on individual resilience appear to be growing within the field of psychology, with increasing numbers of studies appearing within the literature in which resilience is conceptualised in a highly individualised manner (see e.g. Munoz, Brady, & Brown, 2017; Hou, Wang, Guo,

Gaskin, Rost, & Wang, 2017; Wu, Zhai, Ding, Yang, Qian, Feng et al., 2017). Indeed, one recent strand of work on resilience that is receiving considerable attention within psychology is the study of ‘mental toughness,’ which focuses on the ability of the individual to cope with stressors (Lin, Mutx, Clough, & Papageorgiou, 2017).

It has been argued in the context of LGBQ youth and minority stress that it is particularly important to adopt a more ecological understanding of resilience, however it is conceived (Harvey, 2012; Riggs & Treharne, 2017). Indeed, in the specific context of the experience of trauma among transgender people of colour, Singh and McKleroy (2011) argue that the highly individualistic literature on resilience is a distinctly White, Western way of conceptualising experience that is inadequate to the needs of people of colour and other global marginalised communities. A more politically sensitive and ecological approach will arguably allow us to recognise the way that an individual’s capacity to cope is dependent in large part on the relationship between that individual and their social milieu. Key to this position is how we must understand the particular risk factors that LGBQ people face and the often-overlooked inventive strategies employed in facing adversity and surviving (Ungar, 2012). Some of the most common examples involve relational innovation like families of choice; blurred boundaries between friendship, intimacy, and support; and non-dyadic relationship forms (see *Summarising Themes* below). The adoption of a social-ecological perspective on resilience may better enable us to understand how we might optimise the social conditions for growth and/or engage in more successful clinical interventions (Harvey, 2012).

Aims

The present article aims to critically interrogate stories of LGBQ resilience within academic research in order to understand how resilience is currently conceptualised

within the field. To this end, we present here the results of a thematic meta-synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) of narrative studies conducted on LGBQ resilience in order to explore how resilience is storied such that we can then offer suggestions grounded in empirical evidence for how we might move the field forward in a productive manner, mindful of the growing notion of resilience within the individual differences literature. Whilst there have been some powerful theoretical arguments (e.g. Riggs & Treharne, 2017) suggesting that the resilience as ‘bouncing back’ model common within psychology more generally is inadequate for this population, this study aims to systematically examine the stories of resilience told by LGBQ people and researchers in the extant literature. This will enable us to determine whether these extant narrative accounts concerned with LGBQ experience reflect the dominant individual ‘bouncing back’ trope or, as we believe, represent something more ecologically complex. For this purpose, we first examine the coping resources discussed in the literature. We then probe the conceptualizations of resilience that are either explicit or implicit in these narrative studies. Finally, we discuss the limitations of the current understanding of resilience and coping resources in the case of LGBQ resilience and explore the importance of conceptualising the field differently such that the strengths of LGBQ individuals and communities continue to be recognised in future research.

Corpus and Analysis

In order to identify research relevant for this review, we searched EBSCO, PsycINFO, the British Education Index, ERIC, MEDLINE, and the Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection. We used a range of search terms related to LGBQ identities and experiences (*gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer* etc.), resilience (*resilient, resiliency* etc.), and stories (*narrative, life story* etc.). This search returned over 300 results. We included peer reviewed journal articles, dissertations and chapters in edited books, but not book-long studies. We appreciated that book-long reports (e.g., Plummer, 1995) had such a

broad scope (in integrating methods, developing theory etc.) that they could not be read as self-contained narrative analyses. We also excluded papers on counselling and psychotherapy (e.g., narrative therapy) as these did not include empirical material that was collected in a systematic manner beyond the individual case study. Thus 21 relevant reports were retained. Of these, 14 were peer-reviewed journal articles, 4 were unpublished doctoral theses, 1 was an unpublished report, and 1 was a chapter in an edited book. All studies were written in English. As with LGBTQ research more generally, the present corpus overrepresented experiences in the West (see Bartos, Berger, & Hegarty, 2014). The characteristics of the studies are summarised in Table 1.

Unlike quantitative systematic reviews and meta-analyses, attempts to synthesise qualitative research do not follow a widely accepted procedure: rather, researchers have tended to develop their own methods following a number of key principles (Hannes & Lockwood, 2011), despite the recent emergence of a small number of ‘brand name’ procedures (Timulak, 2014). We have developed our own review process for the needs of this project, drawing on extant guidelines (Sandelowski, Docherty & Emden, 1997, and esp. Thomas & Harden, 2008) for thematic synthesis, and in light of a similar review (e.g., Bartos & Hegarty, 2018). Qualitative studies contain a combination of authors’ interpretations and relevant quotes from the data. In this review, we focused on the voices of both participants and researchers², treating Methods, Results and Discussion sections in their entirety as data.

We analysed the data using thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) but also incorporated an analysis of narrative tone, imagery, and chronology (see e.g., Crossley, 2007; Langdrige, 2007). First, we familiarised ourselves with the data through repeated readings of the 21 reports. We then coded the data descriptively in the first instance in which we attributed a class of phenomena to a segment of text in order

to begin the process of identification of themes. Following this initial coding process we moved on to the next stage of pattern coding in which patterns of themes were noted. Second, we identified themes through the categorisation of patterns into coherent analytic themes within an overarching hermeneutic process moving between part (the detailed reading of the data) and whole (thematic meaning and coherence). This was all within the specific context of ascertaining the way in which resilience was conceptualised within this body of literature. That is, our analytic focus throughout was on the way that resilience was understood by participants, as reported in these studies, and then interpreted by the researchers. The themes we discerned revolved primarily around sources of resilience, and constitute the focus of the findings that we present below: these included themes focused on family, friends, communities, and the helping professions. Other more minor issues were apparent within the study but our focus herein is on the major themes that constitute the general phenomenological pattern within the literature. After this thematic analysis, we then identified narrative tones, strategies and images. At this stage, we mainly focused on researchers' (un)critical acceptance of their participants' stories. These steps were iterated several times and negotiated between the two authors until we reached an agreed analysis that best represented the primary ways that resilience was being conceptualised in the literature. Finally, we wrote the report and concomitantly developed a coherent narrative.

Summarising Themes: Participants' Coping Resources

Our meta-synthesis of 21 qualitative studies on LGBTQ resilience found that stories of resilience are almost always stories about others rather than the LGBTQ individual. LGBTQ people find strength in family, friends, communities and political movements, i.e., they have a 'relational resilience' (Reed, 2014). Resilience is most often understood as successful identity formation ('coming out') through close relationships: 'becoming occurs *through* belonging.' (Rowe, 2014, p. 438; emphasis in the original) The four

themes that have been identified are, therefore, the four kinds of relations LGBQ people rely on for support: their parents, siblings, and extended families (*Family*); those with whom they work or study (*Peers, Friends, Mentors*); other LGBQ people (*Communities and Activism*); and, finally, psychologists, counsellors and social workers (*Helping Professions*). To some extent, all of these instances both heal and harm, sometimes serving as sources of resilience and sometimes being the root of problems. In fact, all forms of hardship³ consisted of rejection by people and groups that could reasonably be expected to be nurturing. If such ambivalence is unsurprising in the case of one's family and (school) peers, the distress caused by psychologists, mentors or communities invites reflection.

Family

Resilience can be seen to occur through support and acceptance from families. Bong (2011) warns against a 'stereotype' (p. 659) of (religious, non-Western) families as homophobic, and provides numerous stories of Malaysian and Singaporean families who nurture their LGBQ members: parents, children, and even heterosexual (former) spouses have been described as supportive. Family support is often partial or unenthusiastic, but still welcome. One gay man said of his mother-in-law: "She doesn't understand it. For her she thinks this is wrong. But she is trying to understand it herself. And she's supportive nonetheless" (Bong, 2011, p. 656). Family acceptance can crystallise when the relationship becomes institutionalised. One British man said of his civil partner's family: "I've always been treated like an in-law, but now in my brain I do think I'm an in-law" (Thomas, 2014, p. 211).

LGBQ people construct their families in different ways, but all types of family seem to promote resilience. Some prefer to follow well-known scripts for family life. The American lesbian mothers interviewed by Hequembourg (2004) emphasised the normality of their families, saying "*we're so mainstream*" and "*it's been such a normal*

family” (p. 752; emphasis in the original). They argued that “kids want you to be a garden-variety mom” (p. 753), and used second-parent adoptions and commitment ceremonies (where marriage was unavailable) to manage the social acceptance of their families. This was often done at the expense of those who did not follow the same scripts. They rejected “a mom who’s way out there with a crew cut and pride chains and spiked hair” (p. 753), and labelled such people as “extremists” (p. 753).

Others may construct their own family structures, not bound by the common understanding of gender roles and monogamy. Some move away completely from an understanding of family as based on roles like parent, child or spouse. They base their ‘families of choice’ on mutual support (Weston, 1991), and thus blur the line between friendship and kinship. One man in Kia’s (2012) study described such family ties in the wake of his partner’s stroke: “my family became my friends. So when this all happened, his friends, my friends, everybody came together in support. So those people became my family...” (p. 152). Vaccaro (2010) concluded that her participants, all members of LGBTQ multi-parent families, had ‘a deep desire to construct supportive family environments for their children, while maintaining their queer adult identities and lifestyle.’ (p. 428) As one mother has put it: “I can actually have a quality of life that doesn’t feel like I’m working myself to death... I can always ask for respite and help if I need it...” (p. 437)

Models and institutional forms were usually unavailable for such families. Starting a family, therefore, involved a long planning process, sometimes with the assistance of counsellors and support groups and required considerable innovation. However, members of these families were satisfied with the models they created themselves. Speaking of a contract she had with her co-parents, one mother said: “I don’t know if it would have ever held up in court, but it did in our little family court”

(Vaccaro, 2010, p. 434). Most importantly, non-traditional families open up the possibility of a family life to LGBTQ people who were previously socialised to see their sexuality as incompatible with parenting. One gay man was “taken off guard [by the idea of an LGBTQ family]... because he just assumed that it [fatherhood] was something he couldn’t do...” (p. 430) However, one must note that Vaccaro’s participants were American academics; multi-parent families remain unattainable to many. A Malaysian mother spoke of “this fantasy island where you know, we’d all happily co-exist” (Bong, 2011, p. 657). LGBTQ families, like all others, sometimes involve caregiving. Those caring for their partners with HIV may also derive (quasi-) spiritual meaning from the experience. Two of the participants in Kia’s (2012) study entered relationships with men who already had HIV and were in imminent need of care; they described their situation as ‘an “opportunity” and a “challenge”’ (p. 147) and as ‘the start of a significant “partnership” or “connection”’ (p. 148). It is worth noting that some gay men derived positive meaning out of their experience with HIV-related activism, describing it as a “blessing” and saying they were “thankful” for it (Hostetler, 2009).

LGBTQ people’s families of origin may be, of course, a place of conflict and rejection. Many of the men in Thomas’s (2014) studies struggled to have their relationships accepted by their parents and siblings. One man told of his brother refusing to attend his wedding: “the official reason was that my sister in law had come to the conclusion that she wouldn’t know how to explain it to her children” (p. 208). Young men in Reed’s (2004) study described leaving home and painfully severing ties with their families. One of them ‘went on to detail how his male family members would bully, physically abuse, and chastise him’ (p. 94) over his sexuality.

Peers, Friends, Mentors

Even when not explicitly equated to family, friends can have a fundamental role in LGBTQ resilience. Discussing his own experience of being bullied, Holder (2014) stated

that ‘... having a gay-friendly peer group was the reason I survived... We felt supported and protected even when... tormented by bullies...’ (p. 4) Support from friends can be essential not just in the face of bullying, but also of heterosexism and the erasure of LGBTQ identities: the lesbian and gay Catholic-school teachers interviewed by Litton (1999) all spoke of the importance of having at least one ally in the workplace. Also, friends’ reactions can shape a positive identity: “it’s helped a lot that a lot of people have been like, ‘Oh, you’re gay. Who cares?’ ... it’s probably helped me a lot in my normalization phase...” (p. 256)

Relationships described as mentorship by participants typically involved older LGBTQ individuals. They might be their young mentees’ teachers, bosses, and community leaders, but also casual friends or sexual partners. As Dooley (2009) notes, gay men’s first encounter with a mentor was almost always narrated as serendipitous, i.e., life-changing but unintentional. Also, many of these relationships ‘were nonsexual or quickly became nonsexual’ (p. 20). For many LGBTQ youths, older mentors offer a gateway into LGBTQ culture (Dooley, 2009), for example, by directing them to support groups and pride events (Jordan, 2015) and by ‘instilling an ethic of self-care and a counter-cultural attitude’ (Rowe, 2014, p. 439). Mentors also have the role of deconstructing stereotypes and offering positive models. One gay man credited his openly gay professors with proving to him that “gay men didn’t have to be lecherous and horrible” (Dooley, 2009, p. 21); other young men found that openly gay bosses ‘model[led] career success as well as responsible gay adulthood.’ (Rowe, 2014, p. 440)

Many gay and bisexual men also learned about safer sex from their mentor. Black youths in Reed’s (2014) study particularly praised their community leaders for such education. Unsurprisingly, however, learning about safer sex often occurs in the context of a sexual relationship with a mentor. Many men seem to remember such an

“erotic-pedagogic relationship” (Rowe, 2014, p. 439) fondly. Such relationships taught them “all the ABC’s of sexual activity” (Hostetler, 2009, p. 413), including “how to be safe and to choose wisely” (Dooley, 2009, p. 20).

While many peers are supportive, LGBTQ people often experience bullying. Experiences of bullying range from homophobic slurs and comments to serious physical violence. Some LGBTQ youths have been pushed or hit, cut, and robbed (Jordan, 2015); some gay men have had their hair forcibly cut, or had smoke bombs planted in their car (Halquist, 2012). While homophobic epithets and comments are almost universally reported, some people have elaborate rumours directed against them: one man in Halquist’s (2012) study reported extensive rumours about his alleged promiscuity in gay bathhouses. One of Jordan’s (2015) participants put his bitterness towards his former best friend into simple but pithy words: “I thought I can trust her with my heart but it turns out I can’t” (p. 75). The perpetrators of bullying are often peers, but they may be significant adults such as parents, teachers, and counsellors (Reed, 2004). When they do not taunt LGBTQ teens directly, adults often tolerate bullying: “I think I’m more angry at the fact that it was done in front of adults and adults didn’t intervene at all” (Halquist, 2012, p. 62). Finally, the mentoring relationships discussed above may also turn abusive. Some authors (Dooley, 2009; Hostetler, 2009) problematise the ethics of sex with a mentee, and cite cases of abuse (e.g., Dooley, 2009).

Communities and Activism

Beyond friends and mentors, gay organizations and establishments can also provide support and foster LGBTQ identities and consequently LGBTQ resilience. A man in Reed’s (2014) study described a local organization as “a place where I could go to be gay” (p. 78). One youth in Jordan’s (2015) study contrasted the nurturing environment of Youth Pride to negative experiences with other supposedly supportive organizations: “They all understand me. Not like my church” (p. 84).

Involvement in gay rights activism is often a way to respond to a crisis, and build a sense of purpose and thus resilience in face of that crisis. For example, many men became active in the wake of the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s (Hostetler, 2009). Some found ways of coping with such widespread loss through a heightened involvement with the community, like one man in Holder's (2014) study. 'Frank lost 37 people in his life to AIDS-related diseases -- "people just kept dying." Through this series of tragedies, Frank became an HIV educator...' (p. 83).

Activism can become, for some, the main source of identity and belonging. Activism plays a central role in the lives of several men interviewed by Hostetler (2009). One of them 'recently started volunteering in the community and described his own fears of HIV as a "blessing" that helped to get his life back "on the right track" through community service, spirituality, and a more open and accepting attitude.' (p. 407). Such stories lead Hostetler to conclude that volunteering by middle-aged and older gay men was 'transforming late adulthood into the most generative of developmental periods...' (p. 418).

Jones and Voss (2007) tell the story of lesbian mothers in Texas who started a movement against a proposed ban on same-gender marriages. "We just felt that somebody had to do something -- that *we* had to do something. We could not just let them continue..." (p. 71, emphasis in the original). In the face of such frustration, activism is 'a source of resilience and strength' (p. 63).

More than a response to immediate challenges, activism can be an integral part of some LGBTQ people's everyday lives. In Vaccaro's (2010) study of multi-parent families, '[a]ll participants agreed that being an out, queer parent was in itself a form of activism.' (p. 441) These parents often had to perform an ad hoc 'educational intervention' (p. 439) teaching their children's carers, teachers, and peers about non-

traditional families. Even the Texan mothers who campaigned through traditional means, such as vigils and posters, emphasised the ordinariness of their actions: “We are doing what any good parent would do—fighting to protect our children...” (Jones & Voss, 2007, p. 71) Communities and activist groups can also be spaces for conflict. Vaccaro’s (2010) multi-parent families felt marginalised both by gay communities that were not family friendly, and traditional families that were not open to other models. Therefore, they had to find alternative forms of activism; one man, for example, started a gardening group that gave him the opportunity to discuss queer families with his neighbours. Finally, whether LGBTQ parents should be activists at all is controversial: while Vaccaro’s (2010) participants were adamant about taking their children to pride events, lesbian mothers in Hequembourg’s (2004) study thought that “parents should be all conservative and straight-laced” (p. 752). Finally, the shortcomings of communities are not always attributable to poor internal dynamics. Many communities fell apart in the wake of the 1980s AIDS crisis: “one of the main things is that almost all of our main political national gay leadership have all died of AIDS” (Hostetler, 2009, p. 407).

Helping Professions

Unsurprisingly, some people turn to a ‘helping profession’ for support in dealing with homophobia and similar stressors. The type of support discussed in our corpus is very diverse, including family therapy (Vaccaro, 2010) and social work (Dooley, 2009). For the young Black men in Reed’s (2014) study, HIV counsellors were a constant presence. While the outcome of the therapy or counselling is sometimes brushed over (Vaccaro, 2010), many have had strongly positive experiences. For one man in Rowe’s (2014) study, ‘therapy has been “incredibly important” in working on “my own homophobia, my own self-acceptance”’ (p. 441). Indeed, several of the men in Holder’s (2014) study credit psychotherapy as a key factor in their coming out.

However, some encounters with psychologists and social workers have been unhelpful or outright traumatic. While none of the studies mentioned conversion therapy explicitly, some participants seem to have encountered therapists or counsellors who pathologised their sexuality. One man in Halquist's (2012) study said: "I remember my therapist telling me she doesn't think I'm gay[...] 'If you act flamboyant we're gonna punish you' [...]" (p. 63). Unsurprisingly, such an approach was met with deeply negative emotions: "Because they want to see you in pain for some reason, because for some reason they think you're less than a human being." (p. 63). In Hegna's (2007) case study, a young man felt pressured by social workers to file a number of sexual abuse complaints. However, some researchers have identified progress over time: 'In contrast [to earlier experiences], men who used therapy after the 1970s found support in treatment' (Rowe, 2014, p. 441).

Analysing Narratives: Researchers' Definitions of Resilience

Thus far, this report has provided an overview of the themes in the last 20 years of narrative research into LGBTQ resilience. In this section, we move beyond a description of these themes and now focus on researchers' interpretations of narrative tone and structure in order to deepen our understanding of how resilience is framed within the extant literature. Explicit definitions of resilience are almost absent in our corpus even though all items subject to analysis were framed as studies of resilience, however broadly conceived. Authors' theorizations are broad, sometimes to the point of being vague. For example, Litton (1999) aimed to study 'the strategies that they [gay and lesbian teachers] use in order to be able to truly live, (and not just survive)' (p. 4). Dooley (2009) noted that 'these goal-directed strategies are idiosyncratic and depend on an array of variables' (p. 14). We therefore focus on the understanding of resilience that is implicit in the authors' interpretation of participant narratives.

Some researchers accepted their participants' accounts with little critical reflection. For example, Neville, Kushner, and Adams (2015) merely extracted three themes from their interviews with older gay men in New Zealand. They did not discuss narrative structure, and used the themes to provide recommendations to healthcare services in a way reminiscent of quantitative research. Others, while still embracing their participants' stories, are more theoretically sophisticated about analysing them. Thomas (2014), for example, borrowed the notion of 'atrocity story' from medical sociology and constructed a contrasting notion of 'triumph story' in order to make sense of couples' competing narratives of heterosexism and empowerment.

Other researchers consciously embraced their participants' narratives because they viewed storytelling as a political act. This is unsurprising, since silencing and ignoring LGBTQ people is a prominent element of heterosexism (see, for example, the theme "Family" above). Vaccaro (2010), for example, praises the multi-parent families in her study for providing a counter-narrative to the hegemonic story of the two-parented heterosexual family. Moreover, stories may be viewed as a vehicle for social change: 'Narrative provokes thought, thought provokes conversation, conversation provokes change' (Thomas, 2010, p. vii). In a similar vein, Rickard (2014) argued that imagining an alternative narrative for her autoethnographic story was a step towards change.

In contrast, some researchers critiqued their participants' stories for reinforcing hegemonic narratives. One such narrative was that of LGBTQ people being no different from everyone else (see Kitzinger, 1987). In a very suggestive case study, Crawley and Broad (2004) described a panel presentation where lesbians and others were invited to tell their coming out stories. Panellists were asked by the organisers to be authentic, but at the same time aim to dispel negative stereotypes about their identity. Crawley and

Broad (2004) argued the organization (as much as society at large) provided a formula for lesbian life stories, and ‘the formulaic nature of the narrative decreases the variability and diversity of experiences that LGBT people might otherwise narrate.’ (p. 50; see also Plummer, 1995)

A specific narrative that may be reinforced by resilience stories is that of individual success. Rowe (2014) regarded his participants’ narratives of resilience as formulaic, stemming from an American ethos of individualistic success stories. As he critiqued gay men’s ‘voluntaristic trope of personal striving through social attachments,’ (p. 434), Rowe aimed to deconstruct the story of resilience through family and friends⁴. Interviewing lesbian mothers in Sweden, Malmquist and Nelson (2014) noted that these women downplayed the heterosexism they had experienced in the healthcare system; there were some incidents, but ‘otherwise’, everything was ‘just great’. Such a rhetorical strategy likely has the function to present these women as strong, competent parents. Malmquist and Nelson’s (2014) interpretation of co-occurrence of positive and negative narratives is in stark contrast with that of Thomas (2014): while the latter accepts ‘triumph stories’ as a sign of genuine social change, the former suspects social pressure on LGBTQ people to de-emphasise ‘heteronormative issues’.

It is important to note that participant stories appear consistent despite the diversity of researcher perspectives. The overarching theme of resilience through relationships is consistent across the reports, whether the researcher embraces participants’ narratives (Thomas, 2010), looks for deeper meanings (Malmquist & Nelson, 2014), or outright criticizes them (Rowe, 2014). Indeed, there is remarkable consistency concerning this idea not just across theoretical perspectives, but also across age groups (cf. Jordan’s, 2010, teenagers with Neville et al.’s, 2015, older adults), genders (cf. Halquist’s, 2012, gay men with Hequembourg’s, 2004, lesbians), and

cultures (cf. Reed's, 2014, American Black men with Bong's, 2011, Southeast Asian participants). Building on this, we develop our own critique of individualised models of resilience in the Discussion below.

Discussion

We have conducted a systematic thematic meta-synthesis of qualitative narrative research on the resilience of LGBQ people in face of hardship related to their sexualities. This thematic meta-synthesis of 21 articles and dissertations firstly shows how resilience has not typically been conceptualised in individual psychological terms with respect to this population. That is, the focus in these studies has consistently been on resilience through relationships rather than any simple notion of individual psychological resilience that is common in much of the resilience literature (see e.g. Lin, Mutx, Clough, & Papageorgiou, 2017; Munoz, Brady, & Brown, 2017; Hou, Wang, Guo, Gaskin, Rost, & Wang, 2017; Wu, Zhai, Ding, Yang, Qian, Feng et al., 2017; and Ungar, 2012, for a useful overview). Secondly, we can see that there is a lack of consistency in how resilience is conceptualised. There are many varied and differing accounts of resilience, with little attempt to systematically frame the phenomena, a charge also levelled at the broader field of resilience research (Masten & Reed, 2005). Future research may benefit from better and more consistent conceptualization of this phenomenon. Thirdly, this meta-synthesis highlights how resilience resources – namely, relationships - may be sources of both support and hardship: families offer solace and reject their LGBQ members; peers may turn into friends or bullies; mentors can be nurturing or become abusive. The literature on resilience in the face of climate change has already noted the irony of looking for help to the very economic and social structures that were responsible for environmental degradation (e.g., Gillard, 2016). For LGBQ people, much of the challenge is in negotiating support from families of origin (see, e.g., Bong, 2011) or creating their own new form of family (Vaccaro, 2010). Even

helping professions, such as psychologists, can become a threat to the wellbeing of LGBQ people when they engage in such practices as conversion therapy (see, e.g., Halquist, 2010).

Our analysis further helps us pre-emptively identify and flag a number of risks if traditional models of ‘resilience’ (the individual ‘bouncing back’ or the development of ‘mental toughness’) were to be applied to LGBQ people. First, in line with the theoretical arguments of Riggs and Treharne (2017) concerning minority stress, our empirical analysis highlights how an understanding of resilience that relies on the strength of an individual to sustain themselves in the face of adversity is not suited to this population. As with other social problems, especially those involving oppressive ideologies (such as transgender experience, see e.g. Singh & McKleroy, 2011), a focus on individual success risks obscuring structural problems and the need for systemic solutions (Kitzinger, 1987; Plummer, 1981). Heteronormativity is a long-term presence in the lives of LGBQ people, present from birth, often experienced most acutely in childhood, and only adequately contained in adulthood, if it is at all (see e.g. Halquist, 2012; Holder, 2014; Jordan, 2015; Reed, 2014; Thomas 2010). Therefore, ‘bouncing back’ seems an ill-chosen metaphor: there is no initial pre-crisis or pre-stress state to which one can go ‘back.’ LGBQ resilience is thus not about a return, but instead an adaptive (and often creative) innovation in living in the face of ongoing social threat and stress. For example, Vaccaro’s (2010) participants created families based on idiosyncratic, emerging definitions, rather than falling back on a pre-existing ‘normality’ of traditional family life. Similarly, the older gay men in Hostetler’s (2009) study turned their later years into a generative period via volunteering and activism. Even the stories of individual success critiqued by Rowe (2014) are narratives of creating an equilibrium rather than returning to one.

Where we did identify stories of individual resilience in the literature, most often expressed within the dominant ‘just be yourself’ narrative trope, it is worth noting how this specific focus on individual thriving may actually be a reaction to the shortcomings of communities. The invisibility of LGBTQ people in hostile societies often make communities inaccessible or outright impossible to form (for the narratives of older generations, see e.g., Hostetler, 2009; Neville et al., 2015). When it comes to LGBTQ families there is invariably no pre-existing model, no ‘roadmap’ to follow (Vaccaro, 2010; Weston, 1997). Options may therefore include LGBTQ folk following heterosexual norms (Hequembourg, 2004; Langdridge, 2013) and/or dismissing radical alternatives as mere fantasy (Bong, 2011). Communities thus remain divided over family models, as well as models of sexual and relationship behaviour, with controversy continuing over ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ LGBTQ citizens. It is therefore understandable that some favour the telling of individual stories as a political act in the face of such ethical community challenges (Rickard, 2014; Thomas, 2010).

The limitations of this meta-synthesis are set, first of all, by the limitations of the literature it synthesises. The studies included here were almost all conducted in English speaking countries (with the exception of Malmquist and Nelson’s, 2014, Swedish study), in the rich industrialised world (with the notable exception of Bong’s, 2011, study in Malaysia). While there was some ethnic diversity, especially in the US based research, bisexual people rarely participated in these studies (with the notable exception of Reed, 2014, where about one third of the participants were bisexual). This relative neglect of both bisexual and non-Western people in sexuality research is unfortunately not unusual (see Bartos, Berger, & Hegarty, 2014, for a similar pattern in research on reducing homophobia). Severe forms of persecution, such as imprisonment and executions, still occur in many countries that were not included within the studies

reviewed herein, and the resilience strategies of LGBQ people in those countries remain largely unknown.

Finally, it is worth noting that the notion of resilience as individual accomplishment also risks exposing us to overly deterministic thinking in which human responses to the social world are reduced to mere mechanical process: when under stress a person either bounces back or not. This lacks any substantive consideration of the creative capacity of humans to respond in inventive new ways to external challenges and stressors. Our analysis has shown that stories of LGBQ resilience involve an active sense of agency and are not reducible to a simple causal explanation. LGBQ people have a long and continuing history of innovation, from the creation of ‘families of choice’ to relationship diversity (see e.g. Barker & Langdridge, 2012; Weston, 1997). Such novel forms of family and relationality may offer clues about how we might live differently, distribute economic and social support more widely and thereby sustain ourselves communally – rather than just individually - in the face of external threat and stress. The notion of bouncing back focuses too much on the reactive capacity of individuals to respond to challenge and adversity instead of recognising the ecologically situated nature of LGBQ lives, our particular social situation, and how this might open up space for creativity and innovation in the social world. Debate within the literature on resilience alerts us to the danger of only thinking of this capacity in individual psychological terms without due consideration to socio-cultural and material factors (Ungar, 2012) and we argue here that LGBQ people, relationships and communities offer a particularly valuable example of the need and potential power of a more ecological approach to understanding resilience, one which may hold clues to how all people, regardless of sexuality, might live better in the face of the inevitable stress and adversity that we must face.

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Footnote

¹ We use the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) based on the preferences of authors and research participants cited in this report. It is also important to note that this report focuses exclusively on sexuality: people who are transgender, nonbinary, intersex, polyamorous etc. are acknowledged where mentioned in the literature being examined but their particular concerns are not the main topic of this study.

² In the interest of clarity, we put participants' words in double quotation marks (""), and researchers' comments in single quotation marks (').

³ While, the HIV/AIDS epidemic cannot be reduced to social exclusion, its effects were arguably exacerbated by bigotry.

⁴ Note Rowe's point that resilience through traditional, institutionalised relationships such as families may feed into an individualistic resilience story.

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Table 1. Characteristics of the Studies Included in the Review.

Reference	Participants	Data Collection	Data analysis	Topic
Bong, 2011	6 adults, of diverse religions, ethnicities and sexualities (Malaysia, Singapore)	Individual interviews	Narrative	Negotiating same-sex partnerships within traditional families
Crawley & Broad, 2004	LGBT speaker panels invited to schools and other organizations (US)	Participant observation	(Auto)ethnography	Telling of LGBT life stories in an organised context
Dooley, 2009	15 adult gay men, diverse ages, occupations, serostatuses and ethnicities (US)	Life-story interviews	Thematic	Responding to homophobia over the life course
Halquist, 2012*	12 adult gay men, diverse ages, ethnicities and occupations (US)	Phenomenological interviews	Phenomenological	Experiences of school-age bullying
Hequembourg, 2004	40 lesbian mothers, diverse ages and relationship statuses, mostly white, middle-class (US)	Unstructured interviews (some dyadic, some individual), facilitated by a text read beforehand	Grounded theory	Negotiating institutionalised family relationships
Holder, 2014*	6 adult gay men, diverse ages and ethnicities (US)	Semi-structured interviews	Hermeneutic phenomenology	Coming out in gay men bullied as teenagers
Hostetler, 2009	42 adult gay men, diverse ages, mostly white, middle-class (US)	Life-story interviews	Grounded theory	Generativity across the life span
Jones & Voss, 2004	Case study of lesbian activism in one community (US)	Participant observation, document analysis	Ethnographic	Community-wide effects activism against discriminatory laws

Reference	Participants	Data Collection	Data analysis	Topic
Jordan, 2015	3 teenagers (one bisexual girl and two gay boys), aged 14-15, diverse ethnicities (US)	Individual phenomenological interviews	Phenomenology	Experiences of homophobia and resilience
Kia, 2012	5 adult gay men, diverse ages and ethnicities (Canada)	Individual interviews	Narrative	Experiences of caring for chronically-ill partners
Litton, 1999*	5 gay and lesbian teachers at Catholic schools (US)	Interviews (all participants); group discussions at social gatherings (three of them)	Thematic	Stories of lesbians and gay men who teach in Catholic schools
Malmquist & Nelson, 2014	96 mothers from 51 lesbian couples, diverse ages (Sweden)	Interviews (45 dyadic, 6 individual)	Discourse	Experiences with healthcare
Neville et al., 2015	12 gay men, aged 65 and older (New Zealand)	Individual interviews	Narrative	Coming out narratives of older men
Payne, 2010	4 lesbians, aged 18-21, white, middle-class (US)	Critical life history interviews	Thematic, narrative	Heteronormativity in young lesbians
Reed, 2014*	23 men who have sex with men (MSM), aged 14-24, Black (US)	Individual interviews	Analytic induction	HIV risk
Rickard, 2014	Case study of lesbian teacher (the author; Ireland)	Retelling, reflecting, and taking notes on personal experiences	Autoethnographic	Seeking non-heteronormative ways of telling stories of school life
Rowe, 2014	28 gay men, aged 24-72, diverse ethnicities and classes (US)	Individual interviews	Interpretive biography	Individualism in life stories
Spieldenner, 2014	Case study of a gay man living with HIV (the author; US)	Diary, personal reflection	Autoethnographic	Living with HIV
Thomas, 2010*	2 lesbians and 2 hard-of-hearing people (US)	Individual interviews and open-ended survey	Narrative	Commonalities in experiences of homophobia and ableism

Reference	Participants	Data Collection	Data analysis	Topic
Thomas, 2014	45 lesbian and gay couples, diverse ages (UK, US, Canada)	Dyadic interviews	Narrative	Narratives of marriage and civil partnership
Vaccaro, 2010	5 gay and lesbian academics (US)	Individual interviews	Narrative	Multi-parent families

*Unpublished

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