

ON THE STREET AND ON CAMPUS: A COMPARISON OF LIFE COURSE  
TRAJECTORIES AMONG HOMELESS AND COLLEGE LESBIAN, GAY,  
BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND QUEER YOUNG ADULTS

by

Rachel M. Schmitz

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Sociology

(Women's and Gender Studies)

Under the Supervision of Professor Kimberly A. Tyler

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2016

ProQuest Number: 10100901

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



ProQuest 10100901

Published by ProQuest LLC (2016). Copyright of the Dissertation is held by the Author.

All rights reserved.

This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code  
Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

ProQuest LLC.  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

ON THE STREET AND ON CAMPUS: A COMPARISON OF LIFE COURSE  
TRAJECTORIES AMONG HOMELESS AND COLLEGE LESBIAN, GAY,  
BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND QUEER YOUNG ADULTS

Rachel Marie Schmitz, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2016

Advisor: Kimberly A. Tyler

This study examines the life course experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) homeless young adults and LGBTQ college students. Though both of these groups have in common their age (i.e. young adults) and LGBTQ identity, college students generally have more resources and are expected to fare better into later life compared to homeless young adults. Despite these disparities, all LGBTQ young people are likely at greater risk for negative health outcomes and social issues due to their status as sexual and/or gender minorities. Little research, however, has simultaneously examined these two groups, and how their life course experiences uniquely differ based on social environments (i.e. college vs. homeless). Using in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 46 LGBTQ young adults between 19 and 26 years of age, I examine how homeless young people and college students navigate their sexual and gender identities, social contexts and relationships. Findings reveal the importance of social context in identity development, such that college students largely found the college context to be conducive to identity growth, while homeless young adults viewed homelessness as a hindrance to addressing identity-related issues, as they needed to focus on survival. Furthermore, all LGBTQ young adults strategically managed their identities in distinctive ways depending on the social context and relationship, with college

students' tactics being tied to maintaining their reputations, while homeless young adults' motivations were linked to ensuring their physical safety on the streets. Finally, the majority of LGBTQ young adults conceptualized their identity-related challenges as making them stronger and more resilient by enhancing their social relationships and imbuing them with confidence and empathy. Homeless young adults viewed their challenges in homelessness as more transformative compared to their experiences with sexuality and gender-related prejudice and discrimination. These findings alert service providers and policymakers to the fact that programs need to be tailored to LGBTQ young adults based on their life course experiences. This study also highlights the importance of understanding LGBTQ young adults not as a monolithic social group, but one that is rich with both similarities and distinctions across social context, including the homeless and college environments.

COPYRIGHT

© 2016, Rachel M. Schmitz

PREVIEW

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people to whom I extend my gratitude for their support and guidance in completing this dissertation. First and foremost, I would like to thank my academic advisor and committee chair, Dr. Kimberly A. Tyler, for her unending support and encouragement throughout my sociological career. She has continually provided me with the tools and resources that have helped me establish myself as an independent researcher and academic. Furthermore, my committee members, Dr. Emily Kazyak, Dr. Helen Moore and Dr. Wayne Babchuk, offered invaluable insight into the development and refinement of my dissertation by encouraging me to think beyond my own interpretations, and for this I am truly grateful.

Additionally, I extend my appreciation towards the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer young adults who willingly shared their stories and life experiences with me. Without the participation of these college students and homeless young adults, this study would not have been possible. I hope that this research benefits the lives of LGBTQ young adults in a meaningful way through its focus on the unique impact of social context and identity. Relatedly, I am so thankful for the numerous individuals and organizations that aided in the recruitment process, including local homeless service agencies and university faculty and staff.

I also give my thanks to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Sociology Department for believing in my potential as a graduate student and supporting my academic growth and professional development. The Sociology Department provided

funding for this research and this assistance was invaluable in the process of data collection and allowing me to maintain a timely dissertation timeline.

Last but not least, I am eternally grateful for my family and friends who have always supported my life path and have stood by my side throughout this journey as my dream of earning my PhD has reached fruition. I thank you all for your unconditional love and support.

PREVIEW

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES .....	viii
CHAPTER 1 .....	1
CHAPTER 2 .....	6
CHAPTER 3 .....	14
CHAPTER 4 .....	19
CHAPTER 5 .....	27
CHAPTER 6 .....	63
REFERENCES .....	85
APPENDICES .....	110
Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval Letters .....	111
Appendix B: Participant Informed Consent Form .....	114
Appendix C: Study Recruitment Flyers .....	117
Appendix D: Study Email Recruitment Scripts .....	120
Appendix E: Study Referral Recruitment Cards .....	123
Appendix F: List of Services for Participants .....	126
Appendix G: Screener Eligibility Questions .....	130
Appendix H: Demographic Questionnaire .....	132
Appendix I: Interview Grand Tour Questions .....	135



## List of Tables

Table 1: Respondent Demographics by Primary Social Context .....	26
--	----

PREVIEW

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Adolescence and the transition to adulthood tend to be fraught with uncertainty and complexity, at both the individual and structural levels (Arnett 2000). Young people struggle to exert agency within their life course opportunities (Clausen 1991) while social structures, such as families and education, work to shape young adults' beliefs regarding their future lives and relationships (Plotnick 2007). While primary markers of adulthood are perceived as milestones of pathways to growing up, including education, careers and family formation (Shanahan 2000), there is increasing heterogeneity in how people traverse life course trajectories and the ways that these experiences distinctly shape development (George 1993; McLeod and Almazan 2003). The tension between structural constraints and the individual's ability to exert agency over their life course trajectories is uniquely salient in the transition to adulthood as young people reside in a limbo-like status between adolescent development and the more established status of middle life.

Identity, which can be defined as one's sense of self, conceptualized internally and externally through social interactions, cultural contexts and overlapping, intersecting sources of oppression (Jones and McEwan 2000), is key to understanding how young people navigate their lives. More specifically, processes of unstable identity fluctuations, which characterize adolescence and young adulthood, are prominent in young people's establishment of sexual and gender orientations (Savin-Williams and Ream 2007). Approximately 6.4% of young adults aged 18-29 identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) (Gates and Newport 2012). As young people develop their sexual selves, a sense of family connectedness and support is crucial for maintaining positive

mental health, especially when youth do not subscribe to the norm of heterosexuality and fall somewhere in the LGBT spectrum (Needham and Austin 2010). The majority of studies, however, highlight the distinctive negative influences of parental rejection and family discord on these young people's mental health (Bouris et al. 2010; Bregman, Malik, Page, Makynen and Lindahl 2013; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz and Sanchez 2010). Experiences of family rejection can make these youth nearly six times more likely to report elevated levels of depression (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz and Sanchez 2009), and sexual minority youth in the general population have disproportionately high levels of mental health issues compared to heterosexual young people (Marshall et al. 2011). Young people who identify as gay and lesbian also exhibit higher levels of suicide ideation when they are closeted from their parents or their parents were unaccepting of their sexual orientation (D'Augelli 2002). Same-sex attraction can also reduce the benefits of positive parental relationships for sexual minority youth, as they continue to report heightened engagement with risky behavior such as drinking and drug use (Pearson and Wilkinson 2013).

In addition to mental health issues, gay and lesbian young people who experience residential instability may be at risk for further negative outcomes, as a link has been established between same-sex attraction and running away (Waller and Sanchez 2011). LGBT youth become homeless at disproportionate rates compared to heterosexual young people (Woronoff et al. 2006), with 20% of homeless youth identifying as LGBT compared to only 5-10% in the general population (Center for American Progress 2010). Relatedly, nearly 40% of young people who use street outreach services are LGBT (Durso and Gates 2012). Homeless youth who identify as lesbian and gay are at greater

risk for numerous issues compared to their heterosexual counterparts, including victimization and substance abuse (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler and Cauce 2002; Tyler 2008). Sexual minority youth with a history of homelessness are also more likely to report mental health issues, such as depression, than heterosexual homeless youth (Whitbeck, Chen, Hoyt, Tyler and Johnson 2004) and their non-homeless LGB counterparts (Rosario, Schrimshaw and Hunter 2012). The stigma attached to LGBT identities can transcend numerous social contexts, including both those that are marginalized, such as homelessness, and those that are considered more normative, such as college campuses.

Experiences of discrimination and prejudice based on sexual orientation can be especially salient in the course of higher education as young people develop their identities and chart their future pathways (Perry 1999). Additionally, prejudiced attitudes regarding LGBT identities remain prevalent on college campuses, where heteronormativity, or the privileging of heterosexuality, dominates normative expectations (Wickens and Sandlin 2010). Sexual minority college students tend to endure more instances of harassment related to their sexual orientation from their peers (D'Augelli 1992; Woodford, Kulick, Sinco and Hong 2014), with approximately 36% of LGB college students reporting some form of on-campus harassment (Rankin 2003; Woodford, Kulick, Sinco and Hong 2014). Despite these challenges, young adults who identify as LGBT can find the college environment to be a crucial time of identity development and self-actualization regarding their sexual orientation (Bilodeau and Renn 2005; Stevens 2004). Therefore, the combined search for identity and experiences of harassment and discrimination has the potential to place LGBT college students at higher

risk for a number of mental health issues, such as depression and suicide ideation, compared to their non-LGBT counterparts (D'Augelli 1993; Westefeld, Maples, Buford and Taylor 2001).

While scholars have identified the unique experiences of LGBT college students (Sanlo 2004) and LGBT homeless young adults (Cochran et al. 2002) in separate research, there are few studies that explore how these two groups of young adults compare and contrast in domains such as identity development, coping strategies and family and peer relationships. While LGBT young adults in college and on the street may be similar in terms of chronological age, they typically navigate very disparate life course trajectories and pathways as a result of differential access to resources and opportunity structures (O'Rand 2006). For example, though the theory of emerging adulthood uniquely captures the time of exploration and self-actualization that ideally encompasses the period between adolescence and adulthood, it is very much a white, middle-class model of development that is often limited to the experiences of young people attending college (Arnett 2000, 2015). Thus, young people from marginalized social locations, such as homeless youth and LGBT youth, tend to be excluded from this conception of individual growth that emphasizes privileged backgrounds and social and cultural capital (Arnett, Kloep, Hendry and Tanner 2011). The present study seeks to fill these gaps in the literature by simultaneously exploring the distinctive life courses of both LGBTQ homeless and college young adults through their subjective interpretations of their experiences in the contexts of family, peers and identity formation. To do this, I qualitatively examine the following research questions: How do LGBTQ young adults navigate their current life course trajectories and family and peer relationships in various

social contexts? How do the experiences of homeless LGBTQ young adults and those enrolled in college compare and contrast along the lines of sexual and gender identity-related challenges?

In the following chapters, I situate my study within the realm of existing knowledge on LGBTQ young adults, outline my theoretical framework and describe the methodology. First, Chapter 2 synthesizes the extent of understanding surrounding LGBTQ homeless young adults and LGBT college students and the specific challenges they face in their social worlds. Next, Chapter 3 presents the life course perspective and demonstrates its utility in examining the social relationships and experiences of LGBTQ young adults. Then, Chapter 4 describes my data collection and recruitment strategies, as well as my plan to use narrative inquiry as an analytic tool. Chapter 5 presents the study findings to illustrate how LGBTQ young adults navigate their social contexts, identities and social relationships in unique ways. Subsequently, Chapter 6 outlines a discussion of the implications of this study's findings in relation to broader social issues, future research and service providers, as well as highlighting the study's limitations. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes by reiterating the importance of this study as it emphasizes the diversity of LGBTQ young adults and their life experiences.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Runaway and Homeless LGBT Youth*

Overall, young people with a history of same-sex attraction and/or relationships are considerably more likely to run away from home in relation to youth who report only opposite-sex experiences (Waller and Sanchez 2011). The majority of research on LGBT homeless youth utilizes a risk-based framework that emphasizes their on-the-street experiences while neglecting the influence of their family backgrounds and individual interpretations of their experiences. Primarily, the risks that lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) homeless youth face on the street are significantly exacerbated by their sexual orientation status (Cochran et al. 2002; Gattis 2013; Van Leeuwen et al. 2006). LGB-identified youth who are also homeless engage in more behavior that enhances their risk for contracting HIV, such as survival sex in exchange for food, shelter or other life essentials (Gangamma, Slesnick, Toviessi and Serovich 2008). Relatedly, gay and lesbian homeless youth are more likely to be treated for HIV (Rew, Whittaker, Taylor-Seehafer and Smith 2005) and experience higher levels of street victimization compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Cochran et al. 2002; Tyler 2008).

In addition to engaging in more at-risk behavior and undergoing more negative street experiences, LGBT homeless youth also experience more adverse mental health consequences (Cochran et al. 2002; Whitbeck et al. 2004). For example, LGB street youth were much more likely to exhibit symptoms for depression, post-traumatic stress syndrome and suicide ideation when compared to heterosexual homeless youth (Whitbeck et al. 2004). Concerning their life trajectories, LGB young people on the street

also have more pronounced histories of residing in a mental health facility (Noell and Ochs 2001), which could further contribute to their residential instability. Possibly as a means of coping with the harsh reality of street life and the added stigma of sexual orientation, LGBT homeless youth also report much higher levels of substance use and abuse (Cochran et al. 2002; Van Leeuwen et al. 2006). In a similar vein, LGBT young people with histories of homelessness also experience greater discrimination in homeless youth housing and other services based on their sexual orientation, which can further exacerbate the numerous other risk factors they face (Hunter 2008). Taken together, these unique issues faced by LGBT homeless youth, such as victimization and mental health problems, call for further research on their family relationships and how these social ties impact their health and well-being. The majority of research on LGBT homeless youth describes their experiences from an outsider's perspective and fails to account for the intricate role that sexual orientation plays in these young people's lives and how it shapes their social networks.

#### *Runaway and Homeless Young People and Family Relationships*

Familial conflict and discord are primary factors in shaping a young person's entrance into residential instability and potential homelessness (Kennedy et al. 2010; Thompson et al. 2010; Tyler 2006). Specifically, mixed, or blended families that include stepparents, extended family members and non-blood related kin have been shown to place youth at higher risk for homelessness by increasing household stress levels as family members adapt to each other (Mallett and Rosenthal 2009). Single-parent homes tend to experience higher rates of financial distress and limited parental monitoring, which can drive youth to homelessness (Finkelstein 2005). Young people living in



unstable, conflict-laden foster care and group home situations are also more likely to experience homelessness at some point in their lives compared to their counterparts living in a nuclear family, domiciled environment (Mallett et al. 2005; Thompson et al. 2010; Tyler and Melander 2010). Disruptions in family living situations such as divorce or death of a parental figure can also create pathways into homelessness for young adults (Kennedy et al. 2010).

Youth may also be pushed into running away and subsequent homelessness if they are repeated victims of physical, sexual or emotional abuse (Mallett and Rosenthal 2009; Tyler 2006; Tyler and Whitbeck 2004). One study found that 95% of homeless youth had suffered some form of physical abuse at the hands of a primary caregiver prior to leaving home (Tyler and Melander 2010). Specifically, approximately 69% of perpetrators who physically abused homeless youth can be categorized as a biological mother and/or father (Tyler and Cauce 2002). Youth are also at increased risk of running away at an earlier age if they experienced neglect or sexual abuse in their household (Ferguson 2009; Thrane et al. 2006). Experiences of personal maltreatment and victimization tend to be positively correlated with the number of instances a youth initiated running away (Tyler and Bersani 2008). These abusive experiences are often not isolated as singular experiences, but their negative effects reverberate throughout the young person's life.

Psychological issues such as depression and suicidal ideation may develop over time as a result of repeated familial abuse and maltreatment, thus diminishing a youth's capacity to cope with life's struggles (Ryan et al. 2000; Thompson et al. 2010). Specifically, it has been shown that familial sexual abuse is highly correlated with

thoughts of suicide among homeless youth (Yoder, Hoyt and Whitbeck 1998).

Consequently, physical and sexual abuse in early childhood can lead a youth to utilize violence-laden survival strategies once on the street, thereby replicating a form of socialized violence (Kennedy et al. 2010). Additionally, young women who experience early childhood sexual abuse are more at risk of developing depressive symptoms, which can in turn make them more vulnerable to future victimization within the street context (Chen, Tyler, Whitbeck and Hoyt 2004). Witnessing domestic violence can also damage a youth's sense of efficacy even if he or she is not the direct target of violence, thereby solidifying the path to homelessness if a young person feels they must flee an abusive home (Tyler 2006). Given the increased risks that LGBT homeless youth face and the conflicted family backgrounds of homeless youth in general, more research is needed to understand the specific experiences of LGBT homeless youth and their multifaceted family dynamics.

#### *LGBT College Students*

Similar to, yet distinctive from, LGBT homeless young adults, sexual minority college students also face risks and challenges related to their sexual orientation in the unique social context of campus life (Rankin 2005). For example, approximately 74% of LGB students attending college labeled their campus climate as homophobic, while 60% of these young people opted to remain closeted so as to reduce their chances of peer and structural discrimination (Rankin 2003). More recently, Woodford and colleagues (2014) found that 36% of lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer (LGBQ) college students had experienced some form of sexual orientation-related victimization, such as verbal or physical assaults. While they can experience a wide variety of on-campus harassment,

LGBQ students are 17 times more likely to endure verbal derogation than any type of physical attack (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld and Frazer 2010). Encounters with campus homophobia can distinctively impact sexual minority college students, as they are significantly more likely to report both anxiety and depressive symptoms compared to heterosexual students (Woodford, Han, Craig, Lim and Matney 2014).

LGBT college students may also use substances as a means of fitting in, as one study found that gay men were much more likely to report drinking alcohol to avoid social exclusion when compared to heterosexual students (Longerbeam, Kurotsuchi Inkelas, Johnson and Lee 2007). Compared to their heterosexual counterparts, LGB college students report higher levels of drug and alcohol use, as well as more negative consequences related to alcohol use (Kerr, Ding and Chaya 2014).

In light of these unique barriers, LGBT young people also experience distinctive identity transformations during their college years (Stevens 2004). Processes of identity formation take on many unique forms and intersect with many social domains, making the concept of identity especially complex in the college environment as students simultaneously inhabit numerous roles and statuses (Abes and Jones 2004; Abes, Jones and McEwen 2007; D'Augelli 1991). Sexual minority college students may also express more fluid identities if they do not conform to heteronormative expectations of roles and statuses in college, resulting in a challenge to prevalent norms regarding gender and sexuality (Abes and Kasch 2007). For example, young adult undergraduates who increase their involvement in LGBT-related groups and activism on campus can experience an increasingly public sexual minority identity that develops over the course of their college experience (Renn 2007). Lesbian and gay college students also struggle to reconcile their

multiple identities with their sexual orientation, such that the college context prompts them to engage in processes of self-actualization that can result in experiences of identity conflict (Love, Bock, Jannarone and Richardson 2005).

### *LGBT Young Adults and Family Relationships*

Despite the struggles of college campus life and sexual orientation identity formation, peer and family social networks can serve as critical sources of support for all LGBT young adults in maintaining positive mental and emotional health (Goldfried and Goldfried 2001; Nesmith, Burton and Cosgrove 1999). Research has primarily highlighted the descriptive characteristics of LGBT young adults' family relationships, with little attention given to the intricate dynamics of how youth navigate familial and peer networks. For example, perceptions of general social support, including that from friends and family, can lower LGBT college students' levels of depression at the same time that it can improve their overall life satisfaction (Sheets and Mohr 2009). Increased feelings of family acceptance among LGBT young adults can also act as a protective factor against adverse mental health outcomes such as depression and suicide ideation (Ryan et al. 2010). Conversely, parental awareness of a young person's non-heterosexual orientation may increase their experiences of sexual orientation-related verbal abuse from their parents (D'Augelli, Grossman and Starks 2005), which may be why perceptions of friends' support are more predictive of a youth's disclosure of their sexual orientation (Shilo and Savaya 2011). LGB young adults are also more prone to suicidal attempts if their parents have actively discouraged them from displaying their gender nonconformity (D'Augelli et al. 2005). Based on the complex family dynamics experienced by LGBT young adults, further research is needed to unpack how young people interpret and

manage their family relationships in the context of their sexual identities and social environments.

*LGBT Identity as a Link Across Social Contexts*

Experiences of social harassment and discrimination have the potential to transcend differing social contexts in their critical influence on young people's mental health. For example, LGBT individuals often experience microaggressions, or interactional exchanges that derogate one's non-conforming gender or sexual identity, and these could occur in a variety of social settings. Sexual minority young adults in the general population (Nadal et al. 2011) and as students on campus (Woodford et al. 2014) specifically endure high levels of heterosexist microaggressions that adversely impact their mental health. The socially ubiquitous phrase "that's so gay" has been linked to adverse social and physical health outcomes for LGB college students, ranging from feelings of isolation to chronic headaches (Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz and Yu 2012). Transgender individuals face unique social stigmas that can range from transphobic discourse to disapproval and family rejection (Nadal, Skolnik and Wong 2012). Similarly, homeless LGBT young adults face discrimination related to their gender and sexual identities in shelters, which can inhibit their sense of safety in these facilities (Hunter 2008). In these ways, young people's LGBT identities can act as a link across unique social contexts.

Microaggressions and homophobic bias can also create a hostile academic climate for LGBT young people, especially when teachers and other school officials are complicit in these behaviors (McCabe and Dragowski 2013). Academic relationships are critical for marginalized youth, as lesbian, gay and bisexual adolescents without a

connection to a school official exhibit elevated levels of mental health troubles, such as suicide ideation (Seil, Desai and Smith 2014). Sexual and gender minority young people also endure distinct experiences of school victimization based on their sexual orientation, such as bullying and exclusion (Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz and Sanchez 2011).

Specifically, LGBT homeless youth face greater difficulties in completing high school when they are disconnected from academic support systems (i.e. counselors) and their schools lack LGBT-friendly programs (Bidell 2014). School victimization can severely impede LGBT young adults' psychosocial functioning as well as their potential academic achievement (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card and Russell 2010). For these young people, school-related support, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, could be indicative of wider community resources (Hackimer and Proctor 2015) and social contexts that could be integral to the well-being of LGBT students as well as homeless LGBT young adults.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As introduced by Elder (1998), life course theory is a valuable framework for assessing the situations and circumstances that shape young people's life trajectories, such as experiencing homelessness or attending college, and the effects of these turning points continue to influence young people's outcomes throughout their lives. This theory is understood through its recognition that "early transitions can have enduring consequences by affecting subsequent transitions, even after many years and decades have passed" (Elder 1998:7). In this way, an individual's life events create a chain of opportunities, disadvantages or some combination of the two possibilities, which result in multiplicative effects. For example, a young adult may reap further benefits of attending an elite school such as guaranteed employment after graduation (Howard and Gaztambide-Fernandez 2010), while conversely, youths may continue to fall behind if they prematurely drop out of high school and are confined to low-wage work, or experience bouts of homelessness (Whitbeck and Hoyt 1999). As such, positive or negative life events can either improve or exacerbate present conditions as well as future opportunities for young adults.

The tension between structural limitations and an individual's sense of personal control over their lives is also integral to a life course perspective of LGBTQ young adults' experiences. A young person's sense of agency, or the perceived ability to enact purposeful decisions to a degree within constraining structures, is closely tied to his or her level of identity development, such that young people with a more established sense of identity exhibit elevated levels of agency (Schwartz, Côté and Arnett 2005). Similarly,

agentic young adults feel responsible for controlling their own life course trajectory and believe that they have control over their decisions and outcomes by possessing the ability to overcome challenges on their life course pathway (Côté and Levine 2002). For sexual minority youth in particular, perceiving social support and connectedness to their peers and the broader community is significantly related to an enhanced sense of agency (Poteat, Calzo and Yoshikawa 2016). Therefore, understanding the varying life course pathways of LGBTQ young adults is key in exploring the unique ways that they make choices in a cultural climate that both constrains and resists non-normative gender and sexual identities.

Life course theory is useful for exploring individual transitions and trajectories that shape future outcomes through a lens that simultaneously considers the influence of social, historical and cultural contexts (Elder 1998). The social dynamic of “linked lives” of individuals helps to explain how family members and peer groups inhabit interconnected trajectories that bidirectionally influence one another (Elder 1994; Moen and Hernandez 2009). The quality of family relationships can have lifelong impacts, as disruptions and conflict in early family life between parents and their children continue to exert influence over this relationship well into the children’s adulthood (Whitbeck, Hoyt and Huck 1994). A family unit in discord can drastically alter a youth’s life, leading to detrimental consequences for his or her social and emotional development (Cavanaugh and Huston 2008).

Relatedly, processes of identity formation are not static and often shift in nature and purpose throughout life course trajectories (Caspi and Roberts 2001). Life course experiences also greatly hinge on individual social locations and the ways that these