

Investigating Experiences of Joy Among LGBTQ Young Adults

Amanda Abeywickrama

Faculty: Jennifer Pearson

Department of Sociology, Fairmount College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

As social sciences tend to gravitate towards studying discrimination, stigma and other negative experiences faced by marginalized groups, scholarly studying of joy is vital to foster positivity in our communities. While studying disparities among LGBTQ youth contribute to improvements in access to education, social life, and healthcare, a singular focus on oppression creates a false narrative of suffering and despair. Affirming contexts such as LGBTQ-supportive schools have been associated with less victimization, lower suicide risk, and increased wellbeing. As a social phenomenon, joy is linked to community mobilization and sustained action, which can lead to improvements in cultural climate through changes in policies and resources. In this spirit, this study aimed to understand how LGBTQ young adults find joy in their sexual and gender identities. The current study consisted of 8 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, each lasting for approximately one hour, with participants between 18 and 28 years in the larger Wichita area who identified as a sexual and/or gender minority. Following a grounded theory approach, coding consisted of open, axial, and selective coding phases. During the iterative processes of axial and selective coding, emerging themes were identified. Preliminary results indicated that discovery and learning of LGBTQ identities, expressing authentic gender and sexuality, acceptance from self and family and friends, and feelings of community, belonging, and shared understanding elicited joy. Additionally, respondents described emotional experiences of joy, as “delight,” “wave of happiness,” and “relief,” while physical sensations of joy were described as “electricity,” “seeing colors,” and “bubbly,” despite participants’ insecurities.