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Creating a Safe Space in a Small Town for the LGBTQ+ community

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COUN 6785: Social Change in Action:

Prevention, Consultation, and Advocacy

Creating a Safe Space in a Small Town for the LGBTQ+ community

Martin Tremper

Contents

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OVERVIEW

Keywords: LGBTQ+, Springdale Pennsylvania, Bullying, Oppression, Mentoring, Microaggressions

Creating a safe space in a small town for the LGBTQ+ community

Goal Statement: To create awareness in small town regarding effects of intentional and unintentional oppression and establish safe spaces for members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Significant Findings: Members of small towns learn from generations that preceded them. While cultural views have evolved and become more inclusive over the decades, small towns lagged in acceptance. These lead to microaggressions against the LGBTQ+ by community members who do not realize actions and comments can lead to internal conflicts because they see these comments as a normalcy within their community. Members of the LGBTQ+ community then repress their identity until the reach a point in their life that they are comfortable with themselves if they reach that point at all. The LGBTQ+ community should feel safe during all aspects of their life and have trusted individuals that they can reach out to.

Objectives/Strategies/Interventions/Next Steps: Religion is a staple of the community with many institutions throughout town. It is important to identify which establishments and allies and help members of the religious LGBTQ+ community find these resources. Youth should also establish a safe space within their educational setting. Offering education to teachers through mentoring programs with fellow teachers who identify as allies, the forgiveness approach to bullying to empower the victims will help members of the community have individuals they can reach out to. Community awareness can be achieved by normalizing varieties of sexual

orientations and gender identities by engaging residents in discussions through community

events throughout the year.

INTRODUCTION
Creating a safe space in a small town for the LGBTQ+ community

I come from a small town, 20 minutes north east of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, called

Springdale. Pittsburgh has become a progressive city since the fall of the industrial town that it

had become renown for. With that fall, came a move to a progressive mindset. However, this

trend did not extend to all its Greater Pittsburgh Region. Small towns like Springdale still

maintain their industrial and conservative mindsets passed down over the generations. People

who grew up in town rarely move away, and those that do move across state lines. Ideologies get

passed down between generations. People in the LGBTQ+ community do not often come out

until they have moved away or later in their lives. Some still stay hidden, only coming out

behind faceless images on gay and trans oriented websites. A safe place is needed for people

within this community to be able to express themselves and their concerns to be comfortable

with who they are.

PART 1: SCOPE AND CONSEQUENCES
Creating a safe space in a small town for the LGBTQ+ community

People in the small towns of a remnant industrial city need to have a wider access to

resources regarding the LGBTQ+ community. Oppressing themselves due to fear of the

retaliation and seclusion from friends and family is affecting the mental health of community

members. LGBTQ+ persons tend to have a more passive coping response to microaggressions

towards them and often feel discomfort or unsafe (Nedal et al., 2011). Access to counseling resources that are LGBTQ focused during grade schools, safe social locations, or increased knowledge of these areas in more progressive areas, and inclusiveness in sex education.

PART 2: SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL MODEL
Creating a safe space in a small town for the LGBTQ+ community

Individual

Members of the LGBTQ+ community may encounter many domains in their life that will add resistance to their self-acceptance and increase their chances of negative and dangerous lifestyles (Horwitz et. Al., 2021). An individual may find themselves struggling in areas that will inhibit self-growth and development. The person may start question the value of themselves and their connection to the LGBTQ+ community, have depression, anxiety, or struggles with self-esteem. Protective factors in these areas would focus on the individual's ability to find value in themselves. This includes working on coping and problem-solving skills and finding a connection to positive-growth or expression.

Peer and school

Bullying and Peer Rejection are major risk factors and a peer and educational level for youth in the community (Study Findings, 2020). Bullying can lead to isolation, sleep disturbances, and increased chances of suicide (Jomar, Fonseca, & Ramos, 2021) (Kuehn, Wagner, & Velloza, 2019). Quintana and Rey studied the effects of forgiveness as a method of protective factors against bullying. This idea takes the power away from the victimizer and into the hands of the victim. This also puts the focus of help into the hands of one person rather than trying to rely on the help of many (Quintana-Orts & Rey, 2018).

Family

Individuals in the LGBTQ+ have a higher risk of rejection and neglect from family members (Horwitz et. Al., 2021). Family values and views are often handed down through generations, and much like the small town of Springdale, these conservative views are passed to each generation due to members of the family often staying within the town limits or moving to similar areas in which they grew up. Counseling and therapeutic approaches can assist in bonding and expression as a family unit. This may help family members find full value in the person rather than orientation and gender values in a person.

Community

Related to family risk factors, societal norms within small downs will also pose as risk factors for LGBTQ+ members. Offering public community events or having opportunities to LGBTQ+ groups attend already existent events can help reshape the public mindset by changing the norm (Caroline et. al, 2018). More access to knowledge and understanding can help pave the way to community acceptance. While not every mindset will change, it can also help individuals learn who they can find allies in and create a safer environment and calmer mindset for struggling individuals.

PART 3: THEORIES OF PREVENTION
Creating a safe space in a small town for the LGBTQ+ community

Community Level – Community Organization and Other Participatory Models

When working towards acceptance and understanding within the community, a community organization model would seem most appropriate in prevention. Social planning and social action would be necessary to set up a full preventative solution to the isolation and

oppression that the LGBTQ+ community is experiencing in the area. One of the most difficult

aspects of the social action method will be to help the community find a way that this

acceptance and inclusion will benefit them to act (National Cancer Institute (2005). Teachers

can act as a strong starting point in this preventative theory because their roles in the lives of

students and members of the community. Being a teacher in a small town means that you are

also engaged in their athletics, community events, and can create stronger professional

relationships with the students. This leads to the question; how can this help with a teacher's

self-interest? Creating this safe space allows a teacher to learn more about their students on a

level beyond the books and allows teachers to create collaborate problem solving opportunities

amongst peers and mentors. Working with mentors helps to recognize teachable moments

from seemingly minor incidents. Tompkins, Kearns, & Mitton-Kükner discussed an incident in

their study of a teacher who witnessed social justice practices in the classroom. A mentor

decided to add a dress to a boy illustration. When students proclaimed that only girls are

allowed dresses, the mentor had an open discussion with them about social norms of gender

appearances and how people are not defined by their appearances (2017). Teachers can

continue to spread their knowledge and understanding due to their connections and influences

on all members of the community in a form of social planning.

Peer Level – Bullying approaches

When approaching situations involving bullies in a school setting, educators have had a

wide variety of interventions. Providing assembly services had been the go-to approach for my

school growing up, but this style has shown to have increased rates of bullying or no change in

a study by Ken Rigby (2017). Abuse and trauma in a home can lead to individuals being more

likely to become bullies. Replication of their home life spills into responses towards peers and can take generations to reverse the effects of abuse (Smith, 2016). Instead of focusing on changing the behaviors through punishment and reprimanding the bully, the greatest results came from giving the power to bystanders and the victims (Rigby, 2017). Assisting the victim in methods of coping and assertiveness helps a child if they have been receiving bullying on multiple occurrences from a variety of people. However, a child cannot handle the situation alone and the support of a bystander comes into play. Showing support through leadership and role modeling, teachers can help influence bystanders in being a support system for victims of bullying and avoid bystander apathy. As more people continue to show their support of members of the LGBTQ+ community and standing up for them when they are being oppressed against, that support will grow throughout peers.

PART 4: DIVERSITY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS
Creating a safe space in a small town for the LGBTQ+ community

The LGBTQ+ community is heavily affected by the lack of acceptance of cultural diversities within the community. Even for the most mindful members of the community, heteronormative practices are common without even knowing the results of their actions (Goodboy & Martin, 2018). It is not uncommon to be taught that boys must be tough, play sports, tease people to show assertiveness and attract beautiful women. While heteronormative expectations exist for women as well, "tomboys" have become more socially acceptable, and feelings of disgust are less present towards lesbians (Cunningham et. al, 2013). Growing up, we

hear the comments, "stop being a sissy," "man up," "you hit/throw/run like a girl" as ways to motivate us to become more manlier and socially acceptable to our peers.

To combat this ideology awareness of heteronormative statements must be addressed. Self-awareness will assist in identifying when comments like these are being made and can lead to calling out others who make statements too. Teachers can implement methods as mentioned of the teacher explaining that boys are also able to wear dresses or have long hair. Before we can break into the world of acceptance, we must first break into the world of what it means to be a person, and not defined by our genders or orientation.

PART 5: ADVOCACY
Creating a safe space in a small town for the LGBTQ+ community

When advocating for people in the LGBTQ+ community, there may barriers that we encounter to meet the needs of our target group. At an institutional level, small town education centers and community centers may have pushback to change. This reflects the idea that people in small towns often grew up in these areas and have the same ideas beliefs as their family and friends. Another major institution that will may be a barrier to LGBTQ+ needs are churches. Roman catholic church beliefs oppose homosexuality and identify it as "grave depravity". Members who identify as homosexual should practice chastity to achieve Catholic goals (*Catechism of the Catholic Church,* 2015). While many catholic churches, which dominate the religious beliefs in my area, oppose same sex relationships, it is important to add that this is a blanket opposition and not all members of these religious entities share these beliefs. Presbyterian Church (USA) are generally accepting of homosexual relationships and in 2018 overturned their stance on orientations and identities to fight for the rights of diversity and to not

use religious freedoms to deny the rights of others (Sexuality and Same-Gender Relationships, 2018). At the community level, I anticipate some resistance or criticism from more radically conservative. While I do not anticipate protests to the ideas, I plan for possible discussions at school and township level board meetings from residents. There are currently no public policies in place at this time that would be a barrier to the development of safe spaces for LGBTQ+ members of the community.

To focus on addressing these barriers, there are a few steps we can take. When working with industry level barriers, we can focus on the programs and institutes that are open to LGBTQ+ members. At an educational level, we can reach out to staff that have been identified as allies to the community. For members who are religious and feel unaccepted at their primary churches, we can ask officials of the presbyterian church to participate in planned event and activities. These church officials may even have knowledge of members within other churches that people can reach out to if they do not wish to practice another religion. For community level board meeting opposition, I feel the strongest advocacy approach will be to attend these meetings with others who are open and believe in the importance of these safe spaces to oppose the opposition. Because there are currently no policies in place against the LGBTQ+ community or gatherings, no advocate actions are necessary.

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