

Stress and Substance Use: The Impact of COVID-19 on Sexual Minorities

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Sexual minorities face unique challenges that can negatively impact their mental and physical health. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these issues, leading to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and substance use among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) individuals. Dr Carolyn Fallahi and her colleagues at Central Connecticut State University have been studying the effects of minority stress on sexual minorities, particularly in the context of the pandemic. Their research sheds light on the complex relationships between minority stress, mental health symptoms, and substance use in this vulnerable population.

The Burden of Minority Stress

Sexual minorities experience stressors related to their identity that can accumulate over time, a phenomenon known as minority stress. This includes both external stressors like discrimination and internal ones like fear of rejection. Dr Fallahi explains that minority stress puts sexual minorities at higher risk for mental health issues and unhealthy coping behaviors like substance use.

The minority stress model, developed by psychologist Ilan Meyer, proposes that these chronic stressors contribute to health disparities seen in LGBTQ+ populations. Sexual minorities have higher rates of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance use disorders compared to heterosexual individuals.

Examining the Links Between Stress and Substance Use

To better understand these relationships, Dr Fallahi and her colleagues Dr Joanne DiPlacido and Carissa Daigle conducted a study examining minority stress, mental health symptoms, and substance use among sexual minorities during the COVID-19 pandemic. They surveyed nearly 400 LGBTQ+ adults in the USA about their experiences of minority stress, anxiety, depression, PTSD symptoms related to the pandemic, and substance use.

The researchers were particularly interested in how these factors might influence each other. They hypothesized that minority stress would predict higher substance use but that increased mental health symptoms would partially explain this relationship.

To test this idea, the team used a statistical technique called serial mediation analysis. This allowed them to examine both the direct relationship between minority stress and substance use, as well as indirect pathways through anxiety, depression, and PTSD symptoms.

Key Findings Reveal Complex Relationships

The results supported the researchers' hypothesis, revealing a complex web of relationships between minority stress, mental health, and substance use. As expected, sexual minorities who reported higher levels of minority stress were more likely to engage in substance use. However, this relationship was partially explained by increases in mental health symptoms.

Specifically, the analysis showed that minority stress predicted higher levels of anxiety and depression. These symptoms, in turn, were associated with increased PTSD symptoms related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, both anxiety/depression and PTSD symptoms independently predicted greater substance use.

Importantly, the study found that minority stress still had a direct relationship with substance use even after accounting for mental health symptoms. This suggests that minority stress may influence substance use through additional pathways beyond its impact on mental health.

Intersectionality and Varying Impacts

The researchers also examined how these relationships might differ based on other aspects of identity. They found some notable differences based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and race/ethnicity.



Individuals who identified as bisexual, pansexual, asexual, or queer reported higher levels of anxiety and depression compared to gay and lesbian participants. This aligns with previous research showing that bisexual and other plurisexual individuals often face unique challenges and may experience greater minority stress.

Interestingly, racial and ethnic minorities reported lower rates of substance use compared to white sexual minorities. This contradicted the researchers' expectations but aligns with some previous studies showing lower substance use among racial minorities in general.

The Impact of COVID-19

The study's focus on PTSD symptoms related to COVID-19 provides valuable insight into how the pandemic has affected sexual minorities. Participants who reported more worry about the pandemic spreading and those who had lost jobs due to COVID-19 showed higher levels of PTSD symptoms.

Dr Fallahi emphasizes that the pandemic has created additional stressors for many LGBTQ+ individuals. For some sexual minorities, stay-at-home orders meant being confined with unsupportive family members or losing access to affirming communities. Others faced job loss or reduced access to gender-affirming healthcare. These challenges compounded existing minority stress.

The researchers suggest that the accumulation of stressors during the pandemic may have overwhelmed some individuals' coping resources, increasing vulnerability to substance use as a means of managing distress.

Implications for Support and Intervention

The study's findings have important implications for supporting the mental health and well-being of sexual minorities, particularly during times of widespread stress like the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr Fallahi and her team underscore the need for trauma-informed, culturally competent mental health care for sexual minorities. Providers should be aware of how minority stress can increase vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and PTSD, potentially leading to unhealthy coping through substance use.

The researchers emphasize the importance of addressing minority stress directly, not just its mental health consequences. This could involve interventions to build resilience, combat internalized stigma, and create more supportive environments for LGBTQ+ individuals.

Dr Fallahi notes that substance use treatment programs may need to be tailored for sexual minorities. Standard approaches may not adequately address the unique stressors and experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals. Integrating minority stress concepts into treatment could improve outcomes.

The team also highlights the critical role of social support in buffering against minority stress. During the pandemic, many sexual minorities lost access to supportive LGBTQ+ communities. Finding ways to maintain these connections, even virtually, may be crucial for well-being.



Understanding how to foster resilient support systems for sexual minorities, even in challenging circumstances, could be key to promoting health and reducing substance use.



Looking Ahead: Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights, many questions remain. Dr Fallahi and her colleagues are particularly interested in exploring the role of social support as a potential protective factor. They recognize that social support is crucial for well-being, but the pandemic disrupted many support networks. Understanding how to foster resilient support systems for sexual minorities, even in challenging circumstances, could be key to promoting health and reducing substance use.

The team is also keen to examine how these findings might inform public health responses to future crises. The pandemic has highlighted the unique vulnerabilities of sexual minorities. Going forward, they emphasize the need to ensure that disaster preparedness and response efforts take into account the specific needs of LGBTQ+ communities.

As research in this area continues to grow, Dr Fallahi hopes it will lead to more effective, tailored interventions to support sexual minority health. By understanding the complex interplay between minority stress, mental health, and substance use, researchers can develop better strategies to promote resilience and well-being among sexual minorities – not just during crises but in everyday life.

MEET THE RESEARCHER

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Dr Carolyn Fallahi is a Professor in the Department of Psychological Science at Central Connecticut State University. She obtained her PhD in Counseling Psychology from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 1989. Dr Fallahi's research spans diverse areas, including improving student writing skills, the effects of vicarious exposure to mass shootings, and substance use in college students. She has published extensively in peer-reviewed journals and presented at numerous conferences. Dr Fallahi has received several awards for her teaching and research, including multiple Excellence in Teaching honours from Central Connecticut State University. Most recently, she has been conducting research in the area of sexual minorities and minority stress. She is the co-director of the Sexual and Gender Minority Stress and Health Lab and Central Connecticut State University. She also has served as Chair of the Department of Psychological Science and on various university committees. Dr Fallahi is also an editorial board member for the APA journal *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy*.

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FURTHER READING

[J DiPlacido, CR Fallahi, CD Daigle, *Minority stress and substance use: The role of anxiety/depression and PTSD symptoms in response to the COVID-19 pandemic*, *Cogent Psychology*, 2023 10\(1\). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2023.2218258>](#)



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