External and Internalized Heterosexism, Meaning in Life, and Psychological Distress

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In the current study, we examined the mediating role of internalized heterosexism in the link between heterosexist discrimination and psychological distress among 361 lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) persons who completed an online survey. We also examined the potential moderating role of meaning in life (both search for and presence of) in the links between heterosexist discrimination and psychological distress and between the heterosexist discrimination and internalized heterosexism. As such, we examined a moderated mediation model. We hypothesized that search for meaning would play an exacerbating role and presence of meaning would play a buffering role in these relationships. Results revealed internalized heterosexism mediated the heterosexist discrimination and psychological distress link. In addition, presence of meaning moderated and buffered the heterosexist discrimination-psychological distress link. Findings from the moderation analyses also revealed that the direct effect of heterosexist discrimination on internalized heterosexism and the conditional indirect effect of heterosexist discrimination on psychological distress were contingent on search for meaning such that these relationships were only significant among LGB persons with moderate to high levels of search for meaning. Finally, search for meaning did not moderate the heterosexist discrimination-psychological distress link and presence of meaning did not moderate the heterosexist discrimination-internalized heterosexism link.

Keywords: discrimination, heterosexism, meaning in life, mental health, psychological distress

Meyer’s (2003) minority stress theory postulates that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) persons experience excess stress and negative life events as a result of heterosexism. Heterosexism can take on both external and internalized forms. On interpersonal levels, external heterosexism frequently manifests in sexual orientation based rejection, harassment, and discrimination (Szymanski, 2006). Internalized minority stressors can manifest in internalized heterosexism (i.e., the adoption of negative attitudes about one’s same-sex attractions and romantic feelings and about being LGB; Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, & Meyer, 2008a), sexual orientation concealment, stigma consciousness, and emotional reticence; however, Meyer (2003) posited internalized heterosexism as the most proximal, sinister, and harmful form because of self-stigmatization.

Although minority stress theory posits that heterosexist discrimination and internalized heterosexism directly and uniquely create psychological distress for LGB individuals, other theories, such as feminist theory (Brown, 1988; Szymanski et al., 2008a) and Hatzenbuehler’s (2009) LGB psychological mediation model, postulate indirect effects. That is, experiences of heterosexist discrimination, rejection, and harassment can “get under the skin” through internalization of the negative attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality and LGB persons conveyed by the discriminatory and prejudicial event, which in turn will relate to poorer mental health outcomes (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Szymanski & Ikizler, 2013). However, research examining this theoretical tenet is scant. Thus, the purpose of our study was to examine the mediating role of internalized heterosexism in the heterosexist discrimination → psychological distress link. In addition, we examined the potential moderating role of meaning in life in the links between heterosexist discrimination and both internalized heterosexism and psychological distress. As such, we examined a moderated mediation model.

Internalized Heterosexism as a Mediator

Numerous studies have consistently demonstrated that external heterosexism is related to poorer mental health outcomes, including global psychological distress, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress symptoms (for a review, see Szymanski & Moffitt, 2012). Supporting the links between external and internalized heterosexism, Russell and Richards (2003) found that many LGB persons reported encounters with inflammatory anti-LGB rhetoric and harassment and internalized heterosexism in response to an antigay proposed state constitutional amendment and associated public campaigns aimed at limiting the rights of LGB individuals. Riggle, Rostosky, and Horne (2010) found that participants in committed same-sex couples without legal recognition of their relationships reported more internalized heterosexism than participants in same-sex couples with legal recognition. Studies examining bivariate correlations between interpersonal experiences of heterosexist rejection, harassment, discrimination, and violence and internalized heterosexism have been mixed, with most indicating significant positive associations (e.g., Feinstein, Goldfried,
Meaning in Life as a Moderator

Meaning in life refers to “the sense made of and significance felt regarding the nature of one’s being and existence” (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006, p. 81). It includes a set of beliefs and expectations about one’s life that provides purpose and order and affects how an individual interprets and processes events that happen to them (Park, 2005, 2010). Frankl (1963), drawing from his personal experiences of living in a Nazi concentration camp, was the first person to theorize the important role of meaning in processing the heterosexist experience, which exacerbates the negative effects of heterosexism on psychological distress levels (Halama & Bakosova, 2009; Park, 2005).

In contrast, when encountering heterosexist discrimination, LGB persons who have presence of meaning in their lives often see life as being more comprehensible and predictable (Heintzelman & King, 2014), and they may be less likely to question why this happened to them and more likely to contextualize the incident as an act of injustice toward their minority group. In addition, they may be able to look to the future and its potential, rather than dwelling on the past (such as reliving or remaining focused on their experiences of heterosexism; Blackburn & Owens, 2015). Those who have a sense of meaning in life may be less likely to give up and may be more likely to process and interpret it in more helpful ways that do not shake their fundamental beliefs and in turn create distress (Park, 2005). For example, they may blame their perpetrators rather than themselves, thereby lessening potential internalizing processes and adverse effects on mental health. They might also be able to see a larger purpose in the event and view it as a challenge worthy of investing time and energy (e.g., an opportunity to develop relationships in the LGB community or engage in collective action; Halama & Bakosova, 2009; Krause, 2007) Thus, we hypothesized that search for meaning would play an exacerbating role and presence of meaning would play a buffering role in the heterosexist discrimination-internalized heterosexism and heterosexist discrimination-psychological distress links.
Supporting our assertions, Hong (2008) found that meaning in life buffered the relationships between college stress and depression and self-esteem. Relatedly, Krause (2007) found that having presence of meaning in life buffered the negative effects of traumatic events on depressed mood and somatic symptoms among the elderly. Finally, meaning in life buffered the relationship between emotion focused and avoidant coping styles and suicidal manifestations, with a high presence of meaning decreasing the magnitude of the relationship between maladaptive coping and suicidal manifestations among college women (Edwards & Holden, 2003). Together, our mediating (internalized heterosexism) and moderating (search for and presence of meaning) variables may be useful areas of intervention with LGB persons after experiencing acts of heterosexist discrimination.

The Current Study

In sum, the purpose of our study was to examine one potential mediator and two potential moderators in the relationship between heterosexist discrimination and psychological distress among LGB persons. Our hypothesized conceptual model is shown in Figure 1. Our specific hypotheses were:

1. Internalized heterosexism would mediate the relationship between heterosexist discrimination and psychological distress. That is, higher levels of heterosexist discrimination would be related to more internalized heterosexism, which in turn would be related to greater psychological distress levels.

2. Search for and presence of meaning would moderate the direct relationship between heterosexist discrimination and psychological distress. Specifically, search for meaning would play an exacerbating role and presence of meaning would play a buffering role. Thus, the relationship would be stronger when search for meaning is high and presence of meaning is low and weaker when search for meaning is low and presence of meaning is high.

3. Search for and presence of meaning would moderate the association between heterosexist discrimination and internalized heterosexism. Specifically, search for meaning would play an exacerbating role and presence of meaning would play a buffering role.

4. Search for and presence of meaning would moderate the indirect relationship between heterosexist discrimination and psychological distress. Specifically, the indirect relationships would be stronger when search for meaning is high and presence of meaning is low and weaker when search for meaning is low and presence of meaning is high.

Method

Participants

The initial sample comprised 1,117 participants who began the online survey. We eliminated 436 participants who left the entire survey blank, 298 participants who left at least one measure entirely blank, nine participants who left more than 20% of items missing on one or more measures, four participants who were younger than 18 years old, and nine participants who indicated they were only attracted to individuals of the opposite sex. This resulted in a final sample of 361 participants.

Of the 361 participants in the final sample, 59% identified as female and 41% identified as male. Eleven percent of participants

![Figure 1. Hypothesized model predicting psychological distress.](image)
also identified as transgender. Participants self-identified as lesbian or gay (62%), bisexual (35%), and unsure (3%). Participants’ description of their current feelings of romantic/sexual attraction on the Kinsey scale ranging from 0 to 6 were as follows: 33% attracted only to the same sex (6); 44% attracted more to the same sex than the opposite sex (5 and 4), 14% attracted equally to both sexes (3), and 9% attracted more to the opposite sex than the same sex (2 and 1). Ages of participants ranged from 18 to 73, with a mean age of 27.99 years (SD = 12.82). The sample consisted of 75% White, 7% Latino/a, 5% African American/Black, 5% Asian American/Pacific Islander, 1% Native American, and 7% Multiracial individuals.

Sixty-two percent (n = 222) of participants were currently enrolled in a college or university, with 19% being first year undergraduates, 24% sophomores, 17% juniors, 13% seniors, 21% graduate students, and 7% other. Of the 38% who were not currently students (n = 139), 2% attained less than a high school diploma, 24% attained a high school diploma, 10% attained a 2-year degree, 24% attained a 4-year college degree, and 39% attained a graduate/professional degree. Self-reported social class was 1% wealthy, 20% upper-middle, 35% middle, 36% lower middle/working, and 7% poor. United States geographical residence of participants included 30% Northeast, 27% Midwest, 26% South, and 18% West. Because of rounding percentages may not add up to 100%.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through “news feed” advertisements placed on Facebook. The ads invited our target population to participate in an online study examining the experiences of LGB persons. This advertisement was shown to specific Facebook users who indicated that they lived in the United States, were over 18 years old, spoke English, identified as LGB openly on their profile (i.e., men interested in men, men interested in women and men, women interested in women, and women interested in women and men), or had Facebook interests related to one of these keywords: bisexuality, lesbian, gay, LGB community. In addition, the ad targeted individuals who were part of LGB-related groups or who liked LGB-related pages. Participants were also recruited through research announcements sent via email to the contact person for a variety of LGB listservs, e-groups, organizations (e.g., regional, college campus), and Internet resources. This person was then asked to forward the research announcement to their listserv and/or to eligible colleagues and friends.

After participants clicked on the advertisement (or a hypertext link provided in the e-mail research announcement), they were directed to an online Web-based survey located on a secure firewall-protected server. After respondents went to the first page and read the informed consent, they indicated consent to take the survey by clicking a button. Then they were directed to the web page containing the survey. To reduce response biases, psychological distress symptoms were assessed before measuring external and internalized heterosexism and meaning in life. This created “psychological separation” of the variables as a means of reducing common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). This strategy also served to decrease the chances that participants’ memories of heterosexism could influence their answers to the psychological distress scale.

As an incentive to participate, all participants were given the chance to enter a raffle drawing, awarding a $20 coffee shop gift card to each of five randomly chosen individuals. Participants’ contact information was not linked to the survey responses because we used a separate raffle database. Participants reported hearing about the survey from a LGB related group, organization or listserv (46%), a Facebook advertisement (39%), a friend or colleague (10%), and “Other” (5%).

Measures

Heterosexist discrimination. Heterosexist discrimination was assessed using the LGB inclusive version of the 14-item Heterosexist Harassment, Rejection, and Discrimination Scale (Szymanski, 2006). Participants were asked to report the frequency of heterosexist events that occurred within the past year. Example items include “In the past year, how many times have you been made fun of, picked on, pushed, shoved, hit, or threatened with harm because you are a lesbian/gay/bisexual person?” and “In the past year, how many times have you heard anti-lesbian/anti-gay/anti-bisexual remarks from family members?” Each item is rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale from 1 (the event has never happened to you) to 6 (the event happened almost all the time [more than 70% of the time]). Mean scores were used with higher scores indicating greater experiences of heterosexist harassment, rejection, and discrimination in the past year. Internal reliability (.90), as well as structural (via exploratory factor analyses) and construct validity using a sexual minority female sample were supported (Szymanski, 2006). Internal consistency for the current sample was .89.

Internalized heterosexism. Internalized heterosexism was assessed using the Internalized Homophobia Scale-short form (Herek, Cogan, & Gillis, 2000; Martin & Dean, 1987), which consists of five items reflecting the extent to which LGB persons seek to avoid attractions and romantic feelings to individuals of the same-sex, are uncomfortable about their sexual desires toward members of the same-sex, and reject their sexual orientation. Example items include “If someone offered me the chance to be completely heterosexual, I would accept the chance” and “I wish I weren’t gay/lesbian/bisexual.” Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Mean scores were used with higher scores indicating greater internalized heterosexism. Internal consistency (.88) and construct validity using a LGB sample were supported (Herek et al., 2000; Herek, Cogan, Gillis, & Glunt, 1998; Martin & Dean, 1987; Kashubeck-West & Szymanski, 2008). Internal consistency for the current sample was .82.

Meaning in life. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire, a 10-item measure designed by Steger et al. (2006), is composed of two subscales, presence of (Presence) and search for (Search) meaning in life. Example items include “My life has a clear sense of purpose” (Presence) and “I am always searching for something that makes my life more significant” (Search). Respondents rated items on a 7 point Likert-type scale from 1 (absolutely untrue) to 7 (absolutely true). Mean scores were used with higher scores indicating greater presence of life meaning and higher levels of search for life meaning. Internal consistency reliability (range from .82 to .86 for Presence and .86 to .87 for Search), one month test-retest reliabilities (.70 for Presence and .73 for Search), as well
as structural (via exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses), construct, and discriminant validity using college student samples were supported (Steger et al., 2006). Alphas for the current sample was .92 Search and .91 Presence.

Psychological distress. We assessed psychological distress using the Hopkins Symptom Checklist-21 (HSCL-21; Green, Walkey, McCormick, & Taylor, 1988). This 21-item self-report measure assesses psychological distress along three dimensions: General Feelings of Distress, Performance Difficulty, and Somatic Distress. Participants indicated how often they have felt each symptom during the past several days using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (extremely). Sample items include: “Your feelings being easily hurt” and “Feeling blue.” Mean scale scores were calculated, with higher scores indicating psychological distress.

Descriptives and Preliminary Analyses

Analysis of missing data patterns for the 361 participants in our final sample indicated that less than one-quarter of a percent of all items for all participants/cases were missing, and 72% of the items were not missing data for any participant/case. Considering individual cases, 94% of participants had no missing data. Finally, no item had 1% or more of missing values. Given the very small amount of missing data, we used available case analyses procedures, wherein mean scale scores are calculated without substitution or imputation of values, which produces similar results to multiple imputation methods (Parent, 2013).

Data met guidelines for univariate normality (i.e., skewness <3, kurtosis <10; Weston & Gore, 2006). Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among all study variables are shown in Table 1. At the bivariate level, heterosexism discrimination, internalized heterosexism, and search for meaning were positively correlated with psychological distress, and presence of meaning was negatively associated with psychological distress. Examination of multicollinearity indexes for all analyses indicated that multicollinearity was not a problem (i.e., variance inflation factors <10; tolerance values > .20, and condition indexes <30; Field, 2013; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001).

Mediation Analyses

To test hypothesis 1, bootstrap analyses for mediation were conducted using Hayes (2013; Model 4) PROCESS SPSS macro. As suggested by Preacher and Hayes (2008), for our mediational analysis we used bootstrapping analyses with 1,000 bootstrapping resamples to produce 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effect. If the confidence interval does not contain zero, one can conclude that mediation is significant and meaningful. The test of mediation using bootstrapping analyses revealed that internalized heterosexism mediated the heterosexism discrimination-psychological distress link (mean indirect [unstandardized] effect = .05; SE = .02, 95% CI [.02, .091], β = .05). The variables in the model accounted for 22% of the variance in psychological distress scores.

Moderator and Moderated Mediation Analyses

To test hypotheses 2, 3, and 4, we again used PROCESS (Hayes, 2013; Model 10). For these analyses, predictor and interaction terms were mean centered. Results of these moderated analyses are shown in Table 2. Contrary to hypothesis 2, results indicated that search for meaning did not moderate the heterosexism discrimination-psychological distress link. Supporting hypothesis 2, results indicated that presence of meaning moderated the heterosexism discrimination-psychological distress link (β = -.12; R² change = .01; significant F change = .01). Follow-up simple slopes analysis revealed that heterosexism discrimination predicted psychological distress for LGB persons with low (-1 SD; B = .50; t = 2.97, p = .003), moderate (B = .41, t = 2.588, p = .010), and high (+1 SD; B = .31, t = 2.02, p = .044) presence of meaning. As shown in Figure 2, the difference between the three groups occurred at higher levels of heterosexism discrimination where LGB persons with high presence of meaning scores had lower levels of psychological distress; thereby, supporting a buffering effect.

Supporting hypothesis 3, results indicated that search for meaning did moderate the relationship between heterosexism discrimination and internalized heterosexism (β = .53; R² change = .02; significant F change = .01). Follow-up simple slopes analysis revealed that heterosexism discrimination predicted internalized heterosexism for LGB persons with high (+1 SD; B = .36 t = 4.26, p = .000) and at the mean (B = .20, t = 3.14, p = .002) of search for meaning, whereas it did not predict internalized heterosexism for LGB persons with low (+1 SD; B = .04, t = .45, p = .66) search for meaning (see Figure 3). Supporting hypothesis 4, the indirect path of heterosexism discrimination with psychological distress, mediated by internalized heterosexism, was significant.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for All Study Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Heterosexist discrimination</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Internalized heterosexism</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Search for meaning</td>
<td>5.14</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Presence of meaning</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.29*</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Psychological distress</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.42*</td>
<td>.31*</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>.47*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.
when search for meaning was high, +1 SD; B = .03; bootstrap estimate = .02; 95% CI [.0069, .0717] and at the mean, B = .02; bootstrap estimate = .01; 95% CI [.0043, .0437], but not significant when search for meaning was low, −1 SD; B = .00; bootstrap estimate = .01; 95% CI [−.0103, .0233]. Contrary to hypotheses 3 and 4, results from the regression and conditional process analyses indicated that presence of meaning did not moderate the direct relationship between heterosexist discrimination and internalized heterosexism nor the indirect relationship between heterosexist discrimination and psychological distress.

**Discussion**

Consistent with Hatzenbuehler’s (2009) theory, our findings revealed that greater experiences of heterosexist discrimination were related to higher levels of internalized heterosexism, which in

### Table 2

**Test of Search for Meaning as a Moderator of the Predictor–Mediator and Predictor–Criterion Links**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mediator: Internalized heterosexism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexist discrimination</td>
<td>−.38</td>
<td>−.31</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>13.69*</td>
<td>5,355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search for meaning</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of meaning</td>
<td>−.14</td>
<td>−.23</td>
<td>−4.53*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexist discrimination × Search for meaning</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>2.53*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexist discrimination × Presence of meaning</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criterion: Psychological distress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexist discrimination</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>2.59*</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>33.63*</td>
<td>6,354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search for meaning</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>2.07*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of meaning</td>
<td>−.15</td>
<td>−.34</td>
<td>−7.46*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalized heterosexism</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>2.48*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexist discrimination × Search for meaning</td>
<td>−.03</td>
<td>−.20</td>
<td>−1.10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexist discrimination × Presence of meaning</td>
<td>−.07</td>
<td>−.12</td>
<td>−2.55*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* β and t reflect values from the final regression equation.

*p < .05.*

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Figure 2. Interaction of heterosexist discrimination and presence of meaning on psychological distress. MLQ = Meaning in Life Questionnaire.
were related to greater psychological distress. That is, internalized heterosexism acted as a mediator, thus elucidating how external events can take on internal psychological significance (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Facing sexual orientation–based harassment, rejection, and discrimination may increase a LGB person’s awareness that anti-LGB attitudes are prevalent, leading them to internalize these harmful messages (Szymanski & Ikizler, 2013). Our results are consistent with previous studies showing that many LGB persons reported internalized heterosexism in response to a public campaign aimed at limiting LGB persons’ rights (Russell & Richards, 2003) and internalized heterosexism mediated the relationships between external heterosexism and aspects of gender role conflict and depression among gay men (Szymanski & Ikizler, 2013). Our findings implicate external interpersonal experiences of heterosexism as a potential root cause of both internalized heterosexism and poor mental health.

Our findings also suggest that individuals who are searching for meaning in their lives may internalize negative messages about being a LGB person when they experience frequent heterosexist discrimination. This finding is consistent with previous research demonstrating that greater search for meaning is related to more feelings of fear, shame, and depressed mood (Steger et al., 2006). Consistent with research demonstrating that presence of meaning in life is related to less negative affect, lower incidence of mental disorders, and higher life quality (for a review, see Heintzelman & King, 2014), our findings revealed that presence of meaning plays an ameliorating role in the heterosexist discrimination-psychological distress link. This is also consistent with other research demonstrating that meaning in life can play a buffering role in the life stress and coping and mental health outcome links (Hong, 2008; Krause, 2007).

Taken together, these findings underscore Frankl’s (1963) observations about the important role of meaning-making in promoting healthy adjustment to adverse events. It may be that having a strong sense of meaning in life mobilizes individuals to actively confront the stressor and help them make positive reinterpretations when processing the heterosexist experience (Halama & Bakosova, 2009; Park, 2005, 2010). Supporting this notion, research has demonstrated the positive role that cognitive restructuring, or meaning making, has on facilitating improved mental health outcomes following a negative life event or acute stressor in non-LGB samples (Lepore, Ragan, & Jones, 2000; McIntosh, Silver, & Wortman, 1993).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Theorized mediational models, such as the one proposed in this study, assume that the predictor variable leads to future changes in the mediating variable and that these changes impact the outcome variable. However, without an experimental or longitudinal design, conclusions about causality or directionality cannot be made. Future research that collects data over multiple time points is needed.
Self-selection bias may have influenced our findings, because LGB persons who self-selected to participate may reflect some inherent bias in the characteristics of the participants that differ from those who did participate. For example, participants needed access to a computer and to have some degree of public self-identification as LGB to participant. In addition, our sample was not representative of all educational levels and racial/ethnic groups. Future research might use other methods of participant recruitment to target underrepresented groups. Furthermore, our data were based solely on self-report measures which are subject to measurement error and response bias. In particular, our participants reported their self-perceptions of attitudes, behavior and experiences with oppression.

Given some of the previous conflicting findings about the relationship between heterosexist discrimination and internalized heterosexism at the bivariate level, future research might try to tease these out. For example, previous research has varied in terms of sample sizes (and associated statistical power) and sample types (e.g., samples using LGB persons, sexual minority women only, gay men only, African American LGB persons, predominately white LGB persons, Asian American LGB persons) used. In addition, different assessment measures have been used to measure heterosexist discrimination and internalized heterosexism. Future research, such as a meta-analysis, might examine whether variables, such as these, might explain some of the conflicting findings concerning the relations between heterosexist discrimination and internalized heterosexism. In addition, future research is needed to determine additional moderators, beyond search for meaning, in this link. Although a burgeoning body of research (e.g., Denton, Rostosky, & Danner, 2014; Szymanski et al., 2014; Szymanski & Henrichs-Beck, 2014; Velez et al., 2013) has begun to identify mediators in the minority stress-distress links, very few studies have identified moderators in these links. Thus, future research is need to identify potential exacerbating or buffering variables in these links.

**Practice Implications**

Our findings are noteworthy because they identify ways to focus interventions that are designed to help LGB persons deal more effectively with the potential negative effects of heterosexist discrimination. First, they implicate the importance of targeting negative attitudes and assumptions about homosexuality that some LGB persons might hold. Clinicians might use strategies more fully described by Kashubeck-West, Szymanski, and Meyer (2008) to increase LGB persons’ awareness of internalized heterosexism, make connections between internalized heterosexism and their experiences of heterosexist discrimination, and challenge internalized heterosexist beliefs. In addition, our findings indicate that helping LGB persons find meaning in their lives may be helpful when dealing with heterosexist discrimination. One way to facilitate meaning making is to use cognitive restructuring to empower clients to make a positive choice to grow from adverse events (i.e., heterosexist discrimination) rather than internalize the negative feelings associated with these events (Melton & Schlenberg, 2008). Research on the importance of internally constructed meaning-making (as opposed to the reliance on outside events to shape identity) in identity development in lesbian college women has implied that this construct plays an important role in healthy identity development as an LGB person (Abes & Jones, 2004).

Another strategy of empowerment and avenue of creating meaning-making in LGB client’s lives might be through social advocacy. In particular, encouraging LGB clients to become involved in social movements to reduce heterosexist discrimination could be a way to encourage identity development and connect with other LGB individuals having similar experiences which in turn may provide a sense of collective meaning-making (Wexler, DiFluvio, & Burke, 2009). Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, and Laub (2009) found that youth who were involved in gay–straight alliance groups described different experiences of empowerment through the involvement with these groups, including personal empowerment, empowerment through association with similar peers, as well as empowerment through the exchange of knowledge. Encouraging clients to get involved in groups that promote LGB rights as well as provide connection and support could help clients make meaning of and positively cope with discriminatory experiences as well as provide a sense of empowerment. However, future research is needed to determine the efficacy of these practice suggestions in treatment outcomes.

Beyond the clinical setting, our findings suggest that psychologists might raise public awareness about the prevalence and negative impact of heterosexism on LGB persons and challenge practices and policies that create oppressive contexts for them. Engaging in social justice advocacy may help decrease the occurrence of heterosexist discrimination and the availability of heterosexist messages accessible for internalization.

**Conclusion**

Our study supports Hatzenbuehler’s (2009) LGB psychological mediation model by demonstrating the explanatory role of internalized heterosexism in the link between heterosexist discrimination and psychological distress. In addition, it identifies the important role of search for meaning in exacerbating the heterosexist discrimination–internalized heterosexism link and presence of meaning in buffering the heterosexist discrimination-psychological distress link. Our results suggest that fostering meaning making with LGB persons facing heterosexist discrimination may be fruitful. In addition, it highlights the role of utilizing individual and systems level interventions to combat the existence of heterosexism and the negative effects they may have on LGB persons’ mental health.

**References**


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