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To cite this article: Rachel L. Erhard PhD & Eyal Ben-Ami MA (2015): The Schooling Experience of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth in Israel: Falling Below and Rising Above as a Matter of Social Ecology, Journal of Homosexuality, DOI: [10.1080/00918369.2015.1083778](https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2015.1083778)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2015.1083778>



Accepted author version posted online: 16 Oct 2015.  
Published online: 16 Oct 2015.



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## The Schooling Experience of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth in Israel: Falling Below and Rising Above as a Matter of Social Ecology

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### ABSTRACT

Research on the schooling experience of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth in Israel and in other Western countries has been largely risk-focused, whereas extrinsic and intrinsic protective factors, which enable LGB adolescent students to cope with school homophobic bullying, are often overlooked. To address this shortcoming, the researchers conducted a qualitative study based on semistructured interviews with 20 LGB-identified secondary school students. The findings and implications emphasized the key role of adequate ecological protective factors for LGB youth in enhancing effective coping mechanisms in response to school homophobic bullying.

### KEYWORDS

Coping mechanisms; LGB youth; protective factors; resilience; school homophobic bullying; social ecological systems

Three decades of research suggest that the prevalence of psychopathology among sexual minority adolescents is higher relative to their heterosexual counterparts. Higher rates of depressive symptoms, anxiety, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, substance abuse, eating disorders, and sexual risk behaviors have been reported (Coker, Austin, & Schuster, 2010; King et al., 2008; Lewis, 2009; Shilo & Mor, 2014). However, there is a broad consensus among researchers that same-gender sexual orientation per se is not pathogenic (Adams, 2008; Frisell, Lichtenstein, Rahman, & Långström, 2010; Institute of Medicine, 2011; Juster, Smith, Ouellet, Sindi, & Lupien, 2013). Adolescents face a variety of developmental challenges during their transition into adulthood. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) adolescents face these typical challenges and additional challenges that are strongly and directly related to the social stigma of their sexual orientation (the added burden), which leads to the mentioned health disparities (Meyer, 2007, 2013).

Indeed, anti-LGB discrimination, sexual prejudice, peer victimization, parental rejection, social ostracism, cultural marginalization, and external and internalized homophobia lead to low self-esteem, depression, hopelessness, social isolation, and suicide ideation and attempts (Burton, Marshal, Chisolm, Sucato, & Friedman, 2013; Hatzenbuehler, 2011; Hatzenbuehler

et al., 2014; Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, Keyes, & Hasin, 2010; Hatzenbuehler, Phelan, & Link, 2013; Poteat, 2007; Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Rodkin, 2004; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2009; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011).

Hence, to expand our understanding of the high prevalence of psychopathology among LGB adolescents, research should focus on the complex reciprocal interrelationships within and between the developing adolescent and the multilevel systems in which growth occurs, as elaborated by Bronfenbrenner's bio-psycho-social-ecological systems model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

As evidenced by the large and varied body of empirical literature, individual LGB youth experiences are thoroughly embedded within a given constellation of bio-systems, psycho-systems, micro-systems, (i.e., direct interaction or setting), meso-systems (i.e., links between two or more micro-systems), exo-systems, (i.e., settings that do not involve the individual directly but influence the microsystem), and thus the individual and macro-systems (i.e., the broader culture and society that affect the other system levels and become manifest in the consciousness of the individual) (Barboza et al., 2009; Cook, Purdie-Vaughns, Meyer, & Busch, 2014; Espelage, 2014; Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Herek, Chopp, & Strohl, 2007; Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Meyer & Bayer, 2013; Russell, 2010; Schensul, 2009).

Within the broader social-ecological systems of adolescents' lives, school is a significant microsystem in which adolescents' mental-psychosocial competencies, character, and performance are shaped primarily by their day-to-day multiple interactions with peer groups (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Brown & Braun, 2013; Brown & Larson, 2009; Solomon, 2004; Wentzel, Baker, & Russell, 2009).

Meaningful and strong reciprocal relationships with peer groups, related and non-related caring adults, and strong social and emotional connectedness to the LGB community are particularly significant for LGB adolescents who face excess stress that results from both their disadvantaged sexual minority position and their puberty status, such as affirming their concealable stigmatized sexual orientations in a dominant heteronormative culture and coping with external stressful events and conditions such as persistent school homophobic bullying (Cass, 1996; Cox, Vanden Berghe, Dewaele, & Vincke, 2010; Darwich, Hymel, & Waterhouse, 2012; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Eliason & Schope, 2007; Kertzner, Meyer, Frost, & Stirratt, 2009; Kwon, 2013; Meyer, 2003; Mustanski, Newcomb, & Garofalo, 2011; Weston, 1991).

Since 2004, the Israeli Gay Youth Organization (IGY)<sup>1</sup> has conducted National School Climate Surveys, applying the social-ecological framework and providing unprecedented evidence-based data analysis regarding the

LGBTQ school experience. These research reports consistently indicate that there are high rates of verbal, physical, and sexual victimization based on sexual orientation, gender identities, and gender expressions within Israeli schools (Pizmony-Levy, Kama, Shilo, Lavee, & Pinhassi, 2004; Shilo & Pizmony-Levy, 2008, 2012). Similar findings have been reported in studies of other Western countries, such as the United Kingdom, Spain, the Netherlands, Australia, and the United States (Dankmeijer, 2001; Galán, Puras, & Riley, 2009; Hillier et al., 2010; Jennett, 2004; Kosciw, 2004; Kosciw & Cullen, 2001; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012).

This recent body of research has demonstrated that school homophobic bullying is a serious external threat to the physical and psychological safety and the wellbeing of sexual minority adolescents; it has been perpetuated over time, primarily by peer groups who function as a primary socialization and social support agent during adolescence. The term *bullying* is used because it is most suitable in this case; it refers to verbal, physical, or relational (indirect attacks) aggressive behavior that occurs intentionally and repeatedly in a relationship characterized by an unequal distribution of power because the victim is often unable to protect himself from the perpetrator (Olweus, 1993).

Homophobic bullying is a specific type of bullying; LGBT adolescent school students are bullied more than their heterosexual or gender-conforming counterparts (Kosciw et al., 2012; Shilo & Pizmony-Levy, 2012; Swearer, Espelage, & Napolitano, 2009). Among a subset of aggressive behavior, homophobic name-calling is found to be the most common of all types of school bullying, particularly among male adolescents in Western countries, including Israel (Kosciw et al., 2012; Shilo & Pizmony-Levy, 2012).

Homophobic name-calling (homophobic epithets such as *faggot* and *dyke*), an intended act meant to harm other peers psychologically based on the perceived or actual sexual orientation of the victim, is found to be strongly rooted in rigid gender-role conformity, high traditional masculinity norms of the dominant culture, and the need of male adolescents to prove their heterosexuality (Birkett & Espelage, 2014; Davidson, 2009; Horn, 2007; Kama, 2014; Pascoe, 2011; Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003; Poteat & Anderson, 2012; Rieger & Savin-Williams, 2012).

Indeed, adolescent friendship groups heavily influence members' homophobic attitudes and behaviors, particularly during early adolescence and, consequently, create unwelcoming and unsafe school climates for LGBT and questioning adolescent students (Birkett & Espelage, 2014; Poteat, 2007; Poteat, Espelage, & Green, 2007).

Moreover, the early peer group socialization of homophobic verbal bullying, which reinforces across time-restrictive constraints of heterosexist bias

and limits human diversity to rigid gender roles, is a primary risk factor for excessive mental health problems among the LGB population (Meyer, 2013).

However, findings from longitudinal and cross-sectional studies have indicated that across diverse socioeconomic and ethnic groups, resistance to peer influences increases linearly between ages 14 and 18, and prejudice against sexual minority adolescents declines as they get older (Horn, 2006; Horn & Romeo, 2010; Poteat, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Steinberg & Monahan, 2007).

Social cognitive development theory addresses these age-related changes from early to late adolescence by pointing out that as adolescents grow older, they develop a greater capacity for reasoning and are more able to consciously reflect on their experiences, draw conclusions, and create strategies for navigating complex social situations (Kuhn, 2009; Sprinthall & Collins, 1995). Furthermore, late adolescence is characterized by more intergroup interactions and the formation of one's own attitude and perspective (Bigler & Liben, 2006).

The aforementioned studies have dramatically extended our empirical knowledge of school homophobic bullying in Israel and in other Western countries. Notwithstanding, Israeli National School Climate Surveys have focused on ecological risk factors and on the vulnerability of LGB adolescents, whereas limited attention has been given to ecological protective factors (relevant health-enhancing resources), which assist LGB youth in coping successfully with school homophobic bullying.

Furthermore, studies on factors that promote positive mental health outcomes and moderate the negative effects of sexual minority stress are still relatively scant. Thus incorporating a salutogenic perspective on the dynamic development of resilience among LGB youth in research is most needed (Anderson, 1998; Harvey, 2011; Herek & Garnets, 2007; Herrick, Egan, Coulter, Friedman, & Stall, 2014; Horn, Kosciw, & Russell, 2009; Kwon, 2013; Lasser & Tharinger, 2003; Mustanski et al., 2011; Russell, 2005; Savin-Williams, 2001, 2005; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2007).

It is worth elucidating that exploring the psychosocial aspects of adolescents' positive development, healthy functioning, and constant adaptation require that coping mechanisms be intertwined with stressors, and the term *resilience* should be used only with reference to the normative function that arises from the human adaptive process when facing adversity or a serious threat to the individual's wellbeing (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, 1994, 2001; Masten & Powell, 2003; Ungar, 2011a). As such, resilience involves both exposure to risks and access to multiple internal and external health-enhancing resources, specifically, an equal sustainable livelihood support system (Obrist, Pfeiffer, & Henley, 2010; Ungar, Russell, & Connelly, 2014).

In line with the above view, studies have found that LGB individuals often display self-resilience, coping behaviors, and hardiness to withstand stressful

experiences, manifesting the basic and common functions of the human adaptational system under adversity (Anderson, 1998; Dewaele, Van Houtte, Cox, & Vincke, 2013; Harper, Brodsky, & Bruce, 2012; Lasser, Ryser, & Price, 2010; Lasser & Tharinger, 2003; Madsen & Green, 2012; Russell & Richards, 2003; Savin-Williams, 1989, 2005).

However, studies on resilience among LGB adolescents favor individual-level variables and seldom incorporate in their research the dynamic bidirectional interrelationships between the individual's competencies (self-protective factors) and sociopolitical contextual factors (ecological protective factors) that may affect, over time, the wellbeing of sexual minorities in Western countries (e.g., Baunach, 2012; Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000; Frank, Camp, & Boutcher, 2010; Frank & McEneaney, 1999; Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2012; Hooghe & Meeusen, 2013; Hull, Gasiorowicz, Hollander, & Short, 2013; Kama, 2007, 2011; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010; Weststrate & McLean, 2010).

Therefore, a broader focus on the individual's interactions within diverse environments, which demand constant adaptation efforts, is needed to deepen our understanding of the dynamic resilience-related process (Winders, 2014). In this respect, Ungar (2004) redefined resilience as “the *outcome* from the *negotiations* between individuals and their environments for the *resources* to define themselves as healthy amidst conditions collectively viewed as adverse” (italics added; p. 342).

In addition, studies on resilience have found that building psychosocial competencies and fostering normative healthy adaptive systems among adolescents when facing high levels of adversity depends on the availability, the accessibility, and the subjective quality of extrinsic protective factors (e.g., school, peer groups, educators, family, neighborhoods, community agencies, wider sociocultural contexts) and much less on individuals' intrinsic characteristics, personality psychology traits, and exceptional capacity (Harvey, 2011; Lerner, 2006; Rutter, 1987, 2005; Schoon, 2007; Ungar, 2004, 2011a, 2011b).

Indeed, protective contextual factors have a key function in mediating the interactions between the individual's competencies and stressors by reducing the susceptibility to risk exposure (buffering stress reactivity and counterbalancing negative effects) and ameliorating the individual's response to risk factors—the compensatory effect (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Rutter, 1990, 1995, 2005; Ungar, 2004; Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, 2013; Werner, 2000).

In this respect, drawing from a sociopolitical and historical comprehensive perspective, Kama (2011), a media anthropologist, has even gone as far as to argue that the gay and lesbian community is the strongest minority in Israel. His argument is based on second-order changes at the macro-system level (primarily top-down changes), such as the unprecedented social acceptance of sexual minorities, changes in formal mechanisms such as anti-LGB

nondiscriminatory laws and regulations, and the proliferation of strong nonprofit LGB advocacy organizations, which are all part of the supposed assimilation into the Israeli mainstream society.

This argument has not accounted for the salient absence of protective structural changes within Israeli schools, such as gay-straight alliance clubs, and has not addressed a key question of whether or how these macro-system dramatic changes have affected Israeli contemporary LGBs' school experiences at the micro-system level.

Within the aforementioned new ecological opportunity structures, the health-enhancing resource allocations that address the wellbeing of the LGB population (e.g., the LGBT municipal center in Tel-Aviv is funded wholly by City Hall) and the wide access to safe social environments, which are sensitive to the specific needs of Israeli LGB adolescents, are expected to strengthen their human capacity to cope competently with school homophobic bullying.

Thus the purpose of the current study was to discern ecological and self-factors that could assist contemporary Israeli LGB adolescent secondary-school students in coping with school homophobic bullying. The research question was how LGB adolescents cope with homophobic bullying in Israeli schools.

## Method

The current qualitative research is exploratory in the sense that ecological protective factors and coping mechanisms regarding LGB adolescent students have not been explored in previous Israeli research. As such, the qualitative approach allowed the researcher to gather preliminary data from the ground up, providing opportunities for participants to create new knowledge based on their unique school experiences within their respective school subcultures (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Woods, 2011).

In addition, studies on patterns of positive psychosocial development among youth need to shift their focus from the researcher's own perspective to the internal perspectives of the participants to understand the subjective meaningfulness of social ecological factors that facilitate the development of dynamic coping mechanisms when facing adversity (Cause, Mason, Gonzales, Hiraga, & Liu, 1994; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Procidano & Smith, 1997; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990; Ungar, 2003, 2011a; Ungar et al., 2014).

The qualitative approach allows individuals to define themselves as healthy amid external challenging conditions based on their subjective judgment rather than on late 20th-century, mainstream, Western, middle-class standards of health and adaptive behaviors, which are context dependent and lacking cultural relativism and emic aspects of resilience as well as racial and

gender sensitivity (Cross, 2003; Kaplan, 1999; Klevens & Roca, 1999; Ungar, 2008; Ungar et al., 2013).

Hence, a qualitative methodology is found to be suitable to provide a holistic picture of lives lived under adversity, to attend to the contextual specificity of resilience-related processes, to discover unnamed processes (atypical coping or hidden resilience), to give a voice to marginalized youths, and to account for the intersectionality in the lives of many people (Ungar, 2003, 2004).

### ***Recruitment of participants and sample frame***

Community venue sampling was used because it provides access to members of difficult-to-contact populations by relying on existing social networks (Meyer & Wilson, 2009). The researcher had previously conducted a pilot study on LGB adolescents' role perception of the school counselor with the full collaboration of IGY and maintained contact with key members of this organization and with young adult leaders of their LGB youth support groups.

In the following year, the researcher obtained formal consent from the ethics committee of the Israeli Gay Youth Research Forum to recruit the study participants by himself during the Israeli annual gay Pride event. The complete research report has been reviewed and approved by the head of the Israeli Gay Youth Research Forum.

This event took place in an affirmative environment for the LGB community (LGB-friendly) in the geopolitical center of the gayest city in Israel, Tel-Aviv. Moreover, the annual gay Pride event at the heart of Tel-Aviv is subsidized by municipal bodies and LGBTQ and heterosexual participants who come to this event from across the country and from across the globe (Kama, 2011).

Hence, this specific public sphere facilitated human contact between the "insider" researcher and the researched (the researcher is openly gay and affiliated with the Israeli LGBTQ community). Both of them are situated within one experimental framework and are coping with the "outside" world as sexual minority individuals (though this is not to say that both have equal access to different economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital). Furthermore, the reflexivity and the dialogical reciprocity between the researcher and the study participants is a major and positive component of the qualitative research process at every stage (Dowsett, 2007; Fine, 1994; Harding, 1991; Kama, 2006; Lewin & Leap, 1996; Martin & Knox, 2000; Rodwell, 1998; Sedgwick, 1993; Woods, 2011). The additional advantage attributed to the "insider" researcher is his or her capacity to extract meanings that are part of the "hidden transcript" of the oppressed group and to gain a nuanced understanding of their social situations (Charmaz, 2009;

Scott, 1990). Indeed, the recruitment involved a direct face-to-face contact between the researcher and adolescents, who were interacting with their friends and with LGBTQ activists during the Israeli annual gay Pride event.

The researcher, equipped with a pen and a contact form, asked 40 teenagers to participate in a study on the school experience of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning adolescents. Twenty-three people were excluded from the sample for the following reasons: they had finished high school; they were not LGBs and participated in this event to support their LGBT friends (Allies); or they politely refused to participate for personal reasons. Through the social networks of this group of respondents, three additional study participants were recruited by the researcher.

Finally, the study sample encompassed 20 school-age LGB adolescents who agreed to take part in the current research on the basis of completing a fully informed consent form, a voluntary decision form, and a contact form. (The study participants were not paid for their participation in the current research.)

### ***Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants***

There were 20 participants (12 males/8 females), ranging in age from 15 to 18 years (mean age = 17 years).

### ***Self-labeling diversity***

The researcher asked each of the 20 participants to self-report his or her sexual orientation with his or her own words because sexual labels are culture-bound concepts. Moreover, fixed, rigid, and limited sexual categories, such as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and bisexual, underrepresent differences within groups regarding sexual orientation, sexual identity, and sexual fluidity (Chung & Katayama, 1996; Diamond, 2008; Elia, 2014; Savin-Williams, 2005; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2007; Weinberg & Williams, 1988; Weststrate & McLean, 2010; Worthington & Reynolds, 2009).

Eight participants self-identified as gays; five self-identified as lesbians; one female participant self-identified as bisexual, and six participants felt that labeling their sexuality based on inflexible coercive sexual categories made little sense for them for two main reasons: They were still exploring their sexual orientation, and they perceived sexual labels as too simplistic and restrictive. Five of the participants who did not label their sexuality stated that they were attracted to both sexes/genders, and one reported being attracted only to the same sex/gender.

*Visibility management* is a lifelong process of regulating the exposure of one's sexual orientation (Dewaele et al., 2013; Lasser et al., 2010). Individuals may be openly LGB in varying degrees (level of outness or level of openness) to their closest friends but not to family, or to closest friends and family, to

closest friends outside of school but not to school peers and classmates, or in some other combination. The self-disclosure of LGB individuals to others (concealable stigma) is not static or single life event. It changes across time and places depending on a person's experiences, social-historical context, and comfort level with expressing his or her sexual orientation and with receiving positive or negative feedback from others (Dewaele et al., 2013; Eliason & Schope, 2007; Fuss, 1991; Lasser et al., 2010; Lasser & Tharinger, 2003; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2007; Waldner-Haugrud & Magruder, 1996).

In the current research, 12 participants self-reported as openly LGB to their closest friends (their school peer clique) and to their families. Among these participants, six participants self-reported parental acceptance, whereas six participants self-reported parental denying reactions, strong ambivalent feelings, or disappointment. All study participants lived in their parents' house.

Eight participants self-reported as being in the closet. They had not disclosed their sexual orientation to their family members or to their school peers due to their fear of parental rejection, of losing social support within and outside school, and of victimization upon coming out. Nonetheless, they reported being out to LGB peers outside of their schools or exclusively in supportive queer contexts, such as the LGBT Municipal Center at the heart of Tel-Aviv.

### ***Geopolitical and social diversity***

Israel is geographically small, with a population that is characterized by wide ethnic, religious, cultural, and social diversity: 74.4% of the overall students are Jewish (including *Sephardim*, descended from local Jewish communities from Muslim majority countries, and *Ashkenazim*, descended from Central-Eastern European countries. These ethnic, cultural, and social affiliations reflect a large degree of heterogeneity; however, historically, this aspect has become less significant over time, except within the ultra-orthodox sector), 23.4% of the students are Arab (Muslim and Christian), and the remaining 2.2% are Druze, Bedouin, or Circassian (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

Geographic factors may influence the availability of both LGB youth-related resources and their school experiences (Gray, 2009). Hence, it is worth mentioning that Tel-Aviv is mostly tolerant toward sexual orientation diversity, and the municipality is strongly committed to social justice in various domains. Other cities (even nearby cities), towns, and rural areas can be much less tolerant toward the LGBTQ community or openly hostile to their social existence (e.g., the salient and classic contrast between Jerusalem as the holy land and Tel-Aviv as "gay paradise"; see Kama, 2011).

The 20 participants resided in 16 cities and towns across Israel: 14 participants were from the central district of Israel (two of them lived in ultra-orthodox cities); three were from the southern district of Israel; two

were from the northern district of Israel (both lived in rural areas), and one was from Jerusalem.

### **Religious affiliation**

Eleven self-identified as secular Jews; two self-identified as secular Christians; four self-identified as conservative Jews; one self-identified as a formerly religious Jew; and two self-identified as *Sephardim* ultra-religious Jews. LGBT religious Jews are considered *minorities within minorities*, negotiating their dual-minority oppressed statuses (see Levy, 2005, for fuller details).

### **Educational institution affiliation**

Education is compulsory by law for all children and youth who reside in Israel, from prekindergarten to 12th grade (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

The state education system for the Hebrew-speaking sector consists of two education streams: state education (56.2% of the pupils) and state-religious education (18.7% of the pupils). The state-religious education is aimed at populations that are interested in a greater emphasis on religion in school curricula. These public schools are supervised by the ministry of education and funded by the state (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

There are also *recognized schools* that operate outside the state education system and provide primarily ultra-orthodox education: 25% of the pupils are enrolled in ultra-orthodox private schools (with rigid and total gender segregation). These private schools went through a process of recognition by the state and are partially funded by the state (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

The 20 participants of the current research were studying in the Hebrew-speaking sector (Grades 9–12). Fifteen participants attended formal state secular schools; two participants attended private secular schools; one female participant attended a private ultra-orthodox Jewish school for girls and one male participant attended a private ultra-orthodox Jewish institution for boys (Yeshiva); and one participant attended a youth-at-risk unit that is part of the division of youth and society administration within the Israeli ministry of education. Students in the youth advancement service are youth at risk who dropped out of the formal educational system (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

### **Socioeconomic status**

Schools in the state education system are microcosms of the heterogeneous Israeli society and thus encapsulate students with different socioeconomic statuses. However, Israeli Arabs and ultra-orthodox Jews are two distinct minority groups with low socioeconomic status (Erhard & Erhard-Weiss, 2007). In the present study, 12 participants self-reported as growing up in

middle-class families, and eight participants self-reported as growing up in lower middle-class families with limited resources.

### **Interview**

A semistructured interview format with an open-ended question and additional questions that elucidate the particular research topic was used to permit the participants to use their own words to describe their unique school experiences as LGB individuals (Patton, 1990; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Although language was not a criterion for inclusion in the present study (the researcher speaks five foreign languages), all participants spoke Hebrew fluently; thus interviews were conducted in Hebrew.

The male researcher and a native English-speaking colleague translated the quotes used in this article from Hebrew to English and then had them back-translated to Hebrew. We continued this process until we reached minimal discrepancy between the meaning of the words in Hebrew and English. All interviews occurred in person and were audio-recorded and transformed from spoken texts into written texts to conduct a rigorous thematic analysis. The average length of the interviews was approximately 1 hour. The interviews were conducted in a private room in the LGBT Municipal Center, in Tel-Aviv or on a public bench, according to the interviewee's preference.

Each participant self-reported his or her sexual orientation with his or her own terms to the researcher. All interviewees answered an open-ended question as follows: "What is it like being a gay/lesbian/bisexual or questioning adolescent at your school?" Most participants included in their answers information about *being in or out of the closet* within and outside their schools. If they did not, the researcher asked, "Are you out at school?"; "Please tell me, how out are you at school and outside of school?"

Follow-up questions addressed anti-LGB incidences in school that had been briefly mentioned by participants when answering the open-ended question, as follows: "Could you please give me further details about the incident you had previously mentioned?" Most participants referred to school homophobic bullying using the past tense to describe ongoing positive changes in their school experiences over the years from middle school to high school. Because the Hebrew language lacks the present perfect tense, participants often used words such as "at that time" or "I used to" and then moved forward to the present tense, using words such as "currently" or "today." The researcher thoroughly explored these dynamic changes, asking, "Could you give me further information about what has been changing in your reactions to LGB incidences and to homophobic school peers?" Then the researcher focused on how these apparent changes had been achieved—for instance, "How did you get through it?" or "What types of things helped you feel better?"—and then asked, more specifically, "Who and what helped

you the most when you had to face homophobic bullying at school?" The researcher asked these questions to the 20 participants to support the emergence of information about extrinsic and intrinsic factors that may assist LGB youth in coping with school homophobic bullying.

### **Data analysis—thematic analysis method**

The researchers conducted a constant, comparative, detailed thematic analysis of the 20 interviews by actively identifying, analyzing, and reporting repeated patterns of meaning within the data corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, the researchers read the data corpus several times to familiarize themselves further with all aspects of the entire data. During the repeated reading, notes were taken of all instances in the corpus that had relevance to the current research question, including anti-LGB incidences in school, external and internal support resources, and coping strategies in response to school homophobic bullying (data set).

An inductive approach (bottom up) was implemented to identify themes that were strongly linked to the data set (Patton, 1990). This data set was characterized, summarized, and grouped by short phrases. After the researchers compared and examined the data and the relationships between the categories, the categories were integrated into themes and reconstructed using selective coding, taking the form of an explanatory framework (Charmaz, 2009).

Two key themes that captured important elements of the ways in which the study participants cope with school homophobic bullying were identified: (1) ecological protective factors, which encompassed three subthemes: minority group coping, virtual LGB advocacy community, and heterosexual school peer acceptance; and (2) coping mechanisms, which included five subthemes: cognitive appraisal of school anti-LGB incidents, assertive communication, becoming an advocate on behalf of the LGB community, tactical ignoring, and questioning and resisting sexual labels.

Finally, themes were presented as an explanatory framework and illustrated the complex reciprocal interrelationships within and between the subjective experiences of LGB secondary-school adolescents and the multi-layered dynamic social resilience networks.

### **Findings**

The conducted interviews revealed three ecological protective enabling factors, which were meaningful, accessible, and available within the study participants' environments (minority group coping, the virtual LGB advocacy community, and heterosexual school peer acceptance). The transactional interactions between the three ecological protective enabling factors and

the proactive human capacity of the study participants to navigate their ways to these accessible supportive resources foster the building of five main coping mechanisms related to school homophobic bullying (i.e., cognitive appraisal of school anti-LGB incidents, assertive communication, becoming an advocate on behalf of the LGB community, tactical ignoring, and questioning and resisting sexual labels).

Each theme is illustrated with selected quotes from participants' interviews to highlight both their exposure to excess stressors (direct or relational verbal school homophobia; all participants have experienced bullying behaviors) and their access to a sustainable support system for LGB adolescents, which from their internal perspectives, improved their abilities to cope well under multiple types of adversity. All names used are pseudonyms.

### ***Themes related to ecological protective factors for LGB adolescents***

#### ***Ecological protective factors 1: minority group coping***

Minority group coping is a group-level resource related to the group's ability to counteract social stigma by adopting the group's self-enhancing attitudes, values, and structures (Meyer, 2007).

IGY social youth support groups were the main available and accessible minority group coping resource for 17 of the study participants. The groups function as a health-enhancing resource for growth and thriving in spite of school homophobic bullying, as is exemplified by participants:

Amir, a 17-year-old boy who self-identifies as closeted gay, was secretly traveling for 1.5 hours by bus to reach his close friends from his favorite IGY youth group in Tel-Aviv:

I don't live my real life as a gay within school or in the north, only with my IGY friends in Tel-Aviv. You must wonder why, because it is just different. For example, I remembered an eighth grade peer who was effeminate and was daily teased and humiliated by other guys, and no one wanted to be his friend. So I prefer to go once a week to meet my IGY friends because they are like me, they know how I feel as a gay, and they don't judge me. You know, before IGY, I was like a bubble boy for a long time; I could not stop thinking about my sexual orientation without reaching any conclusion about my future life as a gay. But IGY built my self-confidence, as I finally could speak up about everything, exchanging experiences and gaining acceptance and support from other peers.

Tuti, a 17-year-old girl from the southern district of Israel who self-identifies as lesbian, was outed (outing) by her classmate when she was in eighth grade. Since then, she had been verbally bullied by her school peers. An IGY youth group supports her gradual recovery from her acute depression:

I have been suffering from lesbophobia at school for the last 3 years. I don't know how, but someone figured out that I was lesbian and revealed it in front of my classes. It was crazy! Like, suddenly, the girls totally ignored me, most of my best friends ran away, and the boys were teasing me, using offensive remarks such as dyke. I could not stand their daily negative overreactions for too long. So I skipped school for a while, stopped eating, slept the whole day and started drinking alcohol, and then my mom sent me to a psychologist, believing that he could change my sexual orientation [laughing out loud]. Then, I found information about an IGY group and decided to check it out. I met really nice peers, and I hang out with them. You know, it was such a relief. All the group members accepted me right away; it's not even an issue to be LGBTQ for them, and now I have really close friends and I am feeling much better.

Both participants exemplified the positive function of minority group coping as providing LGB an affirmative, welcoming, and safe environment characterized by high levels of acceptance and new opportunities for supportive friendships. Amir, who had been exposed to relational homophobic aggressive behaviors at his school and who was engaged in increased introspection processes regarding his concealed stigma as gay, benefited from a valued reference group for LGB adolescents—an alternative structure for ventilating “deviant” feelings, which encouraged him to overtly express and address his internal thoughts and emotions and gain consensual validation (Leszcz & Yalom, 2005). Tuti, who was outed at her school, suffered from constant verbal school bullying, which deeply affected her wellbeing. Her turning point was when she met her psychosocial needs for effective support and for a sense of belonging in her IGY group.

### ***Ecological protective factors 2: virtual LGB advocacy community***

The wide-reaching access to LGB virtual support groups—LGB youth online forums, LGB sexual health information by professional counselors on the Internet, LGB online dating services, and LGB telephone helplines—were all mentioned by study participants as a meaningful resource of knowledge and available virtual social support groups, which anonymously attended to their diverse developmental needs. In some cases, virtual friendships had become manifest in the real world (see Hillier & Harrison, 2007). The next quotes illuminate key functions of this resource:

Idan, a 17-year-old boy from the central district of Israel who self-identifies as closeted gay, described how he acquired new knowledge about sexuality:

We did have some sexual education; it was like one session with the school nurse, who explained the use of condoms and sexually transmitted diseases, but she didn't speak about homosexuality, and I did have many questions about my sexual orientation and about how to do my coming out. Therefore, I searched for professional guidance on the Internet, like LGB websites; I read many studies and articles, and now I am a kind of expert.

Dani, a 17-year-old boy from the central district of Israel who self-identifies as openly gay, mentioned available mediums that serve as a channel for interpersonal communications between LGBs and questioning youths:

Questioning teenagers can easily use LGB telephone helplines, like make a phone call for free and get support from LGB volunteers or, as I did, to search on the internet for LGB youth forums. I chatted with many people as well as with IGY group leaders, who gave me good advice, and with gay peers who had more experience compared with me, and they shared their stories. In fact, nowadays, there are many options to get help, it's only a matter of personal choice, and each adolescent just needs to look for what better suits him.

As expressed by participants, a virtual LGB advocacy community is related to both human capital, such as acquiring knowledge about LGB-related issues, and social capital, such as creating peer support networks for LGB and questioning adolescents. In addition, the participants' disclosure of their sexual orientation is not a prerequisite for accessing these virtual support resources, as was previously claimed by Meyer (2013), because pseudonyms are widely used and socially accepted in virtual communication.

### ***Ecological protective factors 3: Heterosexual school peer acceptance***

Whereas social rejection on the basis of sexual orientation, perceived sexual orientation, and particularly nonconforming gender expressions during early adolescence were attested to by all the study participants, 12 participants who were openly LGBs at their schools were accepted by their peer clique, as expressed by these selected testimonies:

Gil, a 17-year-old boy who self-identifies as being attracted to the same sex/gender, explained his trajectory after coming out on Facebook:

I did my coming out when I was in ninth grade by uploading a post on my Facebook wall about my homosexuality, and many peers from my school read it. So, on the following day, my best friends asked me if it was the truth or just a stupid joke, and I confirmed that I was gay. Then, for a couple of months, they teased me, like made sex moaning in front of me and I was known as the faggot student in my school and in my hometown. But you know what, my friends learned to accept it over time because they realized that nothing had changed, that I am still the same cool and funny guy who they had known and loved, and now, in high school, they are less homophobic. I do not regret what I have had done because for me, their acceptance was important, like we were always best buddies.

Noy, a 17-year-old girl from a city near Tel-Aviv who self-identifies as lesbian, exemplified how her heterosexual close friends changed their mind and finally accepted her as a lesbian:

You know, some school peers immediately accepted me as lesbian without any problem, some rejected me, and others needed much more time to

change their mind. I'll give you an example. I came out to a good friend from school when I was in seventh grade, and he told me that it was really disgusting to be a lesbian! But since we had a good, long relationship, I just explained him that I couldn't change myself and to lose our friendship because of that it's just stupid, but it was his choice, like I wouldn't have bothered him if he had taken his distance. And guess what: he learned to accept me, and we are still good friends!

As displayed by both participants, coming out is a process not only for the 12 study participants who had already come out to themselves as LGBs and who were handling others' misconceptions but also for their heterosexual trusted friends, whose primary reactions varied largely; some peers accepted them right away, others initially engaged in homophobic behaviors, as exemplified by Gil, and some peers changed their attitudes and behaviors after reflecting on it (a continuum of acceptance and rejection).

Given the importance of friends' support to the lives of adolescents, particularly in early adolescence, and the normative need for social inclusion, the study participants considered the acceptance of their school peer clique as a meaningful support resource, hoping for positive feedback from their close heterosexual friends.

According to the interviews, the aforementioned themes appear to be related to the building of the study participants' human capacity to anticipate, resist, cope, adopt, and recover from significant adversities and disturbances such as persistent school homophobic bullying and its negative psychosocial outcomes on their subjective wellbeing.

The following theme exemplified various ways in which these ecological opportunity structures for Israeli LGB adolescents enabled the study participants not only to engage in coping behaviors such as tactical ignoring when facing school homophobic bullying (reactive capacity) but also to engage in advocacy (proactive capacity).

### ***Themes related to coping mechanisms***

#### ***Coping mechanisms 1: cognitive appraisal of school anti-LGB incidents***

*Cognitive appraisal* is defined as the process by which a person evaluates whether a particular encounter with the environment is relevant to his or her wellbeing and, if so, how. This term consists of primary appraisal and secondary appraisal. The first is related to the belief that a transaction with the environment may endanger the person's wellbeing, whereas the second is connected to the assessment of the possibility for mastering the threats of adversity (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Ten of the study participants primarily used cognitive reappraisal to reduce the emotional arousal evoked by homophobic incidents. For instance, Meni, a 16-year-old openly gay boy, cognitively altered his response to an

offensive homophobic incident during the annual school fieldtrip by devaluating and discrediting the predators, as follows:

I do remember the school trip. It was last year, and I wanted to take a shower, but when I entered the shower room, some boys had already been taking their shower, and they started shouting at me to go away, but you know, I was cool with that; I mean, I didn't take it too seriously because you can't expect them to be friendly to gays; they are *Mabar* students [a class in secondary school for students who need intensive learning due to learning disabilities and are required to accomplish only the minimum number of points per subject to obtain the Israeli school matriculation]. They are like a gang and are lower than me so I see no point to pay attention to whatever they may do to show off that they are so-called macho guys.

Inbar, an 18-year-old girl who self-identifies as openly bisexual, did her coming out on her personal Internet blog when she was in the eighth grade. She had to face rumors from her school peers about her bisexuality over a long time:

I would have never imagined that so many students had been reading what I used to write on my internet blog, and I was choked by the overreactions of some school peers. People from school who I had hardly known approached me and directly asked me if I was bisexual! You will not believe what happened next: A guy from a different class, I think he was younger than me, shouted during the break time in the corridor that the school had a lesbian! You know what? I didn't care too much because he showed others his immaturity, and his reaction was so stupid, like the one of a 5 year old. It was as if he had discovered something new that had never existed before or, worse, as if there is something wrong with me because I am bisexual.

Study participants who used cognitive reappraisal had previously participated in an LGB support group in their hometown or on the Internet, which validated their "deviant" experiences and feelings of being a minority. Thus Meni was able to reinterpret the homophobic explicit exclusion of his school peers by devaluating them and by removing his energy and attention from this incident. Inbar had not anticipated that her school peers would have known about her blog; however, she cognitively altered the unexpected and unpleasant consequences by firmly transforming her sexual label from being socially conceived as a deviant to a normative and validated aspect of human identity. Indeed, these aversive situations in school are objectively disturbing; nonetheless, the cognitive appraisal of them appeared to elicit less intense undesirable negative outcomes on the study participants' wellbeing.

### ***Coping mechanisms 2: assertive communication***

*Assertive communication* is defined as a clear expression of one's needs, feelings, opinions, and demands without violating others' rights. Assertive communication also entails the right to question one's view of unfair treatment and the right to be the final judge of one's feelings and to accept them

as legitimate (Pfeiffer, 2010). Ten of the study participants exemplified how they stood up for what they believed in and firmly protected their rights to interrupt unfair homophobic treatment, including physical school homophobic bullying.

Tom, a 17-year-old who self-identifies as closeted gay in school, had been bullied by his classmates several times based on his perceived sexual orientation. In his testimony, he discussed how his passive behavior in response to homophobic school bullying dramatically changed, as follows:

Today, if someone pushes me cause I am gay, I ask him who gave him the permission to touch me, or how dare he do that! I have a stronger character, and I'll make it clear to him that I am not comfortable with his unacceptable behavior. I am not the one used to sitting quietly without uttering a word, as if you can do with me whatever you want!

This coping mechanism reflects the building of assertive communication as an interpersonal skill manifested in aversive social interactions when facing school peers' aggressive homophobic behaviors. Indeed, 10 of the study participants successfully affected different social situations by defending basic rights, such as their physical and psychological safety, and expressing themselves in a firm and self-confident manner.

### ***Coping mechanisms 3: becoming an advocate on behalf of the LGB community***

Advocacy consists of three key elements: voice, representation, and rights. This term arose from marginalized and oppressed groups who have been ignored and silenced and who have used this concept as a means to enable them to have a voice, to ensure that their needs and rights are heard and respected, and to promote systemic changes regarding their stigmatized social status (Boylan & Dalrymple, 2009). The study participants who become advocates were assertive, and they courageously discussed their sexuality with their school peers, emphasizing that human beings are different in many aspects but still equal. Additionally, they showed a strong commitment to LGBT rights and the LGBT agenda in their schools.

Guy, a 17-year-old from Jerusalem who self-identifies as gay, separated sexuality from much of his identity; he spoke of going beyond differences to being seen as similar to an "ordinary" human being:

There is a lot of ignorance about homosexuality, although I do try to change it. I feel that I represent the LGBT community in my school, so I try to speak up, to explain and to help, because it's my mission. I must do it. I am not arrogant, so I've never said that I was special or better than others. I ask others to listen to me and tell them that we are the same. Both of us have two eyes, two ears and two hands. I hardly see any difference. So I am attracted to boys and other boys are attracted to girls. It's not supposed to bother anyone.

Adi, a 17-year-old girl who self-identifies as lesbian, expressed concern regarding the psychosocial distress of other female students in her ultra-orthodox school, as follows:

I really want to let students know about IGY. When I finish 12th grade, I'll find a way to let students know about the IGY website so that the girls in my school will have this anonymous platform to discuss their personal issues. If someone finds my IGY sticker and then finds someone to talk with, I will think I did my best!

Adi plans on anonymously leaving IGY stickers in her school bathroom, hoping that some girl will find them. She knows that being an open lesbian in her ultra-orthodox school is strictly prohibited and could result in school expulsion. Therefore, the LGB community, in her opinion, is a vital support resource for religious girls who can explore their same-sex desire only far away from their ultra-orthodox community.

#### ***Coping mechanisms 4: tactical ignoring***

Tactical ignoring refers to a tendency to ignore or to not act on any concerns, despite being aware of them. The tactical ignoring of certain disturbing or inappropriate behaviors can be an effective coping strategy (Hendry, 2010). The 20 study participants who experienced homophobic school bullying, particularly those who were about to graduate from high school, reported that tactical ignoring was effective against derogatory remarks from other school peers.

Idan, a 17-year-old who self-identifies as gay, exemplifies tactical ignoring in his own words, as follows:

There are students who will keep laughing at me because I am gay. I am the only male dancer in my high school, so they figured it out. However, they are not worth my attention, opinions, thoughts and feelings. The best thing to do is to explicitly ignore them because they are not my friends and I don't even want them to be my friends, so who cares when they tell me, "You are such a faggot"?

For all participants, this coping mechanism is associated with their maturity, authenticity, intelligence, and self-acceptance. Participants indicated that they would rather be themselves as an LGB in school, even if some students explicitly reject them or never treat them as equal.

#### ***Coping mechanisms 5: questioning and resisting sexual labels***

Six of the study participants felt that labeling their sexuality based on external coercion and restrictive sexual categories such as gay, lesbian, and bisexual are unhelpful and make little sense for their realities, for various reasons. Five of them stated that they were attracted to both sexes/genders, and one reported being attracted only to the same sex/gender.

For instance, Eli, a 17-year-old boy who was studying in a private ultra-orthodox Jewish institution for boys (Yeshiva), encapsulated in his testimony

two reasons for his resistance to self-labeling, as both culturally bounded and thus absolutely irrelevant within his ultra-orthodox community and as an obstacle for his sexual identity exploration, as follows:

I dislike sexual labeling because I am attracted only to boys, but you never know, like, if I'll find myself attracted to girls, so how could I label myself as gay? What for? But this is only one reason. The main reason is that the concept of homosexuality doesn't even exist in our culture and language. There is no such thing as homosexual identity; the Bible only mentioned sodomy, condemning anal sex between men as immoral and as a sin. But don't worry: At the *Yeshiva*, I had many opportunities to have sex with boys because it was a boarding *Yeshiva* just for boys. However, the well-known rule between the boys is to keep quiet; otherwise, the rabbi will kick you out, telling your parents you misbehaved without giving further details. But, as a Jewish person, you probably know that one can always regret his sins, especially younger boys, whose sins are often forgiven by the rabbi.

David, a 16-year-old who is attracted to both sexes/genders, resists self-labeling for the following reason:

I don't believe in labeling sexuality because to be gay, lesbian or bisexual is totally normal; for instance, boys who like girls won't self-label themselves as straight because straight people are the ones who first used the term homosexuality, referring to us as different. So there is no need to name any sexuality, and I can assure you that I am proudly and openly attracted to both boys and girls. However, when I did my coming out, I told my mom that I was gay because if I had told her that I am bisexual, she would have thought it's just a phase. Anyway, she has accepted me over time.

David reconsidered the problematic significance that the socially available sexual labels conventions hold, questioning their polarity (gay versus straight) and refusing the social meaning tied to non-heterosexual youth sexual labels. He came to see himself as ordinary and embraced his sexuality (see Reynolds, 2008). In a more subtle manner, David also addressed a salient concern regarding bi-negativity and bi-erasure when he came out as gay to his mother, knowing that labeling himself as attracted to both sexes/genders or being bisexual would make her think it was just a phase rather than a true and stable sexual identity (see Elia, 2014, for further information).

Eli accentuated the fact that sexual identity and sexual labels are culturally shaped and context-bounded because his religious lifestyle as an ultra-orthodox Jew is exclusively based on the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*), in which homosexuality as a modern term had never existed; only anal sexual intercourse between two men is mentioned as a sin. Nonetheless, he testified that sexual intercourse between boys at his *Yeshiva* happened quite frequently, although it did not mean anything beyond a forbidden sexual act that often led to self-blaming and *ba'al teshuvah* (one's turn to embrace Orthodox Judaism).

Another aspect is that Eli (like the other six study participants) sees sexuality as changeable across time, and, as such, rigid sexual labels are unhelpful and could not reflect a greater fluidity of sexual desire across time, particularly among adolescents.

## Discussion

The purpose of the current research was to explore the school experiences of contemporary Israeli LGB secondary-school students from a social-ecological resilience perspective, underlying the proliferation of accessible health-enhancing resources for LGB adolescents and examining their often overlooked putative influence on building and strengthening LGB adolescents' mental, social, and emotional competencies to cope with consistently high rates of school homophobic bullying, as was previously documented by Israeli National School Climate Surveys (Pizmony-Levy et al., 2004; Shilo & Pizmony-Levy, 2008, 2012).

The main focus of this study was on the multiple day-to-day interpersonal interactions among school peer groups, given their key function as primary socialization and support agents and accounting for the powerful positive influence of friendship groups on adolescents' development and their school adjustment (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011; Brown & Braun, 2013; Solomon, 2004; Wentzel et al., 2009). In addition, peers represent a more proximal protective factor for LGB youth compared with general social support (Kwon, 2013; Weston, 1991).

Nonetheless, the research findings indicate that school peer group interpersonal interactions during adolescence function as a bipolar factor (both a risk and protective factor). Whereas LGB youth support groups and the acceptance of most of their school heterosexual friendship groups were found to be a salient and meaningful strength resource, most of the study participants had been deeply affected by some of their classmates and their school peers' homophobic bullying, particularly during their early adolescence in middle school. However, homophobic bullying also persists in high school. (Homophobic bullying includes teasing, homophobic name-calling, humiliation, social exclusion, rumors, and physical assaults.)

These findings are related to both a distinctive and contradictory body of research. Recent studies have indicated that homophobic attitudes and behaviors, particularly verbal bullying in schools, have been perpetuated over time primarily by early adolescent peer groups who emasculate other male adolescents and reinforce rigid gender-roles (Birkett & Espelage, 2014; Poteat & Anderson, 2012; Poteat et al., 2009). Other studies have noted that same-sex sexuality and sexual diversity have been socially and culturally destigmatized and even normalized, accounting for the increased acceptance and recognition of the LGBT community by contemporary heterosexual youth (Cohler &

Hammack, 2007; Eliason & Schope, 2007; Savin-Williams, 2005; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2007).

Notwithstanding, based on the conceptualization of the minority stress model (Meyer, 2007, 2013), the research findings indicate that homophobic bullying, which is objectively aversive and challenging, is still a key distal stressor that continues to be mostly prominent and relevant to contemporary Israeli sexual minority adolescents within their immediate microsystem: their respective school subcultures. At the same time, the 20 study participants perceived and experienced positive internal individual changes in their cognitive appraisals and in their self-perception of LGB-related stressors such as homophobia. According to Meyer (2013), these subjective proximal changes stem from the various ways in which each individual perceives his or her sexual stigma (stigma consciousness) over the lifespan.

To address larger social processes, the multi-systemic social-ecological theory of resilience based on Bronfenbrenner's bio-psycho-social-ecological systems model of human development was implemented to deepen our understanding of the aforementioned found changes, which were manifested by a gradual decrease in the study participants' susceptibility to school homophobic bullying or, in other words, a desensitization process (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Ungar, 2011a, 2011b; Ungar et al., 2013).

New ecological opportunity structures for growth and thriving—which originate from outside the person, such as available health-sustaining and health-enhancing resources that promote the wellbeing of the LGB population across Israel and easy access to safe and affirmative environments that are sensitive to the specific needs of LGB youth—have had a key function in fostering the building of participants' self-resilience, such as coping well under adversity. Furthermore, the sustainability of supportive environmental resources becomes more crucial when children and young adolescents are exposed to chronic and severe stressors (Harvey, 2011; Lerner, 2006; Rutter, 1987, 2005; Schoon, 2007; Ungar, 2004, 2011a, 2011b).

Following this comprehensive ecological perspective of resilience, most of the study participants perceived their minority coping groups, which broadly operated outside their schools and on the Internet, as an alternative valued reference group that functioned as a counterbalance to the negative effects of school homophobic bullying and gradually improved their abilities to face anti-LGB incidents in school.

The research findings are largely in line with the compensatory effects of ecological enabling factors on the healthy functioning and positive development of LGB adolescents, which had operated as stress buffers by moderating the negative effects of persistent school homophobic bullying and by fostering coping mechanisms across different developmental trajectories of adolescents from diverse backgrounds and personalities (Fergus & Zimmerman,

2005; Obrist et al., 2010; Rutter, 2005; Schoon, 2007; Ungar, 2011b; Ungar et al., 2013; Werner, 2000).

Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that the salient shift from a narrow focus on a set of individual capacities to the aforementioned quality ecological protective enabling factors, which provide an explanation of LGB youth's "exceptionally" positive growth despite severe adversity, does not overlook "the ordinary magic," that is, the very normative and common function of the human adaptational system under challenging conditions (Masten, 2001). However, this shift has reframed self-resilience within constant transactional interactions between individual and multilayered dynamic social resilience networks (Obrist et al., 2010; Ungar, 2011a).

Indeed, our findings indicate that most of the study participants illustrated their proactive capacity to perceive and fully exploit available and accessible psychological, cultural, and physical resources that sustained their wellbeing. More explicitly, they demonstrated the crucial ability to seek out help and to navigate ways to external supportive resources by themselves. This personal agency draws from their self-resilience, and participants who had not disclosed their stigmatized sexual orientation to their family members or to their school peers nonetheless courageously attended the meeting of the LGB youth support groups.

### **Conclusion**

Consequently to the exposure to LGB-related stressors in school, which triggered their self-resilience to seek and find an adequate sustainable support system within the community, the study participants become less susceptible to peers' homophobic attitudes and behaviors and learned to confront them with diverse coping mechanisms (cognitive appraisal of school anti-LGB incidents, assertive communication, LGB advocacy, tactical ignoring and questioning sexual labels).

Finally, an additional explanation for the intra- and inter-psychoic changes among the study participants, regardless of the prevalent school homophobic bullying, could be related to developmental changes from early to late adolescence; resistance to peer influences increases linearly between ages 14 and 18 (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007).

Indeed, based on the 20 interviews, most study participants attested that they were much less negatively affected by and concerned about homophobic bullying across their high school years because they were able to reappraise their sexual stigma and to form their own attitudes and perspectives on their "deviant" experiences and feelings as sexual minority late adolescents. These social cognitive developmental changes during adolescence have been extensively investigated and documented in previous studies (e.g., Bigler & Liben, 2006; Kuhn, 2009; Sprinthall & Collins, 1995).

### **Limitations and challenges**

The lack of baseline prevalence information on the LGB population, the large variability in the definition of the LGB population across studies (researchers' definitions, self-labeling, or no identity labels at all), and the fact that LGB people are still stigmatized and may resist the disclosure of their sexual identity to researchers (homosexuality is easily concealable) are all among the persistent challenges of sampling the LGB population in research; however, methodological limitations should be minimized as much as possible (Meyer, 2013; Meyer & Wilson, 2009).

Likewise, the current study included participants who freely volunteered for LGB-specific research and who were clearly interested in the topic under study (volunteer bias). Seventeen of the study participants were members of IGY youth support groups and were partaking in the Israeli annual gay Pride event (i.e., they were affiliated with the LGB community). The recruitment of study participants took place in an affirmative environment for the LGB community, in the very center of the gayest city in Israel, Tel-Aviv. Twenty participants self-reported as openly LGB to their closest friends and to their close family members.

Finally, due to the high degree of self-identification among the study participants, they are likely not representative of the school experience of all Israeli LGB secondary school students. As such, the accountability of potential biases (sampling biases and researchers' biased standpoints) and the thick descriptions of a particular social reality construction, as provided in the current qualitative study, bolster the transferability of findings. Readers of the inquiry report can be familiar with the time and context in which transfer of the findings may be possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rodwell, 1998; Ungar, 2003).

### **Implications for practice**

The research findings highlight the importance of facilitating access to quality and adequate health-promoting resources within youths' environment that meet the differential needs of LGB adolescents and thus foster the building of psychosocial capacities for coping with school homophobia and prevent putative health problems. When a social-ecological resilience is absent, even a self-resilient, confident, and competent adolescent such as *The New Gay Teenager* (Savin-Williams, 2005) will have deficient and maladaptive coping strategies (Ungar et al., 2013).

In regard to Israel, although community-based activities for LGB youth have been largely extended across Israel over the last decade, the absence of structural and systemic support for sexual minority adolescents within their school setting present an obstacle in the efforts to reduce school homophobic

bullying. Up-to-date, school-based clubs that promote prosocial bonding between sexual minority and heterosexual adolescents to improve their interpersonal interactions and cultivate anti-bullying behaviors (stress-buffering) are lacking.

Given both the key role school peer groups play throughout adolescence (the negative outcomes of homophobic socialization such as external and internalized homophobia) and the putative positive effects of school-based interventions on the overall school climate, the formation of school Gay-Straight Alliance clubs within the formal state education system, with relevant local contextual and cultural accommodations, is likely to foster safe schools and ensure social justice for every student, including LGBT and questioning adolescents, as evidenced by a growing body of research from the United States (Poirier, 2014; Poteat, Sinclair, DiGiovanni, Koenig, & Russell, 2013; Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011). Effective strategies that lead self-identified heterosexual students to pursue social justice activism in general and heterosexual ally activism in particular (LGB supporters) have been elaborated and should be incorporated in school-based interventions (Duhigg, 2007).

In addition, because intervention levels are related and because they reciprocally affect one another, introducing new school-based interventions within the formal Israeli state education system has the potential to affect, across time, the building of resilience on upper levels as well (Cook et al., 2014; Obrist et al., 2010).

### ***Suggestions for future research***

Future research on LGB youths' school experience should incorporate a cluster of ecological protective factors in quantitative analysis to measure their putative effect on the abilities of sexual minority adolescents to cope with school homophobic bullying and its negative psychosocial outcomes on their wellbeing. Adopting a complementary salutogenic approach in future studies will provide a more comprehensive and integrated perspective on the multifaceted nature of the school experiences of LGB individuals by encompassing both risk and protective factors and by investigating the dynamic, mutually reciprocal, and transactional interactions between and within this constellation of ecological and self-factors.

Further studies are recommended to gain a nuanced understanding of the wellbeing of LGB individuals because their health could be affected over the longer term by sociopolitical contextual changes that may buffer stress reactivity or, on the contrary, accentuate risk factors (for instance, changes in Russian society regarding LGBT rights, see Anderson, 2014).

Finally, future research should make the effort to study LGB youths who do not attend any social activities for sexual minority youths (low peer

support) to account for the diversity of adolescents' experiences of resilience from their internal perspectives within multilayered dynamic social resilience networks. Given that 92% of the Israelis who are over 20 years old have access to the Internet and use it on a daily basis (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2009), an online venue sampling could provide further access to members of difficult-to-contact populations (Meyer & Wilson, 2009), such as LGB young adults in the Israeli Muslim and Christian Arab population and LGB Palestinians in the Palestinian Occupied Territories who seek asylum in Israel (Kagan & Ben-Dor, 2008).

## Notes

1. The Israeli Gay Youth Organization (IGY) was founded in 2002 as a voluntary Israeli non-governmental organization for LGBTQ and is recognized and partially sponsored by the Ministry of Education. IGY operates dozens of social support groups across Israel through the aid of 100 volunteers, providing a safe place for thousands of LGBTQ adolescents.

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