

Abstract

Accumulating evidence reveals developmental disparities among youth of diverse sexual orientations, with lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth having a higher risk of negative self-concept and poorer mental health than heterosexual youth. This can be attributed to minority stress (e.g., discrimination and school victimization) surrounding their sexual orientation, and yet sexual minority youth still have the potential to flourish with the presence of developmental assets. Critical consciousness refers to the ways in which oppressed individuals come to understand and challenge the oppressive social forces that shape their life opportunities. It is composed of three interrelated components: critical reflection (i.e., awareness of societal inequities), critical motivation (i.e., perceived capacity to effect positive social change), and critical action (i.e., individual or collective action taken to advance social justice). By affording the ability to recognize and transform oppressive social structures, critical consciousness can be considered as a potential developmental asset that fosters identity, psychological, and social development in sexual minority youth. The proposed study utilizes a longitudinal prospective design to examine the antecedents and developmental outcomes of critical consciousness among sexual minority youth. It is hypothesized that positive identity-salient experiences (i.e., connection with their sexual minority peers) and negative identity-salient experiences (i.e., heterosexist experiences) will be related to the nurturing of critical consciousness. We also hypothesize that critical consciousness will have a positive cascade effect on identity affirmation, psychological wellness, and social integration across time. A sample of 570 sexual minority youth will be recruited to participate in a longitudinal survey study and followed up for 3 years at regular intervals of 12 months. Multiple statistical analyses will be conducted to examine whether identity-salient experiences facilitate the growth of critical consciousness and determine the developmental outcomes of critical consciousness. Informed by intersectionality, subgroup analyses will be performed to investigate how the hypothesized mechanisms operate similarly or differently across subgroups of sexual minority youth by identity categories (i.e., gender, class, and sexual orientation). Theoretically, the findings will contribute to the growing literature on the developmental trajectories of sexual minority youth and provide empirical evidence on the significance of critical consciousness on identity affirmation, psychological wellness, and social integration. It will determine whether, when, and how critical consciousness contributes to positive development in sexual minority youth. Practically, the proposed study will inform the design and delivery of educational, clinical, and community-based practices that aim to eliminate developmental disparities and foster positive development of sexual minority youth.