

**The Resiliency of Gay Men in Agriculture Science Education**

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## **Introduction**

The public attitudes towards the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual (LGBTQIA+) plus community have moderated somewhat in the last few decades; studies continue to show that rural areas have higher negative feelings about gay men (Wienke & Hill, 2013). Survey data show that residents of rural communities tend to have more negative attitudes toward the LGBTQIA+ community than do residents of urban or suburban areas, a tendency that may be especially pronounced in more remote rural communities (Eldridge et al., 2006). Despite the heteronormative perceptions and statistics, gay men find careers in rural communities (Wienke & Hill, 2013). The current trend shows that gay men are moving away to seek higher education, but they are returning to live in their rural communities (Annes & Redlin, 2012). Gay men choose to live in rural areas for many of the same reasons straight people do because it is where they are from, where their families live, or where they feel at home (Gray et al., 2016). Therefore, gay men are seeking secondary teaching positions in rural communities, including agriculture science education careers.

Currently, there is a limited amount of literature depicting the lived experience of gay men that teach in rural communities. More specifically, there is a minute amount of research on gay men that teach in rural communities. This research attempted to examine the resiliency of gay men in agricultural education. The current literature is on the right path in aiding future teachers in understanding how to serve LGBTQIA+ youth and support LGBTQIA+ teachers; however, agricultural education is falling behind (Murray et al., 2020).

## **Theoretical Framework**

In the 1970s, psychologists, social scientists, educators, and academics started studying children that faced genetic and experiential adversity (Masten & Barnes, 2018). The overcoming of these adversities to find success in adulthood is now a phenomenon labeled as resilience. Resilience was developed and strengthened as a function of surviving past adverse experiences (Masten & Barnes, 2018).

Resilience, as a component of the individual's personality, develops and changes over time through ongoing experiences with one's physical and social environment (Lee et al., 2007). The degree to which one values themselves or finds themselves to be of worth is indicative of higher self-esteem (MacInnes, 2006). Lack of confidence or a view that one is less important than others is associated with low self-esteem (Heidari & Nemattavousi, 2020). Individuals with greater self-esteem tend to be more resilient and are more willing to attempt new endeavors or take on new responsibilities concerning work and other life activities (MacInnes, 2006). There is a paucity of literature on gay men in agriculture education, but by overcoming adverse experiences, LGBTQIA+ teachers exhibit resiliency (Masten & Barnes, 2018).

## **Methodology**

The researchers utilized a qualitative case study to interview twelve men that teach agriculture science. Yin (2018) defines a case study's parameters as an investigation into a phenomenon where real-world context is evident where multiple sources of evidence and data are sufficiently collected. By utilizing listservs, the researchers used snowball sampling to recruit gay men that teach agriculture education. Once identified, the research asked the gay men to participate in an interview. Each of the men interviewed for the study had at least five years of teaching experience in a rural community.

After organizing interview notes and transcriptions, the researcher utilized the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) to analyze the interviews. After this step, codes were outlined of all the collected and observed data. The interviews took place via Zoom.

## Results

There are four constructs of resiliency that the researchers evaluated. The constructs analyzed for the current work surround spirituality, personal competence, peer support, and family cohesion. Daniilidou and Platsidou (2018) created the teachers' resilience scale to analyze these concepts of resiliency.

One man stated, "I'm pretty conservative . . . that is just this area". Several of the men thrive in their conservative communities.

Personal competence is a set of skills that include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Feuerborn & Gueldner, 2019). To fully understand the resiliency of gay men that teach agriculture education, understanding these concepts allowed the researcher to comprehend the decision-making processes of these men. One man stated:

I think it really more or less comes down to the boundaries that were up just for the safety of my own heart, my brain, and eventually have evolved into where I feel that I can just be who I am no matter what that is.

Several men explained how disclosing to their community their identity aided in their self-esteem.

Identifying the support systems of gay men in agriculture education explains why these men stay in the profession. The lack of support from administration, community members, students, and the parents of the students may hinder gay men's success in the classroom (Robinson & Ferfoja, 2001). Therefore, the peer support systems that gay men belong to in agriculture science education have been imperative to explore and analyze. One man stated:

And as my first year got done, it turned into an environment that people loved and supported the things that we did. And people loved and supported the program and people loved and supported the kids. And so naturally, that love, and that support was given back.

Understanding the support within the community allows the men to excel as teachers.

Gay men and their interactions with their families play a crucial role in understanding why gay men may return home to teach in the rural community that they called home. Once a gay man comes out to their parents, the initial reactions are negative, but eventually, the family becomes more accepting over time (Cramer & Roach, 2010). One man stated, "my whole family knows like, that's not an issue." Several of the men interviewed echoed the same testament.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the results, gay men that teach agriculture science education in rural settings are resilient. These men are thriving in their current programs. Evaluating spirituality, personal competencies, peer support, and family cohesion allowed the researchers to gain imperative insight into how gay men interact with their rural communities.

LGBTQIA+ representation in schools is essential but tokenizing (Linley & Nguyen, 2015) needs to be monitored. It is not the responsibility of these men to educate individuals on LGBTQIA+ identities. Therefore, the researchers recommend that preservice teachers, practicing teachers, and higher education personnel attend professional development surrounding these topics.

To conclude, agricultural science education is on the right track, including LGBTQIA+ identities. Still, much work is to be completed to ensure that this community has a voice in this profession. Young gay men wanting to pursue a career in agriculture education must understand that they are not alone and have support.

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