

Positive Themes in LGBT Self-Identities in Spanish-Speaking Countries

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Positive self-identity is an important component of well-being. For lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender/transsexual (LGBT)-identified individuals in Spanish-speaking countries, forming and maintaining a positive identity is important to countering the negative impact of minority stress. An online survey collected self-reported data from participants in 15 Spanish-speaking countries ($n = 121$). Qualitative thematic analysis revealed eight positive identity themes: personal insight and strong sense of self; strong connections with family and friends; belonging to a community and being a role model for others; authenticity and honesty; involvement in social justice activism; freedom from gender-prescribed roles and to explore sexual expression and different types of relationships; empathy and compassion for others, including an awareness of prejudice toward others; and irrelevance or neutrality of sexual or gender identities. These findings suggest that people across nationalities may have similar experiences of positive identity and well-being related to their sexual and gender identities. Community leader- and counselor-facilitated interventions that empower LGBT individuals and groups are discussed as opportunities for enhancement of well-being through engagement and activism.

Keywords: LGBT, liberation psychology, positive identity development, sexual identity

A positive self-image is important to psychological health and well-being. Many character strengths and virtues, commonly found in samples of people from around the world (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004), are conducive to developing and maintaining a positive self-image. These common strengths include a desire to feel like we belong or connect with others, that we can authentically express ourselves, and that we are effective in our interactions. Although these strengths are found cross-culturally, they have specific relevance to the well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender/transsexual (LGBT)-identified individuals in Spanish-speaking countries.

LGBT-identified individuals in predominantly Spanish-speaking countries claim minority identities that remain stigmatized in many areas (see Corrales & Pecheny, 2010). Stigmatized identity may contribute to the stress experienced by an individual, and may also lead to experiences that provide opportunities for creating meanings or personal growth (e.g., Constantine & Sue, 2006). Although stigma remains a significant issue, the social and political environment for LGBT individuals in Spanish-speaking countries has evolved, with tolerance and support for rights increasing (e.g., Human Rights Watch, 2009) and LGBT identities increasingly being viewed as healthy expressions of identity (e.g., Ardila, 2007; Palma & Levandowski, 2008). These societal shifts are important because the integration of ethnic, sexual, and gender identities plays an important role in individual well-being (e.g., Lopes, 2011; Meccia, 2011).

LGBT-identified individuals have many positive life experiences. Recent research based on English-language samples (predominantly from the United States) discovered several self-reported positive themes associated with LGBT

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identities, such as enhanced feelings of authenticity and self-awareness, freedom to define relationships and roles, and a sense of belonging to a community (e.g., Riggle & Rostosky, 2012). The purpose of the present study was to discover in qualitative data collected through an Internet-based survey the positive aspects of self-identifying as LGBT (or equivalent terms) in Spanish-speaking countries.

Macro-Environmental Context for LGBT Identities

Predominantly Spanish-speaking countries include a diverse group of nations in the Caribbean, North, Central and South Americas, and Europe (Spain). Spanish-speaking countries vary greatly in the sociopolitical climate for people with LGBT identities, impacting their life experiences (Corrales & Pecheny, 2010; Wilets, 2010). The social and legal status of LGBT individuals in Spanish-speaking countries reflects modern discourses on religious pluralism, diversity, and human rights. Local cultural and religious beliefs about traditional gender roles and sexual expressions are re-framed in contemporary context as part of this discourse (Russo & Giami, 2012).

Traditional perspectives with respect to gender and sex roles have institutionally and socially limited nonheteronormative expressions in Spanish-speaking countries, in part because of the influence of the Catholic Church on both national and local cultures (e.g., Citeli, Gogna, Valdés, & Brigeiro, 2005; Friedman, 2009). Thus, legal prosecutions along with social persecutions of nonheteronormative behaviors and identities and LGBT communities have been common. Studies of LGBT persons in Latin America document the alarming numbers who have been victims of hate crimes, homicides, threats, harassment, arbitrary detentions, and cruel or dehumanizing treatment by legal authorities (Cáceres, Pecheny, Frasca, & Raupp-Rios, 2008; United Nations General Assembly, 2011).

Public awareness and international connections have strengthened the emergence of social movements working to expand rights and improve social status for LGBT-identified individuals (Grewal & Kaplan, 2001). LGBT-rights activists have used new ideologies of pluralism and multiculturalism to successfully argue for

legislative changes on behalf of equal rights (Friedman, 2009). Although discrimination and oppression remain common, social and political affirmations are increasing (Edsall, 2003; Rios, 2010).

In 2008, a statement by the United Nations Human Rights Commission (2008) confirmed that international human rights protections include sexual orientation and gender identity. This statement mobilized the decriminalization of same-sex sexual contact in all Spanish-speaking countries included in this study. However, inclusive policy protections against discrimination and recognition of same-sex relationships vary greatly from country to country (for a review, see International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, 2010, 2012). For example, although same-sex sexual activity was decriminalized in Panama in 2008, the country still does not offer legal protections against discrimination or government recognition of relationships for LGBT individuals. Argentina, on the other hand, decriminalized same-sex sexual contact in 1887 and has recognized same-sex marriages since 2010 (Ben, 2010; Barrionuevo, 2010).

Political progress has facilitated visibility and inclusion in cultural life. Open spaces for participation in micro and macro economies as well as LGBT representation in the political landscape are increasingly common. For example, LGBT-owned and “gay-friendly” establishments (e.g., bars and cafes, stores, support groups, and health services) have become visible in cities, providing spaces for individuals to expand social networks and develop a sense of belonging and interpersonal connectedness (Corrales, 2009). Additionally, the rise of LGBT-owned and gay-friendly businesses in urban areas in Latin America suggest that spaces for participation enable LGBT-identified individuals to claim these identities, live satisfying lives, and organize urban, societal, and political spaces to build community (Seidman, 2002; Philen, 2006; Martinez & Dodge, 2010; Doderer, 2011).

Expressions of Identity

LGBT identity labels in the Americas and Spain have been influenced by a global identity imported primarily from English-speaking countries (mostly the United States and Western

Europe). The adoption of linguistic expressions of LGBT identity in Spanish-speaking countries has occurred with the rise of identity politics and social movements, coupled with the increasing dispersion of sexuality studies based on scholarship largely produced in the United States (Grewal & Kaplan, 2001). The linguistic popularity of English terms for LGBT identities in Spanish-speaking countries was also facilitated by the globalization of language through media and the Internet (e.g., Corrales & Pecheny, 2010; Friedman, 2007).

Nearly direct translation of “LGBT” in Spanish has facilitated popularity of these terms in recent years. For example, lesbian is most often translated as “lesbiana”; similarly, transgender is often translated as “transgenerista.” Bisexual and transsexual are translated using the same words. “Gay” has been incorporated into common speech and added to “official” Spanish language, whereas the word “queer” is translated directly but is mostly limited to academic settings (Martinez & Dodge, 2010).

Although the globalized use of a common language has supported personal identity development, a sense of community, and social change movements, there are also localized expressions. Depending on the region, “marica,” “pato,” “pájarraton,” and “loca” are all words that have been used pejoratively to describe LGBT individuals but are now being reclaimed by many as part of a positive identity (e.g., Decena, 2008; Guzmán, 2006; Peña, 2007; please note that these words are still considered offensive by many). Such terms, with distinct origins in the Spanish language, may be used by LGBT-identified persons to distance themselves from globalized labels and to assert their local origins and pride (Vidal-Ortiz, 2011; Leap & Provencher, 2011).

The current study asked individuals in Spanish-speaking countries who self-identify as LGBT to reflect on and report the positive aspects of their identities. Based on the review above, we assumed that the globalized label was meaningful and relevant to many, while still acknowledging and recognizing the diverse contexts that shape more localized, linguistic expressions. Although persons with LGBT identities often face significant challenges, they also may find significant opportunities for creating positive identities that contribute to their

well-being. This study sought to document those positive aspects of identity.

Method

Participants

The survey was completed by 121 participants from 15 countries: Argentina ($n = 8$), Bolivia (1), Colombia (6), Ecuador (1), El Salvador (1), Guatemala (2), Mexico (50), Nicaragua (1), Panama (28), Paraguay (1), Peru (5), Puerto Rico (10), Spain (3), Uruguay (2), and Venezuela (2). The participants ranged in age from 18 to 65 ($M = 30.08$; $SD = 12.00$). Participants self-identified their gender: 48% male; 36% female; 5% male to female/ female to male, transgender, or transsexual; and 2% chose “other.” Participants reported their sexual identity: 32% as gay man; 26% lesbian; 15% bisexual; 11% heterosexual or straight; and 2% chose “other” or “no label.” All participants were retained in the sample; participants identifying as “heterosexual or straight” also self-identified as transgender or as, for example, a “man who has sex with men” while also identifying publicly as heterosexual.

A near majority of the sample identified their religious affiliation as Roman Catholic (47.3%), whereas 26.7% identified as Atheist or as having no religious affiliation. Half of the sample reported being single or dating, and 43% reported being in a committed relationship. The sample was relatively well-educated, with 49.1% reporting having a bachelor’s degree and an additional 10.7% having a masters or doctorate; all other participants either had a high school degree or at least some college education (including those currently enrolled).

Nearly 60% of respondents reported having disclosed their sexual or gender identity to most or all of their parents and siblings; a quarter of the sample had not disclosed their identities to parents and siblings and more than one-half had not disclosed to extended family. In their communities, only one third reported being completely “out,” whereas 40% reported disclosing their identity to less than one-half the people in their community.

Respondents were given the opportunity to describe their identity by responding to the prompt (English translation provided here): “What words or phrases do you typically use to

describe your sexual, gender, racial, or ethnic identity?" Most answers included a mix of descriptors demonstrating the interrelated expression of identities and local influences. For example, "mestiza" and "mestizo"¹ are words that combine sexual, gender, and regional identity, such as (translation provided), "I am a bisexual, mestiza Latin American woman." Another participant from Mexico self-described using a local slang term "afeminado" (a feminine male), and a participant from Panama used the phrase "Gay Culiso" to describe himself as a gay man with dark skin and straight hair.

Survey Procedures

Announcements about an online survey were distributed in 2010 via the Foro Latinoamericano de Juventudes (FLAJ [Latin American Youth Forum]), an organization that works to advance social justice, multiculturalism, and social involvement among groups of young adults. The announcement was forwarded to partner organizations (which were not necessarily youth oriented) and to individuals on listservs. Additionally, the study was announced at three international conferences for young adult programs in 2010 attended by persons from all age groups (in Colonia, Uruguay; Mollina, España; and Guanajuato, Mexico). Persons who were aged ≥ 18 years and who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or transsexual, and equivalent Spanish translated identities, were invited to complete a survey that focused on the positive aspects of any of these self-identities. The survey was presented in Spanish (with an English translation available).

The data were collected via an online survey. The survey included an informed consent, demographic questions, and an open-ended question asking participants to describe the positive aspects of their LGBT identities. Demographic measures included questions about age, country of residence, level of education, religious affiliation, and relationship status. Participants were asked to respond to the following questions about their gender and sexual identities: "Gender: do you primarily identify as ____?" and "Which label comes closest to how you describe your sexual orientation or identity right now?" Participants were given a list to choose from, including "other." These questions were followed by an open-ended question: "What words

or phrases do you typically use to describe your sexual, gender, racial, or ethnic identity?"

To assess disclosure of their identity, participants responded to the following prompt: "The following questions concern the degree to which you have disclosed your sexual orientation or identity to the following groups of people." Participants then rated their level of disclosure from 0% to 100% for: parents; brothers and sisters; grandparents; extended family; their children; straight friends; supervisors, colleagues, coworkers, peers, clients, or customers; and cultural community.

Finally, respondents answered the main question of interest: "Please tell us below what you think the positive things are about identifying as a gay man, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender person? Please describe as many positive aspects as you think are important to your life. Use as much detail and give as many examples as you wish."

Data Analysis

The data used for the analyses were the answers submitted for the open-ended question. Each participant's response was first segmented into meaning units (a complete thought on a distinct theme in reference to the question); responses could include one or more meaning units. A total of 191 meaning units were analyzed in the original Spanish and English translation. Open coding thematic analysis based on a grounded theory approach was used (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This inductive approach allowed the thoughts expressed by participants to be analyzed for recurring themes. The themes were interrelated and not mutually exclusive; coding was based on the overall meaning and context of each response. Three of the authors separately analyzed the data for themes; the themes were compared and reconciled by reference to the data. A fourth author checked the themes against both the original Spanish language answer and the English translation. The final consensus on coding emerged through this iterative process (see Hill, 2012).

¹ Mestizo and mestiza are terms used in Latin America, Philippines, and Spain to describe a person of mixed European and Native heritage or origin.

Results

Analyses revealed eight major themes that summarized the responses: personal insight and stronger sense of self; strong connections with family and friends; belonging to a community and being a role model for others; authenticity and honesty; involvement in social justice activism; freedom from gender-prescribed roles and a freedom to explore sexual expression and different types of relationships; empathy and compassion for others, including an awareness of prejudice toward others; and irrelevance or neutrality of sexual or gender identities. (Only the English translations of the participants' answers are provided below. Some extended examples may contain more than one theme in order to maintain the meaning of the participants' expressions in context.)

Personal Insight and a Strong Sense of Self

Gaining personal insight and a stronger sense of self was the most commonly mentioned theme in this sample ($n = 42$). Several respondents attributed their insights and strengths to having a different perspective on life that came from experiences related to their LGBT identity. For example, a 20-year-old gay man from Mexico wrote: "I am someone who many do not have the courage to be." A 32-year-old participant from Venezuela elaborated his experiences:

To belong to a minority group offers the opportunity to look at life from a different perspective than the majority. The problems caused by belonging to this group make you stronger and help you develop feelings of solidarity and comprehend the problems of other minorities who experience situations of discrimination.²

Feeling stronger and more confident are important aspects of the positive experiences of LGBT identities. This strong sense of self was portrayed by a 23-year-old from Argentina: "I am open-minded, feel certainty when confronting problems, I have strength, a fighting spirit, I am nonconformist, and I have the power to choose."

Strong Connections With Family and Friends

The ability to develop a closer and stronger connection to family and friends was a common theme among participants ($n = 31$). Some par-

ticipants indicated that being honest and authentic about their identity gave them the opportunity to invest in more authentic friendships. A 20-year-old female from Argentina illustrated this: "I can truly choose my friendships. If someone were to discriminate against me due to my sexual orientation that means that it was not a very positive friendship to begin with." A 32-year-old female participant from Mexico reported: "I feel accepted in my social networks; it is good to know that the male friends I have are my friends because of who they are and not because they are expecting something more to happen between us."

Another participant, a 53-year-old man from Venezuela, reflected on how his long-term committed relationship has been embraced by family members: "I can share I have been in a relationship with my partner for 11 years of which we have lived together for 7. It has been wonderful to share these years with him and with my family." These close relationships with friends and family help to create a social support network important to well being.

Belonging to a Community and Being a Role Model for Others

For many participants, LGBT identities provided an important link to others with similar gender and sexual identities. These identities, collectively expressed, provided a sense of community or a context for acting as a role model (and activist) ($n = 27$). Finding a community in which they felt accepted, whether it was an LGBT community or a broader group, such as the feminist movement, was positive. A 43-year-old man from Argentina illustrated his feeling of connection: "Even if many do not want to see this, the reality is that there are people in the LGBT community, which I proudly belong to, who love, work, have spirituality, and have friends."

Several participants reported positive experiences related to mentoring or acting as a role model for younger LGBT-identified people. For example, some felt positive about helping younger generations effectively cope with their experiences with prejudice. A participant from Spain commented: "I think my life experience

² Includes Empathy and Compassion for Others theme.

can at least help many other young LGBT people, so that they suffer the least possible, be it because of discrimination in their homes or social milieu.”

Some participants used their social activism to educate others and to publicly serve as a role model. For example, a 51-year-old male participant from Colombia observed: “I have learned to work for the LGBT sector in the city and in my country. I have learned to argue from a legal perspective about my rights. In doing so, I have helped many youth come out of the closet.”³ Participants who focused on helping younger generations seemed to experience a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction from providing a more accepting and safe environment to LGBT youth.

Authenticity and Honesty

Expressing their identity authentically and honestly enhanced feelings of well-being for many participants ($n = 25$). Being open about their sexual or gender identity was an important part of claiming an LGBT identity and creating a positive life. Some respondents cite authenticity and honesty as a way to “be able to love freely” or to “not have to live in a heterosexual marriage in which I would be unhappy.” A 28-year-old respondent from Mexico, wrote: “Identifying as I am and as I live demonstrates my openness and self-awareness. To live without the fear of what others may say.”

Some participants related the positive feelings that came from sharing their identities and relationships in all areas of their lives. For example, having a relationship recognized through a public marriage ceremony was an important part of self-expression and living an honest, authentic life for a 60-year-old male participant from Argentina:

I am a person who does not need to hide my sexual preferences and I am completely happy. I feel understood by my partner, my daughter, and my grandchildren. When my partner and I got married we had interviews in the public media. In my job my sexual orientation is well known and I am respected and well regarded.⁴

Involvement in Social Justice Activism

Participants shared stories of their social justice activism giving them a sense of meaning and purpose associated with their LGBT iden-

tities ($n = 20$). Some participants reported feelings of personal fulfillment that came from contributing to change in their community. A 41-year-old female from Mexico explained:

I am someone who is very happy, accomplished, and complete. I am an activist for the rights of my community and have big projects. I like to grow and provide support so that others will grow. I love to show solidarity first and foremost with the LGBT community.⁵

Other participants indicated that social justice activism was a positive way to give back to the community. A 22-year-old male from Colombia expressed a desire to increase the social presence and visibility of LGBT communities in his home country:

Being openly gay is something that I have had to fight for. As a community we must continue gaining a space. Colombia, being a clearly Catholic country which does not accept the rights of gay people, we have been working to position our community as something positive. We must use all mediums . . . to advance our cause.

Freedom From Gender-Prescribed Roles

Some participants reported positive experiences because they felt free from the restrictions of gender-prescribed roles and a freedom to explore different sexual expressions and types of relationships ($n = 19$). For example, a 40-year-old female from Colombia summed up her experience: “I think it is positive that I do not have to conform to the strict gender roles of heterosexual relationships. This allows me to be creative in my relationships.”

Some participants rejected labels as not capturing the breadth of their experiences. A 57-year-old man from Puerto Rico explained:

I believe we live in a world that wants to label everything and pigeonhole it with names, and this results in stigma. I consider it positive that I am not pigeonholed by a label. This allows me to be free and dynamic. I accept my homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual dimensions, my masculinity, and my femininity.

Other participants highlighted an egalitarian approach to their relationships that they contrasted with the traditional gender-related power structures prevalent in heterosexual relation-

³ Includes Social Justice Activism theme.

⁴ Includes Role Model theme.

⁵ Includes Belonging to a Community theme.

ships. A 26-year-old female from Mexico wrote: "There are attitudes in some heterosexual relationships that I have never seen, felt, or provoked in my relationships with other women, like a certain lack of understanding and lack of equality between partners."

Empathy and Compassion for Others

Participants reported that having LGBT identities had increased their empathy and compassion for members of other groups who experience prejudice. Some participants reported feeling empathy and practicing tolerance when interacting with others who are also stigmatized ($n = 14$). For example, a 20-year-old from Mexico reported: "Being homosexual has helped me to not discriminate against other groups and to grow as a person. I have realized things about discrimination that I perhaps would not have realized if I were heterosexual."

Several participants reported an increased self-awareness and critical understanding of diversity based on their own experiences. A 58-year-old male from Panama wrote: "Being gay has made me more of a free thinker, I am more open to diversity and to differences. It has helped me to not be dogmatic and intolerant." A 56-year-old transsexual-identified participant from Mexico indicated that his gender identity has led to feelings of empathy for diverse populations: "I don't feel tied to conventionalities; this makes me feel freer. Furthermore, I understand diversity much better and I can celebrate the differences of each human being." Other participants indicated that their own experiences of alienation and discrimination helped them empathize with the experiences of other minority groups. A 28-year-old male from Mexico illustrated this: "I think when you have been discriminated against you have a greater awareness of the worthiness of all people."

Sexual or Gender Identity as Irrelevant or Neutral

Some participants maintained that their sexual or gender identity was irrelevant to their experiences; others stated that their experiences had been neutral or lacking in positive aspects ($n = 13$). For example, a 19-year-old male from Mexico commented: "Being gay does not make one person better than another person." Simi-

larly, a 24-year old male from Argentina wrote: "I don't think there is much difference in being gay or not being gay." Some of these respondents, however, proceeded to list positive aspects of their LGBT identity.

Other participants related experiences of oppression in their environment that interfered with finding positive aspects of their sexual or gender identity. A 22-year-old male from Panama explained: "Almost nothing (is positive), many people will denigrate you and perceive you as less credible because you have a different sexual preference." A 32-year-old male, also from Panama, put his experience in a broader context: "To highlight positive aspects about being a gay person in Panama is something unreal, is something that we are very far away from fully enjoying, in our country we have an endless number of social problems."

Discussion

Positive experiences of self-identity contribute to a sense of well-being, optimal human functioning, and flourishing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The themes identified in this study included positive personality traits (authenticity, honesty, compassion, and self-awareness), positive interpersonal relationships (connection with family, friends, and intimate partners), and positive contributions to the next generation, to the community, and to society. At all of these levels, participants identified strengths that allowed them to flourish and derive positive meaning from experiences associated with their identity.

The themes appear to be similar to previous findings in studies based on English-speaking samples. For example, Riggle, Whitman, Olson, Rostosky, and Strong (2008) found that authenticity was the most commonly cited positive aspect of gay and lesbian identities in a sample from the United States (see also, Riggle, Rostosky, McCants, & Pascale-Hague, 2011; Rostosky, Riggle, Pascale-Hague, & McCants, 2010). Zea, Reisen, and Poppen (1999) found that Latina lesbians and Latino gay men living in the United States reported that feelings of belonging and having strong social networks within their Latino/Latina community were important to their psychological well-being. The themes that emerged from these studies appear to reflect fundamental human strengths and val-

ues related to well-being. Therefore, finding similar themes across cultures is consistent with expectations.

The eight positive themes identified by LGBT Spanish-speaking participants appear to capture views of self that are consistent with developing a sense of well-being and self-determination. Self-determination theory, which has been conceptualized and studied in many cultures, posits three psychological needs essential for well-being—competence, autonomy, and relatedness (e.g., Alonso, Lucas, Izquierda, & Lobera, 2006; Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003; Grouzet et al., 2005; Kennon & Gunz, 2009). Our findings suggest that LGBT-identified people were able to find ways to meet these psychological needs and experience well-being even in social contexts that stigmatize them. For example, the positive experiences of authenticity and honesty may increase feelings of autonomy, the freedom to choose one's own behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2002, 2008).

Belonging to a community and being a role model for others promoted social relatedness. Even in stigmatizing contexts, LGBT individuals claim safe spaces by connecting with other members of the LGBT community and supportive allies. Community engagement and social justice activism were also important strategies in providing social connection, positive growth experiences, and a sense of well-being. Participants' recognition and appreciation of the impact of environmental stressors on youth motivated them to reach out to others and to engage in political and social action. The desire to help future generations is at the intersection of generativity and social justice and is consistent with developmental milestones found in psychosocial identity development models (Erikson, 1973; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997).

Narratives that take negative experiences and events and turn them into positive growth may be an important indicator of optimal human development and psychological well-being across many cultures (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). A significant number of participants appeared to engage in self-reflection and introspection that allowed them to reframe their experiences and at least partially mitigate the negative impact of prejudicial environments.

Their narratives about insights and personal growth illustrated movement from negative experiences to positive outcomes. For instance, participants in the present study reported that they had gained insights from their experiences of "second-class" status and discrimination and devoted energy to changing their social environment through advocacy and activism. Consistent with previous research on stress-related growth (e.g., Calhoun, Cann, & Tedeschi, 2010), LGBT people created narratives that contributed to their psychological well-being and healthy identity development.

Some participants in this sample reported that they found nothing positive about claiming an LGBT identity. These narratives appeared to occur across cultures and populations and may represent individual differences that need further empirical study. Identity-formation models might suggest that these participants need to achieve further identity integration in order to find positive aspects of LGBT identities (e.g., Cass, 1984). Liberation psychology, on the other hand, maintains that personal identities cannot be separated from their sociopolitical contexts; thus, identity development models and the assumptions about positive identity achievement that undergird them may not be applicable beyond the European/American sociocultural contexts that generated them (see Corrales & Pecheny, 2010; Morales, 1996; Russell & Bohan, 2007). We would argue that positive narratives can be formed regardless of an individuals' level of disclosure of their sexual or gender identity (see Riggle & Rostosky, 2012).

Research suggests that social stigma at the interpersonal level and at the level of laws and policies negatively affects the health and well-being of LGBT individuals (e.g., Riggle, Rostosky, & Horne, 2010). The social stress created by laws and policies that discriminate and by interpersonal rejection may have a greater negative impact on the well-being of some individuals (e.g., Ceará & Dalgalarrodo, 2010), whereas others develop strategies for coping and exhibit stress-related growth, create positive meaning, and enjoy more positive well-being. For example, social support has been found to be an important resource for gay and bisexual male youth in Puerto Rico; even though those youth reported high levels of depression, they also integrated their identities and engaged in resilience behaviors with positive

outcomes (Toro-Alfonso, Diaz, Andujar-Bello, & Nieves-Rosa, 2006).

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the present exploration of themes of positive LGBT identities extends and enhances basic knowledge of LGBT experiences in Spanish-speaking countries, there are limitations to the study. The respondents to the current survey were self-identified, self-selected, and connected to LGBT and social justice communities. On average, they were better educated than the general populations of the countries represented. Not all Spanish-speaking countries were represented nor were all ethnic or indigenous groups within those countries. The purpose of the current study was to discover a general set of positive aspects of identity that cross national borders; this purpose limited the ability of this study to understand how differences in national, racial, and ethnic identities shape LGBT identity narratives. All of these factors indicate that caution must be used in generalization of the findings.

Future qualitative studies of homogenous samples would be able to reach a level of saturation that was not possible in this broad exploratory study. Future studies may focus less on globalized labels and more on those who embrace localized expressions of their identities. These localized expressions may give unique meanings to sexual and gender identities and provide different positive experiences. In-depth interview studies of individuals in specific communities may also uncover different information about the interaction between positive identity development and specific sociopolitical contexts, including the intersections and integrations of sexual identity with racial and ethnic identities (see Lopes, 2011) and socioeconomic status (see Cáceres et al., 2008). More research on the experiences of those in rural areas and on the experiences of those with less access to LGBT communities or the Internet would extend the findings of the current study. At the macrolevel, future research may focus policies and policy changes in specific countries or regions and how these policies affect individuals' perceptions of their identities and their psychological well-being.

Implications for Counseling and Advocacy

LGBT identities at the individual level may be influenced by the dialectic tension between positive (affirming) and negative (prejudicial) experiences (e.g., Lozano, 2009; Gomez & Barrientos-Delgado, 2012). The current study revealed eight general themes for positive narratives that might assist practitioners in devising holistic assessments, conceptualizations, and interventions with LGBT clients in Spanish-speaking countries. The psychological literature supports the importance of cultivating positive identity through redemption, self-advocacy, and self-determination. For instance, liberation psychology (Martín-Baró, 1994) posits that people whose lives are the subject of sociopolitical discourse must strive to create meaning out of their political situation. Therefore, one therapeutic goal is to make meaning out of the sociopolitical environment as it affects LGBT individuals and then facilitate the individual's participation in social activism as a strategy for personal and political empowerment (see Russell & Bohan, 2007).

Facilitating activism in any form is an act of redemption and can be a powerful intervention (Duran, 2008). However, it may be necessary to invite positive narratives into awareness as an opportunity for redemption and greater understanding of personal strength without necessitating social activism for LGBT rights (which may be unsafe or untenable in some contexts). Ultimately, the goal is to assist LGBT clients to work toward congruency and authenticity by helping them to integrate their sexual and gender identities into other areas of life. Social and political activism may help to facilitate this process in some clients or may be an outcome of the process for others. Psychologists and other service providers, in collaboration with their clients, should carefully assess social context and individual needs to determine the extent to which engaging in activism and constructing positive identity narratives will be of help in facilitating goal attainment.

When the social or political environment is interfering with the health and well-being of a particular community, psychologists are called to act as agents of social change through advocacy and activism (Goodman et al., 2004). Psychologists have a long history of social activism in Spanish-speaking countries. For instance,

dating back to 1977, discussions led by psychologists in Latin America have conceptualized homosexuality as a normal variation in human sexuality in which a person discovers same sex sexual attractions and adopts an identity consistent with this experience (Annicchiarico, 2009; Lozano, 2009; MacCulloch & Feldman, 1977). This discussion has helped to facilitate social and political tolerance. Lozano (2009) observed that legislative changes that advance equality in Mexico have impacted social attitudes.

Globalized dialogues and international pressure as well as local advocacy efforts have contributed to these advances. These changes have, in turn, helped to change attitudes (International Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission, 2003). Advocacy and social action on the part of psychologists are part of a continuous effort to shift social consciousness at local and global levels.

The findings of the current study suggest that LGBT populations in Spanish-speaking countries find positive meanings in their gender and sexual identities. These positive meanings appear to promote well-being and human development. To safeguard the right of current and future generations to healthy and fulfilling lives, it is important to continue to engage in international discussion about the status of LGBT-identified citizens and advocate for their inclusion in international indices of human development (United Nations Development Program, 2010). From a social justice perspective, psychologists have made contributions to advances in equality and well-being and will continue to have a unique opportunity to contribute to a global and local understanding of LGBT identities and the health and well-being of individuals and society.

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