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“Minority Stress among LGBTQ Smokers in the Deep South: A Mixed Methods Study”

Background: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) individuals face higher levels of stress than the general population in the form of minority stress, defined as discriminatory, stigmatizing, and victimizing experiences. Minority stress has been posited as a cause for LGBTQ individuals to smoke as a coping mechanism, leading to higher than average rates of smoking in this population. The Deep South states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina represent an area with both high levels of minority stress and smoking. Therefore, the objective of this study was to elucidate how minority stress influences smoking among LGBTQ smokers in the Deep South, using a mixed methods approach.

Methods: A one-time, cross-sectional online survey was administered to 1,296 LGBTQ smokers in the Deep South. Survey measurements included previously validated measures of minority stress (prejudice events, perceived stigma, and internalized queerphobia), mental health, social support, smoking, quitting, LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ norms, self-efficacy, and smoking outcome variables (stage of change and nicotine dependence level). Multiple linear regression was used to assess the relationship between minority stress variables and smoking outcome variables. To expound on how minority stress affects mental health and subsequent stage of change, 15 individual, semi-structured online interviews were conducted with LGBTQ smokers in the Deep South. Interview topics spanned across 5 domains: LGBTQ identity, smoking/quitting, minority stress, mental health, and social support.

Results: Survey findings showed that after adjusting for covariates, increased levels of internalized queerphobia were significantly associated with increased nicotine dependence level, and decreased levels of perceived stigma were associated with further stage of change. Six themes emerged across interviews: struggles with LGBTQ identity, coping with minority stress, reasons for smoking, desire to quit smoking, and barriers to quitting smoking.

Conclusion: This study elucidates how increased levels of minority stress are associated with poorer smoking outcomes among LGBTQ individuals in the Deep South. Findings will help guide future smoking prevention and cessation programs for LGBTQ smokers. Addressing minority stress in future targeted smoking interventions has the potential to reducing smoking disparities in LGBTQ populations.