

Identity processes and psychological wellbeing upon recall of a significant ‘coming out’ experience in lesbian, gay and bisexual people

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Abstract

This study focuses on the relations between minority stressors, protective factors and psychological wellbeing among lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people. Experimental data based on a sample of 156 showed that participants asked to recall a negative coming out experience to somebody significant reported more identity threat and distress and less positive affect compared to those recalling a neutral coming out experience. In the negative recall condition, the effects of the stressors of discrimination and rejection on the variance of distress through the mediation of identity threat were statistically significant but not in the neutral recall condition and the two conditions statistically significantly differed in regards to the relationship between discrimination and distress. Identity resilience – continuity was associated with less identity threat and distress in the negative recall condition only, while social support was negatively associated and LGB stigma sensitivity was positively associated with distress in both conditions. Degree of outness (operating as a coping strategy) was associated with increased positive affect in both the neutral and negative recall conditions. When recalling a negative coming out experience, LGB people may be more susceptible to distress associated with minority stressors but also capitalize on available coping strategies.

Keywords

minority stressors; lesbian, gay and bisexual people; coming out; coping; identity process theory

Introduction

This study focuses upon the impact of recalling previous sexual orientation disclosure (“coming out”) experiences for psychological wellbeing in a sample of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people. There is an additional focus upon the extent to which recall of a negative vs. neutral previous coming out experience may influence the psychological impact of sexuality-related stressors and defensive strategies.

According to minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), exposure to stressors, such as rejection, discrimination and stigma sensitivity (i.e., anticipating stigma in stigma-relevant situations), is associated with poor psychological wellbeing outcomes (Lehavot & Simoni, 2011; Ryan, Legate & Weinstein, 2015). Moreover, identity process theory (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2014) suggests that these stressors can undermine people’s feelings of self-esteem, continuity, positive distinctiveness and self-efficacy, resulting in what is referred to in the theory as identity threat (Rehman, Jaspal & Fish, 2021). Conversely, protective factors, such as a sense of identity resilience, outness (i.e., the degree to which one is open about one’s sexual orientation) and social support, have been shown to facilitate adaptive coping and, thus, better psychological wellbeing outcomes (Jaspal, Assi & Maatouk, 2022).

Yet, it is unclear why some people are able to maintain a high level of psychological wellbeing despite exposure to stressors while others are not. There is some evidence that recall of previous coming out experiences can lead to “reliving” the event in the present and future (Niziurski & Schaper, 2021), potentially affecting one’s psychological wellbeing (Breakwell & Jaspal, 2021). Using an experimental design, this study tests the hypothesis that recalling a negative (vs. a neutral) coming out experience, involving somebody significant, accentuates the effects of these stressors and protective factors on psychological wellbeing. Moreover, drawing upon identity process theory, the study examines the role of identity threat as a mediator of the relationship between the stressors/ protective factors and psychological wellbeing.

The social psychological significance of coming out

Coming out refers to the disclosure of one’s sexual orientation to others. Coming out is rarely a single, monolithic experience since one comes out to different people and to varying degrees. Yet, people are often able to recall a significant coming out experience and to describe it as well as how it made them feel at the time, especially when the experience involved people who mattered to them (Breakwell & Jaspal, 2021).

A significant coming out experience, that is, one that involved an important person, may have broader, longer-term psychological consequences for the individual, especially when the experience is subsequently recalled. A distinction should be made between the act of coming out and the state of being out, that is, one’s degree of outness. In general, the actual experience of coming out may be subjectively evaluated as positive, negative or neutral but the state of being out tends to be associated with positive psychological health outcomes (Ragins, 2004). However, this relationship is clearly moderated by the nature of one’s coming out experiences (i.e., whether they were positive or negative).

When people recall a significant coming out experience, this experience may have a significant cognitive and affective effect upon them, providing a lens through which particular stressors (e.g., discrimination and rejection) and protective factors (e.g., identity resilience, social support, outness) are perceived and, in the case of protective factors, enacted. Recall may precipitate a cognitive state that makes one more or less susceptible to the adverse effects of stressors that exist in the social context.

Therefore, recalling a significant coming out experience may operate as a moderator of the relationship between stressors/ protective factors and psychological wellbeing outcomes (i.e., distress, positive affect). More specifically, when the negative coming out experience is cognitively salient, people may feel more adversely affected by stressors, manifested in terms of distress. Indeed, it has been shown the negative memory recall is generally associated with negative affect in the current moment (Bradley & Mogg, 1994), thereby potentially accentuating the effects of stressors. Recalling a negative experience may also kickstart coping strategies to protect identity manifested in terms of protective factors (Breakwell, 2015). This line of thinking would appear to be consistent with the notion of autobiographical memory as a determinant of current identity and in particular of one’s “desired self” (Wilson & Ross, 2003).

Identity process theory

Identity process theory (Breakwell, 2015; Jaspal & Breakwell, 2014) proposes that individuals strive to construct a sense of identity that is characterized by feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy, continuity and positive distinctiveness. When these principles are curtailed due, for instance, to exposure to stressors (e.g., discrimination), the individual experiences what is referred to as identity threat. The experience of

identity threat can in turn induce distress, depressive symptomatology, and decreased life satisfaction (Assi, Maatouk & Jaspal, 2020; Breakwell & Jaspal, 2021). The theory postulates that people who experience identity threat will subsequently attempt to cope in a variety of ways.

The concept of identity resilience refers to the perception of higher combined baseline levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, continuity and positive distinctiveness (Breakwell et al., 2021). Identity resilience is subjective, relatively stable and akin to a trait. It is developed on the basis of previous life experiences, as well as various social and psychological characteristics, such as personality and group memberships. It has been found that the level of one's identity resilience determines the extent to which one experiences identity threat as well as one's capacity to adopt adaptive, sustainable coping strategies upon exposure to a stressor (Breakwell, 2021).

Minority stressors

Minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) distinguishes between distal stressors, which are stress processes external to the individual, and proximal stressors, which are internal to the individual and often by-products of distal stressors. This study focuses on three possible stressors: the distal stressors of discrimination and rejection; and the proximal stressor of stigma sensitivity.

Rejection from significant others due to one's sexuality can curtail feelings of acceptance and inclusion which are key to psychological wellbeing (Moeller et al., 2020). In a study of 257 sexual minority adults, Puckett et al. (2015) found that past parental rejection was positively associated with current psychological distress. Similarly, in their survey study of 289 LGB people, Jaspal, Lopes and Rehman (2021) found that rejection from significant others was associated with increased psychological distress.

Exposure to discrimination due to one's sexuality can also be harmful for psychological wellbeing. Discrimination can give rise to both internalizing (e.g., low mood and anxiety) and externalizing (e.g., substance misuse) disorders for sexual minorities (Lee et al., 2016). Similarly, in their study of 1032 LGB young people, Almeida et al. (2009) found that perceived discrimination accounted for greater depressive symptomatology as well as greater likelihood of engaging in self-harm.

In addition to actual experiences of rejection and discrimination, the proximal stressor of stigma sensitivity, which refers to the anxious expectation to face stigma due to one's sexuality in ambiguous social contexts, has also been found to undermine mental health (Feinstein, 2020). Individuals who anticipate stigma are more likely to perceive it even in innocuous or ambiguous situations. They may also be anxious about their self-presentation and attempt to conceal their sexuality to avoid exposure to stigma. Slimowicz, Siev and Brochu (2020) found that stigma sensitivity was a significant predictor of depressive symptomatology in a sample of 242 sexual minority participants. Cohen et al. (2016) found that stigma sensitivity was associated with other mental health issues, namely social anxiety, generalized anxiety and post-traumatic stress symptoms.

Protective factors

Research using both minority stress theory and identity process theory have identified various social psychological factors that may operate protectively against psychological adversity among LGB people. In this study, we focus on the significance of identity resilience – continuity, degree of outness, and the availability of social support.

In research using identity process theory, identity resilience has been found to be associated with increased access to adaptive, sustainable coping strategies (Breakwell & Jaspal, 2021; Jaspal, Assi & Maatouk, 2022) when one is exposed to a stressor with the capacity to threaten identity. Previous studies suggest that one's sense of continuity is particularly susceptible to threat when coming out as LGB (Jaspal & Siraj, 2011). Therefore, it can be predicted that higher baseline levels of continuity will be protective in this context. Accordingly, in this study, we focus specifically upon identity resilience on the basis of continuity alone.

Individuals vary in the extent to which they are "out". Outness tends to have positive social psychological outcomes - it can engender feelings of identity authenticity, self-acceptance and a positive overall sense of self (Cain, 1991; Riggins, 2004; Wells & Kline, 1987). In their study of 333 gay men, Jaspal and Breakwell (2022) found that outness operated as a coping strategy in response to discrimination due to one's sexuality and that it was associated with decreased internalized homonegativity. After all, outness increases one's likelihood of accessing social support and of exposure to more affirmative social representations of one's sexual orientation (Somantico, De Rosa & Parrello, 2018).

The derivation of social support is one of the most adaptive, sustainable strategies that can be deployed in response to stressors and has consistently been found to be associated with increased psychological wellbeing (Jaspal, 2018). In her review of the literature on LGB youth, McDonald (2018) found that decreased access to social support was associated with greater levels of depression, anxiety, shame, and substance misuse (see also Puckett et al., 2015). Similarly, in their study of 108 sexual minority youth, Wilkerson et al. (2017) found that increased access to social support was associated with decreased depressive symptomatology, increased self-esteem and increased coping ability.

Psychological wellbeing outcomes

LGB people appear to be at higher risk of poor psychological health outcomes when compared to the general population (King et al., 2008; Semlyen et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2021). Much research has focused upon clinical psychological outcomes, such as depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation. Conversely, in this study, there is a focus on three *state* psychological wellbeing outcome variables: identity threat, distress and positive affect. These variables focus on how one is feeling at any given point in time and thus reflect an important dimension of psychological wellbeing.

In identity process theory, identity threat is defined as an aversive psychological experience. LGB people have been shown to be at risk of identity threat upon disclosure of their sexual orientation, especially when the reaction they face from significant others is negative (Jaspal & Siraj, 2011). Facing a negative reaction to one's sexual orientation can lead people to feel that they are less valued, that they are excessively distinctive on the basis of a negatively evaluated identity element (i.e., their sexuality), that their new sense of identity is disconnected from their past sense of identity, and that they have limited control over how they are and will be perceived by others.

In their study of 333 gay men, Breakwell and Jaspal (2021) found that recalling a negative coming out experience led to identity threat and that this experience was associated with increased distress. The association between identity threat and distress has been established in cross-cultural samples – Assi, Maatouk and Jaspal (2020) found them to be correlated in a sample of LGB people in Lebanon. Identity threat is commonplace and can occur on the basis of many experiences and events. However,

when it occurs due to a significant element of identity, such as one's sexual orientation, and due to the reaction of somebody significant, it may give rise to distress.

Minority stress theory notes the significance of stigma sensitivity in people who have faced chronic levels of social stigma due to their minority status. As a proximal stressor, akin to a trait (Downey & Feldman, 1996), stigma sensitivity should be associated with increased distress regardless of the nature of the coming out experience recalled.

When experiences of discrimination and rejection give rise to identity threat, one will report higher levels of distress. A key moderator of the relationship between the stressors and distress should be the nature of one's coming out experience to someone significant (i.e., whether it was negative or neutral). After all, coming out to someone significant is a key milestone in one's life and the response one receives is likely to have broader cognitive and affective ramifications, shaping one's capacity to cope with stressors. In short, it is hypothesized that recalling a negative coming out experience may curtail or disable effective coping strategies which can limit the level of distress experienced when faced with proximal stressors.

Positive affect refers to "the extent to which a person feels enthusiastic, active and alert" at a given point in time and a higher level of positive affect reflects "a state of high energy, full concentration, and pleasurable engagement" (Watson et al., 1988, p. 1063). Degree of outness has been found to be associated with better psychological wellbeing outcomes, including positive affect (Villicana et al., 2016). However, when LGB people are asked to recall a negative coming out experience, coping strategies (such as degree of outness) should be activated to militate against psychological adversity and to retain higher levels of positive affect. Therefore, the relationship between degree of outness and positive affect should be stronger in the negative recall condition.

Hypotheses

Based on tenets of minority stress theory and identity process theory and the empirical evidence reviewed in this article, the following three hypotheses are proposed:

1. Following Breakwell and Jaspal (2021), participants exposed to the negative recall condition should report more identity threat and distress compared to participants exposed to the neutral recall condition who, in turn, should report more positive affect than those exposed to the negative recall condition.
2. Given that negative memory recall can induce negative affect (including identity threat), potentially accentuating the impact of stressors and the human motivation for coping (Bradley & Mogg, 1994; Breakwell, 2015; Wilson & Ross, 2003), it is expected that in the negative recall condition, the effects of LGB stigma sensitivity, rejection and discrimination on the variance of distress through the mediation of identity threat will be statistically significant but not in the neutral recall condition. Moreover, the negative recall condition should show a stronger association between discrimination and distress compared to the neutral recall condition and this difference between conditions should be statistically significant. Identity resilience – continuity and social support should be associated with less identity threat and distress in the negative recall condition only.
3. As degree of outness may be mobilized as a coping mechanism among LGB people (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2022), it is expected that there will be an interaction (moderation) effect of experimental condition (negative vs. neutral recall) and degree of outness on positive affect. More specifically, the relationship between

degree of outness and positive affect in the negative recall should be stronger than in the neutral recall condition.

Method

Ethics

Nottingham Trent University's Schools of Business, Law and Social Sciences Ethics Committee provided ethical clearance for this study. Participants received a detailed participant information sheet, an online consent form and a full debrief after completing the study.

Design

A between-participants experimental study was conducted on Qualtrics, an online questionnaire platform. Participants were randomly allocated to either (1) the negative recall condition or (2) the neutral recall condition. The study included pre- and post-manipulation measures.

Participants

There were two eligibility criteria: (1) being aged 18 or over and (2) self-identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. In total, a convenience sample of 285 participants was recruited largely through engagement with LGB associations, charities and groups on social media platforms, namely Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Reddit, with some additional recruitment through the University's student participant recruitment scheme, SONA. After data cleaning, which consisted of deleting cases with missing values on any of the variables (see Briggs et al., 2003), 156 participants remained in the final sample used for analysis, with ages ranging from 18 to 57 ($M = 26.62$, $SD = 7.37$). Table 1 provides a full overview of participants' socio-demographic characteristics.

Insert Table 1 here

Procedure

First, participants provided socio-demographic data, including their age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, level of education, income, and relationship status. They also completed baseline measures of identity resilience - continuity, social support, LGB stigma sensitivity, outness, rejection and discrimination. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of the following experimental conditions: (1) the negative recall condition ($N = 80$; 51%); or (2) the neutral recall condition ($N = 76$; 49%). In the negative condition, they were given the following instructions: "Please think back to a time when you came out to someone who mattered to you (e.g. a parent, friend or relative). In 2 to 3 sentences, please describe one important negative change that has happened in your life as a result of coming out to them." In the neutral recall condition, they were given the following instructions: "Please think back to a time when you came out to someone who mattered to you (e.g. a parent, friend or relative). In 2 to 3 sentences, please describe one thing that stayed the same in your life after coming out to them." This manipulation has been used successfully in previous empirical research (Breakwell & Jaspal, 2021). Finally, participants were primed to think about the experience they just recalled while completing the psychological wellbeing measures: current levels of identity threat, distress, and positive affect.

Measures

Identity Resilience – Continuity

The Continuity Subscale of the Identity Resilience Index (IRI) (Breakwell, Fino & Jaspal, 2021) was used to measure identity resilience - continuity. The IRI consists of 16 items across four factors; self-esteem, self-efficacy, continuity, and positive distinctiveness. The Continuity Subscale consists of 4 items, scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). Example item: “My past and present flow seamlessly together”. Participants were asked to rate the items thinking about their overall sense of identity. A total score for continuity was calculated by summing the four items. Possible scores ranged from 4 to 20 with higher scores indicating greater identity resilience – continuity, $\alpha = 0.81$.

Social support

The Interpersonal Support Evaluation List-12 (ISEL-12) (Cohen et al., 1985) was used to measure perceived social support. The ISEL-12 consists of 12 items scored on a 4-point scale (1 = definitely false to 4 = definitely true). Example item: “I feel that there is no one I can share my most private worries and fears with”. Participants were asked to rate items thinking about their lives in general. The total score is calculated by summing all 12 items ranging from 12 to 48, with higher scores indicating greater perceived social support, $\alpha = 0.89$.

Outness

The Outness to the World Subscale of the Outness Inventory (Mohr, & Fassinger 2000) was used to measure outness. The Sub-scale of Outness to the world consists of four items (e.g., “my new straight friends” and “my work peers”) rated on a 7-point scale from 1 = person definitely does not know about your sexual orientation status, to 7 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status and it is openly talked about. Participants were asked to rate the items according to their degree of outness to others concerning their sexual orientation. The total score is calculated by summing all 4 items ranging from 4 to 28, with higher scores indicating greater outness to the world, $\alpha = 0.88$.

Stigma sensitivity

The Stigma Sensitivity Subscale of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Identity Scale (LGBIS) (Kendra & Mohr, 2008) was used to measure stigma sensitivity. The subscale consists of 3 items measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1=totally disagree to 7=totally agree). Example item: “I think a lot about how my sexual orientation affects the way people see me”. Participants were asked to rate the items thinking about their general experiences. The total score for stigma sensitivity was calculated by summing the 3 items in that subscale. Possible scores ranged from 3 to 21 with higher scores indicating greater stigma sensitivity, $\alpha = 0.83$.

Rejection

The Rejection Subscale of the LGBT Minority Stress Measure (Outland, 2016) was used to measure rejection. The scale consists of 4 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1=never happens to 5=all of the time). Example item: “I brace myself to be treated disrespectfully because I am LGBT”. Participants were asked to rate the items thinking about their lives in general. The total score for rejection was calculated by summing the 4 items in that subscale. Possible scores ranged from 4 to 20 with higher scores indicating greater rejection, $\alpha = 0.90$.

Discrimination

The Discrimination Subscale of the LGBT Minority Stress Measure (Outland, 2016) was used to measure discrimination. The scale consists of 4 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1=never happens to 5=all of the time). Example item: “I have been excluded from an organization (e.g., a religious group, sports team, etc.) because I am LGBT.” Participants were asked to rate the items thinking about their lives in general. The total score for rejection was calculated by summing the 4 items in that subscale. Possible scores ranged from 4 to 20 with higher scores indicating greater discrimination, $\alpha = 0.80$.

Identity threat

Identity threat was assessed using the Identity Threat Scale (Breakwell & Jaspal, 2021). The scale consists of 4 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). Example item: “It makes me feel that my past, present and future are less connected”. Participants were asked to rate the items thinking about how they felt at that moment in time and keeping in mind the task they had just completed. The total score for identity threat was calculated by summing the 4 items in the scale. Possible scores ranged from 4 to 20 with higher scores indicating greater identity threat, $\alpha = 0.84$.

Distress

Distress was measured using the Distress Scale (Breakwell & Jaspal, 2021). The Distress Scale consists of 4 items rated on 5-point Likert scale (1=very slightly or not at all to 5=extremely). Participants indicated the extent to which they were experiencing the following emotions in the current moment: “guilty”, “ashamed”, “distressed”, and “upset”, while keeping in mind the task they had just completed. The total score for state distress was calculated by summing the 4 items. Possible scores ranged from 4 to 20, $\alpha = 0.85$.

State Positive Affect

The Positive Affect Subscale of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) was used to measure state positive affect. The subscale consists of 10 items, measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1=very slightly or not at all to 5=extremely). Participants indicated the extent to which they were experiencing emotions, such as “alert”, “proud” and “active” in the current moment, while keeping in mind the task they had just completed. The total score for positive affect was calculated by summing the 10 items. Possible scores ranged from 10 to 50, $\alpha = 0.91$.

Statistical analyses

Data analyses were performed using SPSS (version 20) and Jamovi Advanced Moderated Mediation and Moderation Generalized Linear Models (GLM) (Gallucci, 2020).

Since the dependent variables of distress and positive affect were not normally distributed, Mann-Whitney tests with the MonteCarlo Method bootstrapped at 10,000 samples to control for power were conducted to examine the effects of the experimental conditions (neutral recall vs. negative recall) on identity threat, distress and positive affect. The non-parametric common language effect sizes (CLES) (McGraw & Wong, 1992) and 95% confidence intervals for non-evenly sized groups were computed for the between-groups differences (see Table 3). Then, Spearman Rho’s correlations were

performed evaluating relationships between pre- and post-manipulation measures and dependent variables.

It is important to note that none of the critical assumptions for Generalized Linear Models (GLM) were violated, e.g., statistical dependence of the n observations, the dependent variable does not need to be normally distributed. Maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) is a parameter estimation (Breslow, 1996). Therefore, a moderated mediation multigroup model was performed with jamovi Generalized Linear Model (GLM). Mediation analyses using bias-corrected bootstrap test were conducted as these are powerful tests even with small samples (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007).

The model tested the moderator effects of experimental condition (neutral recall vs. negative recall) on the effects of pre-manipulation variables of discrimination, rejection, stigma sensitivity (stressors), identity resilience - continuity, and social support (protective factors) through the mediation of identity threat on the variance of the dependent variable of distress.

Finally, a moderation Generalized Linear Model was performed in jamovi. The moderation tested the relationships between degree of outness (independent variable) and positive affect (dependent variable) in the two experimental conditions (neutral vs. negative recall).

Results

Normality Checks

One sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests (K-S) were performed to test normality of distributions. Results showed that outness $D(156)=1.61$, $p=.011$; rejection $D(156)=1.44$, $p=.032$; discrimination $D(156)=3.68$, $p<.001$; identity threat $D(156)=1.57$, $p=.015$; positive affect $D(156)=1.67$, $p=.007$ and distress $D(156)=2.74$, $p<.001$ were all non-normally distributed. Transformations were applied but did not result in normal distributions. Therefore, non-parametric tests were used.

Descriptive statistics

See Table 2 for an overview of the descriptive statistics.

Insert Table 2 here

Effects of experimental condition on identity threat, distress and positive affect

Insert Figure 1 here

A Mann-Whitney Test (see Figure 1) showed a statistically significant effect of experimental condition on identity threat [$U(156)=1961.500$, $p<.001$; $CLES=.65$], indicating that participants in the negative recall condition experienced greater identity threat than those in the neutral recall condition. The effect size for these differences was medium. There were also statistically significant effects of experimental condition on positive affect [$U(156)=2214.500$, $p=.030$; $CLES=.57$] and distress [$U(156)=2326.000$, $p=.040$; $CLES=.55$]. These results showed that participants in the negative recall condition reported lower levels of positive affect but higher levels of state psychological distress compared to those in the neutral recall condition. These results thus supported hypothesis 1. Table 3 provides an overview of the Mann-Whitney Test.

Insert Table 3 here

Correlations

Table 4 presents an overview of the correlations between the continuous variables in this study.

Insert Table 4 here

Multigroup moderated mediation model for the impact of pre-manipulation measures on distress

Insert Figures 2 and 3 here

A moderated mediation multigroup model (see Figures 2 and 3) was conducted to test the effects of the protective factors of identity resilience – continuity and social support; and the stressors of stigma sensitivity, rejection, and discrimination through the mediator of identity threat on the variance of distress. Table 5 outlines the moderation (interaction effects) between experimental condition (neutral=0 vs. negative=1 recall) x protective factors (identity resilience-continuity and social support) and x stressors (LGB stigma sensitivity, rejection and discrimination) x mediator of identity threat for the variance of distress. As indicated in Table 5, the moderation effects of experimental condition (neutral vs. negative recall) x the predictors are not statistically significant, except for the moderation between experimental condition (neutral vs. negative recall) and discrimination.

Contrary to our hypothesis, results showed that LGB stigma sensitivity was statistically significantly associated with distress through the mediation of identity threat in both neutral and negative recall conditions and this association did not statistically significantly differ between the two conditions (see Table 5). Indeed, results showed statistically significant mediation pathways between stigma sensitivity -> identity threat -> distress for both negative recall ($\beta=.11$, $SE=.03$, $Boot95\%CI$ 0.04, 0.13, $p=.045$) and neutral recall ($\beta=.15$, $SE=.05$, $Boot95\%CI$ 0.03, 0.21, $p=.035$) conditions.

Second, results showed that, for the negative recall condition only, the model showed statistically significant mediation pathways between rejection -> identity threat -> distress ($\beta=.19$, $SE=.15$, $Boot95\%CI$ 0.01, 0.60, $p=.040$) and between discrimination -> identity threat -> distress ($\beta=.11$, $SE=.07$, $Boot95\%CI$ 0.02, 0.27, $p=.024$). Moreover, there was a statistically significant moderation effect between experimental condition (neutral recall vs. negative recall) x discrimination for the variance of distress ($\beta=.17$, $SE=.18$, $Boot95\%CI$ -0.84, -0.14, $p=.007$). This supported hypothesis 2, indicating that the relationships between rejection/discrimination and distress were mediated by identity threat and this was statistically significant in the negative recall condition and that the negative recall condition statistically significantly differed from the neutral recall in regards to the strength of the association between discrimination and distress. In the negative recall condition, discrimination was much more strongly associated with distress than in the neutral recall condition.

Third, in the negative recall condition only, there was a direct effect of identity resilience-continuity on distress ($\beta=-.21$, $SE=.08$, $Boot95\%CI$ -0.38, -0.02, $p=.034$), suggesting that the more baseline identity resilience - continuity, the less distress experienced in the negative recall condition. Also, in this condition, there was a direct statistically significant effect of rejection on the variance of distress ($\beta=.50$, $SE=.12$, $Boot95\%CI$ 0.17, 0.62, $p<.001$), suggesting that the more rejection, the more distress experienced in the negative recall condition only.

Fourth, there was a statistically significant direct effect of social support on the variance of distress in the negative recall condition without the mediation of identity threat ($\beta=-.20$, $SE=.04$, $Boot95\%CI$ -0.16, -0.05, $p=.037$).

Fifth, there was a statistically significant direct effect of social support on the variance of distress in the neutral recall condition ($\beta=-.23$, $SE=.05$, $Boot95\%CI$ -0.22, -0.09, $p=.032$). However, there was also a statistically significant mediation pathway between social support \rightarrow identity threat \rightarrow distress for the neutral recall condition only ($\beta=-.18$, $SE=.02$, $Boot95\%CI$ -0.09, -0.02, $p=.040$). For the neutral recall condition, social support impacts directly or through the mediation of identity threat on the variance of distress, but for the negative recall condition social support has only a direct impact on the variance of distress.

It is noteworthy that, in both conditions, there was a statistically significant direct effect of identity threat on the variance of distress ($\beta=.39$, $SE=.06$, $Boot95\%CI$ 0.19, 0.44, $p<.001$ for the negative recall condition and $\beta=.51$, $SE=.06$, $Boot95\%CI$ 0.57, 0.52, $p<.001$ for the neutral recall condition, respectively), indicating that, in both conditions, identity threat was associated with greater distress.

These results partially supported hypothesis 2 because there were statistically significant mediation pathways between the predictors of rejection and discrimination and the mediator of identity threat and then the dependent variable of distress in the negative recall condition only. Moreover, there was indeed a moderating effect for the interaction between neutral vs. negative recall conditions x discrimination for the variance of distress. However, the experimental conditions did not moderate/ interact with the protective factors of identity-resilience continuity and social support and with the stressor of LGB stigma sensitivity to explain the variance of distress. This is inconsistent with what was predicted.

* Insert Table 5 around here*

A moderation model for the impact of pre-manipulation measures on state positive affect

A Generalized Linear Moderation Model was conducted in jamovi to examine the moderation (interaction) between group (neutral vs. negative recall) x degree of outness for positive affect. The model showed a statistically significant effect of degree of outness on the variance of positive affect [$Z=3.86$, $S.E.=0.10$, $p<.001$, $95\% CI$ (.195, .586)], suggesting that degree of outness was associated with positive affect in both neutral and negative recall conditions. Nevertheless, there was no statistically significant interaction (moderation) between group (neutral vs. negative recall) x degree of outness for positive affect [$Z=0.34$, $S.E.=0.20$, $p=.74$, $95\% CI$ (-.351, .460)]. Thus, hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Discussion

In this experimental study, participants were asked to recall and briefly describe a coming out experience to somebody significant which resulted either in negative change (which, according to participants' qualitative data, mainly referred to judgment, rejection or victimization from significant others) or in no change. They described a wide range of experiences, involving different people, and occurring at different points in their lives (e.g., early childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, later life). These experiences were subjectively deemed to be significant by participants themselves.

The results clearly show that recalling a negative coming out experience that involved somebody significant affected people's current psychological wellbeing. More specifically, negative recall was found to induce higher levels of identity threat and distress and lower levels of state positive affect compared to recall of a "neutral" coming out experience (i.e., one that did not result in any change) involving somebody significant. In contrast to research showing that the affective responses associated with negative memories wane over time (Skowronski et al., 2014), these results actually show that recall of a previous distressing experience can shape both state psychological wellbeing outcomes but also the ways in which discrimination impacts on psychological wellbeing outcomes.

Recall and minority stressors

Empirical research using minority stress theory shows the insidious psychological effects of exposure to both distal (e.g., rejection and discrimination) and proximal stressors (e.g., stigma sensitivity) among LGB people (Mongelli et al., 2019). Moreover, it has been shown that both psychological and social factors (e.g., identity resilience, the derivation of social support and the degree of outness) can mitigate against distress when one is exposed to a stressor.

Relationships between the stressors of rejection and discrimination and distress were mediated by identity threat which was observable only in the negative recall condition, thus supporting what was predicted. In contrast to this, the relationship between LGB stigma sensitivity and distress was mediated by identity threat in both the neutral and negative recall conditions and these two conditions did not statistically significantly differ from each other in regards to this relationship. This did not support what was predicted. However, there was a moderating effect of experimental condition (neutral vs. negative recall) x discrimination on the variance of distress, thus supporting our prediction. In contrast to our prediction, we did not observe a moderation effect of experimental condition on the relationships between the other protective factors/stressors and distress.

Contrary to our hypothesis, the proximal stressor of stigma sensitivity was indirectly associated with distress through the mediator of identity threat in both the negative and neutral recall conditions. Thus, there was no moderation effect of experimental condition x stigma sensitivity on the variance of distress. This suggests that people who have the anxious expectation to face stigma on the basis of an identity element (in this case, sexual orientation) occupy a threatening position (Breakwell, 2015) and are more likely to report identity threat upon recall of a previous coming out experience (regardless of its nature). People who report higher levels of stigma sensitivity are indeed more sensitive to the possibility of stigma and are more likely to perceive it - even in innocuous situations. They therefore appear to be more susceptible to identity threat upon recall of a previous coming out experience. The experience of identity threat in this context is then positively associated with distress (see also Assi, Maatouk & Jaspal, 2020). Moreover, and in contrast to what was predicted, the relationship between social support and distress was not moderated by the experimental condition. In both conditions (negative recall vs. neutral recall) social support was associated with less distress. This suggested that available social support is universally protective against distress regardless of whether one recalls a negative or neutral coming out experience (Jaspal, 2018; McDonald, 2018).

Results also suggested that there were statistically significant relationships between the distal stressors of both rejection and discrimination and the dependent variable of distress, which were mediated by identity threat for the negative recall

condition only. Moreover, as predicted, the two conditions (neutral recall vs. negative recall) were only statistically significantly different in regards to the association between discrimination and distress, suggesting that compared to the neutral recall condition, the negative recall condition precipitated a stronger association between discrimination and distress. Conversely, the relationships between the stressors, identity threat and distress were not significant in the neutral recall condition. This suggests that, when memories of a negative coming out experience are cognitively salient, the distal stressor of discrimination is more likely to threaten identity and thus to lead to distress. In other words, the negative psychological implications of facing minority stressors, such as discrimination, appear to be accentuated when one recalls a negative previous coming out experience. Indeed, being discriminated due to one's sexual orientation is likely to be a negative outcome of coming out to relevant others and having a negative coming out experience may also serve as a lens through which past experiences are understood and reacted to. When recalling a negative coming out experience, one's memories of being excluded and discriminated and associated negative affect are likely to be accentuated (Almeida, 2009; Bradley & Mogg, 1994). In contrast, when recalling a neutral experience of coming out that did not induce significant change, one's memories of discrimination and associated negative affect are less likely to be associated with one's coming out experience.

Recall and coping strategies

The results show that the protective factor of identity resilience – continuity appears to be associated with less distress when recalling a negative coming out experience. Upon recall of a negative coming out experience with the capacity to threaten identity, individuals may be motivated to capitalize on a number of coping strategies. In the neutral condition, the relationship between identity resilience – continuity and distress was no longer statistically significant. However, there was no statistically significant moderating effect of experimental condition (neutral recall vs. negative recall) for the negative association between identity resilience-continuity and distress, which meant that the two conditions were not statistically significantly different in regards to this association.

Similarly, contrary to our prediction, in the neutral recall condition, social support did remain a significant predictor of distress and there was also an indirect relationship through the mediator of identity threat. Moreover, both neutral recall vs. negative recall did not statistically significantly differ concerning the negative association between social support and distress. The reason for this is not clear. Social support has repeatedly been shown to be inversely related to both identity threat and distress (Haslam et al., 2005; Holahan & Moos, 1981), suggesting that this may be operating as a general protective factor independently of one's coming out experience being neutral vs. negative, rather than as a coping response *per se*. Conversely, as a psychological self-schema, identity resilience – continuity may be more readily accessed and mobilized by the individual as a targeted response to psychological adversity caused by recalling a negative previous experience (Breakwell, 2021). However, this hypothesis will need to be investigated further.

The results of the moderation model predicting state positive affect did not support hypothesis 3. The relationship between outness (as a coping strategy) and state positive affect was positive in both conditions (neutral recall vs. negative recall) and they did not statistically significantly differ in regards to this relationship, which would indicate that being out about one's sexual orientation is generally associated with experiencing positive emotions even upon recall of a negative coming out experience.

vs. a neutral one. Crucially, these results suggest that thinking about their degree of outness is an effective coping strategy, primarily because of its association with access to social support (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2022).

Limitations and future directions

Due to missing data, the final sample size was relatively small and larger samples should be recruited in future work replicating this study. There was a strong skew of females in the sample and thus a more even distribution of males and females would be advantageous. However, it should be noted that previous work in this area has generally focused on gay men (e.g., Breakwell & Jaspal, 2021). Similarly, there was an underrepresentation of ethnic minority participants in the sample which precluded any analysis of differences by ethnicity. This would be beneficial in view of previous research showing the disproportionate effect of stressors on the mental health of LGB people of ethnic minority background (e.g., Jaspal, Lopes & Rehman, 2021). The experimental manipulation sought to compare negative change vs. no change following a coming out experience. Future experimental research should also incorporate a condition focusing explicitly on positive change. More generally, this study will need to be replicated using different experimental and/ or longitudinal methods and using different LGB samples.

Implications and conclusions

Our study shows that recalling previous negative experiences of coming out, especially involving a significant other, can have longer-term psychological ramifications for the individual. Stressors, such as discrimination and rejection due to one's sexuality, were associated with feelings of identity threat and then distress when a negative previous coming out experience was cognitively salient. Yet, when asked to think about a negative coming out experience, LGB people may activate protective factors, such as identity resilience – continuity and degree of outness, to militate against distress and thus enhance their psychological wellbeing. Recalling a negative coming out experience may render the individual more susceptible to identity threat and distress due to homonegative stressors known to be prevalent in society but it may also kickstart available coping strategies.

The findings reiterate the importance of continuing to challenge homonegativity in society so that LGB people who come out experience a more favorable response from significant others. Often, negative reactions from significant others result from a lack of awareness and understanding of sexual diversity (Yip, 2012). However, previous coming out experiences may continue to influence cognitive and affective responses to future situations. Informing people about sexual diversity at the earliest stage in their development seems important. Inclusivity should be a core value in sexuality and relationships education which would lay the foundations for more accepting and sexuality affirmative attitudes in adulthood. Schools, colleges, universities and community centres all have an important role to play in this collective effort to fight discrimination. Their leaders should be engaged to promote inclusivity across the groups and communities that they serve. Moreover, it is important to support, inform and empower parents whose children come out as gay so that they can be more supportive figures in their children's lives (Jaspal, 2020).

On an individual level, it will be important to build identity resilience, ensure access to social support and empower people to come out to sympathetic others. The results suggest that these factors may protect against both identity threat and distress, while promoting positive affect. Counsellors and psychotherapists should work with

their clients to seek appropriate ways of focusing their clients' attention on aspects of their lives and identities that do enhance the identity principles (thereby bolstering identity resilience), of establishing a psychologically appropriate degree of outness among trusted others, and of deriving interpersonal support in relation to the stressors that can clearly threaten identity and undermine psychological wellbeing in LGB people.

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Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the participant sample

Variables	Categories	Frequency N	Percentage %
Sex	Male	62	31.6
	Female	130	66.3
	Other	4	2
Gender	Male	43	28
	Female	75	48
	Non-binary/ Third gender	29	19
	Other	9	5.1
Ethnicity	White/ White British	125	82
	Asian/ Asian British	11	7.2
	Black/ African/ Caribbean	4	3
	Multiple Ethnicities	8	5.2
	Other	5	3.3
Sexual orientation	Lesbian	30	19.2
	Gay	30	19.2
	Bisexual	67	43
	Other	29	18.6
Relationship status	Single	84	54
	In a relationship	72	46
Education level	GCSE	9	5.8
	A-level	32	20.5
	Diploma	32	20.
	Bachelor	43	27.6
	Master	32	20.5
Income	Doctoral	8	5
	< £10,000	65	42.5
	£10,000-20,000	29	19
	£20,001-30,000	25	16.3
	£30,001-40,000	16	10.5
	£40,001-50,000	7	5
	£50,001-60,000	4	3
	£60,001-70,000	1	0.7
	£70,001-80,000	2	1.3
£80,001-90,000	1	0.7	
>£90,000	3	2%	

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for the continuous variables and descriptive statistics for the pre- manipulation measures by condition (neutral vs. negative recall)

Pre-manipulation measures	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>
Identity resilience – continuity	11.67	3.50	4	20
Social support	35.91	7.86	13	21
Degree of outness to world	13.85	7.39	2	48
LGB stigma sensitivity	12.12	5.15	3	28
Rejection	9.24	4.24	4	20
Discrimination	5.55	2.52	3	15
Post-manipulation measures				
Identity threat	9.03	3.99	3	20
Distress	6.52	3.36	3	18
Positive affect	19.99	8.55	10	45
	Negative recall condition <i>N</i>=80		Neutral recall condition <i>N</i>=76	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Identity resilience- continuity	11.48	3.48	11.83	3.54
Social support	36.71	7.76	35.05	7.93
Degree of outness to world	13.70	7.09	13.89	
			7.67	
LGB stigma sensitivity	12.13	5.14	12.12	
			5.19	
Rejection	9.28	4.12	9.28	
			4.39	
Discrimination	5.66	2.61	5.46	
			2.45	

Table 3: Means, SDs, non-parametric effect sizes and 95% CI for identity threat, distress and positive affect for the negative recall vs. neutral recall conditions

	Negative recall condition N=80		Neutral recall condition N=76		Common Language Effect Size	95% CI
	M	SD	M	SD		
Identity threat	9.93	3.95	7.83	3.76	0.65	-.864, -.225
Distress	6.82	3.43	6.20	3.28	0.55	-.499, .131
Positive affect	18.99	8.77	21.07	8.24	0.57	-.059, .571

Table 4. Correlations between the continuous variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Identity resilience-continuity		-.12	.07	-.01	-.14	-.18*	-.20*	.08	-.17*
2. LGB stigma sensitivity			-.32**	-.37**	.68**	.22**	.44**	-.01	.38**
3. Social support				.44**	-.26**	-.09	-.24**	.16	-.29**
4. Degree of outness to the world					-.31**	.08	-.24**	.28**	-.17*
5. Rejection						.41**	.43**	-.05	.48**
6. Discrimination							.37**	.02	.32**
7. Identity threat								-.05	.63**
8. Positive affect									-.16
9. Distress									

* $p < .05$

** $p < .005$

Table 5. Moderation effects for the multigroup moderated mediation model predicting distress

Moderation (interaction)	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>95 % CI</i> <i>lower</i>	<i>95 % CI</i> <i>upper</i>	β	<i>p</i>
Experimental condition (neutral vs. negative recall) x Identity Resilience- Continuity	0.11	-0.24	0.21	-0.01	0.91
Experimental condition (neutral vs. negative recall) x Social Support	0.05	-0.15	0.07	-0.05	0.47
Experimental condition (neutral vs. negative recall) x LGB Stigma Sensitivity	0.10	-0.19	0.23	0.01	0.89
Experimental condition (neutral vs. negative recall) x Rejection	0.14	-0.06	0.48	0.13	0.12
Experimental condition (neutral vs. negative recall) x Discrimination	0.18	-0.84	-0.14	0.17	0.007
Experimental condition (neutral vs. negative recall) x Identity threat	0.18	-0.13	0.59	0.12	0.20

Figure 1. Means of identity threat, positive affect and distress for the negative recall vs. neutral recall conditions

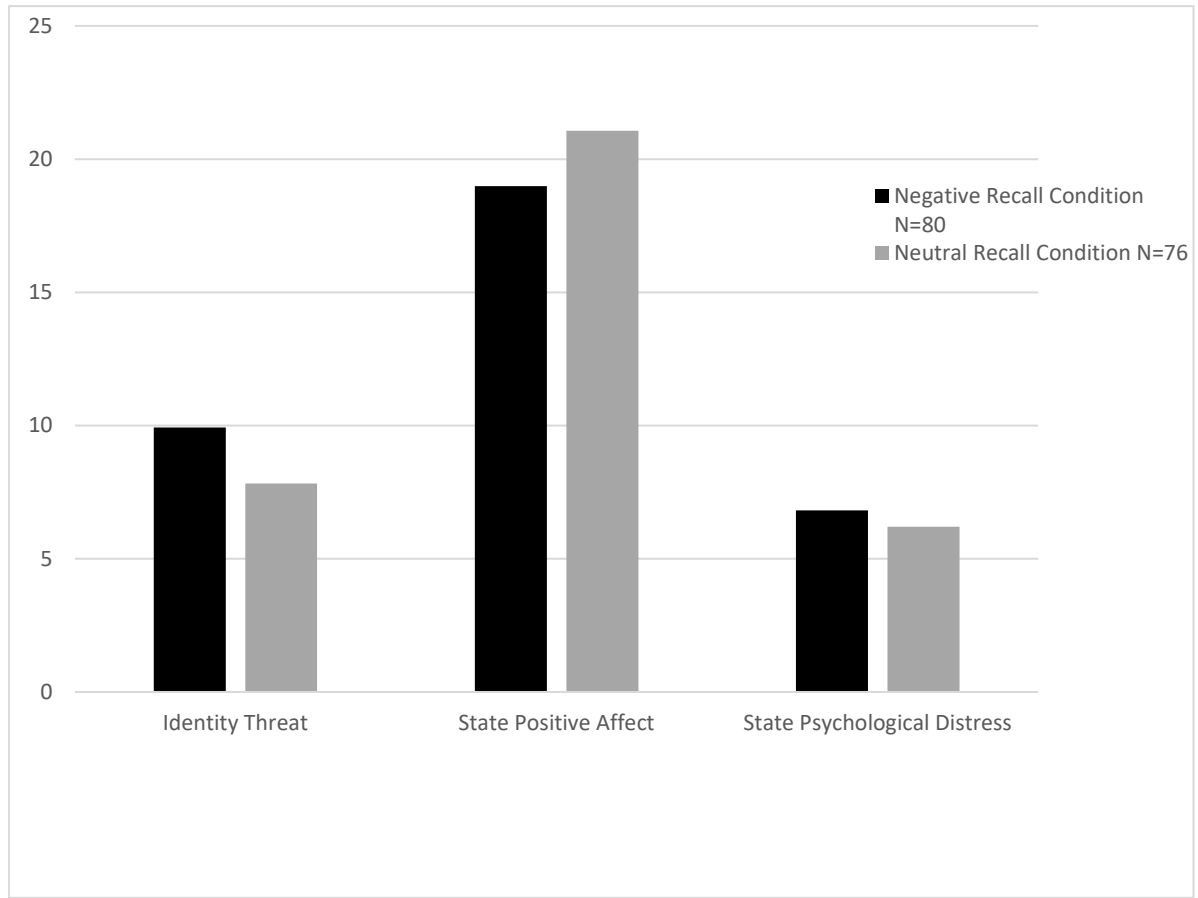


Figure 2. Moderated mediation model for the negative recall condition with identity resilience - continuity, social support, stigma sensitivity, rejection and discrimination as predictors of distress through the mediation of identity threat

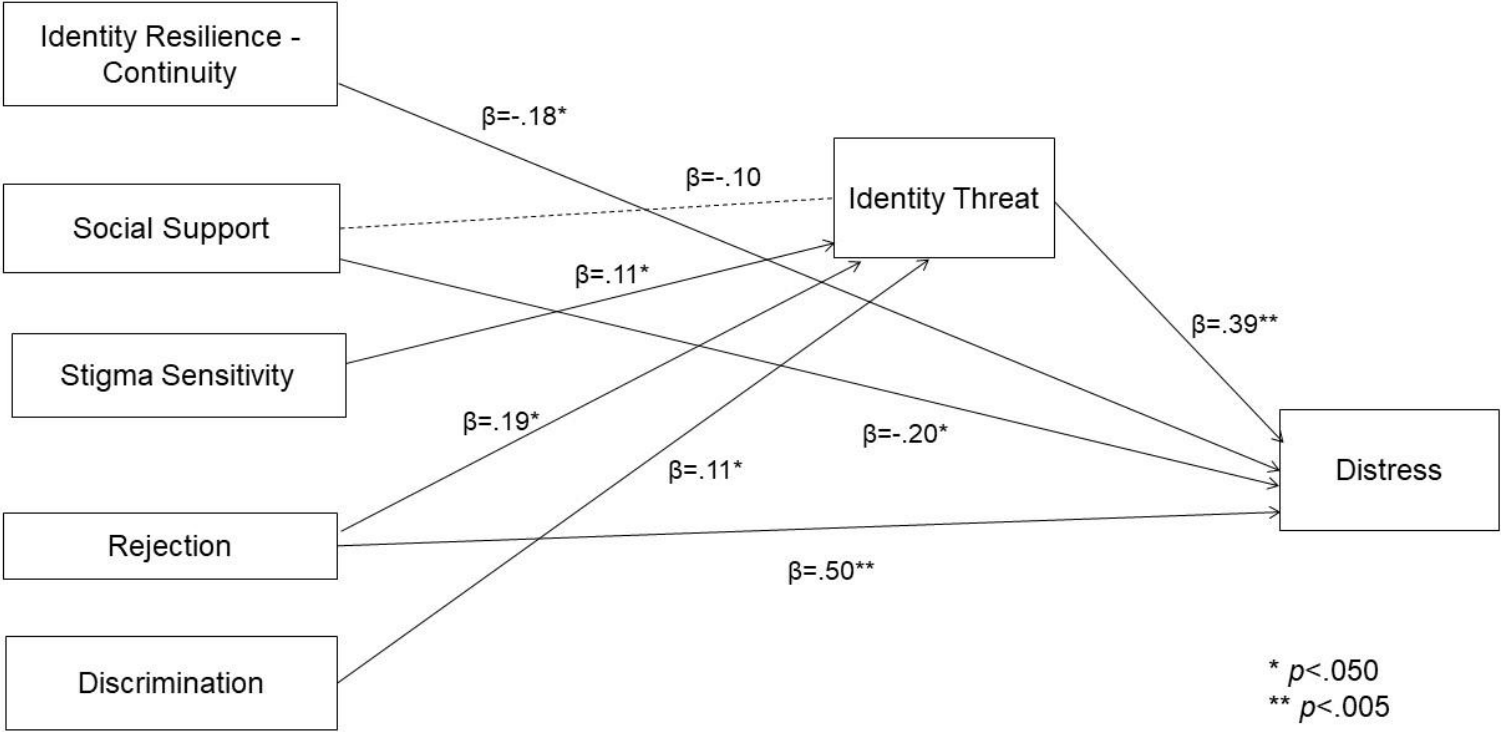


Figure 3. Moderated mediation model for the neutral recall condition with identity resilience - continuity, social support, stigma sensitivity, rejection and discrimination as predictors of distress through the mediation of identity threat

