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**Sexual and Gender Minority Identity Exploration, Tabletop Role
Playing Games, and Clinical Implications**

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Report

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to my partner, Evan, who has been a constant source of support and encouragement throughout my time in graduate school. I will never be able to adequately express how your love and kindness have changed my life. This work is also dedicated to my sister Liz, who fostered a sense of creativity and play in me from the moment she was born, and who sparked my interest in role playing.

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Abstract

Sexual and Gender Minority Identity Exploration, Tabletop Role Playing Games, and Clinical Implications

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Research has demonstrated a host of health disparities for sexual and gender minority (SGM) individuals attributable to the negative effects of societal prejudice, discrimination, and internalized homophobia and transphobia (Meyer, 2003). The effects of the pandemic have hit sexual and gender minority individuals and their communities particularly hard, with a host of environmental burdens leading to increases in stress related to minority status (Anderson & Knee, 2021; Drabble & Eliason, 2021; Gato et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2021). These environmental stressors are ever present, but some SGM individuals may seek containers in which environmental stressors can be safely processed and overcome (Caputo, 2017). One container for this processing and relief is that which is created through participation in tabletop role playing games (TTRPGs). Though research is beginning to highlight the growing proclivity for TTRPGs among SGM individuals as a means of finding community (Garcia, 2019; Sihvonen & Stenros, 2019), more work is needed to identify how SGM players create environments that reduce the impact of SGM-related stressors and develop strategies to facilitate connectedness. A snapshot of player interactions and collaborative narrative building in a TTRPG game is

provided, with a breakdown of how TTRPGs are structured. An exploration of the therapeutic application of TTRPGs will be discussed for SGM individuals next, as well as clinical considerations for professionals interested in use of TTRPGs as a therapeutic tool for this population.

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Introduction

RATIONALE

During the COVID-19 crisis, general daily stressors and stress related to experiencing marginalization have increased dramatically for SGM individuals. Rates of anxiety, depression, and trauma have risen substantially for this community, in part due to the disparate negative impact COVID-19 has had on this population (Drabble & Eliason, 2021; Fish et al., 2021; Gonzalez et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2021). SGM spaces and community support are more difficult to access during quarantine, with some SGM individuals resorting to either a subdued or partial expression of identity, or a return to the closet (i.e., concealing one's SGM status) when spending extended time with families of origin due to family crises, financial difficulties, or destabilization of other supports (Oginni et al., 2021). SGM individuals face additional barriers to receiving mental health support compared to the majority population as well, due to past experiences with or fears of discrimination, lack of financial support or health insurance, or prejudice in the therapeutic process (Cronin et al., 2020).

Research suggests that self-confidence, social connectedness, and adaptive social skills can be increased via participation in role playing games (Gutierrez, 2017; Hawkes-Robinson, 2008; Katō, 2019). TTRPGs used in therapeutic applications is promising (Adams, 2013; Carter & Lester, 1998; Mendoza, 2020), but little research has been done on how they may be used with SGM populations. Research on participation in explicitly SGM oriented role playing narratives suggests that this form of exploration, particularly in a therapeutic setting, may be a useful tool in reducing internalized homophobia and transphobia, as well as provide means of building community and gaining skills associated with navigating minority status (Harris, 2021; Kawitzky, 2020).

OVERVIEW

Tabletop Role Playing Games

The first iteration of tabletop role playing games (TTRPGs) was created in 1974 with the game system Dungeons and Dragons (D&D, Gygax & Arneson). Initially based off of war strategy games, the first TTRPG combined statistical mechanics, character creation, and fantastical settings to immerse players in a world similar to the epic fantasies depicted in J.R.R. Tolkien's books. For nearly fifty years, 'tabletop role playing games' and 'D&D' have been common lexicons in households across the world (Ewalt, 2013). Though tabletop role playing has long been considered a fringe activity that diverges from mainstream entertainment, over the past decade the game and its players have entered mainstream media in shows such as Critical Role [Youtube series, 2015] and Stranger Things [Netflix show, 2016]. Hundreds of podcasts have joined in on TTRPG-based entertainment in the last few years (Tess, 2016).

Despite quarantine reducing gatherings around a physical table top, countless players have begun to gather around the virtual table during the pandemic, with many participating for the first time. The Wizards of the Coast, the company that creates D&D texts and manuals (which we will explore in more detail later in this paper), have enjoyed their biggest sales year ever in 2020 (Whitten, 2021), despite offering millions of downloads of one of their most popular starter modules for free since the beginning of the pandemic (Carter, 2021). Hundreds of other, lesser known TTRPGs are enjoyed by roleplayers, or are in the process of being created now. Kickstarter, a crowdfunding campaign site that asks for pledges to create a product in exchange for promised future goods or services, has 6,240 projects marked as role playing games that aim to be produced in the coming few years (Kickstarter webpage results, September 2021). TTRPGs may have grown in popularity during the pandemic due to those in isolation seeking out

a tool to connect with their community when other avenues of fulfilling this human need have diminished due to quarantine. This negative community impact during the pandemic is especially relevant to the experience of SGM individuals (Drabble & Eliason, 2021).

Sexual and Gender Minorities

SGM individuals face increased stress, above and beyond general daily stress, due to their status as members of a marginalized community. The Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 1995, p. 19), is a framework for understanding how stressors specific to sexual minority experiences can lead to disparate negative health outcomes compared to heterosexual counterparts, due to living in a society where overt preference for heteronormativity by the majority population leads to prejudice, rejection, discrimination, and violence. This framework was adapted for gender minority individuals as well, who face similar deleterious effects associated with living in a cissexist society as a gender minority (Balsam et al., 2013). Implementing coping strategies is theorized in this model to moderate the relationship between environmental stressors experienced by SGM communities and the stress resulting from this minority status. One such coping strategy is the culmination and synthesis of an identity that helps one navigate one's social life (Kosciw et al., 2015), as well as the establishment of oneself in spaces that allow for this lived identity to be experienced (M. Brown et al., 2016; Carnes, 2019; DeHaan et al., 2013). Social activism has also been associated with positive health outcomes for SGM individuals (Frost et al., 2019), suggesting that participation with emancipatory activities may aid in coping with minority stress.

Intersections and Clinical Use

The role of role playing in society has been studied for over a century (Turner, 2001), thoroughly establishing the intrinsic human desire to play and problem solve. Elkonin (2005)

describes role taking and relationship construction and enactment as the core of play, and how players translate these experiences to other aspects of life outside of play. TTRPGs differ from freeform play in that they act as a formalized container, providing structure to help players collaborate and problem solve in creative, elaborate ways with one another to build a central narrative. This may be particularly useful to SGM individuals in building ways to positively cope with minority stressors. Mendoza (2020) identified TTRPGs as “a therapeutic tool with theatrical elements” with the potential to act as a vehicle for therapeutic change, which may lead to more participation by SGM individuals, particularly individuals who may otherwise avoid therapy due to being intimidated or alienated by conventional therapy structures (Abbott et al., 2021). In addition, TTRPGs offer a unique opportunity for identity exploration that may be particularly rewarding for SGM individuals who are looking for ways to make sense of their lived experiences (Harris, 2021; Sihvonen & Stenros, 2018). Shared goals (a key component of TTRPGs) help bond players who experience a TTRPG together, facilitating deep relational exchanges and a sense of team spirit. Studies have used roleplay as a functional lens to better understand how TTRPGs can confer increases in problem solving and social skills in its users as well (Abbott et al., 2021; Adams, 2013). In spaces built on a foundation of trust, SGM players can create safe ways to collaboratively explore difficult feelings related to gender and sexuality, while simultaneously generating insight to the self.

OBJECTIVE

This paper seeks to explore how TTRPGs may be particularly useful to SGM individuals in identity exploration, community formation, and skill building facilitated through role playing in a clinical setting. Though we are beginning to understand how SGM individuals engage in community via TTRPGs, more exploration into the possible clinical applications of this

engagement via TTRPGs is warranted. Understanding how SGM players develop shared narratives that reduce SGM-related stressors and increase identity exploration and strategies to facilitate connectedness may assist clinicians in reaching this population, perhaps now during a global pandemic more than ever before.

Chapter 1: Tabletop Role Playing Games

NARRATIVE EXAMPLE

In this section, I offer an excerpt adapted from a campaign in which I participated, with all identifying features changed. ‘Tabletop’ in TTRPGs alludes to the nature of the experience of a communal gathering around the kitchen table with people you see and hear. This example of immersion illustrates what characters feel, think, and experience in the game, as well as how multiple conversations often take place at once- both between the players and between their characters. We also see how game mechanics add to immersion, with resurrection rules, dice rolls, health and combat status effects, and rates of failure/success all serving to provide a collective spontaneity to how the narrative unfolds. These mechanics serve a narrative purpose, allowing everyone at the table to share in suspense and uncertainty (these game mechanics will be discussed in detail in a later section).

In this particular example of immersion, one of the player characters died during battle. This scene was a climactic end to a difficult encounter, wherein the party came together to attempt a revival of their fallen comrade:

Game Master (GM): our tale begins again in a land called the Isle of Redorin, along the rocky shores of a cold, desolate coastline. Our party of four protagonists were accosted by a sea monster last session. She was a scaly, grotesque, fishlike humanoid who had boarded their sailing ship in the night. After a harrowing battle that ended with a dagger to the heart of the party’s ship captain Leona, the party’s pair of fighters gather around their healer Nu as he tries to ascertain whether Leona can be brought back to life. Let’s begin. Roll an investigation check, Nathan.

Nu sighs, lowering to his knees to stare down at his captain. He places a hand to Leona's face and lifts one eyelid.

*Player 1: *Rolls dice**

Player 1: 12 + 2 = 14

GM: Nu sees black veins across Leona's skin and in her eyes.

"Poison." Nu provides grimly. "The hag's dagger must have been coated with it."

"Can we help in any way?" Henny asks, voice unsteady. She is spattered with the blood of the monster that has killed her lover, and in her expression is an impending grief that threatens to overwhelm her completely should the healer fail to bring Leona back. She throws her sword down to the deck with a clatter as she lowers to her knees beside Leona, face pale.

Henny's sibling Shand stumbles across the deck after her. Stopping beside Henny as they take in Leona's body, bloody and still on the deck, their face drains of blood. They say nothing, tearing up.

Player 4: If you can't save me, just know that this has been the best, and I wouldn't change a thing.

Player 2: If we can't save you? We can. Can we?

Player 1: It looks like- judging from the rules on the spell, and Nu's level- we have a 75% chance of failure.

Player 3: The glass is 25% full you mean.

Player 2: Is there literally anything else we can do to boost his chance of succeeding?

Player 1: We already used everything we had to beat the sea hag. I think this is it.

Player 4: I'm dead, otherwise I'd help, ha.

Player 2: If Leona dies, Henny is never going to forgive herself.

Player 3: Yeah, but if she lives, is Henny gonna finally pop that question?

Player 4: You only live once, my guy. Uh, unless you live twice.

Player 2: Okay. If Leona lives, Henny takes the ring out right then and there.

Player 4: Oh my god. Really?

Player 3: Oh wow. You're trying to make Shand cry today?

Player 1: If Leona says yes, Nu will officiate!

GM: Remember- The spell must be cast within the first ten minutes after death. What do you do?

Nu breathes deep, taking from his shirt a small cylinder hanging from a bronze chain. "Gather around and lay hands upon her. Magic like this is unstable... Please understand if this does not work." He says, nervous. "It does not always. Even our combined prayer may not bring her back."

Shand places a hand at Henny's shoulder, silently there for her as they both sit in suspension, that liminal place where only uncertainty is felt in the heart and mind. Henny takes up Leona's limp hand, and Shand touches their captain's cold brow, and nothing can be heard but the wind through the sails above, and the creak of the hull below.

Henny gazes down at Leona, and remembers the morning spent together, wrapped in one another's arms. She should have asked her for her hand then and there, but she was too scared.

Always too scared. If she had known today would be the day she witnesses the life leave Leona's eyes, she would have found the courage.

Player 4: You're going to make me cry.

Nu breathes, placing both hands to either side of Leona's neck lightly, gently. He closes his eyes.

Player 1: Alright. I'm ready. God, I'm nervous. What's the modifier?

GM: Use your Wisdom modifier for this one.

Player 3: Roll high!

Player 2: I can't look.

Player 4: Fingers and toes crossed, haha. Don't make me roll another character.

Player 2: Shh, don't jinx it.

Player 1: Okay, here it goes. Nu... attempts to bring Captain Leona back.

*Player 1: *Rolls dice**

Player 1: $16 + 5 = 21$

A moment passes as the party concentrates on calling Leona back into being, and from Nu's forehead glows a soft, radiant light in the shape of what appears to be a third eye. The light radiates down to his hands and into Leona's neck, a pulse of magic growing steadily stronger.

GM: ...A shuddering breath, and Leona opens her eyes.

Player 2: Oh my god oh my god-

Player 3, screaming: oh my god you did it Nu-Nu!

Player 1: I'm sweating so bad, hahaha

Player 4: Captain's back!

"Oh my gods, Nu. Nu!" Shand cries, watching Leona blink up at them. "We did it!"

Henny closes her eyes and loses a tearful, shuddering laugh, while Shand pulls her and Nu both into an embrace, overjoyed. "She's okay. She's *okay*."

Nu grins proudly from under Shand's arm, and looks to Leona as she stirs, marveling. "Welcome back, Captain."

Leaning forward, Henny kisses Leona tenderly, overwhelmed in her relief. "It's over. We won." She provides softly. As Leona's tired brown eyes look up at her, Henny's heart hurts. She must tell her, without any doubt, just how much her time on this earth means to her. She pulls a ring from her breast pocket.

Player 1: Oh wow she's really going to do it?

GM: She's finally doing it?

*Player 2: *Smiles**

Player 1: Oh my god, she really is!

Player 3: You go Henny! Get your girl!

Player 4: My heart is beating so fast, Jesus.

As Leona sits up and smiles weakly, Henny takes her hand. “Leona, I have something to say...”

GENERAL STRUCTURE OF TTRPGS

TTRPGs involve groups of people (as few as two or as many as hundreds for some configurations, but typically between three to six players) who each create and control a character which exists in a fictional alternate reality. These realities come in any form one can imagine, from science fiction to apocalyptic; from fatalistic cosmic horror to peaceful microcosm. The technological advances and political systems can vary, but typically, Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) and those TTRPGs modeled after it are reminiscent of archetypal, heroic fiction and are inspired by epic fantasies like J.R.R. Tolkien’s works. D&D, which first set off the formalized system of communal storytelling, typically contains pre-industrial era technological advancements, with a feudal/monarchal system of government.

A group of characters traversing this alternate reality together are called a party, and their shared common goal in the narrative comprises what is referred to as either a one-shot (a single session of gameplay) or a campaign (two or more sessions of gameplay). Campaigns can span across a few days or a few decades depending on the narrative goals that players create together, but typically last anywhere from a few weeks to a few years (King, 2021). These gameplay sessions typically take place on a regular basis, with players carving out an evening one to four times a month to meet in person or virtually (if virtual, players typically meet over a video chat application such as Zoom in order to share screens, voices, collaborative tools, and facial expressions).

Tabletop RPGs typically use statistics to create the underlying structure of the game. Using a set of rules (such as game manuals or rulebooks), probability parameters help guide

players as they create their characters, and, thereafter, these statistics influence which actions their characters take during gameplay and how successful the character is in carrying out their chosen action. When players create their characters, statistics play a part in how much of certain qualities the characters possess (for example, in D&D, characters have six main attributes consisting of Strength, Dexterity, Endurance, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma, with a corresponding statistic for each). After characters select their attribute statistics and/or obtain them with dice rolls, they calculate modifiers based on these statistics. Modifiers are positive or negative numbers that represent how good a character is at something (a positive modifier in charisma, for example, represents a character who is more socially adept than average; whereas a negative charisma modifier would indicate that a character is less socially skilled than average). When a character wishes to exert their will upon the world, they roll a set of dice and add the modifier that is involved in the action. For example, a player may roll to pry open a door. This would require that they add or subtract their character's modifier, and then roll dice. If the character's strength modifier is +2, and their dice roll is 14, they add them together and get a 16. This final number is compared to the difficulty rating of opening the door- if the 16 is higher than the difficulty rating, then the character succeeds, and the door is forced open.

D&D sessions are led (with very rare exception) by a Dungeon Master (DM). The DM is a leader player of sorts, who is responsible for structuring the content of the narrative and facilitating engagement with the world. The DM (sometimes referred to as a Game Master [GM] in other TTRPGs) creates characters that inhabit the world as well, known as non-player characters (NPCs). These characters have their own personalities, motivations, and objectives, and may act as protagonists and antagonists to the players' goals. Though the DM creates a storyline with potential objectives, it is up to players to decide whether their characters will follow it, or guide

the narrative in another direction. These decisions are influenced by how they intuit their characters will react to the scenario, as well as their own desires as players (for example, “do we follow the dragon to his lair, or do we try to fortify the city against aerial attack?”). The story of these characters’ exploits is a practice in communal, campfire style improvisation, a process of joint construction between players individually, the group collectively, and the DM as they interact with the rules surrounding statistical probabilities of actions.

Chapter 2: Sexual & Gender Minorities

DEFINITIONS

Terminology used by members of sexual and gender minorities are ever evolving.

Though lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) is often used when discussing sexual and gender minorities, this acronym does not capture all marginalized sexual and gender identities and expressions (Moradi et al., 2009).

Terminology to describe sexual orientations continues to expand in recent years, adding political and situational nuances that carry layers of cultural meaning. Some terms relating to sexual orientation (though far from all) that are not encompassed by the acronym LGBT include pansexual (sexual attraction to all genders), asexual (experiencing little to no sexual attraction for anyone), polyamorous (attraction to more than one individual romantically and in tandem), and others (Gordon & Meyer, 2007). Queer, which captures the experience of departing from heteronormative and/or cisnormative identities, is a term typically shared with individuals who would also identify as a gender minority.

Gender minority individuals experience a discrepancy between the gender assigned to them at birth and their actual gender identity (American Psychological Association, 2015). Though this experience is sometimes associated with the term “born in the wrong body,” not all gender minority individuals endorse this. Gender minority individuals may refer to their relationship with gender in several ways, and sometimes with a combination of terms. Transgender, genderfluid, gender nonconforming, gender non-binary, genderqueer, or agender are some examples, and individuals who refer to themselves with one or more of these terms may or may not experience gender dysphoria (APA, 2015). For some Native American individuals who do not endorse a cisnormative experience, Two-Spirit may also be used to

communicate identity. Two-Spirit is a term used intertribally to describe a feminine spirit and masculine spirit residing in one person; this phrase was first entered English vernacular thirty years ago in part to reclaim gendered experiences that do not align with the dominant European binary (Driskill, 2010).

Though the experiences of individuals spanning across these identities are each unique, and intra-community conflicts exist, research suggests that many of the experiences of oppression and discrimination of persons across the sexual and gender minority continuum are similar in their structure and in the ways that variables interconnect to affect health outcomes (Meyer, 2003). Therefore, the acronym SGM (sexual and gender minority) is used to describe this community throughout this paper, except when sexual and gender identity are explored separately. Additionally, in recent decades, the term “queer,” previously described in this section as a descriptor for an individual whose identity veers off a heteronormative, cisnormative path, is also used in academic literature on SGM experiences to describe a place of liminality, exploration, or transgression in conceptualizations beyond or in opposition to institutions that seek to police gender and identity (Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 1990; David et al., 2005; Ruberg, 2018). The term ‘queer’ has many connotations, part of which may be associated with designations meant to demoralize or dehumanize SGM individuals- however, considering the scope of reclamation of this word in present-day vernacular in SGM communities and in academic research seeking to describe SGM experiences, queer will also be used throughout this text to refer to texts, research, concepts, and applications.

MINORITY STRESS MODEL

The SGM community faces increased stress linked to societal oppression via internal processes, and external experiences related to SGM status. A model was initially conceptualized

in 1995 to describe the stressors unique to sexual minority population's experiences, known as the Minority Stress Model (Meyer). This model describes the ways in which psychological distress is experienced by sexual minority populations as a result of stigmatization and experiences of discrimination and violence in a heterosexist society, distinct from general daily stress (Meyer, 1995). Later, this model was adapted to encompass the experiences of transgender individuals as well, which captures how minority stress caused by cissexism affects a transgender individual (Balsam, Beadnell, & Molina, 2013).

The initial model built to chronicle sexual minority stressors describes how heterosexism, or behaviors that grant preferential treatment to heterosexual people, reinforces the idea that heterosexuality is more highly valued over minority sexual orientations. Heterosexism can lead to homophobic stigma, which is a variety of negative attitudes (for example, fear, hate, dislike, or disgust) that an individual may have towards the SGM community. Similarly, the later version of this model, adapted to the experiences of gender minority individuals, describes transphobia as stigma resulting from cissexism, or the preferential treatment of cisgender individuals ('cisgender' refers to the state of having been assigned a gender at birth that aligns with one's gender identity). Homophobia and transphobia in this context are both used as an umbrella term for stigmas experienced by multiple sexual orientations that fall outside of heterosexuality, and for multiple genders and identities that fall outside of cisgender experiences. Homophobic and transphobic stigma likewise can be enacted by members of the SGM community, who may feel negative attitudes for themselves and others who are a SGM as a result of living in a majority heterosexist, cissexist society (Meyer, 1995, 2003; Balsam, Beadnell, & Molina, 2013).

The Minority Stress Model also takes care to categorize stressors on a proximal-distal continuum, with proximal stressors relating to how the individual makes sense of the world,

themselves, and their place in the world as a SGM individual, and distal stressors being external to the individual. An expectation for rejection, for example, is a proximal stressor that culminates from making sense of lived individual experiences of past rejection, as well as an understanding of heterosexist and cissexist histories and present-day threats to SGM dignity and agency, such as legislative bathroom bills meant to restrict SGM individuals (Horne et al., 2021). Concealment of one's status as a sexual or gender minority is also identified as a proximal stressor, which is often influenced by lived experiences of distal stressors like discrimination due to SGM status. Discrimination can take on a variety of forms, such as when SGM individuals face unjust treatment (which may involve being barred from services or opportunities which would have been granted to a heterosexual and/or cisgender counterpart), as well as physical, emotional, and mental violence inflicted upon the individual due to SGM status.

Additionally, this model attempts to capture how SGM status can influence an individual's health via the individual's coping mechanisms and social supports. Coping mechanisms and social supports are theorized to have a significant relationship with how an SGM individual experiences proximal and distal stressors. Isolation, self-criticism, and lack of community may influence how internalized stigma can lead to poorer mental health outcomes for SGM individuals (Puckett et al., 2015). Additionally, SGM individuals may withdraw from others due to experiencing proximal stressors (such as internalized homophobia and/or transphobia), which is likely to decrease use of social connections to cope, leading to further isolation (Pachankis, 2014; Testa et al., 2017). Substance use in an effort to cope with minority stress has long been a focal point in understanding reduced health outcomes for LGBTQ individuals as well (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013; Hughes & Eliason, 2002). Additionally, SGM individuals are at increased risk of facing barriers to receiving mental health support to cope with

minority stress, due to concern that one will face discrimination or prejudice in the process (Cronin et al., 2020).

This conceptualization can help clarify the links between minority status and increased risk for a variety of health factors, providing a framework to examine how we can augment and add to existing mental health care to meet the needs of SGM individuals. Having an understanding of the underlying mechanisms of minority stress is vital to understanding differences in SGM populations compared to heterosexual, cisgender counterparts in rates and severity of health concerns. This understanding is particularly beneficial in understanding the impact of COVID-19 on SGM individuals and communities, and how to conceptualize the ways in which this large-scale environmental stressor has augmented the experiences of minority stress across the population.

Chapter 3: Sexual and Gender Minority Experiences and Tabletop Role Playing Games

IDENTITY EXPLORATION

Identities are in part those roles that we or others associate with us (Owens & Samblanet, 2013; Stets & Serpe, 2013). To embody a character is to understand their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, and, often, articulate these to others at the table. It requires empathizing with the character and imagining what kind of life brought them to the place they are now- an act of creative, vicarious identity formation that is central to TTRPGs. For SGM populations, where straight, cisgender perspectives dominate media, and where the scant available stories of marginalized identities can sometimes miss the mark (Birchmore & Kettrey, 2021), self-made representation in RPGs affords a unique opportunity to explore the lives of characters who look like the player; characters who navigate the world in the ways that the player does or, perhaps more tellingly, how the player *wishes* to navigate it; and to vicariously experience identities that align with the core of the individual.

Narrative identity, or an internalized story that is constructed to make sense or meaning about one's life, describes this story building process as not only reflecting one's identity, but *producing* it (McAdams, 2011). When we are in the process of creating a narrative about ourselves, whether that narrative is adaptive or maladaptive to our wider wellbeing, we are changing the way that we make sense of our behaviors, thoughts, and emotions. Within the framework of narrative identity, this process over time unfolds into a wider understanding of the self. Narrative identity is particularly relevant to the exploration and formation of identity via participation in TTRPGs, which explicitly require the player to construct a central narrative through role-play experiences.

In TTRPGs, players are encouraged to enact new behaviors and try on various personae. Brown (2015) conducted a qualitative exploration of RPG online player's experiences with exploration of sexuality and/or sexual expression in a role-playing context. In several of the interviews conducted, players placed value in the exploration of genders and sexual orientations that both aligned and differed from the player's gender and sexual orientation. Some of these explorations included allowing a character to explore sexual experiences in the game narrative, sharing a character's sexual history and preferences with other characters, and explorations of emotional intimacy in the context of a sexual encounter with another player's character. Brown (2015) discovered that participants often inhabit the viewpoint of the character and themselves at once, focusing on ways that they are similar and different from their character in order to place distance between themselves and the experiences of their character for a variety of reasons.

For some, motivation to explore sexuality via role play included a deepening of intimacy exploration in the game's narrative, while for others, building a closer connection to friends or intimate partners was the primary objective. Vicarious sexual arousal was also discussed as a possible motivating factor for this exploration of sexual identity in interviews. This motivation was endorsed by a few players as a valued aspect of roleplay exchanges, though not all, and largely in the context of narrative creation with a trusted partner with whom some sexual relationship had already been formed. The safety afforded by the separation of player from character may also afford SGM individuals to take bigger exploratory risks when building a narrative via their character, providing a degree of separation from experiences that may produce feelings of shame and halt identity exploration (Bowman & Hugaas, 2021).

Some players in Brown's interviews also reported incorporating a character's discoveries of identity and preferences into making meaning of their own explorations of gender and sexuality, citing the roleplay experience as a safer and easier vessel to experiment with sexual expression, than other avenues that involve physical sexual encounters which may lead to experiences of rejection or violence, sexual health issues, or possible involuntary outing of one's status as SGM. For SGM players building narratives online, exploring sexual and gender identities may also be a means of developing relationships within the initial safety net of anonymity (Craig et al., 2015; DeHaan et al., 2013). Role playing online also expands opportunities for sexual play and gender exploration no matter the individual's location, which may be particularly useful for players who live in places where SGM communities are sparse or difficult to access, or are otherwise unavailable.

In a heteronormative society, examples of SGM narratives that centralize identity exploration and examination are sparse. Seeing examples of specific ways other SGM individuals have navigated a problem or social situation, as well as seeing the humanity in SGM characters and narratives beyond the warping lens of heteronormativity, can positively influence a player's sense of self, autonomy, and possibility in the play space and beyond (Evans & Janish, 2015; Harris, 2021). In tabletop role playing, players actively try on social scripts, exploring and occupying bodies that may have many similarities to the player, but belong to the character. These immersive experiences serve as vehicles by which SGM players can create and share their own social scripts, mentally and emotionally preparing themselves and one another for similar circumstances in life away from the game.

Immersion in another life and another gender may also build empathy for others dissimilar to the self. Naming emotions and communicating these emotions during challenging

moments in the narrative requires a deeper exploration of how a character would plausibly react given a situation in-game. This perspective taking in roleplay has been linked to increases in creative processes and in empathy, as well as a means of building a player's social acuity (Russ, 2016).

In building an understanding for a character with shared pain and suffering in particular, the player is presented with a unique opportunity to garner self-compassion. As Neff and Dahm state (Neff & Dahm, 2015), compassion is the act of "...pausing, stepping out of your usual frame of reference, and viewing the world from the vantage point of another" (pg. 121). In relation to the proximal stressors unique to sexual and gender minority individuals, social scripts of queerness/queer narratives that are celebrated and encouraged during roleplay were cited by every queer player in a series of exploratory, qualitative interviews as a means of reducing internalized homophobia and transphobia (Harris, 2021). In having a compassionate viewpoint with characters who share a queer identity, the player may turn this compassion toward the self. Brown and Knopp (2008) elaborate on the importance of queer play, queer history, and making meaning of queer identity; those places that are hidden, abandoned, or forgotten by the majority community are given a place to shine in TTRPGs crafted with queer identity exploration in mind. The relative safety of a vicarious narrative experienced through a character -as well as the often powerfully compassionate viewpoint of one's character through their struggles- fosters self-compassion when translated into meaning making about one's decisions in game. In spaces built on a foundation of trust, players can actively disassemble narratives instilled by heteronormative society and replace them with new, more compassionate versions of identity- and in doing so, reduce internalized homophobia and transphobia.

Seeing others living authentically and celebrating identity can augment one's own identity conceptualization as well in powerful ways. In the next section, communities developed during a TTRPG campaign will be further explored as a way of coping adaptively to minority stress.

COMMUNITY BUILDING

Community has been defined in many ways, from a commercial establishment, neighborhood, event, or organization center (Bradshaw, 2008), to an online forum, chat group, or website (Craig et al., 2015). Community can also refer to commonalities between individuals, or experiences in life that are unique to that subset of people which distinguish it from other narratives (Bradshaw, 2008; Brennan & Brown, 2008).

For SGM individuals, minority stressors related to rejection and concealment are directly associated with threats to one's status as a community member. This threat may include ostracization from one's community, or may be circumnavigated by avoiding potential rejection by hiding one's SGM status. These experiences of rejection and concealment are both shown to have a multitude of negative health outcomes (Meyer, 2003; Tebbe & Moradi, 2016).

Connectedness to community has likewise been shown to partially reduce the negative health effects of minority stress on SGM individuals (Testa et al., 2015). Affirmation and validation in the queer community can take many forms, from participation in events, visiting commercial establishments, moving to queer neighborhoods, or participation in organizations geared toward supporting SGM individuals and their communities (M. Brown et al., 2016; Croff et al., 2017). More recently, online queer communities have become central to many, whether in the form of a forum, chat group, dating app, or website (Bates et al., 2020; Craig et al., 2015). During the COVID-19 crisis, access to internet spaces that can provide a structured social setting

are particularly valuable, especially to those who are geographically isolated, forced to return to a closeted status in order to interact with families of origin during the pandemic, or who are immunocompromised (Oginni et al., 2021).

TTRPGs offer a unique opportunity to build and participate in queer community, whether in person, or online. Community building in the form of participation in a TTRPG campaign group has long been identified as a central benefit to participation in the game (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2018). In a qualitative study on SGM tabletop players, a sense of community and belonging was endorsed by every queer interviewee as a primary benefit of tabletop role playing (Harris, 2021). Practicing cohesion via compromise and conflict resolution, opportunities to be intimate with other players directly or via character interactions, and experiencing losses and victories as a team all contributed to a sense of belonging.

Seeking safe avenues to play with others without expectation of rejection was endorsed as especially valuable to players seeking to make meaning of their SGM identities communally. For example, for those seeking a place to practice naming emotions and communicating emotions related to their SGM identities, the play space in a specifically queer tabletop role playing game provides a container for big or difficult emotions (anger, dysphoria, internalized homophobia or transphobia, grief) and a way to process these emotions communally with others who may be able to support insights and validate feelings. In the next section, we will explore how participating in a queer TTRPG community offers opportunities to process/escape distal stressors by building alternative realities with community members.

IMAGINING ALTERNATIVE REALITIES

Alternative realities are constructed norms that are co-created by the GM and players. When crafted in a trusting, supportive environment, these alternative realities have the potential

of providing a world where characters (and vicariously, players) either have the avenues needed to process minority stressors, or a subversion of power imbalances that alleviate the impact of minority stress while in game. Assumptions, biases, and prejudices that are present in the source material and rulebooks are present as well, and are often part of the deconstruction enacted by queer roleplayers prior to or during gameplay to build an alternate reality suited to queer needs (Kawitzky, 2020). Reflecting what could be -socially, politically, and morally- by creating these alternate realities, is part of a style of role playing called “emancipatory play,” which may lead to sparks of creativity in formulating social justice efforts as well (Hollander, 2021).

When players come together, they bring with them a unique mixture of experiential knowledge through which they process gameplay and share in collaborative efforts to build the game’s narrative. A player’s privileges, oppressions, desires, motives, prejudices, and past experiences all enter play along with their character, and these in turn touch the alternative reality that is communally crafted in the narrative. In this space, players agree on a shared reality, with expectations for how this reality works and the ways their characters can exert power in these realities- this agreed upon reality facilitates the immersion of players into this liminal play space (Bowman and Hugaas, 2021). This communally agreed upon liminal zone, where a host of possibilities reside at once, helps each player hold agency for guiding the narrative of how this alternate reality works. Hollander (2021) discusses how TTRPGs can expand the player’s understanding of the possible ways reality could develop via transgression against heteronormative assumptions, which in turn may lead to possible exploration of alternate possibilities in the player’s social realms outside of role play.

TTRPGs come equipped with plenty to communally unpack as alternate realities are formed. In D&D, for example, there are several aspects of morality built into the mechanics: the

alignment chart is a well-known example, which consists of a character's moral and societal alignment. Each created character has a space on their character sheet to include their moral compass (good, neutral, or evil), as well as their orientation to society at large (lawful, neutral, or chaotic). This combination in turn can affect the ways that the narrative may interact with the character, with some spells, weapons, and places unavailable to those whose alignments do not fit their requirements. Part of the power of creating alternate realities is questioning who has the authority to judge whether someone is good or evil, lawful or chaotic. This exploration of reality, morals, society, and meaning in a communal setting may also fulfill familiar niches that sexual and gender minority individuals may have lost or may only impartially access due to minority stress. For example, Hollander (2021) makes the argument that participating in a D&D campaign fulfills many aspects similar to religion. For those involved, the regular meeting of community members, often to discuss moral and ethical questions posed by the DM, the players, or contexts outlined in the source material (which Hollander points out have many Judeo-Christian influences) can closely resemble the congregation. Encapsulated in the ritual of opening the scene, taking out notes and character sheets, and selecting the dice that will deliver the fate of the narrative and the character serves to explore a communal imagining of society and one's place in society in an engaging, immersive atmosphere. This in turn may lead to moments where players may come to powerful conclusions about our society and the ways in which they move through society through emancipatory play.

Emancipatory play provides alternatives to straight and cisgender narratives that may inspire shifts in perspective to a player. This kind of play serves to fulfill the need of those marginalized by their larger communities to either explore in safety via their character the kinds of challenges that they face in reality, or explore a world where their marginalized status has no

relevance or meaning (Hollander, 2021). For example, a female character may experience sexism in the context of the narrative and explore interacting with sexism from the safety of a supportive group of friends at the table, or a female character may exist in a world where there is no sexism at all. Exploring what these realities look like can provide creative ideas as to how to move forward with social justice narratives and efforts as well, by ‘allowing the often ‘invisible’ subject to be made visible’ and by challenging class, gender, and racial stereotypes (Maddrell, 1994). This play is part processing, part practice: the player is not only afforded an opportunity to think critically about how societal prejudices affect their life, but they are also given an occasion to practice verbalizing disagreement with these prejudices via a character, which may feel like a more accessible step in finding ways to openly disagree with heteronormative expectations to some marginalized individuals.

This practice of challenging oppressive narratives by queer players is often translated to other aspects of life outside TTRPGs. For example, when interviewing the benefits of TTRPG participation, this play was endorsed as helpful in processing shame attached to queer identities, again allowing the ‘invisible to be made visible’ and helping players build self compassion via emancipatory play (Harris, 2021). Processing distal stressors in TTRPGs have the potential of being especially beneficial for SGM folks when conducted in a therapeutic setting, which may amplify meaning making, as well as maximize the potential opportunities for this exploration to take place. In the next section, we will examine the process of translating in-game experiences to life outside these alternative realities via an overview of how TTRPGs have been used in therapeutic settings.

Chapter 4: Clinical Use of Tabletop Role Playing Games with Sexual and Gender Minorities

PROFESSIONAL PERCEPTIONS OF USE

Though TTRPGs are being explored as a means of facilitating growth now more than ever, lingering stigma still sticks to this form of play. False claims of D&D facilitating ritualistic child abuse associated with dark, satanic forces was part of a larger scale phenomenon known as ‘satanic panic’ in the 1980s (e.g., (Smith, 1989). During this time, pushback against fantasy role playing games due to concerns about its harmful effect on mental health led to mixed public opinion about whether the TTRPG would cause psychopathology in players (Janisse and Corupe, 2016). Though the recent resurgence of TTRPGs may be in part due to the reduction of this lingering stigma through media exposure (Sidhu & Carter, 2020), prejudice still lingers in the mental health community. Nearly one out of four psychiatrists from a 2015 study (n = 48) believed there was an association between psychopathology and participation in role playing games (Lis et al., 2015), though the more familiarity mental health workers have with TTRPGs and RPGs in general, the less likely they are to associate dysfunction with role playing (Ben-Ezra et al., 2018).

Despite this history of controversy, the utilization of TTRPGs in a therapeutic setting persists. In 1986, Zayas and Lewis found that, for a group of eight boys (aged eight through nine years), tabletop role playing fostered group solidarity and problem solving, increased self-esteem, and helped participants gain social skills (Zayas & Lewis, 1986). Blackmon (1994) explored the ways in which D&D may facilitate emotional identification and expression in a case study involving a young man experiencing suicidal ideation as well, marking what is possibly the first use of a TTRPG in helping a client target goals related to emotional identification and

expression. Most recently, TTRPGs as a therapeutic tool has grown in popularity, likely in tandem with the reduction of stigma associated with the game in the last decade (Sidhu & Carter, 2020). In the next sections, we will discuss how TTRPGs have been used to increase an array of client skill sets, as well as further considerations for use of TTRPGs in a therapeutic setting.

TABLETOP ROLE PLAYING GAMES AS A SKILL BUILDING TOOL

Research suggests that perceptions of one's social connectedness and social confidence can be improved via participation in role playing games (Gutierrez, 2017; Hawkes-Robinson, 2008; Katō, 2019). Rivers et al. (2016) found that skills related to empathy (particularly perspective taking) are related to TTRPG participation (Rivers et al., 2016). Mendoza (2020) identified TTRPGs as “a therapeutic tool with theatrical elements” with the potential to act as a vehicle for drama therapy. The act of inhabiting the character's mindset and making decisions that align with the character's emotions, thoughts, and previous experiences serves as practice for understanding the ways that others may navigate the world around the player. By asking oneself “what would my character do?” When faced with life's challenges, the client can bridge the gap between a character's learned strengths and their own, dealing with challenges in their lives outside of the game using tools they have learned within it (Davis et. al., 2018).

Abbott et al. (2021) expanded upon this skill-building practice by designing an exploratory, qualitative Role-Playing Skills Group (RPSG) based on a handful of examples of role-playing in group settings. This group of seven participants, built for individuals experiencing social anxiety or isolation, was designed with the primary purpose of creating a less daunting group therapy environment while promoting interpersonal interactions. The authors intentionally framed the RPSG as an alternative to ‘traditional’ group therapy by creating a model that “did not communicate the expectation or need for an expression of personal

challenges or issues.” With an age range of 18-45 and more women represented than men, this group had diverse personal histories, with most reporting no prior participation in TTRPGs, and experiences with trauma, depression, and anxiety. Throughout the first year, all seven participants remained consistently engaged with the group, attending weekly 90-minute meetings. Participants endorsed a feeling of comradery and connection with others in the campaign while practicing social flexibility and problem solving that was applied to their worlds outside of the game narrative. This application of insights and skills learned via participation in TTRPGs is a core benefit of their use in a clinical setting. In the last section, we will explore recommendations from the literature, as well as additional considerations and implications for TTRPG use with SGM individuals.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CLINICAL USE

Implementing a facilitator to DM the campaign and a facilitator to create a player character to join the group’s party was identified in the literature as helpful to furthering therapeutic goals. Abbott et. al (2021) utilized facilitators for a therapeutic TTRPG group: the facilitator more experienced with role playing games acted as DM, and the other facilitator was tasked with character creation and played alongside the participants as a member of their party. This allowed the team to interact with the participants from multiple perspectives in-game, introducing conversations and scenarios to players that facilitated growth while allowing them to lead the conversation. More specifically, modeling flexibility each week was deemed essential by clinicians in the Abbott study: when participants engage with the story in unexpected ways, improvising as facilitators via the DM and the facilitator player roles ensures that participants are able to practice social flexibility and problem solving on their own. With gentle suggestions for actions from a player facilitator, the group gains the option to *ignore* the suggestion presented by

the facilitator's character, whereas redirection from the facilitator acting as DM may be taken by players as non-negotiable due to the nature of the DM's organizational/structural role in the narrative.

Clinical expertise was also identified as a primary necessity in the use of TTRPGs as a therapeutic intervention in Gutierrez's (2017) qualitative study. They warned against the possibility of promoting a false equivalency between participation in TTRPGs in general, and receiving mental health support. Clinicians who have implemented this approach discussed the hazards of TTRPGs framed as a form of treatment by individuals who have not additionally created a case conceptualization and treatment plan for their participants with set goals and outcomes, and/or who are not trained in the administration of mental health interventions. In addition to clinical experience and expertise, consultation with clinicians who have implemented similar strategies, as well as participating in TTRPG experiences oneself, was recommended.

To this end, Gutierrez (2017) interviewed five mental health practitioners using RPGs as a form of intervention in therapy. In general, a qualitative exploration of interviews identified some shared observations. 1). TTRPGs have the possibility to aid participants at any age, with some practitioners running adolescent groups and groups containing adult and elderly individuals. 2). The nature of TTRPGs also lends itself to a client-centered narrative, and was endorsed as a flexible frame with which to tailor a client's narrative experience depending on their presenting concerns. 3). TTRPGs were identified as a potential interim step in exposure therapy, providing clients with an environment to safely experience simulated scenarios related to fears. Though the number of clinicians utilizing TTRPGs is small, this study and others like it detailing clinical perspectives on role playing games can help build a framework for

implementation, as well as help clinicians gauge how appropriate this tool may be for use in various populations.

During assessment for fit with the population of interest, one potential risk that clinicians in Gutierrez's study identified was utilizing TTRPGs with populations that may not benefit from its structure due to presenting concerns. For example, TTRPGs with individuals who struggle to discern between reality and fantasy may not be able to transfer the game's narrative and experiences into their own lives, and may not benefit therapeutically from delving deeper into a fantasy setting. Additionally, Polkinghorne et al. (2021) warns that for some individuals who are neuro-diverse, the mechanics of role playing games can be overly simplifying in social interactions, leading to what he describes as "problematic uncomfortableness in the context of therapeutic play for some neuro-diverse participants, one that I have experienced personally in my practice as an educator for children on the autism spectrum" (Polkinghorne et al., 2021). One such statistic that influences the narrative in D&D is called the Charisma (CHA) statistic. Each player has a CHA score, and the better the score, the more likely the character will have a favorable outcome when they roll for success or failure (this roll is called a charisma check). The D&D Player's Handbook (p.178) describes this mechanic as arising when "...you try to influence or entertain others, when you try to make an impression or tell a convincing lie, or when you are navigating a tricky social situation (Crawford et al., 2014). The Deception, Intimidation, Performance, and Persuasion skills reflect aptitude in certain kinds of Charisma checks." Polkinghorne continues this observation by describing how this statistic and its checks may make therapeutic immersion in the game harder for participants who have endorsed difficulty with social interactions.

Alternate observations that support TTRPG use with neuro-diverse participants exist in the literature as well, however. Fein (2015) described in a qualitative exploration of a role playing summer camp for adolescents on the autism spectrum. During interviews with participants, the interpersonal relationships and the narratives enacted served to foster a sense of belonging (Fein, 2015). Fein notes how the mechanic of charisma checks could serve participants on the spectrum in particular, stating that “... *if a character with high charisma asks your character to do something, respect for the game system entails that your character do it. Social interactions in game are therefore structured by a top-down, explicitly articulated, systematic, and shared set of behavioral norms and obligation[s]—the very kind of system that Ochs et al. [2004] suggested is most productive of interactive success among individuals on the spectrum*” Several roleplayers who identified as autistic found value in playing with other community members as a means of increasing understanding of social cues, or enjoying a more streamlined social environment that feels easier to connect with (Conn, 2014).

Though assessments of TTRPG use in various populations differ in the literature, research offering recommendations seem to converge on the importance of the DM’s facilitation style and experience. The DM’s style of game facilitation, as well as their familiarity with the game itself, should help guide conversations about resource allocation in TTRPG use. Before moving forward with using TTRPGs as a therapeutic tool, gauging how much time is available to train clinicians in roleplay rules and conventions is needed, as well as how much time is made available during group therapy for gameplay. Expectations for the time each participant is expected to spend on gameplay and processing outside of the therapy session can help guide how a TTRPG may be utilized in a therapeutic setting.

In addition to gauging time and resources used, limitations of this type of therapeutic tool should be discussed as a part of planning. The majority of the sparse research available on use has been conducted with largely white populations, leaving blind spots for clinicians in implementing this approach with clients of color. Approaches were also utilized with largely younger players in these studies. As a result, recruitment for a therapeutic setting involving TTRPGs may not reach older SGM folks or SGM folks of color, and benefits discussed in the literature may not be similarly applicable to these populations in practice. Additionally, lack of adequate health insurance coverage may pose a barrier for SGM individuals who are seeking this form of therapy. In one recent study conducted in a community care setting, 89% of SGM participants were uninsured (Egan et al., 2021). Even for those who are employed, health insurance companies may turn down claims for any therapeutic approaches that do not fall under an established category of therapeutic intervention, and mental health providers specializing in a specific type intervention or population may not accept insurance due to issues with reimbursement (Busch & Kyanko, 2021).

Gender affirming components of tabletop play, as well as encouraging the exploration of multiple roles in and out of the therapy setting, should also be explored. Use of correct gender pronouns for both players and their characters may facilitate this end, as well as explicitly exploring how each character may relate to gender and to sexuality (this may be done via roleplay, metaphor, collaborative storytelling, or via processing after sessions). Encouraging creative exploration of character building outside of the therapy hour and processing the similarities and differences that the players see in how characters relate to one another and the world around them may aid in translating insights from the game to players' identities and social interactions as well.

The qualitative research noted above is particularly valuable for clinicians delving into TTRPG use, in part because this practice is relatively novel. There exists no manualized approach to using TTRPGs in this way, and specific approaches are difficult to gauge for efficacy due to a lack of outcome research available. Until more research is conducted on the facets of TTRPG use in therapeutic settings broadly and in SGM populations in particular, many aspects of this implementation will remain exploratory.

Conclusion

After exploring the structure of TTRPGs and an example of immersive narrative in game, we discussed definitions of SGM orientations and identities, and how stress associated with minority status can lead to disparate health outcomes for SGM individuals in the framework provided by the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 1995, Balsam, Beadnell, & Molina, 2013). We then examined the intersection of SGM status and how participation in TTRPGs may be particularly rewarding endeavor for this population in the easing of minority stress, including the potential reduction of internalized homophobia and transphobia via identity exploration in game, coping with rejection and concealment perpetuated by living in a largely heteronormative and cissexist society with community support and celebration via TTRPG games, and the potential for safely processing minority stressors using emancipatory play in exploring alternative realities in TTRPG narratives. This review ended in an exploration of how TTRPGs have been used in clinical practice, with possible implications for use. Clinical applications of TTRPGs with SGM populations were explored as well, including some suggestions for set-up, navigation, strengths, and limitations of this type of intervention.

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