ESCAPING NETHERLAND

An Assessment of the Developmental Impacts of Homelessness and Sexual Identity on Emerging Adulthood

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The inspiration for Yates’ essay was a 12-10-12 New Yorker article entitled "Netherland."

Samantha is an 18-year-old, half-Caucasian, half-Cherokee lesbian female navigating between the homeless shelter system and streets of New York City (Aviv, 2012). Originally from Central Florida, Samantha, a victim of sexual assault and the daughter of conservative parents, ran away from home at 17 and relocated to New York City in search of a new family system and a safe place to foster both her psychosocial and sexual identities. An examination of Samantha’s characteristics against the theories of Erikson, Bowlby and adolescent development; and the multi-stage coming-out process of Coleman; reveal a remarkably capable young woman. Samantha safeguards her resilience with attachment formation via the recreation of a nuclear family system with her “street family,” strategic implementation of systemic resources, and the protective qualities of ego functions and defenses.

Erik Erikson designated “Identity vs. Role Confusion” as the crisis of adolescence, and subsequent research on identity formation has focused on its inheritance to the adolescent process (Berzoff, 2011, p. 110). Berzoff also writes that the next of Erikson’s crises, Intimacy vs. Isolation, begins at age 19. Arnett (2000) theorized that Western adolescence should be extended until age 25; adopting this notion, Samantha meets the chronological criteria for Identity vs. Role Confusion (p. 469). She sits within what Arnett calls the “emerging adulthood” stage of adolescent development (p. 469). She has completed the physiological benchmarks of puberty, including menarche and the development of secondary sex characteristics (Levy-Warren, 1996, pp. 6-8). Cognitively, her thinking process has shifted from concrete operations and the associated Freudian concept of primary process thinking (Berzoff, 2011) to Piagetian formal operations, which fuel theory generation, heightened personal insight, and considering external perspectives (Levy-Warren, 1996, p. 9).

Despite these positive developments, emerging adulthood remains one of the most turbulent, potentially volatile periods of life (Arnett, 2000, p. 469). For adolescents questioning their sexual identity, the precariousness of the period is increased (Button, 2012, p. 18). The cementing of sexual identity, which Appleby and Anastas (1998) define as “self labeling as lesbian, gay or bisexual”, occurs concurrently with adolescent development and its psychosocial identity-building process (p. 49). Samantha initially identifies as asexual, finding correlations between herself and the
plants she, as an amateur botanist, studies (Aviv, 2012, p. 60). This self-labeling may be symptomatic of an early stage in Coleman’s coming out process, the ego defense of repression, or both. Only after leaving Florida and establishing a new life in a more accepting environment does she begin to self-identify as lesbian and incorporate that label in gay and heterosexual communities, thereby achieving Coleman’s integration level (Roseborough, 2003, p. 33).

For Samantha, who fits into several heightened-risk categories (adolescent, sexual minority, homeless, HIV positive), the search for positive support systems is of vital importance. Viewing Samantha’s development through the lens of Eriksonian theory proves therefore beneficial, as Erikson emphasized the potentially positive role of society in supporting individual development (Roseborough, 2003, p. 34). Framing non-familial sources as possible positive supports for development is especially salient when studying the development of sexual-minority adolescents, as these individuals often face limited support or outright rejection from their own families (Saltzberg, 2004).

John Bowlby’s research on attachment centered on the infant-caregiver bond, and only contemporarily has attention been paid to attachment throughout the lifespan. Evidence now exists that humans possess a behavioral system of attachment that begins in infancy but continues throughout the developmental lifespan (Sable, 2007). Research has even pinpointed the neurobiological source of attachment in the right hemisphere of the brain, which also carries out key functions of socio-emotional processing (coping mechanisms) and regulation (Schore, 2001). The continuing development of attachment in early adulthood supports another recent trend in developmental research that posits that qualitative changes in cognition continue beyond adolescence and through early adulthood (Lesser and Pope, 2010, p. 337). The work of Schore (2001) and modern attachment theorists finds positive correlation between attachment and levels of functioning (resilience), and underscores the essential nature of human attachment relationships throughout the lifespan.

Adolescent resilience has been intrinsically linked to the presence of supportive caregivers (Ungar, 2004, p. 25). For Samantha, whose attachments to her original caretakers have been severed, creating new attachments is key to the maintenance of her wellbeing. Kurtz, Jarvis and Nackerud (2000) find a positive correlation between supportive presences and runaway/homeless youth wellbeing, regardless of the level of formality of the support. For gay and/or homeless youth, recreating family systems provides a new source for attachment relationships and positive support systems (Aviv, 2012, p. 64). In New York, homeless youths band together to create the Gay Family, a nuclear family setup with fictional bloodlines and roles (Aviv, 2012, p. 63). The Gay Family establishes parent-child-type mentoring relationships between seasoned homeless youths and those new to the streets, to help said neophytes adapt and survive, and to compensate for the biological familial rejection that often accompanies coming out (Aviv, 2012, pp. 63-64). This notion is in keeping with what Roseborough (2003) describes as “re-parenting”, a
phenomenon of compensatory emotional support for newly “out” gay individuals who lack support from their own biological families (p. 42).

Samantha, either because of her current stage in Coleman’s coming-out process or ego- defensive repression of her sexuality, does not feel comfortable in the Gay Family, and instead forms attachments with her Street Family, a smaller system of gay and straight homeless youths. Street families are sexually non-exclusionary, and therefore open systems (Holle, & Long, 2006). They tend to be whiter, which is the race with which Samantha affiliates, and have no parent figures— only brothers and sisters— which appeals to Samantha, whose dysfunctional relationship with her parents influenced her decision to run away. Her parents dismissed her allegations of sexual abuse as imaginary, and this rejection of her sexual trauma, coupled with limited opportunities for advancement in Florida due to low socioeconomic status, led her to run away from home and sever all ties with them.

A certain level of “demographic diversity and instability” is inherent to adolescent development (Arnett, 2000, p. 470). Likewise, the process of emotionally moving away from one’s parents (individuation) is an attachment milestone of emerging adulthood (S. Bloom, HB2 class, February 12, 2013). And female adolescents especially struggle to preserve strong attachments with their families while creating their individual identities (Stern, 1990). The extremity of Samantha’s complete disavowal, however, is atypical. Aviv (2012) does not clarify if Samantha’s parents are aware of her sexual orientation, although they may have unconsciously rejected any atypically unfeminine expressions of gender by encouraging her to wear dresses, thus promoting heterosexist aesthetic ideals (p. 62).

Samantha may be utilizing the ego defense of displacement in her rejection of her parents: she cites only their failure to acknowledge her sexual assault— not their tacit rejection of her sexual minority status— as the reason behind her excommunication. This evidences that she has not yet reached the final “integration” phase of Coleman’s five-step coming-out process (Roseborough, 2003, p. 34). Running away may even be an external manifestation of the internal ego dystonia she feels as she grapples with her sexual identity (Roseborough, 2003, p. 38).

Several biopsychosocial factors threaten Samantha’s resilience, and many are the products of risk-taking behavior often associated with adolescence. Risky behaviors peak during adolescence, when constant, frenetic neurological activity in the frontal lobes—which monitor executive functions including judgment and impulse control—causes erratic activity (S. Bloom, HB2 class, February 5, 2013). Samantha engages in biological risk-taking by using marijuana and over-the-counter pharmaceutical drugs as coping mechanisms to escape from the intensity of her psychosocial reality (Aviv, 2012, p. 67). Drug use among homeless youth is often attributed to the “combination of stressors inherent to daily life,” and these risks are “exacerbated for homeless youth identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual” (Ray, 2006, p. 9). Psychologically, drug use also aids in the perpetuation of the ego defense of repression, which allows Samantha to continue to navigate the difficult world of the
streets without acknowledging the traumatic impacts of her sexual assault, which, in addition to psychologically threatening her resilience, led to her contraction of HIV, a biological threat to her wellbeing. Unfortunately, running away from the original site of her abuse does not immune Samantha from its traumatic impact, nor does repression through biological and psychological means protect her from future violence.

Living on the street exposes Samantha not only to the harshness of the elements but of other people: to violence, sexual harassment, and physical harm. According to the National Runaway Switchboard, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (LGBT) homeless youth are “seven times more likely than their heterosexual peers to be victims of a crime” (Ray, 2006, p. 11). These risks do not necessarily diminish when youth take up temporary residence in shelters. Intended as a respite from the streets, shelters, despite their eponymous connotations, often prove to be the opposite of safe havens for homeless youth. Samantha avoids the adult shelter system because she hears stories of young people—especially sexual minorities—being sexually harassed and exploited, both by residents and employees. Shelters often engage in homophobic actions: Samantha’s transgendered friend Ryan leaves his bed at the Covenant House after staff members insist on addressing him by his legal, female name (Aviv, 2012, p. 65). And within the first month of her stay at the Turning Point shelter in Brooklyn, Samantha is bullied, sexually harassed by fellow residents, and has her throat slashed by one of her roommates. The incident sends her to the hospital, where she recovers from the knife wound but develops a litany of other biological symptoms, including vertigo, fever, hemoptysis, and the discovery of her HIV-positive status (Aviv, 2012, p. 63).

The biological implications of sexual orientation are unclear, as genetic studies of sexual orientation in women are limited, reflecting a possible bias towards homosexuals in sexual identity research (Pattatuci, 1998, p. 23). Regardless, the psychosocial impacts of sexual minority identity, especially when co-occurring with homelessness, are myriad and detrimental (Ray, 2006). The Citizen’s Committee for Children (2012) calculates that approximately 20,000 youth live on the streets of New York City. Of these, the National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce estimates that anywhere from 20-40% also identify as LGBT (Ray, 2006, p.9). “Family conflict is the primary cause of homelessness for all youth, LGBT or straight”, but exposure to physical or sexual assault is also a prevalent force, with 40 to 60% of all homeless youth listing it as a factor in their driving the decision for youth to leave home (Ray, 2006, pp. 10 and 26).

Adolescents who enter into the homeless system of New York City are folded into a complex social network with unique hierarchical strata and social etiquette. Far from the stereotypical connotations of homeless people as dirty, isolated and disconnected from popular capitalist culture, the homeless youths Samantha encounters have cell phones and Facebook profiles, and dress in clean, on-trend clothing—much of it stolen. Samantha sees homelessness as an opportunity to join a group. This desire to affiliate with a meso or macro-level group outside of the family
system is a benchmark of the adolescent quest for identity (S. Bloom, HB2 Class, February 12, 2013). High school often serves as the primary site for adolescent group affiliation, but Samantha never felt as though she fit in at her high school in Florida (Aviv, 2012, p. 60). Becoming a part of the LGBT homeless fold of New York allows her to witness the highs and lows of typical high school social experiences gossip, cliques, trysts, and the highs and lows of romances firsthand, and form new positive attachments to fill the void created by leaving home.

While the social elements of the homeless system prove positively impactful, the macro-level shortcomings and failures of homeless assistance programs are anathema to Samantha’s resilience, as she experiences oppression through lack of resources. Homeless youth programs have historically been federally under-funded, and social services for homeless populations, while extant, are small in number (Ray, 2006, p. 12). As Aviv (2012) writes, Manhattan has approximately 250 shelter beds available for the over 4,000 young adults (aged 13 to 25) who are homeless on a given night (p. 62). Snagging a bed provides only temporary respite from the streets, as the shelters impose time limits for residents’ stays. Samantha and her Street Family cycle in and out of the Streetworks long-term shelter, sleeping on a rock in St. Nicholas Park while they await eligibility for re-admission, a process that often takes several weeks.

The socioeconomic impacts of homelessness test Samantha’s resilience and ingenuity. Though her homelessness is voluntary, the limitations associated with it are beyond her control: she lives in poverty, and experiences oppression through marginalization and its subsequent necessitation of criminal behavior. Samantha seeks gainful employment but is dismissed for her lack of job experience and outward appearance of homelessness. With few other options available to her, she turns to shoplifting, which is easy and profitable but threatens her resilience and hope for upward mobility as it further envelopes her into the world of the streets.

Samantha safeguards her resilience by employing the ego defenses of mastery-competence and adaptive regression in service of the ego. Bellak (1994) defines competence as the “exceptional ability to solve real life problems” (p. 10). Samantha uses competence to successfully navigate the often murky waters of the shelter system, researching admission requirements for long-term shelters and supportive housing programs, and compiling the various prerequisites to gain admission to both. She even wields her ego function to appear less functional: to obtain Supplemental Security Income (SSI), which requires evidence of a psychiatric condition, Samantha and her friends coach each other on how to “exaggerate their dysfunctions” (Aviv, 2012, p. 68). And she masterfully manipulates her external presentation, making herself look more “stereotypically movie homeless” to bring in more money panhandling (Aviv, 2012, p. 67). Her advanced thought processes (another ego function) extend to manipulating the potential subconscious effects of her accessories: to garner more sympathy when panhandling, she wears a pink backpack.
Samantha displays further evidence of mastery-competence through planning for a future off the streets. Initially, homelessness narrows Samantha’s perspective and makes the future seem imaginary, leading her to experience a sense of “futurelessness”, a fatalistic worldview that results from repeated exposure to violence and fosters an expectation of violence and death within children and adolescents (Garbarino, 1992). But Samantha’s advanced levels of mastery-competence and resilience ultimately buoy her. After nearly two years on the streets, she begins devoting one day each week to “dealing with the future” and submits applications for jobs and subsidized housing (Aviv, 2012, p. 67). This is evidence of planning to enter into the world of work, a positive benchmark of early adult development (Lesser and Pope, 2010, p. 344). Samantha’s ego functions and resilience overpower the formidable opposition her circumstances brandish, and allow her to take responsibility for herself and make independent decisions, both key criteria of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

Samantha utilizes the ego function of adaptive regression in service of the ego, which Lesser and Pope (2006) describe as the process of the individual returning to an earlier stage of psychosexual development “in order to avoid anxiety or conflict” (p. 53). Samantha, a rape victim, shows evidence of having returned to Freud’s latency phase, in which “sexual urges are submerged, [and the] focus is on mastery of skills” (Lesser and Pope, 2006, p. 49). She rejects the sexual advances of her roommates at Turning Point, and does not pursue sexual activity beyond kissing, focusing instead on mastering the art of homeless survival and fostering secure attachments with her surrogate street family. Adaptive regression in service of the ego allows her to concentrate on survival on the streets, but prevents her from processing her past trauma, and delays her acceptance and integration of her sexual identity (Roseborough, 2003).

Samantha’s resilience is threatened by biopsychosocial factors in every system to which she subscribes, and her risk for maladaptive psychosocial development is further heightened by her sexual minority status (Button, 2012). She exhibits many aforementioned characteristics of the ego defense of repression, excelling at “stuffing the feelings down” (Aviv, 2012, p. 67). She also shows signs of identifying with the aggressor, which Lesser and Pope (2011) describe as “the tendency to imitate what is perceived as the aggressive or intimidating manner of an external authority” (p. 54). Samantha’s mother suggested her rape allegations were the product of hallucination (Aviv, 2012, p. 60), and Samantha focuses her anger at her mother (her initial and primary attachment figure) and makes her the aggressor.

Absent the support of her own parents, Samantha adopts the role of compassionate caregiver for her street family, handling domestic matters, navigating the shelter application process for herself and the others, and becoming an autonomous version of Winnicott’s Good Enough Mother (Applegate, 1993, p. 3). Her desire to protect her “family” as her mother failed to protect her is so strong that she resorts to threats and subterfuge to ensure their safety, planting drug paraphernalia on a random shelter resident’s bed to get her kicked out and make room for one of her...
street family (Aviv, 2012, p. 65). These maternal instincts, if not an example of identifying with the aggressor, evidence her developmental precociousness: her motherly tendencies belie many characteristics of Erikson's Generative stage of development, and the bonds that she forms with her homeless “family” further her developmental along the lifespan while perhaps unconsciously compensating for the lack of support she received from her biological parents (Roseborough, 2003).

Through the creation of new attachments with her “street family”, strategic use of ego functions and defenses, and reliance upon her exceptional resilience, Samantha successfully navigates through and out of the homeless system of New York City. Although the homeless system is rife with macro-level failures and biopsychosocial risk factors, Samantha uses her resilience, and the ego function of mastery competence, to optimize her experience as a homeless youth, making it a decisive opportunity for forming positive new attachments, and furthering both her individual identity development and sexual identity acceptance and integration as she moves into emerging adulthood.

References


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