Current research examines the mental health needs of the LGBTQ population, but little is known about the specific experiences of LGBTQ college students. Based on findings of adult and youth LGBTQ studies, these individuals experience higher levels of stress which likely carry over into the college years (Dunbar et al., 2017). Unique social stressors such as stigma, discrimination, a lack of belongingness, and risk to sexual/romantic partner violence are attributed to this increased risk of mental health issues (Dunbar et al., 2017; Klein et al., 2021). Furthering the widening gap in mental health disparity for LGBTQ college students is the observation that this population exhibits a higher need for mental health treatment while simultaneously experiencing higher barriers to receiving treatment (Dunbar et al., 2017). Stigma is often perpetuated through heterosexual experiences that involve microaggressions such as through comments like “that’s so gay” and “no homo” which imply that being LGBTQ is status is less good or favorable than being heterosexual/cisgender (Crane et al., 2020).

Microaggressions are often subtle but still have a heavy impact on the health and wellness of LGBTQ individuals. Discrimination in the form of hate crimes is an example of overt aggression and has been associated with previously studied. Microaggressions in the form of disrespect and invalidation are sometimes unintentional and occur more subtly, and as research is finding, occurs more often as well. Research has found a link between LGBTQ college students experiencing microaggressions and poor mental health outcomes (Winger et al., 2018). Additionally, evidence shows that exposure to microaggressions does not just impact the mental wellness of LGBTQ college students, but it is also associated with an increase in drug and alcohol misuse as well as increased smoking rates (Winger et al., 2018; Yligia et al., 2018). Hostile heterosexist environments created by micro-aggressions and discrimination contribute to LGBTQ retention rates and significantly impact the mental well-being of this population (Crane et al., 2020).

In a nationally representative sample published by Access to Higher Education Survey, it was found that college students face higher instances of bullying (both online and in person), sexual harassment and assault (Williams Institute, 2022). Where almost 20% of LGBTQ students experience microaggressions compared to about 5% of straight students, over 12% of LGBTQ experience microaggressions in the form of indirect bullying compared to about 5% of straight students. Additionally, nearly 12% of LGBTQ higher education students are sexually harassed compared to almost 6% of straight students. This research adds to the growing body of literature on LGBTQ student experiences regarding microaggressions, micro-violations, micro-discrimination, and mental well-being (Jaekel, 2021).

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