

Same-Sex Relationship Welfare and Sexual Minority Stress

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ABSTRACT: *To evaluate 179 effect sizes derived from 32 study studies on the effects that sexual minority stress can have for same-sex relationship well-being, meta-analytic approaches were used. Sexual minority stress was moderately and negatively correlated with same-sex relationship well-being (aggregated through multiple forms of stress) (aggregated across different dimensions of relationship well-being). Internalized bigotry was strongly and adversely correlated with the well-being of same-sex relationships, while heterosexist prejudice and visibility control of sexual identity were not. In comparison, the impact size for internalized homophobia was substantially greater than for heterosexist discrimination and visibility management of sexual orientation. The content of the same-sex relationship was strongly and negatively correlated with sexual minority tension but not associated with closeness or stability. The relationship well-being among same-sex female couples, but not among same-sex male couples, was substantially and negatively correlated with sexual minority stress. Also summarized and addressed was the current status of research approaches in this area.*

KEYWORDS: *Legalization, National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), Physiological Stresses, Same-Sex Relationships, Stigmatized Community*

INTRODUCTION

The 2013 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) data reveals that there are around 690,000 same-sex couples in the U.S. The highly politicized existence of same-sex relationship problems has caused ongoing political, judicial, and social dialogues. Researchers have been challenged by the growing exposure of same-sex couples to provide more information about this demographic and have catalyzed a flood of studies in the past few decades on same-sex relationships.

Within different socio-political spheres, same-sex partners also face heightened vulnerabilities to relationship well-being, considering their traditionally disenfranchised status. They likely face both common life stressors faced by all couples and minority stressors uniquely associated with being members of a stigmatized community while trying to achieve good relationships. The efforts have been committed over the past few decades to discussing the effects that various forms of sexual minority stress may have for the well-being of same-sex relationships[1].

While there are no golden rules about the "optimal" or "correct" time point for undertaking a meta-analytical literature review on a specific topic, the following considerations have illustrated the significance and value of systematically reviewing the existing research concerned with the connection between sexual minority stress and same-sex relationship well-being. The historical shifts in legal choices available for same-sex partners are likely to lead to the substantial variability among various cohorts in their relationship histories. Thus, before and after the implementation of the U.S. national legalization of same-sex marriage, same-sex couples' partnership interactions can be (at least partly) "different," even if they may continue to be socially stigmatized. With the decision on marriage equality as a milestone, it is imperative for researchers interested in the effects of sexual minority stress on the well-being of same-sex relationships to examine what has been and has not been done and understood about this issue, and to take this social policy change as an opportunity to build a scientifically informed agenda to advance research in this area. Considering that all studies included in the present study were published prior to the U.S. national legalization of same-sex marriage, this study can provide a comprehensive overview of the study within a given historical span of time and lay the groundwork for subsequent analysis[2].

Given that research in this area is somewhat in its infancy, there might be questions about whether a sufficient number of studies have been performed to date to perform a meta-analysis. It should be noted that over the past few years, research in this field has gradually increased and that the number of publications included in the current study is comparable to those of recently released meta-analyses on marriage and family issues. In addition, as it is clear that research on this hot topic (i.e. sexual minority stress and same-sex relationship well-being) will increase significantly and rapidly over the next few decades, a comprehensive and critical meta-analytical analysis of the recently emerged (yet still a decent amount of) research in this field will effectively direct this field to get on the "right" path and develop in this field[3].

➤ *Multidimensional nature of stress and relationship well-being of the sexual minority:*

Although general stress is characterized as stressors faced by all individuals in their everyday lives (e.g. daily issues, significant life events), as Meyer conceptualized, minority stress refers to stressors that are uniquely associated with being members of socially stigmatized groups (e.g., internalized homophobia, heterosexist discrimination). Stressors for minorities:

- I. Are often additive to general stressors and require additional efforts to cope;
- II. Are related to stable sociocultural structures and are therefore relatively chronic; and
- III. Are based on social status and are the product of social processes and systems.

Meyer also suggested a distal-proximal distinction in which a continuum of proximity to the self occurs for various minority stressors. The distal minority stressors refer to stressors that are independent of the expectations of a person, whereas the more proximal minority stressors are classified as subjective stressors that as a member of a minority group are linked to self-identity.

From the distal to the proximal, in terms of minority stressors especially associated with being members of a sexual minority group, they are:

- a) External prejudice based on heterosexism;
- b) Environmental evaluations of sexual minorities as dangerous, resulting in perceptions of heterosexist discrimination; and
- c) The internalization of detrimental social attitudes towards membership of communities of sexual minorities.

In addition, Meyer also stressed that it can be stressful to handle the exposure of one's sexual orientation since it requires constant concern with tracking one's actions in different situations and thus probably causes cognitive and physiological stresses, which can inevitably contribute to physical and psychological problems. "As he also stated, it can be seen as a more proximal stressor to manage the visibility of sexual orientation because its effects include a series of personal internal processes; and on the continuum of proximity to the self, it is more proximal to the self than the "discrimination expectations" but less than the "internalized homophobia".

The well-being of couples is often multi-faceted. A significant body of research has indicated that quality, security, dedication, and closeness are among the most relevant indicators of the well-being of couples. Although these metrics frequently correlate favorably with each other, they are still conceptually distinct. Therefore, it can be defined as "healthy" to the extent that a partnership is stated by partners to be fulfilling, secure, dedicated, and intimate. Relationship quality reflects the subjective measure of the degree to which spouses feel satisfied with the relationship and partner when all is taken into account. Stability in a dyad refers to the "affective and cognitive states along the associated actions" suggesting the probability of the relationship continuing. Commitment represents the tendency of couples to remain in their current partnership dependent on a variety of variables (e.g., investment). In a relationship, closeness is characterized as the affective, cognitive, and physical closeness between partners[4][5].

Despite the fact that both sexual minority stress and the well-being of couples are multidimensional, little is known about the relative contributions of various forms of stress to the well-being of same-sex partners and when and to what degree stress influences different aspects of same-sex relationship well-being. That is, although the correlation between a certain form of sexual minority stress (e.g., internalized homophobia) and a certain aspect of same-sex relationship well-being (e.g., satisfaction) has been explored by an emerging body of research, little attempt has been made to investigate multiple forms of sexual minority stress or different aspects of same-sex relationship well-being at the same time. Increased precision seems crucial in refining our understanding of the relationship between sexual minority stress and well-being in same-sex couples by differentiating between different stressors and different outcomes of couple relationships. Simply put, the present study aims to explore more concrete effects using meta-analytic methods to synthesize research results from a variety of independent reports: whether the strength of the correlation between sexual minority stress and same-sex relationship well-being varied across various forms of stress and different dimensions of relationship well-being[6][7].

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CONCLUSION

Same-sex partners are likely to face heightened vulnerabilities for relationship well-being considering their traditionally disenfranchised status. Over the past few decades, the effects that various forms of sexual minority stress may have for same-sex relationship well-being have been one of the main research focuses. Findings from the latest meta-analytic analysis indicate that same-sex relationship well-being was substantially and negatively correlated with average sexual minority stress. However, the extent of this association was poor. It is also notable that internalized homophobia was negatively and marginally associated with well-being in same-sex marriages, whereas heterosexist prejudice and visibility management of sexual identity were not. In addition, the impact size for internalized homophobia was substantially greater than that for heterosexist discrimination and visibility management of sexual orientation, indicating that minority stressors that are more proximal to the self could be more influential predictors in well-being of same-sex relationships.

The "small" effect sizes we observed in the current study may not actually be "trivial" effects, but may have important methodological and theoretical consequences, given the limited sample characteristics in the current study. Examinations focused on more diverse and representative samples in which the traditionally

underrepresented groups are oversampled would provide a less biased view of the impact of stress on the well-being of same-sex relationships from a statistical point of view. From a theoretical point of view, continuing to record the simple primary correlation between stress and well-being of the same-sex relationship seems to reach a point of decreased returns; rather, future research would benefit from systematically exploring this association from a more "specified" and "refined" viewpoint to address: (a) what dimensions of well-being of the same-sex relationship are expected. (b) Under what circumstances same-sex partners will effectively navigate the deleterious effects of stress and succeed under challenging circumstances; and (c) under what circumstances stress in same-sex relationships and well-being relationship decline can take place.

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