

An Examination Couple-Level Minority Stress

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ABSTRACT: Social tension arising from stigma, racism and discrimination, "minority stress," adversely affects the wellbeing and emotional well-being of sexual minority individuals. The present study explored how being in a same-sex couple can result in sensitivity at the person level to particular minority stressors that are not accounted for. Relationship timeline interviews with 120 same-sex couples were performed similarly through two research sites (Atlanta and San Francisco), gender (male and female), and length of relationships (at least six months but less than three years, at least three years but less than seven years, and seven or more years). In nine distinct social contexts, guided content studies established 17 separate couple-level minority stressors encountered. Analyses have reported dyadic minority stress processes experiences (stress discrepancies and stress contagion). In future attempts to better recognize and resolve the accumulated effect of minority stress on relational well-being and individual wellbeing, these results may be helpful.

KEYWORDS: Discrimination, Internalization, Minority Stress, Minority Communities, Stressors, Social Stress.

I. INTRODUCTION

The high rates of health issues among individuals with sexual minorities are partially due to their exposure to minority stress. The idea of minority stress is embedded in broader social stress theories, which indicate that social stressors may diminish well-being, events or situations that cause people to respond to changes intra-personally, interpersonally, or in their environment.

Relevant stressors can be exposed to sexual minority communities, including (1) discrimination encounters (both acute incidents and persistent, daily mistreatment), (2) stigma or rejection perceptions, (3) camouflage of a stigmatized identity, and (4) internalization of derogatory social attitudes about one's social groups or social identity. This conceptualization of minority tension, in part, stems from the classic works of Goffman on stigma and impression management. As such, on a scale of closeness to self, minority stressors occur. The most distant stressors to the self are mainly environmental-based objective stressors, such as dominant prejudices, bias, and discrimination. These contribute to more proximate environmental evaluations as threatening and to rejection perceptions (feeling stigmatized) as well as attempts to mask or conceal stigmatized identities (managing experiences of others). The internalization of adverse social attitudes towards one's minority community is most proximal to oneself (e.g., internalized homophobia). Minority stressors reduce psychological well-being and account for differences in different health outcomes between the sexual minority and heterosexual populations [1][2].

➤ *Same-sex Couples and Minority Stress*

Political and legal discussions on same-sex marriage have centered on same-sex marriages and the health of sexual minorities. Analysis shows that recent state-level bans on same-sex marriage have been adversely related to the mental health of sexual minorities. A positive correlation between same-sex marriage and mental health among sexual minority groups is also indicated by studies. The 2015 decision by the Supreme Court that made same-sex marriage legal in all 50 states is deeply rooted in the social, political and legal issues surrounding same-sex marriage in the

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United States. Over time, their impacts continue, and they differ across social environments and geographical locations[3][4].

While most minority stress research focuses on the experiences of individuals, a relational emphasis has been adopted by emerging work. Over the past two decades, a small number of studies have shown that increased minority stress experiences are related to poorer relationship quality for same-sex couples. However, in order to advance theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of minority stress in a relational context, a more oriented line of investigation is required.

➤ *Shifting Attention from the Individual Level to the Couple Level*

When people become part of a same-sex pair, they may then become vulnerable to particular minority stressors at the couple level that are not reducible to their experiences as individuals of the sexual minority. As a consequence of the stigmatized status of their partnership, in and of itself, couple-level minority stressors can be encountered by individual partners or jointly by couples. In other words, people can face difficulties or adversity as a consequence when their interpersonal relationships are devalued or diminished by society. As individuals who are mutually stigmatized because their relationship reflects a stigmatized type of relationship, they may often face certain challenges together. It is the root of this stress that distinguishes such stressors as couple-level minority stressors (i.e., society's marginalization of the relationship).

Take the example of a man who hides the fact that he is gay from his peers, who he perceives to be homophobic, to prevent rejecting or unsupportive responses, to compare individual and couple-level minority stressors. In the context of perceptions of rejection and identity concealment, this example constitutes individual minority stress. If this same man were to start a relationship with another man, however, his status as a member of a same-sex couple is likely to result in exposure to additional stressors, above and above what he as a person could encounter. He and his wife could now be faced with handling the exposure of their partnership in addition to his personal identity concealment. In the form of couple-level concealment, this constitutes a couple-level minority stressor. In the context of rejection of their partnership as well as of each man as the other's spouse, the lack of recognition by those in their respective social and family networks can be considered a couple-level minority stressor. The root cause of stress is the social disadvantage associated with same-sex relationships in all types of couple-level minority stress, as opposed to disadvantages linked to individual experience[5][6].

➤ *Contextualizing Couple-level Minority Stress*

It takes careful analysis of the social environment in which they exist to gain a deeper understanding of the stress mechanisms impacting people in same-sex relationships. Although same-sex marriage in the United States is now legal, this is a recent development. The U.S. previous to 2015 In *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the decision of the Supreme Court, the political background surrounding the access of same-sex spouses to legal recognition was complicated, varying across states and municipalities. Despite this historic federal-level ruling, policy cultures at the state and local levels remain complex, some marked by acts of rebellion and opposition to the enforcement of federal law. Stressors embedded in legal and structural contexts are still still relevant to research. Indeed, when same-sex couples obtain rights and visibility, stressors that have yet to be conceptualized can consequently be encountered.

Moreover, in many facets of people's lives, couple-level minority stressors continue to emerge beyond their legal rights and institutionalized policies. It has been well established that sexual minorities experience traumatic experiences in family contexts, working environments, social interactions, service settings, and public spaces. How both of these social contexts form the perception of minority couple-level stress has yet to be systematically studied, both interpersonally and intra-psychically[7].

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It is also of theoretical interest to consider how couple-level minority stressors are encountered through various social contexts. Special stressors are not necessarily found in particular realms of life, whether they are eventful or recurrent in nature. Rather, they travel with the person from place to place, and with couples. As such, in different social contexts, such as in family or occupational environments, any given minority stressor, for example, unequal treatment or prejudice, can be encountered. It is therefore important to consider how minority stressors manifest in varied social contexts. Some same-sex couples can face significant prejudice in their workplaces or within their social networks from their families of origin, but relatively little. It is therefore problematic to neglect the fullest spectrum of social contexts influencing the perception of minority stress[8].

II. DISCUSSION

The present results provide the first empirical evidence for a theoretical model of minority stress at the couple-level. Since current conceptualizations of minority stress do not include constructs of couple-level stress, they underestimate the degree to which particular types of social stress are overwhelmingly experienced by sexual minority communities.

Narrative evidence from this relationship timeline analysis indicates that minority tension at the couple level is not reducible at the individual level. In fact, as individuals, some sexual minority individuals may experience little to no minority stress, but nonetheless face major challenges related to the devaluation of their intimate relationships. Their un-partnered equivalents escape such stressors. In addition, this conceptualization of minority couple-level stressors arising from participation in a socially stigmatized partnership is also distinct from other conceptualizations of traumatic life events occurring within social networks of people (e.g., illnesses, divorces, or economic hardships), which may be correlated with psychological distress among network participants who do not specifically experience psychological distress among network members. Those arising from relationship dynamics within couples that set in motion dyadic stress processes also involve couple-level minority stressors. As shown above, person-level minority stressors may pass through stress proliferation processes involving stress differences or contagion between partners from the individual to the relational level[9].

Future research could look much further into the social context of minority stress and its importance as a potentially crucial mechanism in non-examined stress mechanisms that simultaneously combine both identity-based (e.g., sexual orientation) and role-based (e.g., partner) stressors. We suggest that looking beyond individual-level stressors associated with sexual identity and also exploring relationship stressors associated with sexual identity can lead to a deeper understanding of sexual minority health and relationship well-being as well as ongoing health inequalities based on sexual orientation in this analysis of minority stress affecting sexual minority individuals[10].

III. CONCLUSION

The current research is the first attempt to examine the existence of minority couple-level stress faced by couples of the same sex. It expands the current theory of minority stress by emphasizing the associated sense of minority stress. In addition, by simultaneously considering both identity-based (sexual minority) and role-based (partner) stress domains, it expands stress scholarship more broadly, providing evidence to support a new stress paradigm for identifying stress processes that are potentially harmful to relational well-being and individual health, particularly among minority populations. In certain respects, the particular couple-level minority stressors we defined relate to conceptual categories of minority stress at the person level, but also point to aspects of minority stress previously unrecognized in the lives of same-sex couples. Our results show that same-sex couples view structural stigma as stressful and undergo unequal legal and policy care. However, they also clearly demonstrate that in social/interpersonal and family environments, much of the couple-level stressors faced by same-sex couples occur. This knowledge is important for the advancement of potential studies and successful approaches to identify and resolve the different ways in which minority stress affects people's health and well-being in same-sex relationships.

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