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Limitations to Participation in Family of Origin among Same Sex Couples: A Couple-Level Minority Stressor

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Abstract

Purpose: Emerging studies focus on minority stressors emanating from society's stigmatization of particular relationship forms (i.e., couple-level minority stressors). The present study examines how same-sex couples experience one such couple-level minority stressor: limitations to participation in families of origin.

Methods: Qualitative data are drawn from a sub-sample of same-sex couples (N = 18) who participated in a large-scale study of minority stress among 120 same-sex couples distributed equally across two study sites (Atlanta and San Francisco) in 2012 and 2013.

Results: Instances of limitations to participation in families of origin ranged in severity, falling into three distinct areas: 1) *partial acceptance*, where some family members were accepting and others were not, 2) *mixed messages* where some family members said they were accepting but behaved as though they were not and, 3) *rejection*, where some family members were blatantly unwelcoming or hostile. These types of exclusion were also evidenced in dyadic minority stress processes of stress proliferation (e.g., stress discrepancies and stress proliferation) causing additional stress for both partners.

Conclusion: These narratives portray struggles associated with experiences of couple-level minority stress faced by people in same-sex relationships.

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Keywords

Couples; Minority Stress; Lesbian Couples; Gay Couples

Introduction

It is now well established that sexual minority populations can be exposed to unique stressors relating to their sexual identity or orientation. These minority stressors include: (1) experiences of discrimination (both acute events and chronic everyday mistreatment); (2) stigma or expectations of rejection; (3) concealment of a stigmatized identity; and (4) internalization or negative social beliefs about one's social groups or identity (Meyer, 1995; Meyer, 2003). Moreover, such "minority stressors" have been demonstrated to diminish psychological well-being and mental and physical health and account for disparities between sexual minority and heterosexual populations in multiple health outcomes (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Frost, Lehavot, & Meyer, 2015; Hatzenbuehler, 2014; Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Mays & Cochran, 2001).

To date, studies have largely ignored how stress experience emanates from society's stigmatization of relationship forms. See (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006; 2007; Gamarel, Reisner, Laurenceau, Nemoto, & Operario, 2014; Rosenthal & Starks, 2005) for exceptions. In response to this, LeBlanc, Frost, and Wight (2015) have introduced the theoretical construct of couple-level minority stress, drawing attention to the ways in which this previously unexamined domain of minority stressors can arise from society's devaluation of specific relationship types, as well as how the individuals in those relationships experience such stressors in their everyday lives. To illustrate, researchers have identified an array of unique, couple-level minority stress constructs, including those that stem from institutionalized stigma (LeBlanc, Frost, and Bowen, 2018), and social interactions in varying social contexts (e.g., in public or at work) (Frost et al. 2017). For example, a woman in a same sex couple may attempt to conceal her sexual orientation from family, friends, and co-workers, and thus experience an individual-level minority stressor, as is typically assessed in minority stress research with sexual minority populations. Additionally, she may also attempt to conceal her relationship with another woman, leading her to experience a couple-level minority stressor, a novel domain of minority stress that has been increasingly recognized and measured in recent years (LeBlanc, Frost, & Wight, 2015; Frost et al. 2017; Neilands et al. 2020).

Dyadic minority stress processes of stress proliferation, which often occur between persons, or at the dyadic level, should also be reflected in discussions of couple-level minority stress as they are useful for understanding how various stressors faced by people in same-sex relationships can increase their overall stress burden, both as individuals and as partners in a couple. The level of stress for a couple is not merely the sum of its two parts. Each partner's minority stress experiences can proliferate (create additional stress) through challenges relating to stress discrepancies and stress contagion. (LeBlanc, Frost, & Wight 2015; Frost et al. 2017). The relational outcomes of such dyadic minority stress processes could, at the very least, lead to conflict within couples and, if not addressed, could potentially lead

to the dissolution of the relationship. Literature suggests that individuals who experience minority stress are more likely to have negative mental health outcomes however, we know relatively little about the negative relationship outcomes resulting from couple-level minority stress experiences, including the role of dyadic minority stress processes that involve them (LeBlanc & Frost 2020).

Families of Origin and Sexual Minority Individuals

When sexual minority individuals share their sexual orientation with their families of origin, this information is often met with negative reactions. Some family members may feel shame or embarrassment due to their own discomfort with same-sex relationships; some may feel guilty and blame themselves in some way. For example, some parents of sexual minority children may feel they are “bad parents” who did something “wrong” to influence their child’s sexuality. Many families share religious beliefs that create moral conflicts surrounding homosexuality or bisexuality. Some individuals may additionally worry that their loved one (e.g., a child or a sibling) will have a more difficult life dealing with rejection from the larger society (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001).

Like people in other stigmatized relationship forms (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006), those in same-sex relationships often face negative family reactions that reinforce feelings of rejection (Beeler & DiProva, 1999), for example, when a family member refers to a partner as a “roommate.” In extreme cases, rejection by family members is manifested by verbal or physical abuse, lifelong estrangement, and for youth, being forced to leave home (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009; Beeler & DiProva, 1999). Although many families go through a process that results in eventual acceptance of sexual minority individuals (Beeler & DiProva, 1999), for others it can be an ongoing struggle. Negative family reactions contribute to feelings of devaluation, shame and anger as well as negative physical and mental health outcomes (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchex, 2010; Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001). For some, the fear of family rejection is so severe that it prevents sexual minority individuals from disclosing their sexual orientation altogether, further contributing to emotional distress, and requiring them to edit who they truly are while among family.

In this paper, we examine these familial experiences as a unique and powerful form of couple-level minority stress (LeBlanc et al., 2015; Frost et al., 2017). Specifically, we identify the range of experiences of limitations to participation in family of origin and the impact these experiences have on both members of the couple. It is important to examine these issues so that we have a deeper understanding of the forms and levels of minority stress couples endure and to develop strategies that help couples manage stress and to support same sex relationships.

Methods

Recruitment and Sample

One hundred and twenty same-sex couples participated in a qualitative phase of a large-scale, mixed-method study of same-sex couples’ experiences of minority stress and mental health, which was fielded between 2012 and 2013 in the greater Atlanta and San Francisco

Bay Areas. All study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at San Francisco State University. Participants in this qualitative phase were recruited using a modified targeted nonprobability sampling strategy (Meyer & Wilson, 2009; Watters & Biernacki, 1989). The team began by using an ethnographic approach to identify key locations and venues frequented by sexual minority populations in the two sites. Targeted locations included select neighborhoods and business districts. Targeted venues included, for example, grocery stores, hardware stores, childcare centers, churches/temples, parks, theaters, bars, and senior centers. Finally, the team disseminated study information through local mainstream and gay newspapers and appropriate websites, local listservs, and radio stations.

Eligibility criteria for participation in the qualitative study were that: (1) both partners were at least 21 years of age; (2) both individuals perceived of one another as their partner, and of themselves as a "couple"; and (3) at some point in their shared history, they had been engaged in a sexual relationship. Further, from among those meeting these eligibility criteria, couples were selectively enrolled to ensure they were evenly distributed by site, gender, and relationship duration (6 months to < 3 years; 3 years to < 7 years; and 7 years or more). Moreover, the total sample – and within each of the two study sites – at least 40 percent of the participating couples were couples in which one or both partners were persons of color.

Procedures

Each couple met on one occasion together with a trained interviewer for an audio-taped discussion lasting approximately two hours. Interviews took place in private research offices. Interviews were organized around the couples' joint creation of a "relationship timeline," along which they defined and discussed key events or periods of time–with some being discrete events and others more indicative of important transitions or turning points–over the course of their relationship. Interviews focused explicitly on the stressors that stemmed from these events and turning points.

Couples began by jointly creating a timeline that is anchored with "DATE WE MET" on one end, and "TODAY" toward the other end, leaving space for their envisioned future, wherein anticipated stressors may also reside. They then defined and labeled the key events or periods that occurred over time and rated these events together in terms of how stressful each event was on a scale of 0 (not at all) to 4 (very). After constructing and rating each event on the timeline, interviewers instructed participants to revisit the events listed on the line and mark any event that involved prejudice, discrimination, or other negative feelings related to their membership in a same-sex couple (i.e., designate events involving minority stress). The interviewers then applied an algorithm to participants' stress ratings to select a series of events in the couple's past, present, and imagined future to discuss in more detail. This process led to the identification of important events that contributed to their current understandings of their partnership, and provoked memories of the challenges associated with pivotal events and relationship transitions. The narrative component of the interview focused on couples' subjective experiences of stress, and the nature and context of those experiences, as well as how they attempted to manage any related difficulties as a couple. At

the completion of their interview, a $30 cash incentive was paid to each participant, or $60 per couple.

Seventeen distinct couple-level minority stressors were identified through qualitative data analysis by the parent study team (Frost et al., 2017). These unique couple-level minority stressors were the bases for the codebook and data were coded after having been entered into NVivo qualitative data analysis software. *Limits to Participation in Family of Origin* was one of the 17 emergent couple-level minority stressor codes and was reported by 18 couples. Details of the overall sampling, eligibility, timeline method, coding and preliminary analysis for the larger qualitative study are described in more detail elsewhere (de Vries et al., 2017).

Data Analysis

The sub-set of couples (N = 18) for the present analysis each discussed ways in which they experienced *limitations to participation in family of origin* on their relationship timeline interviews. All coded interviews were reviewed by two of the authors who met weekly to examine the narratives identified as examples of limitations to participation in family of origin. A narrative analysis focusing on interactions with family was conducted. This led to the identification of three general ways in which families or origin place limits on people in same-sex relationships: *partial rejection* from family; those who received *mixed messages* from their family; and those who experienced clear *rejection*. A second narrative analysis was conducted that focused on interactions within the couple, between partners, to examine how the stressful events discussed in the interview reflect dyadic minority stress processes.

Results

The diverse sample included seven female and eleven male couples. Eight couples were couples where both partners were White, two couples were couples where both partners were Black and eight couples were couples where the two partners had different racial/ethnic identities from one other. Six couples were in their relationship for less than three years, six were in their relationship over seven years, and the remaining six couples were in their relationship between three and six years. The ages of the individual partners in these couples ranged between 21 and 74 years of age. Six couples had age differences between partners that were greater than five years and 12 couples had age differences of five years or less. All eighteen couples reported some instance of feeling excluded or devalued by at least one of their families of origin, often in relation to a family event or holiday.

Partial acceptance.

Couples whose families accepted them partially tended to involve instances where one parent was accepting and one was not, or situations where siblings were accepting but parents were not. There were also generational factors, for example, some couples were encouraged not to tell grandparents on either side of the family that they were in a same-sex relationship, or even to falsely refer to one another only as roommates or friends. Families expressed a desire to protect older family members who might not understand deviations from a heteronormative lifestyle. Additionally, some of the couples had siblings who let it be known that they did not want their children to know that their aunt or uncle was lesbian or

gay, causing ongoing stress for same-sex couples given that they could not be honest with, or have close relationships with, some family members. The following female couple talks about no longer having a relationship with a niece and nephew after a sibling found out that they were lesbians.

> Partner A "They insist I visit by myself, without Partner B. And I feel conflicted because, I want to maintain… because I have a niece and nephew who at this point I haven't seen since like, Easter. So, it will be going on two full years. And I used to see them maybe four or five times a year."
>
> Partner B "And you were your niece and nephew's god mom? She was the god mom. So, I'm sure that changed."
>
> Partner A "Oh, yeah. I was in their will, that if they died, I would be their guardian."
>
> Partner B "But now you're not safe suddenly."
>
> Females, age 39 and 29, White,

Mixed messages.

Several participants were told by their parents that they and their partner were welcome to family gatherings and considered just like any other member of the family. However, at an actual event, couples were sometimes discouraged from acting like a couple. There were a number of instances where partners were excluded from family photographs while the heterosexual partners of other family members were included. This was hurtful to both partners, as illustrated in the words of one female participant in describing her experience regarding an event involving her partner's family.

> "I mean we knew there was stigma, but where it was just blatant…[Partner's] cousin was supposed to bring his girlfriend that no one had met to the event and that wasn't a question. But bringing me was an issue. I think your sister said that it would be okay [to attend] as long as we didn't act like a couple."
>
> Female, age 35, White

One male couple felt they must hide their relationship in order to be accepted.

> Partner A "Well his niece accepted us but the rest of his brothers and sisters didn't accept the fact that I was coming up as his partner. I mean it's like family pictures were him in all of them, not us as a couple."
>
> Partner B "So it's still a lot, they know we're a gay couple, but it's not talked about."
>
> Partner A "This is a friend of the family. Not even a roommate, I'm just a friend of the family."
>
> Males, 39 and 29, White

This theme of mixed messages is also evident in narratives where couples describe how their families communicate with them about family gatherings. The male couple below described their experiences in the following way.

Partner A “His brother had given us the wrong time for birthday parties so people wouldn’t have to see us there.”

Partner B “We’re always I mean we’re always going to be the different people in the family, right. So, there’s… there’s always some agreements or things that we hear about after the fact you know about why we weren’t invited to this or that you know.”

Males, both age 45, White

Rejection.

Some couples had families who overwhelmingly rejected them because of their sexual orientation. For example, one female participant described a difficult experience with her family regarding a potential holiday visit.

“Like, they called on New Year’s Day just to tell me not-like, if you were thinking of stopping and staying with us on the way to Florida, you can’t if [Partner] is with you, is basically why they called. Like months in advance.”

Female, age 29, White

Couples handled rejection in a variety of ways. Some spent holidays apart so that one or the other could be with their family of origin, and not upset the homeostasis that reinforces existing family dynamics. Some chose to spend holidays with friends. Regardless, family rejection, from either partner’s family of origin, had a negative impact on both partners. Interestingly, partners did seem to handle their frustration differently depending on whose family the rejection was coming from, and the following examples suggest how dyadic minority stress processes involving stress discrepancies and stress contagion can take shape.

Dyadic Minority Stress Processes.

Some partners expressed a desire to “fix” their partner’s relationships with their family or origin. “Fixers,” while typically well intended, gave unsolicited advice about how their partner should take the high road and embrace their rejecting family member, or alternatively, how they should challenge the family directly because of how hurtful the rejection is for their loved one. Pushing a partner beyond their comfort level created friction for some couples and represents a critical discrepancy in how partners may navigate significant minority stressors. This kind of pressure on a partner to fix their relationship with their family of origin so the two of them might spend the holidays together as a couple with them is illustrated in the following quote from a male participant.

“But Christmas is very… you know; you’ve got to be there at Christmas… you know. It’s too important for the family, and traditional. And, so I think I realized… oh, are we ever going to be able to spend Christmas Eve together? And that leads to, in order to do that, he has to, um open up or- keep living [as] two, two lives, basically.”

Male, age 53, White

More often than not, the partner with a rejecting family tended to rationalize or defend the behavior of their family to their partner. These partners were resigned to the fact that that

is how the family operates and upsetting the system was too scary to take on for fear they would be rejected completely. Thus, staying connected with their family of origin for some partners was at the cost of concealing their true selves, as well as the true nature of their relationship with their partner.

Within some couples both partners seem to agree that not making waves with rejecting families was a good way forward. Some couples seemed so grateful for being included at a family event that sitting in the back of the room or not sitting together was viewed as a minor inconvenience. This male participant illustrates this approach.

> "And we don't want to make anyone's life harder because we are a couple. But that's a choice we've made. I know there's plenty of people that say, 'I don't care what people think, we're a couple.' But I would rather let everyone live their life as happy as they can be and seeing us together or apart doesn't make a difference to us. So, like if we need to stand on opposite ends of the room, to me that's what we would do just to make it."
>
> Male, age 40, White

Another male participant felt that in time, his relationship would have value in the eyes of his family,

> "It's not like us getting married and people are gonna be thrilled about it. There's still people in our families that aren't gonna be happy we even want to do it. That's why we wanted 20 (Meaning, 20 years together before getting married). From the very beginning we said if we are together for 20 years, we'll do something. Now it's getting closer cuz it is 15 years this year. But it's like, for us, the 20th makes us finally feel like we did something big."
>
> Male, age 40, Hispanic

For many however, family rejection, regardless of which partner's family or which family member, was hurtful, as illustrated by this male participant's reflection on how his family's rejection diminishes his partner.

> "And my parents not being accepting of us makes it… makes him feel small, insignificant when they're present because he feels ignored and unvalued as a part of my life."
>
> Male, age 35, White

Collectively, these narratives shine a light on the dyadic minority stress processes that have been understudied in previous research. Partner descriptions of how they experience and respond to limitations to participation in their own, or their partners', family or origin suggest that minority stress processes of proliferation stemming from stress discrepancies and stress contagion strain not only their well-being as individuals, but also their collective well-being as couples. Stress discrepancies are illustrated in these data with the examples of how some partners take on the role of "fixers" of their partner's relationships with their family of origin. Stress contagion examples are illustrated with the illustrations of how mutual resignations to accept the limitations on participation imposed by either partner's

family of origin, as well as with depictions of how one partner recognizing how their own family's rejection is challenging not only for themselves, but also for their partner.

Discussion

Family of origin relationships are often strained for people in same-sex relationships. In these qualitative data, a common theme among the couples who reported limitations to participation in their, or their partner's, family of origin is the awareness of, and struggles with, not fitting in or not being let in. Efforts to try to be welcomed in often led couples to make challenging concessions. Those who were able to have some kind of a relationship with their families of origin sometimes did so at the cost of compromising themselves, their partners, and ultimately their relationships with one another. For example, couple conflict occurred when partners navigated family rejection in discrepant ways. Specifically, seeing one's partner passivity or acceptance in response to rejection from their family of origin as the way it is was stressful to observing partner who felt that change was possible. However, their efforts to intervene and "fix" the situation usually made the things worse. This exemplifies a key minority stress discrepancy in how same-sex partners manage minority stress, subsequently creating additional stress for both. Moreover, limitations to participation in families of origin may be contagious between partners as well as partners suffer these challenges together, with stress increasing as a direct result of seeing one another face familial rejection. In both cases, stressful experiences beget more stressful experience through processes of minority stress proliferation and diminish the well-being of both partners as individuals, and that of their relationship (LeBlanc et al., 2015; Frost et al. 2017; Frost, 2011; Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006). Future longitudinal analysis of couple-level minority stressors and dyadic minority stress processes must strive to provide deeper understandings of how the effects of minority stress processes involving couple-level minority stressors like limitations to participation in family of origin become manifest in the lives of people in same-sex relationships. Their effects on sexual intimacy, power dynamics, and relationship satisfaction, for example, are unknown. Future research must simultaneously also work toward identifying the most effective coping mechanisms employed by individuals and by couples that may make people in same-sex relationships more resilient to such pernicious couple-level minority stressors and dyadic stress processes involving them.

The narratives from the present study focused on instances of family rejection that contribute to minority stress for same-sex couples. However, this study did not explore psychosocial factors that help same-sex couples to mitigate such stressors, such as resilience resources like social support and coping strategies. Previous research has found that a large proportion of sexual minority individuals seeking support (i.e., Who would you go to if you needed to borrow a large amount of money? Who could you rely on in making important decisions?), go to their families of origin for that support. This varied somewhat by gender, in that women were more likely than men to go to family for major support but both genders sought major support from family, and this was consistent across race/ethnicity (Black, Latino, White) (Frost, Meyer, and Schwartz, 2016). Such findings suggest that being able to rely on family is critically important for many sexual minority individuals. Findings from the present study illustrate the tensions within families when sexual minority family members

and their partners are not fully accepted. Future research is needed for more fully explore the determinants and consequences of inadequate social supports from family among people in same-sex relationships (Frost et al. 2017; Neilands et al. 2020). Like minority stressors, such resources are usefully conceptualized and assessed at both the individual and couple levels, which highlights the need for more theorizing and data analyses that adopt a dyadic perspective. Certainly, there are many aspects of same-sex relationships that serve as buffers to family stress. Given previous research suggests that sexual minority individuals benefit from the support of their peers and similar others (i.e., someone who is known to share their stigmatized identity/characteristic) (Frable et al., 1998; Frost & Meyer, 2009: Frost et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2009; Beeler & DiProva, 1999), it would be helpful to understand potential ways in which same-sex couples uniquely support other same-sex couples.

One important implication of this study is that it highlights the need for providers to be vigilant about family-of-origin dynamics at play among their clients in same sex relationships. Specifically, there is a high tolerance for being treated badly by one's own family, and to downplay the stress it causes. Providers who work with individuals must help clients acknowledge the hurt and additional stress that results from such challenges and encourage positive coping strategies. For example, it is important to find ways to help them people in same-sex relationships reframe the discrepancies of stress experience within couples in productive ways, as well as to better understand their experiences of stress contagion in order to more effectively manage through difficult shared experiences and support one another.

There are a number of limitations to this study. This purposive sample was recruited in two large metropolitan areas. Consequently, generalizing to the larger sexual minority couple's population should be done with caution due to the geographically limited nature of this self-selected group that was willing to participate in the study. In addition, the sample size of N = 18 couples is relatively small so findings should be interpreted conservatively. Although the sample is racially/ethnically diverse, cultural factors related to family acceptance were not explored in this manuscript. The qualitative nature of the present study does not allow us to use established quantitative measures to test associations between indicators of couple-level minority stress and negative health and relationship outcomes, although emerging quantitative studies have begun to address relevant themes (LeBlanc et al. 2018; LeBlanc & Frost 2020; Frost & LeBlanc 2022). These and future studies that addresses such association longitudinally will be especially helpful in identifying strategies to mitigate the unique minority stress process that support the well-being of people in same-sex relationships, as individuals and as couples.

Conclusion

For all kinds of couples, family-of-origin relationships can be complex and challenging even in the best of circumstances. Family tensions stemming from the stigmatization of same-sex relationships by society at large – couple-level minority stressors – can be especially difficult to manage and difficult for families of origin, sexual minority persons, and their same-sex partners to reconcile. Couples in the present study described some key ways in which they experience unique minority stress processes that result from limitations to participation in

either their or their partner's family of origin. More research is needed to further understand the scope of these harmful stress experiences and to develop psychosocial resources (e.g., support systems, coping strategies) to help same-sex couples manage them.

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