



Relationship dynamics around depression in gay and lesbian couples



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ABSTRACT

Research on intimate relationship dynamics around depression has primarily focused on heterosexual couples. This body of work shows that wives are more likely than husbands to offer support to a depressed spouse. Moreover, when wives are depressed, they are more likely than husbands to try and shield their spouse from the stress of their own depression. Yet, previous research has not examined depression and relationship dynamics in gay and lesbian couples. We analyze in-depth interviews with 26 gay and lesbian couples (N = 52 individuals) in which one or both partners reported depression. We find evidence that dominant gender scripts are both upheld and challenged within gay and lesbian couples, providing important insight into how gender operates in relation to depression within same-sex contexts. Our results indicate that most gay and lesbian partners offer support to a depressed partner, yet lesbian couples tend to follow a unique pattern in that they provide support both as the non-depressed and depressed partner. Support around depression is sometimes viewed as improving the relationship, but if the support is intensive or rejected, it is often viewed as contributing to relationship strain. Support is also sometimes withdrawn by the non-depressed partner because of caregiver exhaustion or the perception that the support is unhelpful. This study points to the importance of considering depression within gay and lesbian relational contexts, revealing new ways support sustains and strains intimate partnerships. We emphasize the usefulness of deploying couple-level approaches to better understand depression in sexual minority populations.

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Depression typically occurs in the context of social relationships, perhaps most saliently in intimate relationships. Depression clearly shapes intimate relationship dynamics, but past research on relationship dynamics around depression is primarily limited to heterosexual marriages. These studies show that relationship quality decreases in response to depression of a partner (Najman et al., 2014; Whisman and Bruce, 1999) and that being married to someone with depression increases one's own risk of depression (Coyne et al., 1987; Siegel et al., 2004; Thomeer et al., 2013). At the same time, spouses often work together to alleviate depression, and these experiences may counterintuitively enhance intimacy and help sustain relationships (Sharabi et al., 2015). Moreover, these experiences depend on whether considering the husband's or the

wife's depression, as intimate relationship dynamics within heterosexual marriage—and depression processes more generally—are strongly gendered wherein gendered scripts and structures stipulate how women and men react to both their own and their spouse's depression (Apesoa-Varano et al., 2015; Bottorff et al., 2013; Oliffe et al., 2011; Reczek and Umberson, 2012; Thomeer et al., 2013).

Despite significant research on depression within heterosexual marriage, relatively little is known about within-couple relationship dynamics around depression in gay and lesbian relationships. It is unclear how gay and lesbian couples interact in response to a partner's depression or the similarities and differences between gay couples' and lesbian couples' approaches. These issues are critical given that most gay and lesbian people are in an intimate relationship (Gates, 2015) and given that mental health scholars have consistently demonstrated that gay- and lesbian-identified adults have higher rates of depression than heterosexual-identified adults (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2009; Hsieh, 2014; Mays

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and Cochran, 2001; Meyer, 1995, 2003). Further, because past studies of intimate relationships and depression focus on relationships between a man and a woman, empirical examination of depression and interpersonal dynamics in gay and lesbian relationships advances understanding of gendered depression experiences across diverse relationship contexts.

In this study, we use dyadic qualitative methods to examine relationship dynamics of gay and lesbian couples wherein depression is reported by one or both partners. In our analysis of in-depth couple-linked interviews with 52 adults in 26 long-term gay and lesbian relationships, we ask: What are the relationship dynamics around depression within gay and lesbian couples? The present study builds on recent calls to examine how mental health processes are experienced jointly by both partners within gay and lesbian relationships (LeBlanc et al., 2015; Umberson et al., 2015a). In doing so, we consider how depression within gay and lesbian relationships is not an individual experience; rather, depression reverberates between partners in ways that demonstrate both resilience and vulnerability in relationships.

1. Background

Gay and lesbian adults have higher rates of depression, more depressive symptoms, and higher suicide rates than heterosexuals (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2009; Mays and Cochran, 2001; Meyer, 2003; Russell, 2003). The minority stress framework articulates that this mental health disadvantage is due to the higher levels of stress gay and lesbian adults face, including individual and institutional discrimination, prejudice, and homonegativity (Meyer, 1995). Previous research has paid close attention to minority stress theory to determine sexual minority mental health disadvantage, and most work in this area examines depression among gay men and lesbian women at the individual level (see Institute of Medicine (2011) for overview). Although this individual-focused research is important, the majority of gay and lesbian adults are in some form of intimate relationship (Gates, 2015). Intimate relationships are potentially important resources for depressed gay and lesbian individuals, as gay and lesbian adults in intimate relationships have lower rates of depression than single gay and lesbian adults (Ayala and Coleman, 2000; Oetjen and Rothblum, 2000). At the same time, intimate relationships could be an obstacle to recovery; dysfunctional interpersonal relationships, characterized by high conflict and low support, can exacerbate depressive symptoms and increase the risk for chronic and recurrent depression (Hammen, 2006). LeBlanc and colleagues recently argued for greater attention to gay and lesbian intimate relationships within a minority stress framework, stating, “More work is needed to foster deeper understandings of individual mental health as it is influenced not only by individual-level stressors but also by stressors inherently and uniquely tied to their experiences as partners in close [gay and lesbian] relationships” (2015: 45). Within this perspective, depression is not something faced in isolation but is experienced, for better or worse, through dyadic processes within the context of an intimate relationship. We extend this research call, but shift the focus from the ways in which individual mental health is influenced by experiences within gay and lesbian relationships to the ways in which individual mental health itself shapes gay and lesbian relationship dynamics.

Few studies to date examine how gay and lesbian relationship dynamics are shaped by depression. The ways in which depressed people are affected by and affect their intimate partners has been empirically examined in studies of heterosexual relationships and, to a lesser extent, lesbian relationships, though not gay relationships (Butterworth and Rodgers, 2006; Henderson et al., 2009; Holahan et al., 2007; Otis et al., 2006a; Sharabi et al., 2015;

Thomeer et al., 2013; Whisman, 2001; Whisman and Uebelacker, 2009). These studies consistently show that depression is detrimental to relationship quality and sexual satisfaction. Potentially positive consequences of depression for relationship dynamics are examined less often, though one study of heterosexual couples indicates that depression may enhance relationship intimacy (Sharabi et al., 2015).

Gender differences in interpersonal dynamics within intimate relationships around depression are likely shaped by social constructions of gender. Gender constructions in turn influence gender scripts (i.e., expectations regarding men's and women's behaviors in social interactions which conform to social understandings of gender), which vary depending on whether one is in a relationship with a man or a woman, reflecting a gender-as-relational theoretical perspective (Moore, 2008; Springer et al., 2012; Umberson et al., 2015b). An understanding of gendered relationship dynamics around depression is limited because prior qualitative studies examine heterosexual couples only (Bottorff et al., 2013; Harper and Sandberg, 2009; Oliffe et al., 2011; Sandberg et al., 2002; Sharabi et al., 2015; Thomeer et al., 2013). These studies demonstrate that heterosexual men's and women's experiences with depression within intimate relationships are largely structured around discourses of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. Hegemonic masculinity, the dominant culture's ideals of being a man, emphasizing strength, stoicism, and self-reliance, is constructed in relation to emphasized femininity, defined as compliance to patriarchy through women conforming to the needs and desires of men (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). For example, in a recent study of depression within heterosexual couples, Thomeer et al. (2013) found that a depressed wife often works to protect her husband from her own depression, sometimes even actively concealing her depression from her husband. Yet other studies demonstrate that although many women work to achieve gendered ideals, in practice the strain of living with someone with depression often causes this gender script to break down and patience and care from a wife to her depressed husband has its limits (Bottorff et al., 2013; Oliffe et al., 2011). Support from husbands is markedly different than support from wives largely due to these gender constructions within marriage; in fact, one study found that the husband sometimes denies the seriousness of his wife's depression, such as by telling his wife to “get over it” and justifying these dynamics by saying that, as a man, he is unable to understand or help with his wife's emotions (Thomeer et al., 2013).

Considering gay and lesbian couples allows us to extend current understanding of how gender operates within intimate relationships. Studies of heterosexual couples emphasize gender difference, focusing largely on the ways in which men and women are constructed as distinct and opposite from one another. Based on this perspective, we would expect depression to impact interpersonal dynamics differently in lesbian compared to gay relationships, with gay couple dynamics being largely informed by masculinity discourses and lesbian couple dynamics being informed by femininity discourses. There is some support for this perspective from past studies which find that broader social constructions of women as emotional experts and natural nurturers and men as self-sufficient and incompetent at understanding emotions also seem to be operating within gay and lesbian relationship contexts (Rosenfield et al., 2005; Simon and Nath, 2004; Umberson et al., 2015b). For example, studies comparing gay and lesbian couples show that lesbian women provide substantial emotion work (i.e., activities done with the intention of changing an emotional state, Hochschild, 1979) more frequently in their intimate relationships than do gay men and that lesbian women desire fewer emotional boundaries between partners than do gay men (Rothblum, 2009; Umberson et al., 2015b). These gender

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