

Same-sex relationships and minority stress

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Same-sex relationships are stigmatized in a culture that privileges heterosexual relationships. This stigma creates minority stress in the lives of same-sex couples. We review current research on minority stress and same-sex relationships using an ecological framework to conceptualize the sources of minority stress that impact couples. Findings from this review suggest a need for research that moves conceptually and methodologically beyond a focus on the individual to a focus on the dyad and the interpersonal, institutional, and cultural sources of minority stress that affect couple relationships. Focusing on the strengths and resiliencies of same-sex couples will also extend the research. Creating effective dyadic interventions will promote the health and well-being of same-sex couples and their families.

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Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) identified people form and maintain their intimate partnered relationships in a culture that privileges heterosexual identities and relationships and stigmatizes same-sex relationships. Heteronormativity, and the resulting prejudice and discrimination against same-sex relationships, is enacted at all levels of the socio-ecological system and negatively affects the health and well-being of same-sex couples and their families through the creation of minority stress [1,2]. In this system, prejudice and discrimination at one level affects actions in all other levels of the system (Figure 1).

In U.S. culture the stigmatizing narrative about same-sex relationships (and LGB or non-heterosexual identities more generally) is based on negative beliefs and stereotypes that support and reinforce discriminatory laws and policies, prejudicial treatment by religious and community organizations, and rejection by family members.

These negative beliefs may be internalized by LGB-identified individuals and impact their feelings and interactions within their couple relationship. Minority stressors, their sources in the ecological system, and their impact on same-sex couple relationships are the subject of this review.

Minority stress and dyadic relationships

Minority stress is the chronic psychological stress that results from belonging to a stigmatized social category [3,4]. Minority stress is linked to psychological [4] and physical health disparities in the LGB population [5–7]. Minority stress includes five factors: experiences of discrimination and prejudice, expectations of rejection, making decisions about disclosure or concealment, internalized stigma or negative views of one's own identity as LGB or same-sex partnered, and coping with these stress experiences.

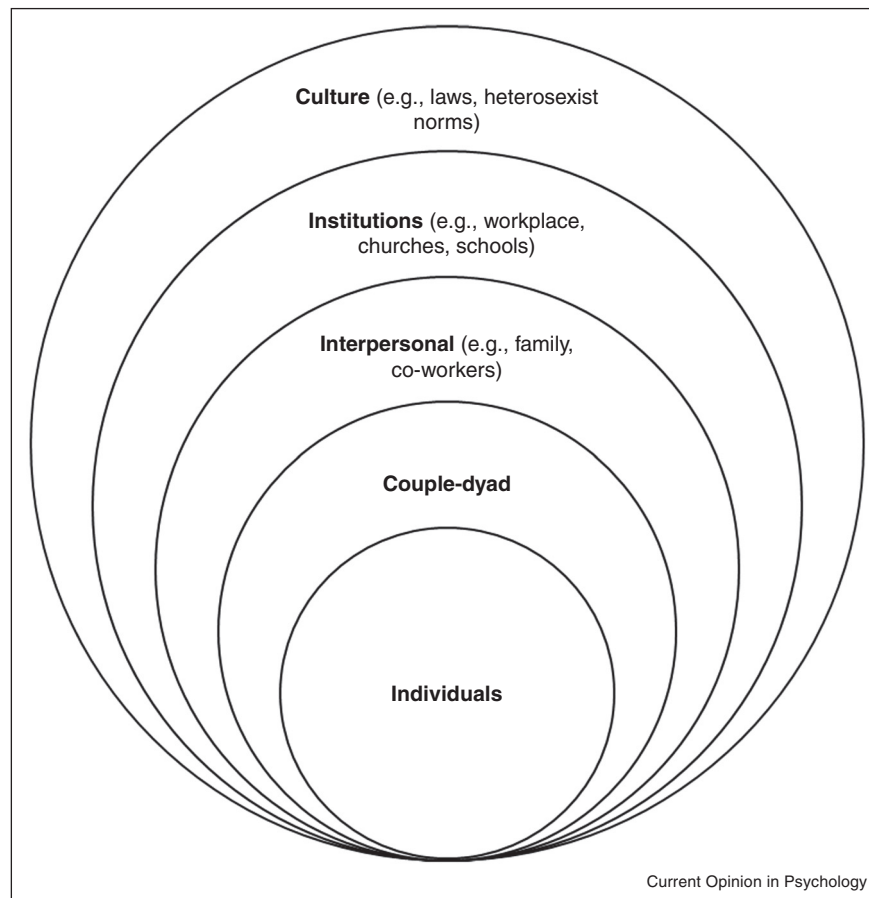
Each minority stress factor can trigger others. For example, experiences of discrimination and prejudice can lead to expectations of rejection. Experiences of discrimination or expectations of rejection impact decisions about whether, when, and to whom to disclose or conceal a same-sex relationship. Rejection or identity concealment may reinforce internalized stigma about LGB identity or having a same-sex partner. Finding ways to cope with prejudice and its effects is a stressor in itself, especially when negative coping strategies exacerbate stress.

Couples experience and respond to minority stressors as a dyad. Minority stress that affects one couple member will also affect the partner [8]. For example, if a family member is rejecting, it affects both members of the couple and they must cope with this rejection as a couple [9]. This minority stress can affect the quality of the couple's relationship. Despite this known interdependency, dyadic-level minority stressors have received much less conceptual and empirical attention than individual level minority stress [10^{**},11^{**}]. However, findings from our research and other research studies have consistently demonstrated the negative (and sometimes positive) impact of contextual sources of minority stress on same-sex relationships.

Systemic sources of minority stress

The socio-ecological system we refer to is a set of nested intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural levels (Figure 1). It is essential to understand that minority stress is the result of the stigma that manifests within and between each of these levels, and this stress impacts the well-being of couples [11^{**}]. We have conducted

Figure 1



Same-sex couples live in a socio-ecological system composed of nested levels. Interactions at any level of the system affect all of the other levels of the system. All levels of the system impact the couple relationship.

research focused on identifying the sources of stress at the different levels of the socio-ecological system.

At the macro-level, governmental and political processes directly impact couples through laws and policies that reflect the cultural stigmatization of same-sex couples and LGB identities. For example, the lack of legal rights, including relationship recognition and protection, are sources of feelings of vulnerability and instability in same-sex relationships [2,12]. During state-level campaigns for marriage restriction amendments in 2006, LGB adults reported increased exposure to stigmatizing conversations and negative media messages about LGBT people and same-sex couples, increasing their psychological distress [13]. Qualitative analyses revealed that LGB adults felt alienated by the pervasive negative rhetoric, the ultimate passage of marriage restriction amendments in their state, and the lack of legal protections for their relationships and their children [14]. LGB adults in same-sex relationships who lived in states with no legal recognition of their relationship reported

higher levels of internalized homophobia, more psychological distress, and less meaning in life compared to those who lived in states that did provide legal recognition (i.e., civil marriage, civil union, or domestic partnership) [15].

Couples also experience stigma in their interactions with organizations and communities. For example, same-sex couple members are less likely to be 'out' in their own workplace if *their partner's workplace* does not have an inclusive nondiscrimination policy [8]. Prejudice within some religious communities is a source of minority stress [16] affecting couples' decisions about their religious and spiritual practices [17]. Interracial same-sex couples described negative experiences of being 'invisible' to others as a couple. For example, people in their neighborhood, churches, or other social networks failed to recognize or acknowledge their couple relationship. These couples noted that in some social situations they concealed their relationship because of fear of race-related or sexual identity-related discrimination [18].

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