



Sexual Orientation and Marriage

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Minority Stress in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Individuals

Psychological and psychiatric experts have agreed since 1975 that homosexuality is neither a form of mental illness nor a symptom of mental illness (Conger, 1975). Nonetheless, there is growing recognition that social prejudice, discrimination, and violence against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals take a cumulative toll on the well-being of these individuals. Researchers (e.g., DiPlacido, 1998; Meyer, 2003) use the term “minority stress” to refer to the negative effects associated with the adverse social conditions experienced by individuals who belong to a stigmatized social group (e.g., the elderly, members of racial and ethnic minority groups, the physically disabled, women, the poor or those on welfare, or individuals who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual).

A recent meta-analysis of population-based epidemiological studies showed that lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations have higher rates of stress-related psychiatric disorders (such as those related to anxiety, mood, and substance use) than do heterosexual populations (Meyer, 2003). These differences are not large but are relatively consistent across studies (e.g., Cochran & Mays, 2000; Cochran, Sullivan, & Mays, 2003; Gilman et al., 2001; Mays & Cochran, 2001). Meyer also provided evidence that within lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations, those who more frequently felt stigmatized or discriminated against because of their sexual orientation, who had to conceal their homosexuality, or who were prevented from affiliating with other lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals tended to report more frequent mental health concerns. Research also shows that compared to heterosexual individuals and couples, gay and lesbian individuals and couples experience economic disadvantages (e.g., Badgett,

2001). Finally, the violence associated with hate crimes puts lesbians, gay men, and bisexual individuals at risk for physical harm to themselves, their families, and their property (D’Augelli, 1998; Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999). Taken together, the evidence clearly supports the position that the social stigma, prejudice, discrimination, and violence associated with not having a heterosexual sexual orientation and the hostile and stressful social environments created thereby adversely affect the psychological, physical, social, and economic well-being of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals.

Same-Sex Couples

Research indicates that many gay men and lesbians want and have committed relationships. For example, survey data indicate that between 40% and 60% of gay men and between 45% and 80% of lesbians are currently involved in a romantic relationship (e.g., Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994; Falkner & Garber, 2002; Morris, Balsam, & Rothblum, 2002). Further, data from the 2000 U.S. Census (Simmons & O’Connell, 2003) indicate that of the 5.5 million couples who were living together but not married, about 1 in 9 (594,391) had partners of the same sex. Although the Census data are almost certainly an underestimate of the actual number of cohabiting same-sex couples, they indicated that a male householder and a male partner headed 301,026 households and that a female householder and a female partner headed 293,365 households.¹

Despite persuasive evidence that gay men and lesbians have committed relationships, three concerns about same-sex couples are often raised. A first concern is that the relationships of gay men and lesbians are dysfunctional and unhappy. To the contrary, studies that have compared partners from same-sex couples to partners from heterosexual



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couples on standardized measures of relationship quality (such as satisfaction and commitment) have found partners from same-sex and heterosexual couples to be equivalent to each other (see reviews by Peplau & Beals, 2004; Peplau & Spalding, 2000).

A second concern is that the relationships of gay men and lesbians are unstable. However, research indicates that, despite the somewhat hostile social climate within which same-sex relationships develop, many lesbians and gay men have formed durable relationships. For example, survey data indicate that between 18% and 28% of gay couples and between 8% and 21% of lesbian couples have lived together 10 or more years (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Bryant & Demian, 1994; Falkner & Garber, 2002; Kurdek, 2003). Researchers (e.g., Kurdek, 2004) have also speculated that the stability of same-sex couples would be enhanced if partners from same-sex couples enjoyed the same levels of social support and public recognition of their relationships as partners from heterosexual couples do.

A third concern is that the processes that affect the well-being and permanence of the relationships of lesbian and gay persons are different from those that affect the relationships of heterosexual persons. In fact, research has found that the factors that predict relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and relationship stability are remarkably similar for both same-sex cohabiting couples and heterosexual married couples (Kurdek, 2001, 2004).

RESOLUTION

WHEREAS the American Psychological Association (APA) has a long-established policy to deplore “all public and private discrimination against gay men and lesbians” and urges “the repeal of all discriminatory legislation against lesbians and gay men” (Conger, 1975, p. 633); and

WHEREAS the APA adopted the Resolution on Legal Benefits for Same-Sex Couples in 1998 (Levant, 1998, pp. 665–666); and

WHEREAS discrimination and prejudice based on sexual orientation detrimentally affect psychological, physical, social, and economic well-being (Badgett, 2001; Cochran et al., 2003; Herek et al., 1999; Meyer, 2003); and

WHEREAS “anthropological research on households, kinship relationships, and families, across cultures and through

time, provides no support whatsoever for the view that either civilization or viable social orders depend upon marriage as an exclusively heterosexual institution” (American Anthropological Association, 2004); and

WHEREAS psychological research on relationships and couples provides no evidence to justify discrimination against same-sex couples (Kurdek, 2001, 2004; Peplau & Beals, 2004; Peplau & Spalding, 2000); and

WHEREAS the institution of civil marriage confers a social status (Donovan, 2003; *Goodridge v. Dept. of Public Health*, 2003; Johnson, 2000; Kujovich, 2000; *Maynard v. Hill*, 1888; *Turner v. Safley*, 1987) and important legal benefits, rights, and privileges (*Baehr v. Lewin*, 1993; *Baker v. State*, 1999; *Goodridge v. Dept. of Public Health*, 2003); and

WHEREAS the U.S. General Accounting Office (2004) has identified over 1,000 federal statutory provisions in which marital status is a factor in determining or receiving benefits, rights, and privileges, for example, those concerning taxation, federal loans, and dependent and survivor benefits (e.g., Social Security, military, and veterans); and

WHEREAS there are numerous state, local, and private sector laws and other provisions in which marital status is a factor in determining or receiving benefits, rights, and privileges, for example, those concerning taxation, health insurance, health care decision making, property rights, pension and retirement benefits, and inheritance (*Baehr v. Lewin*, 1993; *Baker v. State*, 1999; *Goodridge v. Dept. of Public Health*, 2003); and

WHEREAS same-sex couples are denied equal access to civil marriage (Eskridge, 1999); and

WHEREAS same-sex couples who enter into a civil union are denied equal access to all the benefits, rights, and privileges provided by federal law to married couples (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2004) (Eskridge, 2001; Recent Legislation, Act Relating to Civil Unions, 2001; Strasser, 2000); and

WHEREAS the benefits, rights, and privileges associated with domestic partnerships are not universally available (Allison, 2003), are not equal to those associated with marriage (Shin, 2002; Strasser, 2002), and are rarely portable (Knauer, 2002; Shin, 2002, Strasser, 2002); and

WHEREAS people who also experience discrimination based on age, race, ethnicity, disability, gender and gender identity, religion, and socioeconomic status may especially benefit

from access to marriage for same-sex couples (Division 44/Committee on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns Joint Task Force, 2000);

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the APA believes that it is unfair and discriminatory to deny same-sex couples legal access to civil marriage and to all its attendant benefits, rights, and privileges;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the APA shall take a leadership role in opposing all discrimination in legal benefits, rights, and privileges against same-sex couples;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the APA encourages psychologists to act to eliminate all discrimination against same-sex couples in their practice, research, education and training (APA, 2002, p. 1063);

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the APA shall provide scientific and educational resources that inform public discussion and public policy development regarding sexual orientation and marriage and that assist its members, divisions, and affiliated state, provincial, and territorial psychological associations.

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ENDNOTE

1. The same-sex couples identified in the U.S. Census may include couples in which one or both partners are bisexually identified, rather than gay or lesbian identified.

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