

Psychological Distress, Well-Being, and Legal Recognition in Same-Sex Couple Relationships

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Legal recognition of same-sex couple relationships provides at least some material benefits to couple members; however, few studies have examined the associations between legal recognition and psychological distress or well-being. Using an online survey sample of 2,677 lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) individuals, participants were placed in 4 groups: single, dating, in a committed relationship, and in a legally recognized relationship. Analyses revealed that participants in committed or legally recognized relationships reported less psychological distress (i.e., internalized homophobia, depressive symptoms, and stress) and more well-being (i.e., the presence of meaning in life) than single participants. Significant group differences and multivariate analyses indicated that participants in a legally recognized relationship reported less internalized homophobia, fewer depressive symptoms, lower levels of stress, and more meaning in their lives than those in committed relationships, even after controlling for other factors. The need for further research on the psychological benefits of legal relationship recognition for same-sex couples is discussed.

Keywords: lesbian/gay, same-sex couples, marriage, minority stress, relationship commitment

During the life course, the vast majority of individuals will enter into a committed relationship with an intimate partner as observed in the first part of the traditional rhyme, “First comes love, then comes marriage.” In the United States, most adults will fulfill this social script by entering into a civil marriage with an other-sex partner (i.e., a heterosexual marriage). For lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB), and same-sex attracted individuals, however, their committed intimate relationships are formed largely without civil sanction or legal recognition (e.g., civil union, domestic partnership, civil marriage).

Marriage provides many material benefits as well as enhanced or protected physical and psychological health (e.g., Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005). Overall, research findings have indicated that married adults report lower

levels of psychological distress and higher levels of mental health and well-being in comparison to single adults and those in cohabiting heterosexual adult partnerships (e.g., Wu & Hart, 2002). Although there are few restrictions on the civil opportunities for heterosexual marriage, same-sex couples have far fewer opportunities for legal recognitions of their relationships. Also, same-sex couple relationships are created and maintained in a stigmatizing macro-environmental context that contributes to minority stress and the lack of social support (e.g., Oswald, Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & Clausell, 2008; Rostosky, Riggle, Gray, & Hatton, 2007).

Same-sex couples commonly report the desire for the legal protections and benefits as well as the social support and cultural legitimacy associated with legal recognition of an intimate relationship (e.g., Lannutti, 2008). In the United States, fewer than one in four same-sex couples live in a jurisdiction in which some form of legal recognition of their relationship by state or local government is available (Gates, Badgett, & Ho, 2008); therefore, very little is known about the psychological benefits that members of same-sex couples in legally recognized partnerships may enjoy (Herdt & Kertzner, 2006; Herek, 2006).

In this study, we extended previous findings on the psychological benefits for spouses in heterosexual marriage. We hypothesized that individuals in legally recognized same-sex relationships would report lower levels of psychological distress (i.e., internalized homophobia, depressive symptoms, and stress) and higher levels of psychological well-being (i.e., meaning in life) compared to individuals who were single, dating, or in committed relationships.

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Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants who identified as LGB, same-gender loving, or partnered, were 18 or older, and were U.S. citizens or residents were recruited via targeted email listserv announcements and website postings inviting them to complete an online survey concerning their attitudes and experiences related to the debate over marriage rights for same-sex couples. The online survey included an informed consent page and participants could request information about the results of the survey. A total of 2,677 participants completed the survey. The sample was 57% women, 88.4% White/European American, participants reported living in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, the mean age was 39 years ($SD = 12.5$), and 26.2% reported they were the parent of a child. The average annual personal income category was \$40,000 to \$50,000. Over 70% of the sample reported having a BA or higher degree; 18.7% of the sample reported being college students and 64% were employed full time. Participants indicated their current relationship status. Participants in a committed relationship reported a shorter average relationship length (7.8 years, $SD = 7.4$) than participants in a civil marriage, civil union, or domestic partnership (11.2 years, $SD = 7.9$); by definition, participants who were single or dating but not committed did not report a relationship length with a current partner.

Measures

Independent variable. Relationship status included four groups: participants who reported being single ($n = 542$); dating but not committed ($n = 179$); in a committed relationship with a same-sex partner ($n = 1,353$); and with a legal status, either a registered domestic partnership, civil union, or a civil marriage with a same-sex partner ($n = 406$). Participants who indicated that they were widowed, separated, divorced, in a relationship with an opposite-sex partner, or did not answer the question were dropped from further analyses ($n = 197$).

Dependent variables. Perceived stress was measured using the Perceived Stress Scale–Short (PSS4; Cohen & Williamson, 1988). The 4-item scale assessed the degree to which participants perceived the previous month to be stressful for them. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). Scores were summed and lower scores indicate less reported perceived stress. In the current sample, these questions were included on the survey form for 1,766 participants (i.e., the scale was added to the original survey during a revision). Alpha reliability for the current sample was .82.

Depressive symptoms were assessed using the 10-item Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale–Short Form (CES–D–S; Andresen, Malmgren, Carter, & Patrick, 1994). Each item was measured on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*rarely or none of the time*) to 4 (*all of the time*; two items reverse scored). Scores were summed to create a composite measure and lower scores indicate fewer

depressive symptoms. Alpha reliability for the current sample of LGB individuals was .86.

Internalized homophobia was assessed using The Internalized Homophobia Scale (Wright & Perry, 2006), a self-report inventory comprised of nine items, with each item on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). Item responses were summed to create a composite measure, with lower scores indicating lower levels of internalized homophobia. For this sample, alpha reliability was .81.

The presence of meaning in life was measured using a 5-item index from Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler (2006). Responses indicated agreement with items on a scale ranging from 1 (*absolutely untrue*) to 7 (*absolutely true*). Higher scores indicate greater levels of the presence of meaning in life. In the current sample, these questions were included on the survey form for 1,766 participants. Alpha reliability for the current sample was .91.

Control variables. Sex was coded as 0 (*male*) and 1 (*female*). Education was measured as six categories, ranging from 0 (*less than a high school degree*) to 5 (*a doctorate or professional degree*). Participants reported the length of their current relationship in number of years. Participants were coded as 0 (*not having children*) or 1 (*having children*).

Results

The means and standard deviations for the four relationship status groups on the dependent variables are displayed (Table 1). Hypothesis testing was performed by a one-way analysis of variance with the dependent variables and the independent variable of relationship status. Post hoc Bonferroni comparisons were conducted to determine significant differences in means between the groups. Single respondents reported significantly higher levels of stress, depressive symptoms, and internalized homophobia and lower levels of the presence of meaning in life than respondents who were in a committed or legal relationship. Dating respondents reported higher levels on the dependent variables than legal respondents (and differed from committed respondents only on internalized homophobia). Committed respondents reported significantly higher levels of stress, depressive symptoms, and internalized homophobia and lower levels of the presence of meaning than those in legal relationships. Cohen's d for the significant differences indicates small to medium size effects for the significant differences; these effects correspond to an increase in risk for higher levels of stress, depressive symptoms, and internalized homophobia, and the risk of lower levels of meaning in life.

The primary purpose of the study was to examine the association between legal relationship recognition and psychological outcomes beyond the benefits associated with being in a committed relationship with no legal status. Therefore, the multivariate models included only participants in committed relationships (coded 0) and those in legal relationships (coded 1). The results of the regression models predicting stress, depressive symptoms, internalized homophobia, and meaning in life are shown in Table 2. Female participants reported more stress and depressive symptoms; more educated participants reported less stress, fewer depressive symptoms, and more

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Effect Sizes of Significant Mean Differences of Psychological Distress Between Single, Dating, Committed, and Legal Participants

Dependent variables	Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i> ^a		
				Dating	Committed	Legal
Stress (range 4–20)	Single	10.48	3.36	<i>ns</i>	.32	.62
	Dating	9.82	3.05	—	<i>ns</i>	.41
	Committed	9.47	3.13	—	—	.29
	Legal	8.54	2.73	—	—	—
Depress (range 10–40)	Single	20.10	6.58	<i>ns</i>	.40	.59
	Dating	18.70	5.68	—	<i>ns</i>	.36
	Committed	17.68	5.75	—	—	.19
	Legal	16.55	5.38	—	—	—
IH (range 9–45)	Single	16.99	5.78	<i>ns</i>	.32	.55
	Dating	16.57	5.55	—	.24	.47
	Committed	15.30	4.97	—	—	.22
	Legal	14.13	4.66	—	—	—
Meaning (range 3–35)	Single	24.27	7.24	.34	.54	.74
	Dating	26.39	6.36	—	<i>ns</i>	.39
	Committed	27.59	5.72	—	—	.20
	Legal	28.82	4.73	—	—	—

Note. Analysis of variance model statistics: stress: $F(3, 1633) = 21.208, p < .001$, depress: $F(3, 2457) = 32.583, p < .001$, IH: $F(3, 2457) = 27.672, p < .001$, meaning: $F(3, 1633) = 36.834, p < .001$. IH = internalized homophobia.

^a Cohen's *d* presented only for significant mean differences ($p < .01$) based on post hoc Bonferroni tests of differences between groups.

meaning in life. Parents reported more meaning in life. The longer a participant had been in a relationship, the less stress and internalized homophobia they reported. Of primary interest, participants with legal relationship status reported significantly lower levels stress, depressive symptoms, and internalized homophobia, and higher presence of meaning in life.

Discussion

Being in an intimate same-sex relationship that has a legally recognized status is associated with reports of significantly less psychological distress and more well-being than being single or dating. Even after controlling for other factors, same-sex partnered participants in committed relationships reported significantly more psychological distress and less meaning than those in legally recognized relationships. These associations are consistent with findings that being in a relationship and being married has positive effects on psychological health for heterosexual individuals (e.g., Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005). Other studies have indicated that selection effects do not solely account for the associations between heterosexual marriage and psychological health (e.g., Lamb, Lee, & DeMaris, 2003). Hope, Rodgers, and Power (1999) concluded from an analysis of a national longitudinal study that marriage has a psychological health benefit beyond pre-existing individual mental health levels. This may also be true for same-sex couples. If so, then our findings would suggest that being in a legally recognized relationship offers a protective effect against depressive symptoms, stress, and internalized homophobia. Further, legal recognition may provide a relational context in which individuals perceive more meaning in their lives because of the recognition of their intimate relationship.

Given that the availability of legal recognition for same-sex relationships is very recent and that even same-sex couples with legally recognized relationships still live in a macro-environmental context that does not fully recognize the legal status of the relationship, the benefits that heterosexual married individuals experience may not yet be fully realized by same-sex partnered individuals. The differences in the types of legal recognition available for same-sex relationships, the timing of that availability, and issues of the portability of that status may account at least in part for the small to medium effect sizes of the findings. Ambiguity concerning the legal status of same-sex relationships may diminish the possible psychological benefits of having legal status.

In evaluating the findings of this study, we note several limitations. This was a convenience sample and we cannot assess nonindependence of participants. Compared to Census data, the sample collected for this study is composed of more females, is more educated, and includes more White participants; the participants in this sample are similar in age, employment rate, income level, and as likely to have children as those in the Census sample (Romero, Baumle, Badgett, & Gates, 2007). The cross-sectional design of this study cannot establish causality. Also, response categories in the survey did not allow us to distinguish between, determine the origin, or level of recognition of domestic partnerships, civil unions or marriages. Future research will be needed to assess the impact of legal uncertainties as well as legal opportunities on same-sex relationships and the couple members.

Others have argued that civil unions and domestic partnerships are “second-class” relationship recognition statuses

Table 2

Summary Table of the Association Between Measures of Psychological Distress and Well-Being and Relationship Status, Sex, Education, Parental Status, and Relationship Length

Dependent variable	Variable	B	SE	β	t	Model
Stress	Sex	0.481	.189	.077	2.545**	$F(5, 1098) = 10.408^{***}$ Adj. $R^2 = .046$
	Education	-0.286	.083	-.104	-3.3440***	
	Parent	0.092	.198	.014	0.465	
	Relationship length	-0.038	.012	-.098	-3.204***	
Depress	Relationship status	-0.675	.215	-.095	-.3140**	$F(5, 1631) = 5.421^{***}$ Adj. $R^2 = .016$
	Sex	0.595	.291	.052	2.045*	
	Education	-0.428	.131	-.083	-3.278***	
	Parent	-0.139	.304	-.011	-0.458	
Internalized homophobia	Relationship length	-0.015	.019	-.021	-0.807	$F(5, 1631) = 6.425^{***}$ Adj. $R^2 = .018$
	Relationship status	-0.845	.340	-.063	-2.482*	
	Sex	0.002	.253	.000	0.006	
	Education	-0.138	.113	-.031	-1.214	
Meaning	Parent	-0.117	.264	-.011	-0.442	$F(5, 1098) = 8.690^{***}$ Adj. $R^2 = .038$
	Relationship length	-0.050	.016	-.078	-3.083**	
	Relationship status	-1.029	.294	-.087	-3.499***	
	Sex	0.099	.343	.009	0.288	
	Education	0.612	.151	.123	4.047***	
	Parent	1.444	.360	.121	4.018***	
	Relationship length	0.001	.021	.002	0.056	
	Relationship status	0.890	.391	.069	2.277*	

Note. The following categories were used: sex: 0 (male), 1 (female); education: 1 (less than high school degree) to 5 (PhD or professional degree); parent: 0 (no), 1 (yes); relationship status: 0 (committed relationship), 1 (legal recognition). Relationship length was measured in years. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

that will not deliver the same legal or personal benefits as marriage (Herdt & Kertzner, 2006; Herek, 2006). Preliminary evidence from other countries suggests that this may be true (Eskridge & Spedale, 2006). Same-sex couples in the United States, given the choice of marriage, perceive the benefits of that status over civil unions and domestic partnership (Gates et al., 2008).

Legal relationship recognition eliminates neither minority stress nor stigmatization of a LGB or same-sex partnered identity. For example, Todosijevic, Rothblum, and Solomon (2005) found that couples in civil unions from Vermont still faced significant stress from family reactions to their sexuality. Likewise, Eskridge and Spedale (2006) related stories of social prejudice and family rejection among same-sex married couples in Denmark and other Scandinavian countries. Nevertheless, our findings suggest that legal recognition is an important macro-environmental factor that may affect the psychological health and well-being of same-sex couple members.

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