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Similar Others in Same-Sex Couples' Social Networks

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Abstract

Same-sex couples experience unique minority stressors. It is known that strong social networks facilitate access to psychosocial resources that help people reduce and manage stress. However, little is known about the social networks of same-sex couples, in particular their connections to other same-sex couples, which is important to understand given that the presence of similar others in social networks can ameliorate social stress for stigmatized populations. In this brief report we present data from a diverse sample of 120 same-sex couples in Atlanta and San Francisco. The median number of other same-sex couples known was 12; couples where one partner was non-Hispanic White and the other a person of color knew relatively few other same-sex couples; and there was a high degree of homophily within the social networks of same-sex couples. These data establish a useful starting point for future investigations of couples' social networks, especially couples whose relationships are stigmatized or marginalized in some way. Better understandings of the size, composition, and functions of same-sex couples' social networks are critically needed.

Keywords

Same-sex couples; social networks; similar others; health

Introduction

Sexual minority persons (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, and other non-heterosexual individuals) may be exposed to stressors related to their stigmatized minority status relative to heterosexual individuals. This “minority stress” has been shown to have a negative impact on sexual minority health and well-being, and in part explains health disparities based on sexual orientation.¹⁻³ Similarly, same-sex couples also experience stress related to the marginalized status of their relationships,⁴ which negatively influences relationship quality.⁵⁻⁷

Existing research demonstrates significant associations between individuals’ social networks and health, and evidence suggests that network characteristics facilitate access to psychosocial resources (e.g., social support, coping strategies), which in turn help people combat the deleterious health effects of stressful events or periods of time.⁸⁻¹⁰ Social support, particularly from within sexual minority communities, is one psychosocial resource that can be mobilized to reduce the negative effects of minority stress on health.¹¹ One relevant study demonstrated that the presence of “similar others” (i.e., individuals who share the same stigmatized social status) can ameliorate the deleterious effects of social stress on the health of stigmatized individuals,¹² suggesting that network composition may be particularly important to the well-being of marginalized populations.

Although some research has investigated the potential of those networks to promote well-being and health among sexual minorities,¹³⁻¹⁵ very little is known about the social networks of same-sex couples and consequently how their relationships with similar others may function as important psychosocial resources in their lives. A small number of studies have examined aspects of same-sex and heterosexual couples’ social networks as predictors of relationship quality,¹⁶⁻¹⁷ for example perceived social network support for romantic relationships from parents and friends has been shown to be directly associated with relationship well-being, and indirectly with mental and physical health.¹⁶ However, such research has not examined the presence or absence of other couples – whether they are similar or dissimilar to a given couple – in the social networks of couples. We begin to address this topic by presenting data on the representation of similar others in the social networks of a diverse sample of same-sex couples in the Greater Atlanta and San Francisco Bay areas.

Methods, Sample, and Analysis

One hundred and twenty same-sex couples participated in a qualitative research phase of a large-scale, mixed-method study of their experiences of minority stress and mental health. Greater Atlanta and the San Francisco Bay areas were selected because both attract large and diverse populations of sexual minority individuals, and collectively they represent two regions of the country that significantly differ in social, political, historical, and cultural contexts.

Although same-sex couples are increasingly visible in social life, they remain, in research terms, a hidden population. Therefore we employed a modified targeted nonprobability sampling strategy to recruit this sample.¹⁸⁻¹⁹ We 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, child care centers, churches/temples, parks, theatres, bars, and senior centers. In order to minimize bias inherent to community samples of sexual minority populations, we avoided recruitment from venues that over-represent individuals with high levels of mental health problems and exposure to stressful life events (e.g., 12-step programs, HIV/AIDS service providers). Finally, we disseminated study information through local mainstream and gay newspapers and appropriate websites, local list serves, 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, 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, we selectively enrolled couples based on the duration of their relationship. This was done to increase the sample's representativeness regarding relationship stage. Three categories reflecting relationship duration were selected to guide sample recruitment: six months to less than three years; three years to seven years; and more than seven years. We included new couples who have been together as few as six months in order to identify some of the early stressors that emerge in relationship formation. Our seven-year benchmark distinguishing long-term couples is in keeping with a general finding – from studies of heterosexual marriages – that the risk of relationship dissolution increases in the early years, reaches a peak, and then steadily declines with time.²⁰

In order to ensure couples met these eligibility criteria, each partner within a couple was directed to complete an online screener containing questions about their own age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, location of residence, and relationship characteristics (e.g., length, cohabitation status). Partners' responses to the screener were compared to one another to confirm the integrity of their responses and eligibility for the study.

Quota-based sampling was used to enroll equal numbers of male and female couples, as well as equal numbers of couples representing the three categories of relationship duration, within each study site. Moreover, couples were selectively recruited so that in at least 40% of participating couples within each of the 12 recruitment cells, at least one partner was from a racial/ethnic minority background. Therefore, the total sample of 120 couples was, by design, evenly dispersed by study site, gender, and relationship duration.

Table 1 presents demographic data that describe this sample. As per our sampling goal for racial/ethnic diversity, at least 40% of the couples in each recruitment cell were couples where at least one partner was a person of color. For the total sample – and within each study site – half or less than half of both the male and female sub-samples were couples in which both partners were non-Hispanic White.

Participating couples took part in a two-hour-long qualitative interview based on a facilitated exercise designed to elicit discussion and joint narratives about potentially stressful events and periods of time in their past and anticipated future together. These

qualitative interviews were not designed to elicit narratives about the social networks of these couples in general, or about their connections to other same-sex couples in particular.

However, at the end of each interview, participating couples – answering jointly – provided demographic data about “other same-sex couples they know.” Participating couples were first asked to report the number of other same sex couples that they knew. If they struggled to give a precise count, they were asked to estimate the total as accurately as possible. They then described these other couples in terms of their gender and racial/ethnic composition. These data on similar others within the social networks of same-sex couples were collected to address a methodological question regarding the potential use of respondent-driven sampling approaches in future attempts to recruit diverse samples of same-sex couples. For this reason, we offer these data as a brief report to stimulate more complete studies of related issues.

Findings

Table 2 presents comparisons in the median numbers of other same-sex couples known for this sample, as well as comparisons of medians based on study site, couple race/ethnicity, gender, and relationship duration. Median comparisons were more appropriate than mean comparisons because the distribution in numbers of other same-sex couples known was highly skewed.

For the sample as a whole, the median number of other same-sex couples known was 12. This number did not vary significantly by study site or gender. However, it did differ by couple race/ethnicity and by relationship duration. Couples in which one partner was non-Hispanic White and the other was a person of color (i.e., any race/ethnicity other than non-Hispanic White) knew fewer other same-sex couples (median of 9) than their counterparts where both partners were non-Hispanic White (median = 15) or both partners were persons of color (median = 17.5). Couples who had been together at least six months but less than three years knew more other same-sex couples (median = 17.3) than couples who had been together three years to less than seven years (median = 10). Moreover, newer couples knew more male couples (median = 10 couples) than medium- and longer-term couples (median = 5 for both). Also, the networks of newer couples contained a smaller proportion of non-Hispanic White individuals (median percentage = 50%) who were in same-sex relationships within their social networks. In comparison, the median percentage of non-Hispanic White individuals in same-sex relationships known among longer-term couples was 85%.

Female couples reported knowing more female couples than male couples, while male couples reported knowing more male couples than female couples. Moreover, couples where one or both partners was White reported higher proportions of non-Hispanic White persons within their larger network of other same-sex couples they know. To illustrate, couples where both partners were non-Hispanic White estimated that a median of 80% of individuals in the other same-sex couples they knew were non-Hispanic White. For couples where one partner was non-Hispanic White and the other a person of color, this percentage was similarly high (65%).

In contrast, couples where both partners were persons of color reported that just 12.5% of individuals in other same-sex couples they knew were non-Hispanic White – a proportion in stark contrast to the 67% being Black or African American. Of couples where at least one partner was non-Hispanic White, much smaller percentages of the individuals in other same-sex couples they knew were Black or African American (6.3% if “both non-Hispanic White”; 11.5% if “non-Hispanic White and person of color”).

Summary and Conclusion

This study provides an initial glimpse into the social networks of same-sex couples, in particular regarding the degree to which they know other same-sex couples. These data are not without significant limitations. They only provide select demographic information about same-sex couples' social networks. Nonetheless, they do allow us to take an essential first step toward understanding social connections between and among same-sex couples, which are factors that may be related to relational and individual well-being. Moreover, these data are drawn from a diverse sample of same-sex couples living in two distinct regions of the U.S. and we know of no other studies that present similar information. Thus, they offer a meaningful starting point for future study.

Homophily is reflected in the general tendency that people who share similarities (e.g., race/ethnicity, age, and religion) have more contacts and connections with one another than people who are dissimilar.²¹ These data suggest there is significant homophily with regard to the gender and race-ethnicity within the social networks of same-sex couples, consistent with what is known about the social networks of individuals.²¹⁻²² Same-sex couples may benefit by having access to other couples who are similar to them in terms of gender and race/ethnicity. As it does within social networks of individuals, homophily in the social networks of couples may provide a relevant and meaningful yardstick for understanding their life experiences as a couple.²³ Moreover, if the presence of similar others can reduce negative affect and anxiety in stigmatized individuals,¹² then same-sex couples may benefit by having access to other couples who are similar to them as well. Additionally, maintaining ties with other same-sex couples may serve a group-level coping function by fostering a sense of psychological connectedness to the sexual minority community.¹¹

Certainly, much more research is needed to investigate the size, composition, and functions of same-sex couples' social networks in all respects. Studies must look beyond the presence, meaning, and function of relationships with other same-sex couples to simultaneously include connections of all kinds (e.g., to family-of-origin, heterosexual couples, and single persons of diverse identities). For instance, one existing study¹⁷ suggests that the joint social networks of same-sex couples are large relative to those of heterosexual couples, including more friends but similar numbers of kin. Connections to friends (separate and shared within the couples' joint social network) appear to play especially significant roles in determining the relationship quality (measured as conjugal adjustment) of same-sex couples.

Moreover, even with a relatively narrow focus on the ties between and among same-sex couples within social networks, future research must gather a great deal more data about other same-sex couples known, including more descriptive information about them, such as:

the legal status of their relationship (e.g., marriage, domestic partnership), relationship duration, and perceived relationship stability) as well as substantive information about the collective relationship between the two couples (e.g., how long the focal couple – from the perspective of each partner and collectively as a couple – has known the other couple and the individuals that comprise it, the degree of closeness they feel to one another, and how much they feel they have relied/can rely on one another during challenging times). Relevant existing research has examined processes through which lesbians and gay men have created and strengthened their “family networks.”²⁴ Research focusing on the connections and relationships among same-sex couples will be critical to further illuminating the role that similar others may play in determining the well-being of these couples, and the health of each partner.

The findings from the present study that newer couples may have larger and more racially ethnically diverse social networks and that there may be a relationship between relationship duration and the gender composition of couples’ social networks suggest potentially useful avenues for future study. Such differences raise important questions regarding social networks and health as they differ by relationship stage, individual partner age or birth cohort; and within-couple age similarities/discrepancies. For instance, newer same-sex couples – particularly at younger ages – may know more new same-sex couples because new relationships may be relatively plentiful within their shared social networks as many individuals pair up for relationships in young adulthood that do not last, although additional research is required to answer these kinds of questions.

Perhaps most significantly, these data suggest that inter-racial/ethnic couples may have especially small numbers of other same-sex couples in their social networks. Thus, future research should more fully examine critical issues relating to the race/ethnicity of each partner, and collectively within couples, which may have important implications for their access to supportive social relationships during times of distress. For example, a San Francisco-based study of Black men who have sex with men suggest that they in particular are pushed, because they are constrained by others’ preferences and attitudes and the social environment, to be socially isolated from larger communities of gay men and more highly interconnected with one another.²⁵ Moreover, census data on same-sex households suggests that racial/ethnic minority individuals in same-sex couples tend to live in locations where there are higher proportions of people of their own race/ethnicity,²⁶ which may contribute to the racial/ethnic homophily²⁷ we observe in these data.

In closing, this brief report is based on descriptive data from a non-representative sample of same-sex couples living in two geographic locations. The available data regarding their social networks are limited. They concern only the degree to which participating couples knew other same-sex couples, and select demographic information (gender and race/ethnicity) regarding those couples. Moreover, the data did not contain information regarding the nature or the quality of any relationships between same-sex couples.

Nonetheless, despite these limitations, these data provide the first glimpse into the degree to which same-sex couples are represented in one another’s social networks. There is a pressing need to understand the psychosocial resources that promote the health of sexual

minorities—and by extension, same-sex couples—in the face of the prevailing climate characterized by minority stress. Better understanding the size, composition, and functions of same-sex couples' social networks is critical to the development of more effective clinical interventions and public health programs that promote the health of sexual minority individuals and same-sex couples.

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Table 1

Qualitative Research Sample: Race/Ethnicity

	SF BAY AREA SUB-SAMPLE			GREATER ATLANTA SUB-SAMPLE			TOTAL SAMPLE		
RACE/ ETHNICITY	Female Couples (n=30)	Male Couples (n=30)	Site Total (n=60)	Female Couples (n=30)	Male Couples (n=30)	Site Total (n=60)	Female Couples (n=60)	Male Couples (n=60)	Total Sample (n=120)
Both non- Hispanic White	12 (40%)	14 (47%)	26 (44%)	17 (57%)	13 (43%)	30 (50%)	29 (48%)	27 (45%)	56 (47%)
Non-Hispanic White / Person of Color	9 (30%)	14 (47%)	23 (38%)	3 (10%)	9 (30%)	12 (20%)	12 (20%)	23 (38%)	35 (29%)
Both Persons of Color	9 (30%)	2 (6%)	11 (18%)	10 (33%)	8 (27%)	18 (30%)	19 (32%)	10 (17%)	29 (24%)

Table 2

Representation of Other Same-Sex Couples Known by Study Site, Race/Ethnicity, and Gender

CHARACTERISTICS OF KNOWN SAME-SEX COUPLES	STUDY SITE COMPARISONS		COUPLE RACE/ETHNICITY COMPARISONS			GENDER COMPARISONS		RELATIONSHIP DURATION			TOTAL SAMPLE (N = 117)
	SF Bay Area (n = 59)	Atlanta Metro (n = 57)	Both non- Hispanic White (n = 54)	Non-Hispanic White/Person of Color (n = 34)	Both Persons of Color (n = 29)	Female Couples (n = 59)	Male Couples (n = 58)	6 MOS – < 3 YRS (n = 40)	3 YRS – < 7 YRS (n = 38)	7 YRS OR MORE (n = 39)	
TOTAL (Median)	10	16	15 ^a	9 ^b	17.5 ^a	15	12	17.3 ^a	10 ^b	12	12
GENDER (Median <i>f</i>)											
Female Couples	5	6	5.5	4.5	8	10 ^a	3 ^b	7.5	5	4	6
Male Couples	4	7.3	6.5	4	5	3 ^a	9 ^b	10 ^a	5 ^b	5 ^b	5
RACE/ETHNICITY (Median %)*											
Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	10% ^a	5% ^b	5.5%	11.3%	10%	9%	9.2%	10%	9%	6.6%	9%
Asian	6.6%	0%	1%	2%	0%	0%	2%	2.3%	0%	0%	1%
Black/African American	10%	13%	6.3% ^a	11.5% ^b	67% ^c	14%	10%	18.5%	10%	10%	10%
White	70%	56.5%	80% ^a	65% ^a	12.5% ^c	60%	72%	50% ^a	60%	85% ^b	65%

Note: Different superscripts indicate significant between-group differences in the distribution of participants above and below the median of the total sample at

< .05 within sub-samples defined by study site, race/ethnicity, gender, and relationship duration.

* The medians for race/ethnicity reflect the couples' estimated proportion of the individuals in the other same-sex couples they know who are from the racial/ethnic backgrounds listed below.