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Examining Ethnic Differences in Parental Rejection of LGB Youth Sexual Identity

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Abstract

Upward of 70% of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth experience some degree of parental rejection of their sexual identity, which is problematic in light of research documenting links between parental rejection and psychological difficulties in LGB youth. Additionally, emerging research suggests that ethnic minority LGB youth may be at greater risk to experience parental rejection than ethnic majority LGB youth. However, this research is inconclusive and has significant gaps. The current study is one of the first to include a multiethnic sample of LGB youth and their parents to investigate how ethnicity may be related to parental rejection. Specifically, the current study examined ethnic differences in parental rejection as well as in intrapersonal variables (i.e., homonegativity and traditional gender role beliefs), which are thought to be related both to ethnicity and parental rejection. Additionally, indirect effects of ethnicity on parental rejection through homonegativity and traditional gender role beliefs were examined. Participants included 90 parents (ages 32–63) and their 90 LGB children (ages 15–24). Fifty-nine percent of the sample was ethnic minority. Significant ethnic differences were found in parental rejection and homonegativity, but not in traditional gender role beliefs. Homonegativity was found to fully mediate the relation between ethnicity and parental rejection. These results provide important information on why ethnic minority parents, in general, may have a more difficult time accepting their LGB children than ethnic majority parents.

Keywords

ethnicity; parental rejection; LGB youth; homonegativity; traditional gender role beliefs

Relative to their heterosexual counterparts, lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth (including young people from adolescence to emerging adulthood) are at heightened risk to experience psychological difficulties (Mustanski, Garofalo, & Emerson, 2010). One risk factor for such difficulties is parental rejection, which refers to negative reactions from parents regarding their children's sexual identity (Bregman, Malik, Page, Makynen, & Lindahl, 2013). Research in this area has found that parental rejection is common (Carnelley, Hepper, Hicks, & Turner, 2011; Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006). For example, D'Augelli, Grossman, and Starks (2008) found that 71% of LGB youth perceived the reaction of at least one of their parents to be predominantly negative. Research also has

linked parental rejection with deleterious outcomes in LGB youth (D'Amico & Julien, 2012; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009).

Although negative reactions from parents are known to be relatively common (Willoughby et al. 2006), data with ethnically diverse samples are lacking and therefore generalizability of this finding is unclear. Preliminary research in this area has found a tendency for ethnic minority LGB youth tend to report greater negative parental reactions than ethnic majority (i.e., White, non-Hispanic) LGB youth (Ryan et al., 2009). Another significant limitation in this area of research is that parents have rarely participated directly in such research, with most studies relying solely on youth report of parental responses and behavior. Due to potential bias in youth report, it is critical that parent report be included. The current study included a multiethnic sample of LGB youth and their parents to address these gaps.

Ethnic Differences in Parental Rejection

In one of the few empirical studies to investigate a potential association between ethnicity and parental reactions to LGB youth, Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, and Sanchez (2009) found that Hispanic/Latino LGB males tended to report greater parental rejection than ethnic majority LGB males. Hispanic/Latino females also tended to report greater parental rejection than ethnic majority LGB females. African American families were not included in this study.

Despite inconclusive and limited data regarding ethnic differences in parental rejection, related research indicates that ethnic minority parents may be more at risk for negative reactions. For example, studies have found that ethnic minority LGB youth disclose their sexual identity to their parents at a later age, if at all, compared with ethnic majority LGB youth (Dubé & Savin-Williams, 1999; Maguen, Floyd, Bakeman, & Armistead, 2002; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004), suggesting possible concerns about parental reactions. For example, Maguen, Floyd, Bakeman, and Armistead (2002) found that fewer Black LGB youth reported coming out to their parents than White, non-Hispanic LGB youth. Research with LGB adults has found similar ethnic differences in disclosure to parents (Grov, Bimbi, Nanín, & Parsons, 2006). In a recent survey by the Pew Research Center (2013), likewise, fewer ethnic minority (42%) than ethnic majority LGBT adults (58%) said that society is more accepting now than it was a decade ago.

Overall, it is unclear whether or not ethnic differences in parental rejection exist due to scant data, though studies suggest the potential for differences. More broadly, only a few studies with LGB youth have systematically examined ethnicity (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). This is an unfortunate gap in the literature. It further appears that no study to date has examined factors that might mediate the association between ethnicity and parental rejection, assuming that such an association exists. This task is important as ethnicity may function as a proxy for psychological factors related to variability in parental reactions.

Potential Indirect Effects of Ethnicity on Parental Rejection

The social-cognitive-behavioral model of adjustment provides a framework for understanding possible ethnic differences in parental rejection and mechanisms through which ethnic differences may manifest (Crosbie-Burnett, Foster, Murray, & Bowen, 1996).

The social-cognitive-behavioral model posits that parental reactions are related to intrapersonal factors such as homonegativity and traditional gender role beliefs. Homonegativity is defined as negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Hudson & Rickets, 1980). Gender role beliefs refer to expectations of how men and women ought to behave (Kerr & Holden, 1996). Thus, this model predicts that greater homonegativity and traditional gender role beliefs will be associated with more negative reactions to the sexual identity of LGB youth.

Ethnic differences in parental rejection are presumed to be due to systematically varying levels of intrapersonal factors. For example, relative to ethnic majority parents, ethnic minority parents may face stronger sociocultural pressures favoring heterosexism (i.e., an ideology perpetuating the devaluation of nonheterosexual forms of behavior, identity, relationship, or community), which in turn may lead to greater parental rejection. The current study specifically examined two such factors: homonegativity and traditional gender role beliefs.

It appears that no research has yet examined ethnic differences in homonegativity and traditional gender role beliefs in parents of LGB youth. However, some studies in the general population have suggested that ethnic minority individuals tend to exhibit greater homonegativity (Daboin, Peterson, & Parrott, 2015; Glick & Golden, 2010) and traditional gender role beliefs (Daboin et al., 2015; Ahrold & Meston, 2010) than ethnic majority individuals. For example, Daboin, Peterson, and Parrott (2015) found that, in a sample of heterosexual male adults, Black males reported greater negative attitudes toward lesbian and gay individuals as well as greater beliefs in traditional masculinity than White males. However, findings of ethnic differences in homonegativity and traditional gender role beliefs are inconsistent, potentially due to ethnicity's intersection with other factors including gender, religiosity, or acculturation. For example, in a study conducted by Ahrold and Meston (2010), Hispanic/Latino female college students reported greater homonegativity than White, non-Hispanic females, but males exhibited the reverse tendency. Clearly, further investigation is needed in general and, specifically, with the understudied population of parents of LGB youth.

The Current Study

This investigation sought to extend the limited literature on ethnic differences in parental rejection, as well as ethnicity in families with LGB youth in general, by including a multiethnic sample of LGB youth and their parents. The primary aim of the current study was to better understand the link, if any, between ethnicity and parental reactions to LGB youth sexual identity, including examining possible intrapersonal mediating mechanisms (i.e., homonegativity and traditional gender role beliefs). The first hypothesis was tentative in nature given the lack of data with diverse samples. It was anticipated that ethnic minority parents would exhibit greater parental rejection, homonegativity, and traditional gender role beliefs than ethnic majority parents. Second, it was expected that if ethnicity and parental rejection were related, parental homonegativity and traditional gender role beliefs would mediate this relation.

Methods

Participants

Ninety parent-youth dyads from the southeastern United States participated in the current study ($N = 180$ respondents). Of the parents, 73 were female and 17 were male, with a majority ($n = 88$) identifying as heterosexual. The parents ranged in age from 32 to 63 ($M = 48.01$, $SD = 6.55$). Parents identified as White ($n = 39$), Hispanic/Latino ($n = 27$), Black ($n = 18$), and multiethnic ($n = 6$). The majority ($n = 81$) were biological parents of the LGB youth. The mean annual parent income reported was \$72,158.29 ($SD = 48,292.73$). Among the youth, 39 identified as gay male, 6 as bisexual male, 31 as lesbian, and 14 as bisexual female. The youth ranged in age from 15 to 24 ($M = 19.47$, $SD = 2.72$). Youth identified as White ($n = 35$), Hispanic/Latino ($n = 32$), Black ($n = 19$), and multiethnic ($n = 4$). The mean time since sexual identity disclosure to the parent participating in the study was 3.44 years ($SD = 2.88$).

Procedures

The current study received approval from the Institutional Review Board prior to collecting data. Participants were recruited through fliers, community organizations, high school counselors, and peers as part of a larger study examining family relationships of LGB youth. Youth were required to have disclosed their sexual identity to at least one parent. Written informed consent was obtained from parents and youth over the age of 18. For youth under the age of 18, written assents were collected in addition to parent permission. Parents completed questionnaires assessing demographic information, parental rejection, homonegativity, and traditional gender role beliefs, and youth completed questionnaires assessing demographic information and parental rejection. These forms were completed in person, by mail, or online (approximately 10% were completed online). Participants were each compensated \$50.

Measures

Homophobia Scale (HS)—The HS is a 25-item measure designed to assess homonegativity (Wright, Adams, & Bernat, 1999). The HS measures global homonegativity as well as three subcomponents: cognitive homonegativity (e.g., “Homosexuality is immoral”), affective homonegativity (e.g., “Gay people make me nervous”), and behavioral homonegativity (e.g., “I have damaged property of gay persons”). The current study used the global measure to assess parental homonegativity. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). The global score is calculated by summing all of the items, with scores ranging from 25 to 125 and higher scores indicating greater homonegativity. The HS has been demonstrated to be a reliable ($\alpha = .94$, test-retest $r = .96$) and valid measure of homonegativity (Wright et al., 1999). The HS was demonstrated to be reliable in the current study ($\alpha = .90$).

Machismo Measure (MM)—The Traditional Machismo (TM) subscale of the MM is a 10-item subscale designed to assess an individual's level of traditional gender role beliefs (Arciniega, Anderson, Tovar-Blank, & Tracey, 2008). The TM subscale taps traits typically associated with machismo: hypermasculinity (e.g., “It is important not to be the weakest

man in a group”), emotional restrictedness (e.g., “Real men never let down their guard”), chauvinism (e.g., “A man should be in control of his wife;” “It is important for women to be beautiful”), and aggression (e.g., “It is necessary to fight when challenged”). Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale, from *very strongly disagree* (1) to *very strongly agree* (7). The score of the TM subscale is obtained by summing all of the items on the subscale, with scores ranging from 10 to 70 and higher scores indicating greater traditional machismo. The TM subscale has been demonstrated to be a reliable ($\alpha = .84$) and valid measure of traditional gender role beliefs (Arciniega et al., 2008). The TM subscale was demonstrated to be reliable in the current study ($\alpha = .87$).

Perceived Parental Reactions Scale (PPRS)—The PPRS is a 32-item measure designed to assess parental reactions to LGB youth sexual identity (Willoughby et al., 2006) and was completed by parents and youth. The PPRS includes items such as “I am concerned about what my family might think of me” and “My parent believes that homosexuality is immoral.” Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). A total score is calculated by summing all items, with scores ranging from 32 to 160 and higher scores indicating more negative reactions. The PPRS has been demonstrated to be a reliable ($\alpha = .97$; test retest $r = .95 - .97$) measure of parental reactions (Willoughby et al., 2006). The PPRS was demonstrated to be reliable in the current study (parent report $\alpha = .97$; youth report $\alpha = .97$).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Observed means, standard deviations, and ranges of the variables of interest are presented in Table 1 as well as correlations among the variables of interest. Homonegativity and traditional gender role beliefs were positively related to parental rejection. Parent and youth reports of parental rejection were strongly related.

Possible associations among demographic factors (i.e., youth age, gender, and sexual identity; years since sexual identity disclosure; and parent age and income) and the dependent variables (i.e., parental rejection, homonegativity, and traditional gender role beliefs) were examined. Parent income was inversely related to traditional gender role beliefs ($r = -.28, p = .008$) and parent report of parental rejection ($r = -.24, p = .025$). Parent age was inversely related to homonegativity ($r = -.31, p = .003$), traditional gender role beliefs ($r = -.31, p = .003$), and parental rejection (parent report: $r = -.26, p = .013$; youth report: $r = -.23, p = .036$). Whereas negative correlations between parent income and the dependent variables were expected, the negative correlations between parent age and the dependent variables were surprising. Ethnicity may account for the unexpected direction of these correlations, however, as ethnicity and age were related. Ethnic majority parents ($M = 50.67, SD = 5.71$) were significantly older than ethnic minority parents ($M = 45.98, SD = 6.46$), $t(88) = 3.582, p = .001$. Youth age, gender, sexual identity, and years since sexual identity disclosure were unrelated to the dependent variables.

Ethnic Group Differences in Parental Rejection and Intrapersonal Variables

Given the small sample size, parents were divided into two, rather than three, ethnic groups. The ethnic majority group included White, non-Hispanic parents ($n = 39$), and the ethnic minority group included parents identifying as Hispanic/Latino, Black, and multiethnic ($n = 51$). Multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was used to examine for possible ethnic differences in parental rejection, homonegativity, and traditional gender role beliefs, controlling for parent age and income. Results are presented in Table 2. Ethnic minority parents exhibited greater parental rejection than ethnic majority parents, as reported by both parents and youth. Ethnic minority parents also reported greater homonegativity than ethnic majority parents. These results support the hypotheses that there would be ethnic differences in parental rejection and homonegativity. No significant differences in traditional gender role beliefs were found, though ethnic minority parents ($M = 23.44$, $SE = 1.60$) did tend ($p = .10$) to report greater traditional gender role beliefs than ethnic majority parents ($M = 19.22$, $SE = 1.83$). Additionally, follow-up analyses suggest that collapsing parents into two ethnic groups may have obfuscated significant differences in traditional gender role beliefs. An analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) found significant ethnic group differences ($F(3, 82) = 4.80$, $p = .004$). Post-hoc comparisons using a Bonferroni correction indicated that Black parents ($M = 29.39$, $SE = 2.41$) reported greater traditional gender role beliefs than White, non-Hispanic ($M = 18.78$, $SE = 1.66$) and Hispanic/Latino parents ($M = 20.25$, $SD = 2.03$).

Ethnicity and Parental Rejection: Testing Indirect Effects

Hypothesized indirect effects of ethnicity on parental rejection through intrapersonal variables were tested using a bootstrap estimation approach, as this approach tends to maximize power and limit Type I error (Hayes, 2009). Indirect effects, standard errors, 95% confidence intervals, and completely standardized indirect effects were computed with 10,000 samples on the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013). Indirect effects are significant when zero is not included in the 95% confidence interval (Hayes, 2009). Ethnicity was dummy coded for the following analyses with ethnic majority parents as the reference group (i.e., coded 0) and ethnic minority as the experimental group (i.e., coded 1). Control variables were entered (i.e., parent age in both analyses, and parent income in the analysis with parent report of parental rejection). Only homonegativity was examined as a mediator, as a significant ethnic difference was not found in traditional gender role beliefs.

Homonegativity fully mediated the association between ethnicity and parental rejection. Regarding parent report, the 95% confidence interval [8.09, 24.74] of the indirect coefficient ($ab = 16.22$, $SE = 4.24$) did not contain zero. Regarding youth report, the 95% confidence interval [5.84, 21.14] of the indirect coefficient ($ab = 12.65$, $SE = 3.86$) also did not contain zero. Completely standardized indirect effects (parent report: $ab_{cs} = .29$, youth report: $ab_{cs} = .21$) indicate that parental rejection increased by approximately .21 – .29 standard deviations due to ethnic minority group membership indirectly via homonegativity. As such, these results support the hypothesis that the association between ethnicity and parental rejection would be mediated by homonegativity.

Discussion

Parental rejection of LGB youth sexual identity is a salient variable in predicting psychological difficulties in LGB youth (D'Amico & Julien, 2012; Ryan et al., 2009). One subgroup of LGB youth that may be particularly vulnerable to the experience of parental rejection is ethnic minority LGB youth (Ryan et al., 2009). However, research on ethnic differences in parental rejection is inconclusive. Gaps in this literature include limited data from multiethnic samples and parent report (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). The current study is among the first to utilize data from a sample of multiethnic LGB youth and their parents in systematically examining factors associated with ethnic differences in parental rejection.

Intrapersonal Variables Link Ethnicity and Parental Rejection

Significant ethnic differences in parental rejection were found. Ethnic minority (i.e., Black and Hispanic/Latino) parents reported greater parental rejection than ethnic majority (i.e., White, non-Hispanic) parents. Youth data yielded a similar result. Thus, the current study provides more conclusive evidence regarding ethnic differences in parental rejection in this nascent area of research. These findings also extend previous research in indicating that ethnic minority parents appear to exhibit greater parental rejection, in part, due to more negative attitudes about homosexuality in general. Relative to ethnic majority parents, ethnic minority parents reported greater levels of homonegativity, which in turn significantly mediated the relationship between ethnicity and parent and youth reports of parental rejection. Notably, these results are particularly robust given consistency of findings across multiple informants (i.e., parent and youth report of parental rejection).

These data suggest that the pathway between ethnicity and parental rejection appears to be, at least in part, a function of sociocultural pressures. As suggested by the social-cognitive-behavioral model of adjustment (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996), parental reactions to their child's sexual identity occurs within a sociocultural context. This larger context likely varies systematically across ethnicities with ethnic minority individuals perhaps being exposed to more heterosexist messages than ethnic majority individuals. As suspected, ethnicity appears to be a proxy for some of the broader influential variables, such as homonegative attitudes.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations in the current study should be noted. First, LGB youth were required to have disclosed their sexual identity to at least one parent, who had to be willing to participate. This may have biased the sample toward more accepting parents. Another limitation was limited statistical power to account for parent gender in analyses, as fewer fathers ($n = 17$) than mothers ($n = 73$) participated. Findings in the literature to date suggest that parent gender, as well as its interaction with youth gender, may differentially impact outcomes of interest (D'Amico & Julien, 2012). Having mostly mothers participate also may have affected traditional gender role belief results, especially because the traditional gender role beliefs examined were predominantly beliefs regarding masculinity, as opposed to beliefs regarding both masculinity and femininity. Likewise, although follow-up analyses found ethnic differences in traditional gender role beliefs with Black parents reporting more

traditional gender role beliefs than Hispanic/Latino and White parents, small group sizes limited our ability to examine the role of this variable in understanding differences between ethnic minority groups. In addition, the current study was limited in its inability to definitively establish causality or mediation in the model due to the lack of longitudinal design. Including larger, multiethnic samples with data on both fathers and mothers in prospective studies are important directions for future research.

Intrapersonal factors not included in the current study that may link ethnicity and parental rejection may be important variables for future research to consider. For example, in addition to homonegativity and traditional gender role beliefs, religiosity may be an important cultural pressure affecting the adjustment of families with LGB youth (Rosario et al., 2004). Concern for children having multiple minority status may be another intrapersonal factor accounting for ethnic variations in parental rejection (Murry, Brown, Brody, Cutrona, & Simons, 2001).

Future research also is needed to more thoroughly understand the interrelations among the factors of interest in the current study and how they relate to overall family, parent, and youth adjustment. For example, future research might examine associations between ethnicity, parental rejection, and intrapersonal variables in light of other parent factors, such as emotional responsiveness, or certain features of family dynamics, such as cohesion and flexibility. Future research might further consider utilizing measures other than self-report (e.g., implicit measures, observational data of parent-child interactions, and report from other informants).

Conclusion

Holtzen and Agresti (1990) note that an LGB child's sexual identity disclosure is a significant event for parents, who must then balance their love for and acceptance of their child with preexisting beliefs and ideas about sexuality and gender. The current study's findings indicate that homonegativity and possibly traditional gender role beliefs may indeed conflict with the feelings and wishes parents, especially ethnic minority parents, have for their LGB children. In identifying these variables as significant correlates of parental rejection, the current study provides some direction for interventions with this population. In particular, current findings highlight homonegativity as a critical factor for clinicians to assess with parents of LGB youth, which may then be a potential target for intervention. To reduce homonegativity, for example, a clinician may present and then discuss the extant research findings on the association between biology and sexual identity (Shpigel, Belsky, & Diamond, 2015) or try to cognitively challenge the underlying assumptions of homonegativity.

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Table 1
Correlations and Sample Descriptive Statistics

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Parental Homonegativity (HS)	--			
2. Parental Traditional Gender Role Beliefs (MM)	.50 *	--		
3. Parent Report of Parental Rejection (PPRS)	.84 *	.53 *	--	
4. Youth Report of Parental Rejection (PPRS)	.66 *	.35 *	.72 *	--
<i>n</i>	90	89	89	85
<i>M</i>	45.61	21.72	60.26	61.31
<i>SD</i>	16.67	11.02	26.92	28.32
Minimum – Maximum	25 – 97	10 – 70	32 – 135	32 – 129

Note. HS = Homonegativity Scale. MM = Machismo Measure. PPRS = Perceived Parental Rejection Scale.

*
 $p < .01$.

Table 2
Multivariate Analysis of Covariance: Ethnic Group Differences in Parental Rejection, Homonegativity, and Traditional Gender Role Beliefs

Parent Report of Parental Rejection (PPRS)		
Ethnic Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>
Ethnic Majority	49.36	4.37
Ethnic Minority	69.02	3.82
$F(1, 78) = 10.45, p = .002$		
Youth Report of Parental Rejection (PPRS)		
Ethnic Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>
Ethnic Majority	50.09	4.65
Ethnic Minority	68.37	4.06
$F(1, 78) = 7.98, p = .006$		
Parental Homonegativity (HS)		
Ethnic Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>
Ethnic Majority	38.86	2.54
Ethnic Minority	49.55	2.22
$F(1, 78) = 9.16, p = .003$		
Parental Traditional Gender Role Beliefs (MM)		
Ethnic Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>
Ethnic Majority	19.22	1.83
Ethnic Minority	23.44	1.60
$F(1, 78) = 2.75, p = .101$		

Note. Covariates include parent age and parent income. PPRS = Perceived Parental Rejection Scale. HS = Homonegativity Scale. MM = Machismo Measure.