

RUNNING HEAD: Stigma, Attachment and Relationship Dissolution

Stigma, Attachment and Relationship Dissolution: Commentary on Meanings of Intimacy

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Abstract

The chief difference between Frost's same-sex and heterosexual couples was that same-sex couples experienced more stigma and discrimination. We discuss implications of these stressors for relationship outcomes and consider the role of attachment orientations. We also consider the imminent changes that might occur in these processes due to the legalization of same-sex marriage in the USA. In particular, we hope that stigma and discrimination against LGB couples might decrease, and that attachment security might increase, together reducing their vulnerabilities for relationship dissolution. Legalization of same-sex marriage should also provide new opportunities to investigate committed same-sex relationships alongside committed heterosexual relationships.

The chief difference between Frost's same-sex and heterosexual couple participants was that same-sex couples experienced more stigma and discrimination. Although same-sex and heterosexual couples have more in common than not, the added stress associated with being stigmatized will impact on relationship outcomes. We discuss implications for relationship dissolution and the role of individual differences in attachment. We then speculate how legalization of same-sex marriage might influence these processes.

Stigma and Discrimination

Stress and relationship dissolution. The stigma associated with being in a same-sex relationship, and resultant prejudice and discrimination, are stressful to couple members and can affect their mental health (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Meyer, 2003), physical health (Lick, Durso, & Johnson, 2013), and relationship health (Mohr & Fassinger, 2006). Although Peplau, Veniegas, and Campbell (1996) found that only 14% of lesbian women reported societal attitudes toward lesbian relationships as a reason for a relationship break-up, stigma may contribute indirectly to dissolutions. For example, stigma might increase known break-up predictors such as negative couple interactions (Karney & Bradbury, 1997), reduce network support for the relationship (Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010), or expose couple members' vulnerabilities (Randall & Bondenmann, 2009). Given the relatively recent advent of legally-recognized same-sex partnerships and marriage, there is little extant research on break-ups in formally committed same-sex relationships. However, research suggests that stigma creates everyday stressors among same-sex couples (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007) and that daily stress undermines marital quality (Randall & Bondenmann, 2009). We can also study similar processes in interracial married couples, who may also experience stress as a result of stigma and discrimination. Indeed, interracial marriages are more likely to end in divorce than are same-race marriages (Bratter & King, 2008). It would be valuable to compare couples whose marriages may be viewed as stigmatized to examine the role of stress in relationship dissolution.

Attachment. A key vulnerability likely to be exacerbated by the stress of stigma is attachment insecurity (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In times of stress the attachment behavioral system is activated and an individual typically seeks proximity to a caregiver. For individuals who have generally had reliable and sensitive caregivers (i.e., those with a secure attachment pattern), seeking proximity provides feelings of security and the attachment system is downregulated so the individual can pursue other activities. For individuals who generally have had inconsistent or overprotective caregivers (i.e., those with an anxious attachment pattern), seeking proximity only results in felt security intermittently so they tend to cling to caregivers and be hypervigilant to signs of threat or rejection. For individuals who have generally had neglectful or rejecting caregivers (i.e., those with an avoidant attachment pattern), seeking proximity is not a viable strategy so they disengage from relationships and deactivate the attachment system. These attachment patterns have important consequences for close relationships (Collins & Read, 1990; Hepper & Carnelley, 2012; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Whereas secure individuals are comfortable with intimacy, interdependence and commitment, those high in attachment anxiety are clingy, jealous and fear abandonment, and those high in avoidance avoid intimacy, emotional expression and commitment. Unsurprisingly, insecure individuals' relationships are less satisfied and more likely to break-up (Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Research demonstrates that LGB and heterosexual individuals do not differ in their prevalence of each attachment pattern (Ridge & Feeney, 1998) and that attachment patterns correlate with relationship functioning in the same way for LGB and heterosexual samples (Carnelley, Hepper, Hicks, & Turner, 2011; Kurdek, 2002). However, because stress activates the attachment system, individuals who experience prejudice and discrimination frequently will show exacerbated attachment style differences in relationship behavior (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1996). This may lead to relationship dissolution either directly via damaging relationship functioning (Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994) or indirectly via mental health problems for insecure individuals (Mohr, 2008).

Potential Consequences of Legalized Same-Sex Marriage

Now that same-sex marriage is finally legal in all of the USA, the above gloomy picture might be able to change. First, it will increase visibility of long-term LGB couples who will demonstrate the similarities in intimacy and commitment reported in Frost's research. This evidence may contradict some society members' assumptions about LGB relationships (e.g., that they are based on sex rather than intimacy; LaMar & Kite, 1998), helping to challenge stigmatized attitudes and reduce prejudice and discrimination. Second, it might promote attachment security in LGB partners, particularly those high in attachment anxiety who need constant reassurance of their partner's love and may find security in the public declaration of love and commitment provided by marriage. Indeed, heterosexual newlyweds show decreases in attachment anxiety over three years (Davila, Karney, & Bradbury, 1999). Together, reduced stress and increased attachment security may help to facilitate relationship stability and maintenance in committed LGB couples.

In addition, the legalization of same-sex marriage affords new opportunities for relationships researchers. We can now pinpoint relationship marker events in both LGB and heterosexual couples, such as marriage proposal/engagement, wedding, honeymoon, and divorce. Researchers can now identify newly-wedded LGB couples and follow them over time to investigate issues such as the effect of daily experiences of prejudice and discrimination on relationship satisfaction and commitment. It also provides the opportunity to examine predictors of relationship dissolution in terms of separation/divorce. Past research shows that LGB couple members reported fewer barriers to ending their relationship than did married heterosexual couple members (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986); with legalization of same-sex marriage, barriers to ending a relationship should be similar across couple orientations and perhaps enhance relationship stability in LGB couples. Indeed, Rosenfeld (2014) found in a US nationally-representative sample that heterosexual marriages and same-sex marriages (or marriage-like unions) had similar break-up rates.

In conclusion, Frost presents evidence that heterosexual and same-sex couples describe important relationship events similarly in terms of intimacy, trust, commitment and caregiving. Now that same-sex marriage is legal in the USA we hope that this will be more readily demonstrated to

those with negative views of same-sex couples, and that this will lead to more tolerance and help those couples have longer, happier relationships.

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