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MARCH, 2024

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SEXUAL- AND GENDER-MINORITY FAMILIES: A DECADE REVIEW

Reczek, C. (2020). Sexual- and Gender-Minority Families: A 2010 to 2020 Decade in Review. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 82(1), 300-325.

The Study of SGM Families Over Time

The number of families with a gender or sexual minority member is on the rise, increasing the importance of SGM families in the broader field of family studies (Allen & Mendez, 2018; Powell et al., 2010). Historical events such as marriage legalization have increased social acceptance of sexual minorities and increased stigmatization of gender minorities. Concurrently, new data sources have allowed scholars to move beyond gay and lesbian couple contexts to explore gender-minority families and the family ties in SGM youth and adolescents. Reczek (2020) focuses their review on three primary subareas of SGM families: (a) SGM family-of-origin relationships, (b) SGM intimate relationships, and (c) SGM-parent families. The author also highlights three main gaps in existing literature: (a) a primary focus on same-sex and gay and lesbian families, and a lack of focus on other sexual and gender minorities as well as single-parent SGM families; (b) a focus on White, socioeconomically advantaged SGM people and a failure to account for racial-ethnic and socioeconomic diversity; and (c) a lack of integration of SGM families across the lifespan.

Family of Origin Relationships

According to Reczek (2020), literature shows that family-of-origin relationships are important to minor children due to children's financial and social dependence. However, far less is known about SGM family-of-origin ties in mid- and later life.

A. The Nature of Adolescent Ties:

1. Sexual-minority youth are less likely to report closeness, attachment, and support, are less likely to disclose personal problems, and are more likely to report conflict with parents than their cis or heterosexual counterparts (Feinstein et al., 2018; Montano et al., 2018; Montano et al., 2017).
 2. Parent-child conflict appears to be particularly impactful after a child discloses their sexual identity; however, siblings and extended family members can be key sources of support during times of parental rejection (Alonzo & Buttitta, 2019; Jhang, 2018; Scherrer et al., 2015; Grafsky et al., 2018; Hilton & Szymanski, 2011; Rothblum 2010).
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3. Transgender youth are at especially high risk of family rejection due to transgender stigmatization and report a significant physical or emotional break with family after disclosing their transgender status (McGuire et al., 2016).

B. The Influence of Adolescent Ties on Health and Well-Being:

1. Lower levels of parental involvement, closeness, and support among same-sex-attracted youth were associated with higher levels of depression, substance use, and running away from home (Pearson & Wilkinson, 2013).
2. A survey of LGB adolescents showed that, for LGB adolescents, family acceptance after disclosure of their sexual-minority status was related to better well-being and a reduction in mental distress; in contrast, adolescent SGM who reported family rejection during the disclosure process were 8.4 times more likely to attempt suicide (Ryan et al., 2009).
3. Gender-minority youth may be among those most at risk for harmful health effects from low-quality family-of-origin relationships, whereas parental support and acceptance are associated with lower levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms (Klein & Golub, 2016; Budge et al., 2013); further, family boundary ambiguity causes significant psychological and financial distress.

C. The Nature of Adult Ties:

1. Family members appear to support SGM adults via integration into family relationships, inclusion through requested language markers, social support in times of need, and public affirmations; families demonstrate rejection via detached relationships, daily putdowns, and marked traumatic events (Reczek, 2016a,2016b; Reczek et al., 2014).
2. Intergenerational ambivalence also appears to be a critical dimension in SGM adults, as gay and lesbian adults appear to provide instrumental support to aging parents, even when relationships are conflictual (Reczek & Umberson, 2016).
3. For gender minorities, strained relationships in youth continue into adulthood, where transgender people must consistently negotiate disclosing and enacting their gender identity, even after “coming out” to family (Norwood, 2013; Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2018).

D. The Influence of Adult Ties on Health and Well-Being:

1. For LGB young adults, acceptance from parents in adulthood is associated with a lower psychological impact of internalized homophobia and lower levels of emotional distress (Feinstein et al., 2014; Doty et al., 2010).

Virtually no studies on gender-minority adults examine the link between family support and health, although family support is likely critical for preventing negative life and well-being outcomes such as homelessness, HIV, drug and alcohol use, and suicide attempts among gender-minority adults (p. 304).

Intimate Relationships

While focusing on comparisons between same-sex and different-sex couples, Reczek (2020) highlights the following areas: (a) dating and relationship formation, (b) relationship quality, (c) the division of labor, (d) health and well-being, and (e) dissolution.



A. Dating and Relationship Formation:

2. Sexual-minority adults adhere to normative values; however, sexual-minority young adults are less likely to value faithfulness and lifelong commitment than heterosexual young adults, as these values are considered boring, sexist, monogamous, and confining (Meier et al., 2009; Potârncă et al., 2015; Lamont, 2017).
3. Many SGM individuals—particularly women—point to the problematic nature of marriage as a heterosexist, patriarchal, and homonormative institution that reinforces hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality; yet, in some instances, one partner may push marriage onto a reluctant partner who rejects marriage based on these feminist principles (Kimport, 2013; Bosley-Smith & Reczek, 2018).

B. Relationship Quality:

1. In the past decade, more studies focused on the unique determinants of relationship quality in same-sex couples—focusing specifically on the consequences of stigmatization from family, friends, and institutions, such as uncovering how interracial same-sex couples faced concurrent hypervisibility and hyperinvisibility due to their doubly marginalized statuses (Steinbugler, 2012).

Although recent family scholarship points to the importance of sex and sexual intimacy as a dimension of intimate relationship quality, few studies examine sexual quality in SGM couples (p. 306).

2. While Farr, Forsell, and Patterson (2010) found differences in sex frequency by sexual orientation, with gay men having the most sex and lesbian women the least, they found no differences in sexual relationship satisfaction.
3. In some cases, cisgender partners made negotiations in response to their transgender partner's identity, including changes in their own sexual orientation labels, concerns with safety and marginalization, and the development of a new understanding of the gender spectrum (Platt & Bolland, 2017).

C. The Division of Labor:

1. Gendered housework theory suggests that partners in sexual-minority couples are less reliant on gendered norms, more likely to have similar housework preferences, and more likely to be dually employed outside the home (Doan & Quadlin, 2019).
2. Recent studies suggest that relationship dynamics unique to SGM populations may shape the division of labor, such as depending on time availability and income inequality, not necessarily gender (Moore, 2011; Tornello et al., 2015; Widiss, 2016).
3. Gender minorities appear to divide labor based on preference and labor for participation, suggesting the relationship between gender and division of labor in SGM families is more complex than the predominant “egalitarian” framework would suggest (Kelly & Hauck, 2015).

D. Health and Well-Being:

1. Same-sex married individuals have similar self-rated health relative to their different-sex married counterparts and have better self-rated health than different-sex or same-sex cohabitating individuals (Reczek et al., 2014).
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2. Gay and lesbian older adults who are legally married report better quality of life and more social and economic resources than those who are partnered but not married (Goldsen et al., 2017).
 3. Partnered transmen, in particular, reported fewer depressive symptoms than their single counterparts (Meier et al., 2013).

Liu and Wilkinson (2017) used the National Trans Discrimination Survey and found that married transgender respondents tended to report lower levels of perceived discrimination than their cohabitating and previously married transcounterparts.

E. Dissolution:

1. The results from studies done before federal U.S. marriage equality have been inconsistent, in part due to varying comparison groups; meanwhile, the ability to legally marry, coupled with general social tolerance toward marriage, is associated with a stronger desire for long-term relationships and stronger monogamy beliefs among SGM populations (Potârca et al., 2015).
2. While relationship dissolution among gender minorities is largely understudied, Meier et al. (2013) reported that half of transmen who were partnered before transition experienced relationship dissolution during or after transition.

Parenthood

Same-sex parents are more likely to be racial-ethnic minorities, particularly Black or Latino, than same-sex couple households with children (Gates, 2015).

A. Parenthood Contexts and Experiences:

1. **Pathways to Parenthood:** The majority of SGM adults today become parents in the context of heterosexual relationships (Riskind & Patterson, 2010; Riskind & Tornello, 2017); however, there have been substantial increases in “planned” childrearing through adoption, reproductive technology, and surrogacy.
2. **Parenting Dynamics:**
 - a. Research in the past decade highlights the unique role of social stigma and social support in SGM parenting dynamics, where supportive social and legal communities significantly improve experiences of social stigma (Bos et al., 2016; Goldberg & Smith, 2011; Oswald et al., 2018).
 - b. Very few studies examine parenting experiences and dynamics in bisexual and transgender families (Ross & Dobinson, 2013); however, Pyne et al. (2015) showed that transgender parents work to renegotiate their relationships with their children, and former spouses may restrict access to transgender parents or may facilitate the transparent and child in adjusting to gender transition.

B. SGM-Parent Family Effects on Children:

1. Variables other than sexual minority status, such as lower SES and family transitions, account for lower outcomes among children raised in SGM families compared to those raised in cisgender heterosexual families (Potter, 2012; Potter & Potter, 2017).

Lick et al. (2012) analyzed county-level social climate data and found that institutional factors such as living in areas with antidiscrimination laws were associated with better psychological outcomes in children raised by same-sex parents.

2. In gender-minority parenting families, children's well-being is strongly shaped by whether the cisgender parent is transphobic and rejecting or accepting of the transgender parent (Pyne et al., 2015).

Directions for Future Research

In looking back at the past three decades of research in this area, it is hard not to admire where we have come from and be humbled by the work that is to be done, emphasizing the following areas for further research: (a) SGM diversity, (b) integration of racial-ethnic and socioeconomic diversity, and (c) integrating a life course approach.

A. Diversity of Family Types:

Research has not kept up with the rapid growth of [SGM] family norms... these gaps neglect the full range of SGM minority families, especially those who may be the most stigmatized as well as those who offer the most robust challenges to paradigms of monogamy, the gender binary, and heteronormativity (p. 313).

B. Racial-Ethnic and Socioeconomic Diversity:

1. Racial-ethnic minorities make up a more significant percent of the SGM population than the general population, and SGM people are socioeconomically disadvantaged relative to their cisgender heterosexual counterparts (Gates, 2014); yet, research primarily provides White and socioeconomically advantaged views of SGM family life.

C. A Life Course Approach:

A life course approach requires a better understanding of historical context and cohort effects, taking into consideration recent legal, social, and political changes (Baumle & Compton, 2015).

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2. **Family-of-Origin Ties:** Significant gaps remain in understanding how early life experiences with parents translate into mid- and later life relationships, where virtually no research examines intergenerational ties in later life.
 3. **Intimate Relationships:**
 - a. Same-sex couples are less likely to exhibit specialization when dividing labor; however, this gap narrows across cohorts, and future research could facilitate a greater understanding of how and why such changes have shifted over time (Giddings et al., 2014).
 - b. Little research shows how SGM relationships protect—or undermine—health during times of illness and injury later in life, and future research could study caregiving processes when a spouse is sick as well as how relationship conflicts shape health over time (Fredricksen-Goldsten et al., 2016).
 - c. Gay and lesbian couples are more likely to plan for the end of their life than heterosexual couples, yet we know virtually nothing about end-of-life experiences among SGM families (Thomeer et al., 2017; Marsack & Stephenson, 2018).
 4. **Parenthood:** While trends show that parenthood pathway constraints lead some SGM adults to become parents later in life than their cisgender heterosexual counterparts, it is unknown how this shapes parenting practices and subsequent parent well-being.

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