SOCIOLOGY POLICY BRIEFS

August 2019 | No. 04-2019

Summary

Fears about the future, like other types of stress, can diminish well-being and increase anxiety. Minority populations uniquely anticipate challenges and hardships based on the stigmatization of themselves or of their relationships. Policymakers should not simply react to what is known to be stressful in the moment; they should also seek deeper understandings of stress experience within life course contexts, including the stress that people anticipate. Indeed, existing data suggest there may be public health benefits associated with policy changes that reduce the impact of "stress that awaits." For example, the legal recognition of same-sex relationships is associated with better mental health among sexual minority persons—even if they did not get married. Still, some anticipate that the legal recognition of same-sex marriage will be reversed in the future, and this possibility can be a source of stress as well. By identifying anticipatory stressors, we expand our knowledge of people's stress universes and better account for the cumulative stress burden that can lead to greater health disparities.

Author Biography

Mieke Beth Thomeer (mthomeer@uab.edu) is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Allen J. LeBlanc (aleblanc@sfsu.edu) is the Health Equity Institute Professor of Sociology at San Francisco State University.

Suggested Citation

Thomeer, M.B., and A.J. LeBlanc. 2019. "The Importance of Anticipatory Stress in the Lives of People in Same-Sex Relationships." Policy Brief No. 04-2019, *Sociology Policy Briefs,* August 1.

The Importance of Anticipatory Stress in the Lives of People in Same-Sex Relationships

Mieke Beth Thomeer, University of Alabama at Birmingham
Allen J. LeBlanc, San Francisco State University

Sexual minorities (e.g., people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer) are in worse health, on average, compared to heterosexuals. The prominent explanation for this health disparity is that sexual minorities, like other stigmatized and disadvantaged populations, are exposed to unique "minority" stressors, including discrimination. For example, sexual minority persons often feel that they are not welcome to bring their same-sex partners to family gatherings. Such stressors accumulate to create deleterious consequences contributing to population-based health disparities. This policy brief focuses on how couple-level anticipatory minority stressors (i.e., stressors expected in the future which emanate from the stigmatization of their intimate relationships by the larger society) create challenges for same-sex couples that can diminish their health and well-being.

Most discourse around stress implies that minority stressors emerge from experiences rooted only in the past or present. For example, studies may ask respondents whether "in the past month" they have experienced poor treatment from others because of their sexual orientation. However, we argue that we need to also consider *anticipatory stress, which is experienced in the present, but rooted in the future*. Despite the popular mantra that "it gets better," many sexual minority adults experience serious fears and concerns about the potential hardships they might encounter in the future, or "stress that awaits." By identifying anticipatory stressors, we expand our knowledge of people's stress universes and better account for the cumulative stress burden on well-being. Our focus on people in same-sex relationships draws attention to how anticipatory stressors are experienced in the context of socially stigmatized relationships. Much of the stress that people experience is relational, not contained to the domain of the individual, but shared and created within the dynamics of the relationship. Such stress processes have implications for the well-being of the relationship itself and of each partner.

As part of a large-scale, multi-method study of minority stress among same-sex couples, 120 same-sex couples in two cities (Atlanta and San Francisco) were interviewed using a novel "relationship timeline" method. In this method, each couple worked together as a couple to create their own unique relationship timeline (a simple visual using a line that begins with "the day we met" and end with the anticipated future). Couples jointly identified key events and periods within their relationship, both as they happened in the past and were anticipated for the future. They rated how stressful these events were or would likely be. Respondents also designated which stressors they viewed to be minority stressors (i.e., "involved or will involve challenges or difficulties related to being a same-sex couple"). Same-sex couples identified a wide-range of anticipatory stressors, including planning a wedding, retiring, and having children. Having children was rated as the most stressful future event, followed closely by stressors related to their family of origin (e.g., providing care for aging parents, attending a sibling's wedding). The third most highly rated categories in terms of stress related to future moves (e.g., deciding what city to live in, buying a house). Respondents identified that having children and future relationship plans (e.g., planning a wedding) were uniquely stressful due to stigma associated with being in a same-sex couple.

Source

Thomeer, M.B., A.J. LeBlanc, D.M. Frost, & K. Bowen. 2018. "Anticipatory Minority Stressors among Same-sex Couples: A Relationship Timeline Approach." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 81(2):126–148.

Further Reading

Frost, D.M., A.J. LeBlanc, B. deVries, E. Alston-Stepnitz, R. Stephenson, & C. Woodyatt. 2017. "Couple-level Minority Stress: An Examination of Same-sex Couples' Unique Experiences." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 58(4): 455–472.

García, S.J. 2018. "Living a Deportation Threat: Anticipatory Stressors Confronted by Undocumented Mexican Immigrant Women." *Race and Social Problems* 10(3): 221–234.

LeBlanc, A. J., D.M. Frost, & R.G. Wight. 2015. "Minority Stress and Stress Proliferation among Same-sex and Other Marginalized Couples." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77(1):40–59.

LeBlanc, A.J., D.M. Frost, & K. Bowen. 2018. "Legal Marriage, Unequal Recognition, and Mental Health Among Same-Sex Couples." *Journal of Marriage and Family 80*(2):397–408.

Meyer, I.H. 1995. "Minority Stress and Mental Health in Gay Men." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 38–56.

Thomeer, M.B., R. Donnelly, C. Reczek, & D. Umberson. 2017. "Planning for Future Care and End of Life: A Qualitative Analysis of Gay, Lesbian, and Heterosexual Couples." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 58(4): 473–487.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge project team members who conducted interviews in the greater Atlanta and San Francisco Bay areas. We also acknowledge contributions to the original article with David Frost and Kayla Bowen. This work was supported by National Institutes of Health grant R01HD070357 (Allen J. LeBlanc, Principal Investigator).

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The primary takeaway from this research is that policymakers should not simply react to what is known to be stressful at present, but that progressive changes designed to promote the civil rights of sexual minority populations must be understood in life course contexts, including how historical changes over time experienced differently across age cohorts. For example, if a sexual minority adolescent is able to see legal marriage as a possibility, they may carry less minority stress as they age. But they would carry more minority stress if they grow up, as previous generations did, with the sense that their relationships would never be legally recognized, or, as some currently do, that recent legal protections might not be maintained. By asking respondents within affected communities how future plans, specifically the hopes and fears they may have about them, would shift based on specific policies, we can gain early insight into the potential effects of "stress that awaits."

Beyond sexual minority populations, many disadvantaged groups in the U.S. face public policies that increase their distress about the future, harming their health now and increasing health disparities. For example, immigrant communities anticipate policies that would increase deportation, continuing family separations and limiting employment opportunities.

1. **Future policy making should identify anticipatory stressors that would result from the creation of new public policies.**

Anticipatory stressors provide important insight into current inequalities within society, and, to the extent that anticipatory stressors are representations of what is to come, examining anticipatory minority stressors can provide deeper insight into future inequalities especially when discussing same-sex couples, sexual minority families, and other marginalized populations. Many of the key anticipatory stressors identified by same-sex couples in our study would be impacted by public policies. For example, many in our study mentioned wanting to adopt children. Several states have passed "religious freedom" laws which allow religious-based adoption agencies to deny services to same-sex couples. In many regions, these religious-based agencies are the only available source of these services, preventing same-sex couples from adopting or fostering children. Many also mentioned anticipatory stress around accessing marriage, given that our study was conducted prior to the federal recognition of same-sex marriage. A recent study found that since 2015, having legal relationship recognition is associated with less mental health problems, but same-sex married couples still perceive that their relationships are not viewed "equally" when compared with different-sex marriages. The policies affecting the rights of same-sex couples should be evaluated for their potential future impact on the well-being of sexual minority populations.

2. **Future policy should be designed to address the anticipated concerns of sexual minorities, in addition to present stressors.**

In our analysis, we found that people in same-sex relationships often anticipate facing discrimination and unique hardships in the future. For example, same-sex couples were concerned about discrimination they might face during the home-buying process. Respondents also expressed concerns related to future job loss because of their sexuality. There is no federal statute forbidding employment discrimination based on sexual identity. Policies specifically designed to reduce discrimination by sexual minority status would benefit the health and well-being of sexual minorities, partly by reducing anticipatory stress. These can be enacted at federal, state, and local levels. Key areas of future discrimination concern for respondents in our study included housing, parenthood, aging, and marriage, and lacking protections often translates into desires to move to a new city, state, or even country (e.g., "moving to safety")—although only respondents with high levels of financial resources and fewer family obligations are able to do this.