



The Impact of Societal Stigma on Same-Sex Marriages and Relationships and How We Can Work to Promote Resilience

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Although progress has been made for same-sex relationships in terms of societal acceptance and the recognition of same-sex marriages, same-sex couples continue to experience societal stigma for being a sexual minority. As a result of stigmatization, same-sex marriages and relationships may be at particular risk for negative relational and psychological outcomes. Despite a variety of research examining how same-sex marriages and relationships are negatively impacted by societal stigma and discrimination, more research must be conducted to understand how same-sex couples can work to strengthen resilience within their relationships. The present literature review synthesizes available research on building resilience in same-sex relationships through social support and the development of communication skills. The present review also summarizes evidence-based strategies that might improve positive relational outcomes for same-sex marriages and relationships.

Introduction

Although progress has been made for same-sex relationships regarding the acceptance and recognition of same-sex marriages as legitimate, same-sex couples continue to experience societal stigma, often experienced through various aspects of discrimination (Sansone, 2019). For example, same-sex relationships face stigmatization concerning their relationships and non-traditional family structures; they experience hate crimes, discriminatory

judgments, and even acts of aggression (Tombolato et. al., 2018). As a result of these negative experiences, same-sex marriages and relationships may be at particular risk for negative relational and psychological outcomes (Frost, 2014). Oftentimes, these outcomes are characteristic of depression, anxiety, traumatic stress, and feelings of vulnerability and helplessness associated with social stigmatization and discrimination (Herek et. al., 1999). Recent research suggests that resilience can act as a buffer between these potential negative outcomes and risk factors for same-sex relationships (Frost, 2014).

Resilience is an individual's ability to overcome, adapt, grow from, or move beyond adversity with positive outcomes (de Lira & de Morais, 2020). Due to the risk of negative outcomes for same-sex marriages from societal stigmatization, same-sex relationships should be prioritized in interventions that foster resilience.

Present research does examine how same-sex marriages and relationships are negatively impacted by societal stigmatization and discrimination, but does not always provide suggestions for how to improve positive outcomes. Consensus in the literature is still limited on how same-sex marriages and couples can work to promote resilience within their relationships. The present literature review provides a bridge between same-sex relationship practices and the development of resilience in same-sex families to combat societal stigmatization and discrimination. Although research demonstrates the negative outcomes associated with experiencing societal stigma for same-sex relationships, couples could still benefit from additional practical guidelines and strategies, helping them understand how to address their adverse experiences and promote resilience within their relationships.

In order to effectively provide same-sex marriages and relationships with practical strategies that promote resilience within relationship dynamics, the uniqueness of same-sex relationships must be discussed. The present review will first identify the unique relationship functioning of same-sex marriages, with a particular emphasis on role negotiation and relational openness of same-sex relationships. The impact of societal stigma on marital and parental distress for those in same-sex relationships will also be examined, before addressing how resilience promotes positive outcomes for relationships. Once the impacts of societal stigma on same-sex relationships are established, domains of social support and the development of communication skills that help same-sex marriages foster resilience will be discussed. Finally, an

application of discussed concepts and practical guidelines for same-sex relationships will be provided, hopefully encouraging the development of resilience within a diverse range of couples.

Relationship Functioning of Same-Sex Marriages and Relationships

The unique relationship functioning of same-sex marriages and relationships must be acknowledged to create a foundation for how resilience practices can be integrated into these relationships. Research from Wickham et al., (2016) is significant as they examine how same-sex couples approach conflict management and resolution as a process of relationship functioning. Same-sex relationships are unique as they are more likely to adopt positive problem-solving behaviors such as compromise and negotiation, due to a lack of traditionally based relationship roles (Wickham et al., 2016). When traditional roles within relationships are challenged, there can be more room for partners to fulfill roles and communicate needs that might not fit within the traditional gender-role framework (Wickham et al., 2016). Relatedly, the way partners approach conflict is more indicative of overall relationship outcomes than the number of conflicts experienced; partners that use more positive problem-solving behaviors like compromise and negotiation, have more successful relationships amidst conflict (Wickham et al., 2016). These thoughtful dyadic relationship processes that promote relational resilience would be significant to promote in relationships that are more prone to stress, such as those exposed to societal stigma.

Conflict and disruptions to same-sex relationships are likely to unfold due to pressures and issues from societal stigma. As noted by Haas and Lannutti (2022), how partners within same-sex relationships choose to respond to conflict will have significant impacts on their relational resilience. For example, communicative relationship maintenance

strategies are significant when used to strengthen relationships and avoid the dissolution of these relationships (Haas & Lannutti, 2022). Communicative relationship maintenance strategies include verbal assurances about the relationship, positivity when interacting with the partner, and productive conflict management techniques in times of conflict (Haas & Lannutti, 2022). When same-sex partners adopt communicative relationship maintenance strategies during conflict, they are more likely to engage in relationship behaviors that are positive and contribute to the well-being of the relationship (Haas & Lannutti, 2022). As such, relational openness and role negotiation are important to examine as they could be related to the adoption of positive, communicative relationship maintenance behaviors within same-sex relationships.

Relational Openness of Same-Sex Relationships

A significant aspect of relationship functioning within same-sex marriages and relationships is relational openness. According to Totenhagen et al. (2018), levels of relational openness about sexuality in same-sex relationships is correlated with psychological well-being. For example, lower levels of transparency (such as “outness” about sexuality and relationship type) in same-sex relationships can serve as a risk factor for same-sex couples regarding relationship functioning and quality over time (Totenhagen, 2018). These findings are consistent with newer research; Nguyen and Pepping (2022) find that higher amounts of internalized stigma (comfortability about sexuality and relationship type) and lower levels of relational openness are correlated with lower relationship satisfaction. Consequently, societal stigma influences same-sex relational openness, which can then negatively impact transparency and create a constant vulnerability within same-sex relationships (Totenhagen, 2018).

Relational openness is an important aspect of same-sex relationship functioning, as it is significantly connected to long-term relationship outcomes, quality over time, and is integral to the positive functioning of same-sex marriages and relationships. Transparency about same-sex relationships could be one of the differentiating factors between resistant or hesitant forms of communication between partners and the adoption of open communication skills in times of conflict (Nguyen & Pepping, 2022). When shame regarding sexuality or relationship type is at the root of a lack of relational openness, partners may be more likely to withdraw or be resistant within their relationships in times where positive communication and support are most needed (Nguyen & Pepping, 2022). Negative partner interactions, such as withdrawing support, conversation, or resisting partner abilities to help can undermine relational openness and support that is necessary in promoting resilience strategies (Nguyen & Pepping, 2022). Since relational openness is integral to the positive functioning of same-sex relationships, it should be given the utmost attention in the promotion of resilience for these couples.

Role Negotiation Within Same-Sex Relationships

Another significant aspect of relationship functioning and maintenance within same-sex marriages and relationships is role negotiation, particularly within communication and conflict. Role negotiation within communication and conflict management is based on a couple’s ability to engage in dyadic coping skills that promote understanding, collaboration, support, and satisfaction in conflict resolution (Rosenthal & Starks, 2015). According to Ogolsky and Gray (2016), positive communication styles require that partners engage in more thoughtful conflict management behaviors, such as working to problem-solve and engage in empathy

with one another. Engaging in empathy between partners means recognizing the other partner's attempt to practice positive behaviors and intentions to promote positivity within the relationship, even when experiencing conflict (Ogolsky & Gray, 2016).

Positive role negotiation within conflict management includes promoting dyadic coping skills that focus on coming together to resolve a conflict as a unit, rather than as individuals (Rosenthal & Starks, 2015). As negative relationship outcomes are found to be associated with exposure to stigmatization, partners in same-sex relationships need to be particularly mindful when negotiating roles within conflict management together (Rosenthal & Starks, 2015). When same-sex partners are able to work through negative emotions alongside one another using thoughtful conflict management behaviors, they can be more successful in overcoming adversity; negotiating and validating positive communicative roles between partners leads to better emotional and relationship management during times of conflict (Ogolsky & Gray, 2016). Successful conflict management within same-sex relationships could be the differentiating factor between further development of dyadic coping skills and relationship dissolution associated with stigmatization (Rosenthal & Starks, 2015). In order for resilience to be promoted within same-sex marriages and relationships, role negotiation within conflict management must be given mindful recognition.

The Impact of Societal Stigma on Same-Sex Marriages and Relationships

According to Thomeer et al. (2018), same-sex marriages often face increased stress as a result of their relationships being stigmatized. Due to this increased stress, partners within same-sex marriages and relationships can experience negative impacts on their physical health, psychological well-being, and relationship quality (Thomeer et al., 2018). These

negative impacts can specifically influence relationship functioning within same-sex relationships, which subsequently reduces a partner's abilities to identify means of support (Thomeer et al., 2018). This notion is further supported by LeBlanc and Frost (2020) with their research on how devalued relationship structures can impact both couples and the individuals within relationships themselves, correlating with couple distress and declines in mental health. On the couple level, these declines in mental health can negatively influence both partners, even when one partner is experiencing a majority of the mental health declines (LeBlanc & Frost, 2020). In order to prevent negative relationship quality associated with stigmatization, it is important to identify the marital distress that is uniquely experienced in same-sex relationships.

Marital Distress from Experiencing Societal Stigma

As conveyed by Frost and LeBlanc (2023), increases in exposure to stigma are found to be positively correlated with minimized feelings of closeness between partners. When feelings of closeness between partners decrease, so does relationship quality and satisfaction (Frost & LeBlanc, 2023). As a result of societal stigma, same-sex marriages can experience relationship distress that can "fall through the cracks" of positive relationship functioning dynamics; relationship quality and feelings of closeness can be undermined when experiences of stigma are not recognized by couples (Frost & LeBlanc, 2023). Perceived and actual closeness are necessary distinctions that can determine how stigma negatively influences intimacy within a relationship, with an inaccurate perception of closeness potentially harming dependability within romantic relationships (Frost & LeBlanc, 2023). Research consistently demonstrates the negative impacts of stigma on relationship distress; perceived

discrimination can also impact stress levels and create relationship strains that lead to a lack of trust and eventual relationship conflict (Song et al., 2022). Even when both partners have positive coping skills, same-sex relationships can still struggle with the excess stress and stigmatization placed on same-sex marriages (Song et al., 2022). It is important for couples to build actual closeness within the relationship to mitigate negative outcomes related to shared stressors.

Parenting Distress from Experiencing Societal Stigma

Same-sex marriages and relationships also experience parenting distress because of societal stigma. Although research demonstrates that same-sex relationships do not differ from different-sex relationships in their ability to parent, same-sex parents are thought to have more harmful and less warm environments for their children by society (Di Battista et al., 2021). Similarly, child misbehavior is more likely to be attributed to same-sex parenting than different-sex parenting, due to the misconception that children need both a mother and father present within their lives (Di Battista et al., 2021). This social stigma stems from the stereotype that traditional, nuclear families best support the developmental needs of children, while families that break traditional narratives are seen as dysfunctional (Di Battista et al., 2021). These negative stereotypes or characterizations of same-sex relationships are not based on empirical evidence. In fact, both two-parent heterosexual and two-parent same-sex family structures have been proven appropriate for successful familial outcomes, and especially for children's positive development (e.g., Meezan & Rauch, 2005).

As a result of the societal stigma that same-sex parents face, same-sex couples that also identify as parents may find themselves at an increased risk of

anxiety and depression (Prendergast & MacPhee, 2018). Particularly, risk for parental distress and negative mental health outcomes are correlated with increased internalized homophobia and lack of legal rights for same-sex parents/families (Prendergast & MacPhee, 2018). Due to the parental distress that same-sex relationships face as a result of societal stigmatization, same-sex partners should find ways to promote resilience within their families. Of course, resilience must be promoted in tandem with efforts to reduce stigmatization within the larger community or culture itself (Prendergast & MacPhee, 2018).

How Resilience can be Promoted in Same-Sex Marriages and Relationships

To understand the significance of supporting resilience in same-sex marriages and relationships, it is important to describe the foundational concept of resilience. Although resilience is a quality that can be inherent from an individual's temperament and ability to cope with stress, it is also a quality that can be cultivated through education and time (Jurček et al., 2022). Resilience is the adoption of positive coping skills when responding to adversity and it helps to aid in recovery from negative experiences, including experiences of societal stigma (Jurček et al., 2022). Within the context of same-sex marriages, *relational resilience* refers to how couples are able to engage in relationship behaviors that are supportive of one another and their relationship despite experiencing stigmatization for their choice of intimate partners (Haas & Lannutti, 2021). Relational resilience for same-sex marriages is important to promote as it deepens relationship quality, feelings of intimacy, and furthers investment within the relationship, producing longer lasting relationships that can withstand experiences of adversity (Haas & Lannutti, 2021).

Resilience within same-sex marriages and relationships can function as a preventative practice

to relational difficulties due to experiences of stigmatization. In order to develop a positive sense of resilience, partners in same-sex relationships should work to establish a positive view of self and further their ability to communicate on a familial level (Crouch et al., 2017). When there is a positive self-concept on an individual level, there is greater room for identity resilience that can improve abilities to connect with social support networks (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2022). For example, Crouch et al. (2017) suggests that in order to build familial and marital resilience, same-sex partners should work to promote parental support, widen the scope of their social family, establish positive role models, identify positive family communication strategies, and focus on individual identity resilience. Resilience can be built by widening the social support network for the family, which recognizes the role that friends and chosen family play in supporting same-sex families (Crouch et al., 2017). The understanding of social support for same-sex couples as parents comes from the idea that people should focus on capabilities to parent, instead of social conventions of what traditional parents “should” look like (such as male-female relationships); (Crouch et al., 2017).

Consistent with aforementioned research, Power et al. (2010) reiterates that resilience should be established through community-level factors such as strong social support networks, connection to community, and legal institutional support. Supporting resilience is important to ensure that stressors from being a sexual minority do not outweigh resources that promote resilience, thus ensuring that family crises do not unfold (Power et al., 2010). For the purposes of this review, how social support and couple communication can be means of resilience building within same-sex marriages and relationships will be explored in further detail.

One way that partners within same-sex relationships can work to promote resilience is through social support. Throughout the research on resilience, social support is demonstrated through an individual’s ability to rely on others, get help when needed, share concerns, and spend quality time with other people (Cohen et al., 1985). Social support has been consistently identified as a mediating factor in increasing resilience for individuals experiencing societal stigma for their same-sex relationship status (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2022). As demonstrated by Haas and Lannutti (2021), social support from friends, family, and partners is positively correlated with commitment, satisfaction, closeness, and relational resilience. Similarly, partner social support is a primary predictor of positive relationship functioning within same-sex couples, specifically regarding sexual minority related stress (Haas & Lannutti 2021). For example, research by Crouch et al. (2017) suggests that in order to increase resilience within same sex marriages and relationships, same-sex partners need to identify and promote social support within their environment: educating the community on their relationship functioning and need for equality, educating institutions while pushing for change, and seeking out environments that are accepting of the LGBTQ community (Crouch et al., 2017). However, communities should also work to increase means of social support for same-sex couples so that they are not left alone in their efforts to advocate for themselves. Communities surrounding same-sex couples should work to create a communal understanding of the need for same-sex couples to have access to the same relationship and community social support as heterosexual couples. On an inter-couple level, identifying social support might look like increasing abilities to communicate about stressors and finding ways to help one another in times of conflict (Haas & Lannutti 2021). According to Thomeer et al. (2021), psychological well-being decreases, and distress increases when partner social

**Social Support for Same-Sex Relationships
Builds Resilience**

support is considered to be inadequate. When inadequate social support is combined with a sexual minority status, negative outcomes such as depression and mental health issues are more likely to be heightened (Thomeer et al., 2021).

Relational and Couple Communication Builds Resilience

Another way that partners in same-sex marriages and relationships can work to promote resilience is through relational and couple communication. Research by Pepping et al. (2020) suggests that relationship education in building practical skills, such as communication and knowledge of realistic expectations, can help increase conflict resolution associated with the development of resilience. When same-sex couples are knowledgeable in communication and relational skills, they can work to manage the effects of generalized homophobia, thus fostering couple coping and resilience (Pepping et al., 2020). Just like in any other relationship, practicing skills related to relationship management can lead to healthier and happier relationships.

These strategies are additionally supported by Scott et al., (2019), as they detail how same-sex relationships can work to develop positive communication skills as a result of the lack of gender roles assigned to their relationship. Due to a lack of assigned gender roles within same-sex relationships, same-sex couples may be more able to negotiate relationship roles that focus more on partner strengths and needs rather than conventionality (Scott et al., 2019). Similarly, when same-sex relationships choose to adopt positive communication skills such as taking turns when speaking, using more calm tones, negotiating more solutions, and engaging in less demand-withdraw patterns, they are associated with higher relationship quality and resilience (Scott et al., 2019). When partners engage in less demand-withdraw patterns

such as partner blaming or partner avoidance, couples might be able to engage in conflict more positively and effectively (Holley, 2010). Couple communication patterns with expressiveness, positive responses, warmth, and understanding also help promote success in same-sex relationships in a way that contributes to the development of resilience, despite exposure to homophobia and stigmatization (Rostosky & Riggle, 2017).

Practical Strategies to Increase Resilience via Social Support

Practical strategies to increase social support within same-sex marriages and relationships include: legal recognition, familial counseling, and networking groups to connect same-sex parents with other LGBTQ families. Advocacy for marriage rights and legal recognition is one of the first steps towards increasing social support for same-sex marriages and relationships as it creates a communal understanding and acceptance of same-sex marriages as functional and legitimate (Campanile, 2022). If same-sex marriage is recognized to be legitimate from society and private institutions, there might be less need for same-sex couples to rely upon LGBTQ-specific outlets as a means of social support (Haas & Lannutti, 2021). Although same-sex marriage is legal within the United States, as of 2021, there are still 71 countries that continued to criminalize same-sex activities (Gerber et al., 2021). A global understanding of the legitimacy of same-sex marriages as both functional and legitimate is necessary in order to fully increase social support as a community-based resilience factor.

Since familial support is the strongest social support after partner social support, family acceptance should also be given careful attention for increasing resilience strategies (Haas & Lannutti, 2021). For example, family counseling interventions that help promote familial acceptance and understanding of same-sex relationship dynamics

might increase resilience as families can learn to engage in respectful conversations and empathize with one another (Diamond et al., 2022). This allows for parents and their LGBTQ children to share emotions with one another and engage in opportunities to give positive responses, where parents can be relied upon as a means of social support by their non-heterosexual children (Diamond et al., 2022).

Additionally, community support and resources can help provide a safe space for same-sex couples to explore and connect with one another in their unique experiences, which can then help to reduce stress associated with societal stigma (Haas & Lannutti, 2021). Another strategy to increase social support for same-sex marriages and relationships could be community networking groups that seek to connect same-sex families with one another and allow them to discuss relatable stressful experiences, such as coming out to family and friends, and undue discrimination for their parenting style (Barden et al., 2022). These strategies are consistent with research by Ungar (2011), which suggests that community building is essential in promoting resilience within families and individuals as it allows for the growth of physical and social resources for those at-risk to adverse outcomes. Building community support for resilience helps shift issues of stigmatization from an individualized perspective to a like-minded perspective, focusing on resource navigation for those at-risk and processes that strengthen the community as a whole (Ungar, 2011).

Practical Strategies to Increase Resilience via Relational Communication

Practical strategies to increase relational and couple communication within same-sex marriages and relationships include relationship education interventions specific to same-sex couple needs and programs that target internalized homophobia

(Barden et al., 2022). Relationship education interventions that focus on communication skills of feelings, partner responses to stress, and how to make sense of frequent stressors for same-sex relationships could be particularly beneficial for same-sex couples because of their unique exposure to societal stigma (Barden et al., 2022). Specifically, a guidebook supported by relationship education practices might help same-sex couples maneuver and strategize together through societal stigmas in the long-term, after receiving relationship education intervention (Pepping et al., 2020). These guidebooks could be made accessible to same-sex couples as they ideally would be available within community resource centers, online/digital resources, and other LGBTQ-specific outlets.

Another way to effectively promote resilience within same-sex couples is through the use of positive relationship education interventions, administered by clinicians, that emphasize relational openness and mitigation of internalized stigma within same-sex relationships (Nguyen & Pepping, 2022). Programs that target internalized homophobia could also be utilized as a strategy to increase relational and couple communication, as internalized homophobia is found to be associated with lower relationship quality and higher relationship strain (Frost et al., 2009). Planning programs to thoughtfully target and reduce internalized homophobia might help increase relational and couple communication, as partners could have more opportunities to explore and discuss their fears of relationship outness and commitment. Through programs that target internalized homophobia, same-sex couples might have a greater opportunity to build identity resilience that contributes to their ability to have relational openness (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2022). Although research acknowledges that outness is an ongoing and continuous process in any same-sex couple's life, providing the resources necessary to help decrease internalized homophobia and increase a positive

sense of self could be instrumental in promoting resilience within same-sex relationships.

Conclusion

Examining literature on resilience is significant because it is a positive quality in same-sex relationships for overcoming societal stigma, helping couples to move beyond their vulnerabilities and work towards positive outcomes. Stewart et al. (2019) suggests that same-sex relationships are at particular risk for negative outcomes when exposed to structural and societal stigmas, especially when there is a denial of equal rights and a lack of acceptance by family members. As a result of the increased risk that same-sex marriages and relationships are exposed to through societal discrimination, there should be a push for relationship education, family counseling, community support groups, and programming for same-sex parents and families in order to foster the resilience necessary to overcome these negative situations.

Although the present review provides an evidence-based overview of practical tools and skills necessary for fostering resilience in same-sex marriages and relationships, more research is needed in order to better support same-sex partners in the development of their resilience. Relationship education interventions could be particularly beneficial for same-sex relationships experiencing heightened stress as a result of societal stigmatization (Barden et al., 2022). Effective relationship education could be instrumental within same-sex relationships. When individuals are able to foster resilience effectively and have stable relationships over time, benefits in physical health, socioemotional well-being, and even positive effects on children are consistently demonstrated (Whitton & Buzzella, 2012). In order to move forward and promote resilience over adverse experiences, it is important that research attention is given to those at-risk for

negative outcomes. Future research should work to further support same-sex parents and families by thoroughly evaluating the effectiveness of the practical strategies suggested in the present literature review to help foster resilience within these unique relationships.

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