"Similar Others in Same-Sex Couples' Social Networks"

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Extended Abstract

Although population-based surveys have begun to include measures of sexual orientation – and some federal surveys are already used to produce useful statistics regarding households where persons of the same sex cohabit – we know very little about *the form and composition of the social networks of same-sex couples* in the U.S. For instance, knowledge about the representation of similar others in same-sex couples' networks has yet to be examined. Understanding the degree to which same-sex couples know and affiliate with other same-sex couples is important given the stress ameliorative role of the presence of similar others for stigmatized individuals. Data from same-sex couples participating in an ongoing NICHD-funded study (Project SHARe) offer an initial glimpse into these social networks, as detailed below.

One hundred and twenty same-sex couples, 60 in each of two study sites (Greater Atlanta and San Francisco Bay areas), participated in an initial, qualitative research phase of a large-scale study of minority stress and mental health. These two sites were selected because both attract large and diverse populations of sexual minority individuals from surrounding areas, and collectively they represent two regions of the country that significantly differ in social, historical, and cultural contexts. After completing a facilitated exercise and discussion designed to elicit joint narratives about significant events and periods of time in the past – and in the anticipated future – participating couples provided demographic data about "other same-sex couples they know." This demographic data about their social connections to other same-sex couples will be used for generating additional research samples in subsequent phases of the project. *Moreover* –

and for the purposes of this presentation – these data also offer potentially important information about the social networks of a demographically diverse sample of same-sex couples living in the Greater Atlanta Metropolitan and San Francisco Bay areas.

We employed a modified targeted nonprobability sampling strategy to recruit this sample, beginning by using an ethnographic approach to identify key locations and venues frequented by sexual minority populations in the two sites. Targeted locations included select neighborhoods and business districts. Targeted venues included, for example, grocery stores, hardware stores, child care centers, churches/temples, parks, theatres, bars, and senior centers. In order to minimize bias inherent to community samples of sexual minority populations, we avoided recruitment from venues that over-represent individuals with high levels of mental health problems and exposure to stressful life events (e.g., 12-step programs, HIV/AIDS service providers). Finally, we disseminated study information through local mainstream and gay newspapers and appropriate websites, local list serves, and radio stations. Recruitment efforts also focused on locations, venues, and dissemination strategies that would yield high proportions of racial/ethnic minority participants.

Eligibility criteria for participation in the qualitative study were that: (1) both partners were at least 21 years of age; (2) both individuals perceived of one another as their partner, of themselves as a "couple"; and (3) at some point in their shared history, they had been engaged in a sexual relationship. Further, from among those meeting these eligibility criteria, we selectively enrolled couples based on the duration of their relationship. This was done to increase the sample's representativeness regarding "relationship stage" (e.g., new relationships versus mid- and long-term partnerships), as well as the ages of the individual partners. Three categories reflecting relationship duration were selected to guide sample recruitment: six months to less

than three years; three years to seven years; and more than seven years. Within each of these three categories, participating couples were split evenly across the two study sites. In addition, half were male couples and half were female couples within the three categories at each site. Finally, we also selectively recruited participants so that in at least 40% of participating couples within each of the twelve recruitment cells (Table 1), at least one partner was from a racial/ethnic minority background. Therefore, the total sample of 120 couples is, by design, evenly dispersed by study site, gender, and relationship duration.

Table 1. Qualitative Research Sample Design (N = 120)

RELATIONSHIP DURATION	**SF Bay Area (n=60)**		**Greater Atlanta (n=60)**	
	Gay Couples	Lesbian Couples	Gay Couples	Lesbian Couples
6 months to < 3 years	10	10	10	10
3 years to 7 years	10	10	10	10
> 7 years	10	10	10	10

Table 2 presents demographic data that describe this sample. As per our sampling goal for racial/ethnic diversity, at least 40% of the couples in each recruitment cell (cells are illustrated in Table 1) are couples where at least one partner is a person of color (combine the second and third rows of Table 2). For the total sample, fewer than half of both the male and female sub-samples were couples in which both partners are non-Hispanic White (Table 2). In short, this sample of same-sex couples is racially/ethnically diverse. With regard to the site-based sub-samples, half or less than half of the couples are couples where both partners are non-Hispanic White (44% in the SF Bay and 50% in Greater Atlanta).

Table 2. Qualitative Research Sample: Race/Ethnicity

	SF BAY AREA SUB-SAMPLE			GREATER ATLANTA SUB-SAMPLE			TOTAL SAMPLE		
RACE/ ETHNICITY	**Female Couples (n=30)**	**Male Couples (n=30)**	**Site Total (n=60)**	**Female Couples (n=30)**	**Male Couples (n=30)**	**Site Total (n=60)**	**Female Couples (n=60)**	**Male Couples (n=60)**	**Total Sample (n=120)**
Both non-Hispanic White	12 (40%)	14 (47%)	26 (44%)	17 (57%)	13 (43%)	30 (50%)	29 (48%)	27 (45%)	56 (47%)
Non-Hispanic White / Person of Color	9 (30%)	14 (47%)	23 (38%)	3 (10%)	9 (30%)	12 (20%)	12 (20%)	23 (38%)	35 (29%)
Both Persons of Color	9 (30%)	2 (6%)	11 (18%)	10 (33%)	8 (27%)	18 (30%)	19 (32%)	10 (17%)	29 (24%)

Table 3 presents comparisons in the median numbers of other same-sex couples known for this qualitative research sample, as well as comparisons of medians based on study site, couple race/ethnicity, and gender. Because the distribution in numbers of other same-sex couples known was highly skewed, median comparisons are most appropriate. For the sample as a whole, the median number of other same-sex couples known was 12, and this number did not vary significantly by study site or gender. However, it did differ by couple race/ethnicity. Couples where one partner is non-Hispanic White and the other is a person of color knew significantly fewer other same-sex couples (median of 9), as shown in row 1 of Table 3.

In addition, female couples reported knowing significantly more female couples than male couples, and male couples reported knowing significantly more male couples than female couples, as illustrated under "Gender Comparisons" in Table 3. This finding suggests there is significant homophily – the tendency of people to associate and bond with similar others – based on gender in the formation of social connections within networks of same-sex couples.

These data also suggest evidence of homophily based on race/ethnicity. As shown in Table 3, couples where one or both partners are non-Hispanic White (the first two columns under "Couple Race/Ethnicity Comparisons") were significantly more likely to report higher

proportions of non-Hispanic White persons within their larger network of other same-sex couples they know. To illustrate, couples where both partners are non-Hispanic White estimated that 80% of individuals in the other same-sex couples they know were non-Hispanic White. For couples where one partner is non-Hispanic White and the other a person of color, this percentage is similarly high (65%).

In contrast, couples where both partners are persons of color (third column under "Couple/Race/Ethnicity Comparisons," Table 3) reported that just 12.5% of individuals in other same-sex couples they knew are non-Hispanic White – and this can be contrasted with 67% being Black or African American. Of couples where at least one partner is non-Hispanic White, much smaller percentages of the individuals in other same-sex couples they know are Black or African American (6.3% if "both non-Hispanic White"; 11.5% if "non-Hispanic White and person of color").

These data provide an initial glimpse into the social networks of same-sex couples, in particular regarding the degree to which they know other same-sex couples. In general these data suggest there is significant homophily with regard to the gender and race-ethnicity within the social networks of same-sex couples. They also suggest that interracial couples (where one partner is non-Hispanic White and the other is a person of color) know significantly fewer other same-sex couples.

This homophily may be adaptive if it serves the purpose of helping couples cope with minority stress. If the presence of similar others can reduce negative affect and anxiety in stigmatized individuals, then same-sex couples may benefit by having access to other couples who are similar to them in terms of gender and race/ethnicity. However, much more research is needed to investigate the form and function of same-sex couples' social networks. Such research

will help to illuminate the role that similar others may play in determining the well-being of same-sex couples, and the health of each partner respectively.

Table 3. Representation of Other Same-Sex Couples Known by Study Site, Race/Ethnicity, and Gender

CHARACTERISTICS OF KNOWN SAME-SEX COUPLES	STUDY SITE COMPARISONS		COUPLE RACE/ETHNICITY COMPARISONS			GENDER COMPARISONS		TOTAL SAMPLE (N = 117)
	SF Bay Area (n = 59)	Atlanta Metro (n = 57)	Both non-Hispanic White (n = 54)	Non-Hispanic White/Person of Color (n = 34)	Both Persons of Color (n = 29)	Female Couples (n = 59)	Male Couples (n = 58)	
TOTAL (Median)	10	16	**15**[a]	**9**[b]	**17.5**[a]	15	12	12
GENDER (Median *f*)								
Female Couples	5	6	5.5	4.5	8	**10**[a]	**3**[b]	6
Male Couples	4	7.3	6.5	4	5	**3**[a]	**9**[b]	5
RACE/ETHNICITY (Median %)*								
Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	**10%**[a]	**5%**[b]	5.5%	11.3%	10%	9%	9.2%	9%
Asian	6.6%	0%	1%	2%	0%	0%	2%	1%
Black/African American	10%	13%	**6.3%**[a]	**11.5%**[b]	**67%**[c]	14%	10%	10%
White	70%	56.5%	**80%**[a]	**65%**[b]	**12.5%**[c]	60%	72%	65%

Note: different superscripts indicate significant differences between medians at $p < .05$ within sub-samples defined by study site, race/ethnicity, and gender.

*The medians for race/ethnicity reflect the couples' estimated proportion of the individuals in the other same-sex couples they know who are from the racial/ethnic backgrounds listed below.