Chapter 6

LGBTQ Relationships: Families of Origin, Same-Sex Couples, and Parenting

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an overview of research regarding the familial and romantic relationships of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals. The topic of families of origin, describing the coming out process for LGBTQ individuals and its ramifications for individual outcomes, as well as for relationships with immediate and extended family members are covered. What is known about same-sex couple relationship dynamics, both in comparison to other-sex couples and in ways that uniquely characterize LGBTQ couple relationships, are highlighted. Finally, the literature about LGBTQ parent families, including child and parent outcomes and family processes unique to these family systems, are discussed. Throughout the chapter, areas for future LGBTQ relationship research, particularly the inclusion of underrepresented samples within the LGBTQ population, are emphasized.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we begin with an overview of the numbers of LGBTQ persons in the United States, and then primarily emphasize what is known in the research literature about the relationships of sexual and gender minority individuals – particularly with their families of origin, in their couple relationships, and as parents. In general, far less research attention has been given to gender minorities as compared to sexual minority individuals. Thus, research on LGBTQ relationships predominantly focuses on family relationships among sexual minorities, same-sex\(^1\) couples in which partners identify as cisgender (i.e.,

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gender identity is consistent with biological sex), and sexual minority parenting. Moreover, the context for this research has largely been the United States, but we include reference to international samples when possible.

A substantial number of American adults identify as sexual and gender minorities (Gates, 2015). As a term, sexual minority refers to individuals whose romantic and sexual identities, attractions, behaviors, relationships and/or desires are non-heterosexual in nature and are not exclusively oriented toward the other sex. Sexual minority refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer (LGBQ) and any other non-heterosexual identities. Gender minority is a term that refers to any individuals, including transgender (T) and gender diverse persons, whose gender expression and/or identity differ from their assigned biological sex or do not exclusively fit within the male/female binary. We use the acronym LGBTQ to refer to both sexual and gender minority persons.

**NUMBERS OF LGBTQ PEOPLE IN THE US**

To begin with, LGBTQ individuals represent a substantial minority population within the US. A common estimate is that about 3.5% of the adult (age 18 or older) population identifies as LGBTQ, or approximately 8 million Americans (Gates, 2011a, 2013). Estimates for transgender individuals range anywhere from 0.3% (Gates, 2011a) to 0.6% (Flores, Herman, Gates, & Brown, 2016) of the adult population, or approximately 700,000 to 1.4 million individuals. These numbers are likely to be a conservative estimate of these populations. One reason this may be the case surrounds the definition and identity of being LGBTQ. The 3.5% estimate usually references individuals who exclusively identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and as such, other identities (such as queer) may not be captured, nor are individuals who engage in same-sex behavior but who may not identify as LGBTQ. As a case in point, when explicitly tracking individuals who engage in same-sex sexual behaviors, the estimate goes from 3.5% to 8.2%. Moreover, when surveys track same-sex attraction, the number goes even higher to 11% of the population, or roughly 25.6 million American adults (Gates, 2011a).

A secondary reason that these statistics may underestimate the numbers of LGBTQ people in the US is the reliance on Census data, which are in some ways limited in their representation of the LGBTQ population. As Cianciotto (2005) has noted, while the Census does capture information on same-sex couples that live together, it cannot account for single LGBTQ people, LGBTQ couples who are not living together, LGBTQ seniors who live alone, LGBTQ youth, undocumented immigrants or homeless individuals, and those who are uncomfortable listing themselves as “out” on a federal document such as the Census. It is imperative to consider that estimates of the US population are limited by how particular identities are operationalized, and thus, in representing the true diversity of the LGBTQ population.

**Numbers of Same-Sex Couples in the US**

According to 2010 Census data, there are at least 650,000 cohabiting same-sex couples in the US (Gates & Newport, 2013). Same-sex couples are currently the highest growing population of householders in the US, as compared with other-sex² married and unmarried couples, with numbers almost doubling (an 80.4% increase) from 2000 to 2010 (Gates, 2012). The 2000 U.S. Census was the first time in which the government officially began to track LGBTQ households. As stigma associated with LGBTQ individuals has decreased in the US, it is likely that more LGBTQ individuals have become comfortable ‘outing’