CONSEQUENCES AND BUFFERS OF RELATIONSHIP STIGMA FOR MENTAL HEALTH AMONG ADULTS IN INTERRACIAL AND/OR SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

Lisa Rosenthal (Pace University)
& Tyrel J. Starks (Hunter College, CUNY)
Currently, 87% of people in U.S. approve of marriage between Black & White individuals (Gallup Poll, 2013)

60% believe marriage between same-sex couples should be recognized equally by law (Gallup Poll, 2015)

Yet, stigmatization of these relationships persists, with consequences for relationship dynamics & mental health
Possession of any socially-devalued attribute or identity & range of experiences that results from that at intrapersonal, interpersonal, & structural levels, such as stereotyping, marginalization, & discrimination (e.g., Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013)

“fundamental cause” of health disparities that “gets under the skin” & adversely affects well-being through various mechanisms, such as stress, social isolation, reduced resources, & unhealthy responses (e.g., Chaudoir et al., 2013; Clark et al., 1999; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013)
Emerging evidence stigma experienced as couple in addition to individually-experienced stigma

Quantitative & qualitative studies (Frost, 2011, Gamarel et al., 2014; Lehmliller & Agnew, 2006, 2007) conducted with individuals in interracial, same-sex, age-gap relationships, & with trans women & their cisgender male partners:

- experience greater stigma/marginalization of relationships
- greater relationship stigma/marginalization → lower relationship commitment, investment, quality, & greater conflict; greater depressive symptoms & odds breaking up
- couples also overcome stigma together & find some positive consequences of experiences
Different sources of relationship stigma (e.g., family, friends, public) might have different consequences (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993).

One study found relationship marginalization from friends & family combined stronger predictor of decreases in commitment & breaking up than from society (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2007).

We aimed to tease apart family, friends, & public sources.
Past work has not tested factors that buffer/protect against negative consequences of relationship stigma.

We investigated two potential buffers:

- **Egalitarianism** – belief in equality for all individuals & social groups → could help better understand stigma experiences & feel motivated to stay positive about situation despite stigma.

- **Dyadic coping** – coping couples engage in collaboratively in face of stressors → could help deal with stigma & maintain mental health & relationships in face of stigma.
Study Questions/Aims

1) are symptoms of anxiety & depression associated with experiences of relationship stigma from family, friends, &/or public?
   - Examine unique associations controlling for other potentially confounding variables & teasing apart different sources

2) what factors may buffer individuals from adverse associations of relationship stigma with mental health?
   - Testing egalitarianism & dyadic coping
Online survey study through Qualtrics

Participants recruited & screened through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) & postings on websites & other online media focused on interracial &/or same-sex dating & relationships

Qualifications: 18 years or older; living in U.S.; in interracial &/or same-sex relationship 3 months or more
Participants

- 511 participants in analytic sample
  - 303 in interracial (but heterosexual) relationship
  - 112 in same-sex (but same-race) relationship
  - 96 in interracial & same-sex relationship

- 274 women, 232 men, 3 transgender, 2 other

- 298 white, 68 multiracial/ethnic, 63 Asian, 46 Black, 32 Latino, 1 Middle Eastern

- Mean age 30.59 years (SD = 9.75)
Variables

Control Variables:
- age in years, length of relationship in months, if living together individually-experienced discrimination
  - 10-item Everyday Discrimination Scale (Lewis et al., 2006; Williams et al., 1997; α=.91)

Main Predictor Variables:
- relationship stigma from family (α=.88), friends (α=.86), & public (α=.92)
  - 25 items total, 19 created for this study, 6 based on Lehmiller & Agnew’s (2006) relationship marginalization measure
  - 3 subscales created based on factor analysis (Rosenthal & Starks, 2015)
Example Relationship Stigma Items

- My family is not accepting of this relationship (Family; Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006)
- People are rude to you/give you an attitude because of being an interracial &/or same-sex couple (Public; Rosenthal & Starks, 2015)
- Friends make comments about your partner &/or relationship that offend you because of being an interracial &/or same-sex couple (Friends; Rosenthal & Starks, 2015)
- Family members do not acknowledge your relationship &/or refer to your partner as your ‘friend’ because of being an interracial &/or same-sex couple (Family; Rosenthal & Starks, 2015)
Mental Health Outcome Variables:
- symptoms of depression
  - 20-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies- Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977; α=.94)
- symptoms of anxiety
  - 7-item Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 Scale (Spitzer et al., 2006; α=.92)

Potential Buffering Variables:
- egalitarianism
  - 8-item egalitarianism dimension of Social Dominance Orientation scale (Ho et al., 2012; Pratto et al., 1994; α=.93)
- dyadic coping
  - 7 items from Dyadic Coping Inventory (Ledermann et al., 2010; α=.84)
Regression Results: Main Effects

- Relationship stigma from friends $\rightarrow$ greater depressive symptoms ($\beta=.18$, $p<.01$)
- Relationship stigma from family $\rightarrow$ marginally greater depressive symptoms ($\beta=.10$, $p=.07$)
- Relationship stigma from family $\rightarrow$ greater anxiety symptoms ($\beta=.12$, $p=.04$)
- Everyday discrimination $\rightarrow$ greater depressive symptoms ($\beta=.32$, $p<.001$) & anxiety symptoms $\beta=.21$, $p<.001$)
Regression Results: Interaction Effects

- egalitarianism X relationship stigma from public → depressive symptoms ($\beta=-.12, \ p=.05$) & anxiety symptoms ($\beta=-.16, \ p=.02$)
- dyadic coping X relationship stigma from family → depressive symptoms ($\beta=-.15, \ p<.01$)
Results: Egalitarianism as Moderator

Depressive Symptoms vs. Relationship Stigma from Public

Anxiety Symptoms vs. Relationship Stigma from Public

Level of Egalitarianism
- Maximum score
- Mean
- 1 SD below mean
Results: Dyadic Coping as Moderator

![Graph showing the relationship between depressive symptoms and relationship stigma from family]

Legend:
- 1 SD above mean
- Mean
- 1 SD below mean

Depressive Symptoms vs. Relationship Stigma from Family
Summary

- Relationship stigma from friends & family may have important consequences for mental health.
- Does not mean stigma from public does not matter.
- Relationship stigma from friends & family may be most harmful because more proximal in social networks & people expect support from.
- Clinicians working with same-sex or interracial couples should be aware of potential negative impact of stigma.
Summary

- Egalitarianism & dyadic coping may be important buffers of consequences of relationship stigma from family & public.
- Buffered individuals from adverse consequences of & even supported positive outcomes in response to relationship stigma.
- Egalitarianism & dyadic coping could potentially be increased through intervention/clinical work.
Limitations & Future Directions

- Data cross-sectional, cannot determine causality
  - Future longitudinal & experimental studies
- Data self-report & from only 1 member of couple
  - Future studies dyadic data & connecting to other data sources, such as public surveys to assess societal stigma or surveys of social network to assess stigma among friends, family, etc.
- Other sources of stigma?
  - Co-workers, neighbors, etc.
Number of interracial & same-sex relationships & marriages in U.S. increasing

More research needed to understand these couples’ experiences & to learn how best to support them
Acknowledgements

- Study funded by Pace Scholarly Research Award
- Thanks to my collaborator Dr. Tyrel Starks (Hunter College, CUNY) & to my Pace student research assistants who helped with survey development, recruitment, data collection & cleaning:
  - Jessica Bendert
  - Erin Carroll
  - Kirsten Dagrosa
  - Avalon Henry
  - Ella Quinlan
  - Cory Reano
  - Arielle Stein
  - Kristin Thies
Thank you!

lrosenthal@pace.edu