Gendered Marital Dynamics and Health: Gay, Lesbian, and Heterosexual Couples

Debra Umberson

Network on Life Course Dynamics and Disparities - Gender Differences

May 3, 2015
Who Needs Marriage?

Men do more than women... And it works better for richer than for poorer.

A TIME/FOX Special Report

BY MELINDA KLERMAN

GAY MARRIAGE ALREADY WON.

THE SUPREME COURT HASN'T MADE UP ITS MIND—BUT AMERICA HAS

BY MARK VON HOLLER

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
Sexual Minority Populations and Health

- Elevated risk of depression and anxiety disorders
- Less frequent use of preventive health services
- Access to health insurance/health care
- Greater risk for obesity (for women)
- Higher rates of substance use
Gendered Marital Dynamics & Health

• Marital dynamics \(\rightarrow\) cumulative effects on health
• His and Hers Marital Experiences \(\rightarrow\) Health
• How SS marriage fits with this story
HIS AND HERS: Marital Interactions, Gender, & Health
Gendered Marital Dynamics ➔ Health?

• Recent meta analysis by Robles and Colleagues:
  • Small (if any) gender difference in marital quality ➔ health

• Depends on health outcome:
  • Self-rated health (Umberson and colleagues, 2006)
  • Inflammation (Donoho, Crimmins, & Seeman, 2013)
  • Immune function (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001)

• Beyond moderation: All things are not equal (Relative Disadvantage)
  • Emotional support, emotion work, social control, stress
What We Can Learn From Same-Sex Marriage

• Decades of research on heterosexual marriages
  • Assumption: gender difference

• What does this suggest for marital dynamics and health of same-sex couples?
  • Social control of health behaviors
  • Emotion work, emotional support, and stress
  • How spouses react to illness/provide care
Same-Sex Couples

• Inclusion: Same-sex marriage: 36 states and counting
• From gender difference to gendered marital contexts:
  • Women with women
  • Women with men
  • Men with Women
  • Men with men
Blended Dyadic Methods

- In-depth interview component
- Baseline surveys and daily diary component
  - Ten day diary

- Focus on *process* in both components
- *Dyadic data* for both components
- *Same-sex and different-sex couples* in both components
Massachusetts Sample  
(n = 480 individuals; 240 couples, 4800 diary days)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey/Diary Sample</th>
<th>Men with Men</th>
<th>Men with Women</th>
<th>Women with Women</th>
<th>Women with Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married 3+ years</td>
<td>120 individuals (60 couples)</td>
<td>120 individuals (60 couples)</td>
<td>120 individuals (60 couples)</td>
<td>120 individuals (60 couples)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-65 years old</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-depth Interview Sample (subset of larger diary sample)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married 7+ years</td>
<td>30 individuals (15 couples)</td>
<td>30 individuals (15 couples)</td>
<td>30 individuals (15 couples)</td>
<td>30 individuals (15 couples)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-60 years old</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Study Goals

• Examine relationship/health processes for same-sex and different-sex married couples
  • How partners influence each other’s health behaviors
  • How partners provide informal care to each other during illness or injury
  • How partners influence each other’s use of formal health care systems
  • How stress and mental health of one partner influences the other partner
Two Examples

• Health behavior
  • How partners influence each other’s health habits
• Health problems and informal care
  • How partners provide care to each other when one is sick or injured
Social Control Processes

• Baseline survey results—dyadic data
• How do SC tactics systematically vary across dyads, and by gender
Factorial Method (West, Popp & Kenny, 2008)

• Tests 3 “gender effects”:
  • Respondent gender
  • Spouse gender
  • Respondent gender * spouse gender (dyad)
  • With gay, lesbian, and different-sex dyads, results for four groups
    • MM, MW, WM, WW
Social Control-Supportive (Dyad Effect)

Social Control-Facilitation (R Effect)

Social Control-Regulation (P Effect)
How Much Respondent Wants Spouse to Change Current Health Habits (P Effect)
Social Control

• Importance for population health
  • Health behavior as explanatory mechanism
Serious Illness of a Spouse
Marriage and Cancer: Anne & Cheryl

• *Oh, she went to every appointment, every infusion, every pap smear, every oncology meeting that I had, she advocated for me, she had the questions, she knew exactly what it was that she needed to ask, and she dealt with all the insurance people.* (Anne, age 55)

• *It was just crushing. I’m self-employed, and I couldn’t really take a lot of time off. I would cry on the way to work and I would cry on the way home. I really pretty much did everything.* (Cheryl, age 50)
Marriage and Cancer: Andrew & Eric

• Maybe it was ignorance is bliss...because it wasn’t like testicular cancer or melanoma or anything that had a big name” (Eric, age 51)

• You assume responsibility for yourself, but then the other is there for counsel and just a little TLC. (Eric, age 51)

• I don’t think there’s anything he does differently, it’s just like knowing he’s there. (Andrew, age 45)
Marriage and Cancer: Gwen & Hal

• If it had been me, I would have laid there and suffered and not cared if anybody cared. (Hal, age 58)

• I knew he got weary and he needed a break. And he did take a vacation and went away for two weeks. (Gwen, age 52)

• There are times when I just need time out, I just need space. Like I mentioned, when I come home from work all day...sometimes I just don't want to talk for a little while. (Hal)
Marriage and Cancer: Joe & Lori

• I had a really negative and bad attitude. People come to visit me in the hospital and then they wondered why they came... I wasn’t being nice. (Joe, age 60)

• I know by the way he is breathing in the morning if he is going to wake up and have a good day or a bad day... He was in the hospital so we had medical people taking care of him, but I needed to be sort of a caregiving person... I worked hard to meet his needs and make sure that his nursing care was good, that he wasn’t in any pain. (Lori, age 54)
Patient’s View: Most Serious Illness Event

**Stress of Illness for Patient (P Effect)**

**Overall Support From Spouse During Illness (P & Dyad Effect)**

**Confidence in Spouse to Provide Support in Future Illness (R & Dyad Effect)**
Patient & Spouse: Stress of Illness for the Relationship

Standard Score

-0.20
-0.10
0.00
0.10
0.20
0.30
0.40
0.50

Patient Report
Caregiver Report

MM
MW
WM
WW
The Diary Analysis

• Day-to-day fluctuation in reciprocal marital and health processes
• Old Pathways revisited
  • Social Control and Health Behaviors
  • Emotional Support
  • Relationship Strain
  • Emotion Work
• How these processes vary for same-sex and different-sex marriages
Immediate and Lagged Effects

• Social control efforts ➔ health behaviors (and mental health) of both spouses

• Each spouse’s health behaviors ➔ the other spouse’s distress levels

• Daily stress for each spouse ➔ the other spouse’s health behaviors

• Each spouse’s distress levels ➔ the other spouse’s health behaviors
Significance

- Inclusion
- Sexual minority health disparities
- Paradigm-shifting in understanding gender, relationships, and population health
Acknowledgments

• Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

• National Institute on Aging

• Population Research Center, University of Texas at Austin

• Our Study Participants

• Research Team: Rachel Donnelly, Pina Holway, Rhiannon Kroeger, Emily Paine, Corinne Reczek, Brandon Robinson, Minle Xu,