An Examination of Non-Heterosexual Romantic Relationships

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

This paper examines the differences and similarities between heterosexual and sexual minority individuals in various settings. It also examines theories of sexual deviance and how they relate to social and political ideologies of sexual minority individuals. I briefly summarize the current political debate surrounding sexual minorities, and finally suggest some societal level changes that could possibly help alleviate some of the issues this topic has created for U.S. citizens. In my review of this literature, I conclude that expanding the institution of marriage to be inclusive of sexual minorities would only benefit our country. This current debate provides an excellent opportunity to reevaluate societal norms of gender and romantic relationships.

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Introduction

Current political and social debates have stirred much public interest in gay and lesbian individuals and their romantic relationships. Citizens of the U.S. are concerned about what this discussion means for them and their families, and what it means for the nation’s future. With the cacophony that often follows political debates, I find it pertinent to discuss the issues from a research-based perspective. Politics also tends to categorize people into groups (e.g., gay versus straight), for comparison purposes, and I find that this method may not be effective for understanding sexual minority individuals and their romantic relationships. Because each sexual minority group is so few in numbers compared to the general population, in a democracy it is necessary for all citizens to understand the issues in order to best protect the rights of everyone instead of dividing the population on arbitrary lines such as sexual orientation, gender, or sex.

Scope

The scope of the current work was meant to be as inclusive of all non-heterosexual romantic relationships as possible. The groups included are gay men, lesbians, transsexuals, and polyamorists. It should be noted, however that some groups were excluded due to the lack of substantial research on romantic relationships within those groups. Excluded groups include but are not limited to: men who have sex with men and women who have sex with women (but do not identify as homosexual), polygamists, two-spirits, transgender, intersex, bisexual and gender queer individuals. These groups have various characteristics that set them apart from the more widely studied groups of sexual minorities, but for the purpose of this work they will be integrated into one large group of self-identified non-normative sexual minorities. This implies that they do not uphold, agree with, or desire the Western ideal of monogamous heteroexclusivity.
Theories of “Sexual Deviance”

Sigmund Freud, the architect of the psychoanalytic theory of psychology, was perhaps the least disparaging of the contemporary theorists on sexual minorities. Freud (1953) noted a shift in thought from antiquity (read Greco-Roman) to modern times regarding sexuality:

"The most striking distinction between the erotic life of antiquity and our own no doubt lies in the fact that the ancients laid the stress upon the instinct itself, whereas we emphasize its object. The ancients glorified the instinct and were prepared on its account to honor even an inferior object; while we despise the instinctual activity itself, and find excuses for it only in the merits of the object." (Freud, 1953, p.149)

Coming at a time when sexuality and sexual urges were utterly hidden from society and considered taboo and inappropriate, Freud began to challenge this idea by suggesting that sexuality was natural and beneficial to human psychological health. It would appear that this idea remains radical even today.

Perhaps due to this idolization of the classical ideas of sexuality, along with advances in understanding of human anatomy and physiology, Freud made the revolutionary assertion that all humans begin the same sexually, and only differentiate in terms of their sexual preferences later in development. He termed this “psychical hermaphroditism” (Freud, 1954, p. 141). This radical step in the dissolution of gender norms was not followed by Freud’s psychological successors. Lewes (1988) suggested that this divergence is due to ambiguity in Freud’s original theory, leaving modern theorists to add their own interpretations to the body of psychoanalysis. This led to the idea of a normative and natural heterosexuality, the opposite of which was the pathological and unnatural homosexuality. The result of this labeling system, Connell (1992) argued, is that men who identify as homosexual can no longer be seen as men; they are necessarily the opposite.
However, they cannot be seen as women due to their anatomical sex. This leads to an ambiguity that individuals in Western culture are not comfortable with, and in society’s attempt to classify these nonconforming individuals in order to be able to understand them, the minority individuals are stripped down to little more than their sexual preferences (Connell, 1992).

However, other theorists took Freud’s work in an opposite, but equally extreme, direction. Mieli gave a voice to the gay men’s population of London in 1980, and he took Freud’s psychical hermaphroditism to a new level. Mieli posited that everyone was not only born with a capability to be sexually directed towards everyone, but that this only stopped when the individual was “educastrated” to repress their sexual urges – especially those that were not considered moral or acceptable (Mieli, 1980, p.25). While Mieli’s ideas did not seem to take hold on a large scale, they demonstrate the opposition to the conventional mode of thought that labeled sexual minorities as pathological.

**An Examination of Sexual Minority Individuals in Their Various Roles**

To best understand romantic relationships within sexual minority groups, my review begins with a brief summary of the limitations of existing literature on gay men, lesbians, transsexuals, and polyamorists. Next, my review examines research on sexual minorities at an individual, relational, familial, and societal level. The review will then move on to examine the apparent level of support or opposition of sexual minority rights in contemporary American culture, and how these views might affect future generations of all sexes, genders, and sexual identities.

**Limitations of Extant Research**
Research on sexual minorities has focused primarily on sexual deviance, and other sexually charged topics such as mate selection, frequency of sex, and prevalence of sexually transmitted infections such as HIV. These foci imply that sexual minorities differ from the sexual majority by sexual issues alone. Such implications are problematic for a myriad of reasons, but mainly because: (1) they oversimplify the similarities and differences between sexual majority and minority individuals down to sexual behaviors and preferences, (2) they do not account for the effects of prejudice and social exclusion on an individual’s sexual characteristics and choices, and (3) they do not allow for the idea that a sexual minority subculture developed due to the effects of prejudice and social exclusion, and a consideration for the mediating effects said subculture has, positive or negative, on an individual’s sexual characteristics and choices.

Finally, it is worthy of note that most studies regarding sexual minorities suffer from selection bias. These studies are typically conducted on convenience samples, samples from highly urban areas known for a dense minority population, or samples pulled from mailing lists for minority literature such as newspapers or magazines. These samples, though convenient, are not representative of the sexual minority population, so their results should not be considered generalizable. One can safely assume that the majority of individuals studied are white, middle to upper middle class, and part of a supportive minority culture, group, or neighborhood. These limitations noted, the reader also should keep in mind the conflicting nature of existing literature of homosexual individuals; specifically, the relationship between identifying as a sexual minority and educational and financial attainment. I suggest that the reader view this as a dialog, rather than dismissing one side or the other.

Sexual Minorities as Individuals
The Kinsey study of human sexual behavior was arguably one of the most important advances in the understanding of human sexuality in modern times. His findings on male sexuality were perhaps revolutionary for the homosexual community due to the light shed on normal male sexual tendencies. Homosexuality was (and even is today) regarded as a mental illness that only a minute few of society’s outcasts suffered from. Kinsey discovered that 38.7% of single males between the ages of 36 and 40 had experienced some pleasurable homosexual activity (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948). This number was surprisingly high then as it is now. Kinsey observed that the individuals most likely to exhibit homosexual behavior were those most likely to disapprove of it. He noted an association between homosexual behavior and education level, such that men who did not advance beyond high school were more likely to sexually harass homosexual men as a means of demonstrating the homosexual’s inferiority (Kinsey et al., 1948).

These findings are in stark contrast to those of Black, Gates, Sanders and Taylor (2000) whose analysis of census data suggested that the gay and lesbian population is highly educated and relatively affluent. Barrett, Pollack and Tilden (2002) also noted the common assumption in the U.S. that homosexual men and women are as affluent as or even more affluent than most Americans. So what is behind this divergence? First, Kinsey found a positive correlation between education/income and acceptance of homosexuality (Kinsey et al., 1948). Therefore, the males with lower educational attainment were not likely to self-identify as homosexual, but Kinsey’s records suggested that they had strong “psychic reactions” to other males (Kinsey et al., 1948). This finding is consistent with more recent research by Barrett and Pollack (2005), which found that working-class men (those with less education) were less likely to identify as homosexual, and less likely to be involved in the gay community than homosexual men who
were more affluent (or more well educated). Barrett et al. (2002) theorized that this was because the process of developing a sense of self, which includes a stigmatized sexual orientation for sexual minority individuals, may compromise academic achievement during the formative years of middle and high school. This, coupled with Kinsey's positive correlation between educational level and acceptance of homosexuality, suggests that sexual minority individuals who struggle through school as a result of stigmatization are more likely to deny that they are a part of a sexual minority.

Second, and perhaps precipitate of the first explanation, Barrett and Pollack's (2005) research also suggested that one's socioeconomic status (SES) influenced individuals' ability to be "out" about their sexual orientation due to the availability of resources. These resources typically stem from an individual's finances. If an individual has enough capital, they are more able to move to a gay-friendly area, to subscribe to homosexual-centered media such as newspapers and magazines, and to attend social events for the gay community, for example. Living in a gay-friendly community also would lead to an increase in an individual's social support.

These resources are perhaps even more integral to a transsexual person's expression of self. For many transsexual individuals, the idea of "passing" as their desired sex is not enough—they need to feel that they are the sex they have psychologically been all along (Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006). This typically requires hormone treatments, wardrobe shifts, and even cosmetic and sex-reassignment surgeries. For individuals who cannot afford such changes, their sense of self may suffer considerably.

Finally, both transsexuals and homosexual individuals who are not connected with the resources mentioned previously are less likely than their more affluent counterparts to live an
alternative lifestyle openly, or to report such desires. And if they do live an alternative lifestyle, Peplau (2007) contended that homosexual individuals are sometimes reluctant to disclose their sexual orientation or relationship status on questionnaires such as the census. Given that lower SES is simply more populous than higher SES, one might expect that there would be more sexual minority individuals in the lower tiers of income. However, many men simply do not see themselves as homosexual – or if they do, their system of values prohibits them from accepting (and reporting on) that part of themselves. This could be due to internalized homophobia, which might lead individuals with homosexual inclinations to feel inferior and shameful (Dubé, 2000). Thus, because of the reluctance to report one’s homosexual orientation among lower SES individuals, this may distort the data to suggest that there are disproportionately more affluent than working-class sexual minority individuals when the opposite might actually be more accurate.

Despite the divergent nature of these findings, they have a significant value for researchers due to the fact that men who engage in homosexual activity are often underrepresented in most research. Also, many of these studies were limited to samples of homosexual men, thus it is unclear if these findings can be applied to other sexual minorities as well. The sample limitations of extant research further underscore the considerable gaps in this literature.

Sexual Minorities in Romantic Relationships

Possibly the most difficult thing for heterosexual individuals to understand about sexual minorities is their method of forming romantic relationships. What are they attracted to in a potential mate? Do they desire long term relationships or just casual sexual encounters? Is it possible for them to form committed and lasting partnerships in the absence of marriage?
Researchers have drawn some conclusions in regard to these questions about romantic relationships between sexual minority individuals.

Some theorists have speculated that in same-sex relationships, one partner takes on the traditionally "feminine" role and the other takes on the traditionally "masculine" role to form a heteronormative-like relationship. Felmlee (2010) did not find this to be the case. According to Felmlee's research, gay men and lesbians had similar preferences for traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine characteristics in a potential partner. Traits most valued by both gay men and lesbians were agreeableness (such as kindness and supportiveness), intelligence, and extroversion (fun and sense of humor) (Felmlee, 2010). Another stereotype about gay men's and lesbians' preferences in mate selection is that they themselves must exhibit the opposite characteristics than what they prefer in a partner (e.g., a lesbian must exhibit masculine characteristics in order to be attracted to a feminine woman and visa versa). Bailey, Kim, Hills and Lisenmeier debunked this stereotype in their 1997 research study on attraction in sexual minorities. According to Bailey et al. (1997), gay men described themselves and their desired partner as having masculine-type characteristics, whereas lesbians reported that they and their desired partner had feminine-type characteristics.

While homosexual attraction and mate selection may be something that heterosexual individuals find difficult to comprehend, many studies suggest that homosexual commitment is similar to that of heterosexual relationships. As with heterosexual relationships, commitment is based on perceived costs and benefits to remaining in the relationship. Committed people perceive more benefits than costs to remaining in a relationship, while those who are not as committed see the relationship as having fewer benefits than costs (Kurdek, 1995). One point that keeps commitment high in a relationship, however, is perceived barriers to leaving the
relationship. Many researchers have questioned this aspect of relationship commitment in sexual minority populations due to the inability to marry. Marriage has been indicated as an impressive barrier to leaving a relationship for heterosexual couples (despite the high rate of divorce), and contemporary research has focused on teasing apart the effect that the inability to get married has had on sexual minority individuals and their relationships (Peplau, 2007). As Peplau (2007) noted:

"Given the weaker barriers to ending same-sex relationships, we might anticipate that there would be fewer long-term relationships among lesbians and gay men compared with heterosexuals. Unfortunately, we currently know little about the longevity of same-sex relationships. No information comparable to divorce statistics for heterosexual marriages is available" (Peplau, 2007, p. 412).

Peplau concisely explained the current problem with commitment studies for non-heterosexual couples – researchers cannot truly compare two unequal relationship statuses. Some researchers try their best by comparing cohabiting same-sex and married opposite-sex couples, while others only compare cohabiting couples of both orientations. This comparison necessarily causes a statistical problem, as the comparison of two dissimilar groups yields invalid data.

One advantage for homosexual individuals, who lack the opportunity to marry, is the opportunity to demonstrate their resilience and true desire to have lasting and stable romantic relationships outside of a legally (and often socially) recognized union. In a study by Kurdek (2004), approximately 44.5% of the homosexual couples interviewed had been together over 10 years despite their inability to formally marry. Kurdek (2004) suggested that high levels of commitment are influenced by psychological adjustment, personality traits, relationship styles, conflict resolution, and social support. Similarly, Mohr, Selterman, and Fassinger (2013) found
that, as in heterosexual relationships, individuals' attachment style from childhood forms the basis for how they will attach to romantic partners. For example, if one had a healthy, secure attachment in infancy, they are likely to be able to form romantic bonds much more easily than one who was insecure in their primary attachment (Mohr et al., 2013). Mohr et al. (2013) went on to suggest that for individuals with high relationship anxiety (fear of being left or abandoned), monogamous relationships were preferred and greatly increased relationship satisfaction and commitment. However, for individuals with secure primary relationships, the formation of secondary sexual relationships (in addition to the primary relationship) did not affect satisfaction or commitment of the primary relationship (Mohr et al., 2013).

While many researchers have attempted to identify similarities between homosexual and heterosexual relationships, particularly in terms of level of commitment, some theorists have suggested that this may not be best for hetero- or homosexual individuals. While monogamy might be the accepted and traditional form of heterosexual relationships, Bettinger (2006) proposed that this may not be what comes naturally for many individuals, and traditional views of commitment and infidelity need to be modified to include polyamourous relationships. Many proponents of polyamory believe that redefining romantic relationships in this way would benefit everyone because it would reduce the amount of pressure on sexual minorities to conform to a very specific majority norm, but it also would allow for heterosexual people to explore their own ideas of sexuality and romantic relationships in a less strictly monogamous society.

Current research on polyamory tends to examine it within the context of gay male relationships due to the prevalence of it in that population, but as more people learn of the possibilities within polyamory, it is becoming more common. Labriola (2003) explained that there are various forms of polyamory: (1) Primary/Secondary, (2) Polyfidelity, (3) Open Multiple
Primaries, and (4) Multiple Non-Primary. Primary/Secondary is the option most like a traditional monogamous relationship in that two partners are primarily committed to one another and no other relationship can equal the primary in importance. The difference then lies in the other attachments either one or both of the primary partners create. These other attachments may be exclusively sexual in nature, or may include an emotional relationship as well. Secondary relationships can also vary in length as well as level of commitment. Also noteworthy, is that in the event a Primary relationship ends, the secondary relationship(s) do not necessarily advance to the level of Primary. Thus, it is possible for an individual to have a secondary relationship in the absence of a primary. Secondary relationships may even be described as loving relationships, but they do not equal the Primary love relationship. Both primary partners have an important input on all secondary partners, which is why Primary/Secondary is the most popular type of polyamory (Labriola, 2003).

Polyfidelity is different from the Primary/Secondary model in that it promotes the secondary relationship(s) to a primary status. This means that everyone involved is in a love relationship with everyone else. Each relationship is of equal importance and equal value and because of this, everyone must agree before ending or beginning a relationship. This differs from the Open Multiple Primaries model, in which each partner may freely leave and begin relationships without the consent of every other partner (Labriola, 2003). And finally, the Multiple Non-Primary model allows for an individual to have multiple romantic and sexual "secondary" relationships without the commitment of a primary relationship. The Multiple Non-Primary model is the least accepted in today's society due to the idea of infidelity. The difference between the Multiple Non-Primary model and a "cheater" is that in a polyamorous relationship, all partners know of the other partners and consent to the lifestyle (Labriola, 2003).
With that being said, infidelity remains a poignant source of anxiety for most relationships. Harris (2002) found that approximately 70% of individuals (both hetero- and homosexual) had experienced a partner’s infidelity (either emotional or sexual), and approximately 57.5% of those individuals report their relationship ending as a result of the infidelity (Harris, 2002, p.10). Further, Sánchez, Bocklandt & Vilain (2009) found that having a high interest in casual sex led to less relationship satisfaction for both heterosexual and homosexual men. Interestingly, heterosexual men are more likely to fear sexual infidelity while homosexual men have a greater fear of the repercussions of emotional infidelity (Harris, 2002). This may suggest that gay men might be more accepting of a partner’s casual sex, as long as it did not affect the quality of the primary relationship. It is exceedingly important to note here, however, that this is not the case for all gay men, and that many gay men desire completely monogamous relationships.

Sexual minority couples experience conflict stemming from other issues besides infidelity, and conflict has a way of affecting relationship satisfaction, which then affects commitment. In a measure of 20 different issues regarding power, social issues, personal flaws, distrust, intimacy, and personal distance, Kurdek (1994) found that intimacy and power were the top two issues that provoked conflict in relationships of heterosexual and homosexual couples alike. Kurdek (1994) also found that the more frequent the conflict, the less satisfied the couple was in their relationship. These findings suggest that homosexual couples argue about the same things that heterosexual couples argue about, and that conflict has a generally negative impact on relationship quality, regardless of sexual orientation (Kurdek, 1994). In a later study, Kurdek (1998) found that, again, there was no difference in constructive problem solving between heterosexual and homosexual couples. In this same study, Kurdek observed an average decrease
in relationship satisfaction over time for both heterosexual and homosexual couples (Kurdek, 1998).

One topic that is a common cause of conflict in many cohabiting relationships is how to divide household labor (Greenstein & Teachman, 2009). Heterosexual couples in past decades were more likely than contemporary couples to divide housework in gender stereotypical ways, with the female taking responsibility for the bulk of the housework, and the male working primarily outside the home. In the U.S., a traditional division of labor has become less prevalent as more couples work toward gender equality (Greenstein & Teachman, 2009). Same-sex couples necessarily need to define these roles for themselves because they have less defined social scripts. Research has demonstrated that cohabiting gay and lesbian childless couples are much more egalitarian in their division of housework than cohabiting or married heterosexual childless couples (Kurdek, 2006; Kurdek, 2007). In this case, being different from the norm is not such a bad thing, as equal division of household labor has been documented to have positive effects on relationship satisfaction (Greenstein & Teachman, 2009).

**Sexual Minorities as Members of Families**

**Families of origin.** While it may seem that parenthood is the next step in the life cycle after forming a committed relationship for many people, it is important to remember that fewer and fewer people today are choosing to bear children (National Vital Statistics Report, 2010). For sexual minority couples, this is even more poignant because, often times, the road to parenthood is riddled with barriers, and unlike in heterosexual couples there can be no accidental pregnancies. But before I can examine the families that sexual minority couples create, I will discuss their families of origin to better understand the influence this may have on them.
The effect of gender nonconformity on the parent-child relationship can strain the coming-out process for sexual minority children and adolescents. Research involving gay and lesbian children has shown that the parent-child relationship goes through a significant drop in quality during the coming-out process but then typically improves afterward (Patterson, 2000). However, the amount of improvement after disclosure depends greatly on the relationship quality before the disclosure. Therefore, if the relationship was already under strain due to gender nonconformity or other various reasons, then the amount of improvement after disclosure of sexual minority identity might be minimal (Patterson, 2000). The parent-child relationship is also particularly important when it comes to children or adolescents' self-esteem. If they know, or assume, that their parent(s) will be disapproving of their sexual identity, they are much more likely to feel shame and distress (Patterson, 2000).

Mallon and DeCrescenzo (2006) pointed out that, for families, it can be easy to blame the child or adolescent for their “failure to adapt to traditional gender norms”, and that the depression, anxiety and other negative effects this blame has on the child can be seen as “further evidence that something is wrong with the child” (Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006, p. 217). Many transsexual individuals begin to comprehend that they are different from others of their sex not internally, but from external feedback – usually in the form of parents reacting to their gender non-conforming child. This takes us back to Mieli’s idea of “educastration” which suggested that children do not innately uphold gender norms, and only begin to do so under perceived societal pressure (Mieli, 1980). In the 1997 film Ma Vie en Rose, the main character, a young boy named Ludovic, comes up with an elegantly simple solution to why he was not born a girl. After his older sister explains how men have X and Y chromosomes and women have two X chromosomes, Ludovic is convinced that his second X simply fell into the trash on its way down
from heaven and he accidently got a Y instead. Ludovic's explanation clearly shows that he does not grasp that his sex and gender are supposed to be permanent and binary; nor does he understand that his innate feelings could be perceived negatively (Berliner, 1997).

When sexual minority children and youth are exposed to negative feedback from their families, their risk for running away, living on the streets, or escaping the pain through substance use and abuse increases dramatically (Mallon and DeCrescenzo, 2006). These children and adolescents are also at an increased risk for suicidal ideation (Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006). This risk is even greater for transsexual youth (or trans-youth) because of the need for hormone treatments and surgeries. If children or adolescents run away from home they may find themselves in the foster system, which would keep them from getting their hormone treatments. This may lead them to: (a) get hormones from questionable sources off the streets, (b) prostitution in order to afford the hormones and the surgeries, or both (Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006). This places these youth at increased risk for contracting HIV/AIDS, or other sexually transmitted infections. Finally, these youth are at increased risk for bullying and violence (verbal, physical and sexual) due to their gender nonconformity. If they do not have a secure base at home to bring these concerns to, their risk for mental health problems increases even more (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006).

**Families of procreation.** Having examined families of origin, one can more clearly see the effect these families may have on an individual’s desire to start a family of one’s own. Perhaps, then, it does not come as a surprise that many sexual minority families choose to forego having children. According to 1990 U.S. census data, approximately 21.7% of partnered lesbians and 5.2% of partnered gays had children present in their homes (Black et al., 2000). And in the 2000 census, (the first U.S. census to give the option of identifying as an unmarried same-sex
couple) approximately 27% of same-sex couples reported having a child in their homes (Patterson & Riskind, 2010). The disparity between men and women may be partially explained by the fact that around 20% of men and 30% of women (in a sample from the General Social Survey and the National Health and Social Life Survey which documented 14% of gays and 28% of lesbians with children) had been previously married (Black et al., 2000). Black et al. (2000) postulated that many of these children were the biological children of one (or both) of the partners, from a previous marriage. As women are typically the custodial parent in cases of divorce, this may explain the much higher rate of lesbians than gay men who have children in their homes. But this would mean that many of these families are stepfamilies, and the same-sex partners did not create a family within the context of their relationship, but rather formed a same-sex family after the fact.

As Patterson and Riskind (2010) noted, there are two main reasons that sexual minority couples do not become parents within the context of their relationships; they either lack the desire to become a parent (or have another child), or they lack the intention to become a parent (or to have another child). These factors are compounded by logistical barriers to parenthood and the lack of pressure from families and society to grow one’s family (Patterson & Riskind, 2010). Despite this, according to the National Survey of Family Growth, 52% of gay men and 41% of lesbians express the desire to have a child (Patterson & Riskind, 2010). With more gay men than lesbians expressing the desire to have a child, why aren’t more gay men creating families? Berkowitz and Marsiglio (2007) found that, for many men, accepting their homosexual identity was simultaneous to realizing they would never be fathers. Many homosexual men saw their gay identity as “incompatible with their identity as a prospective father”, while others had internalized stereotypes of gay men as pedophiles, or of gay men raising gay children (Berkowitz
& Marsiglio, 2007, pp.372-374). These stereotypes can be detrimental to sexual-minority men who have a desire to become parents because of their ability to damage an individual’s self-concept. Negative stereotypes also bar sexual-minority men from many pathways to parenthood, such as adoption, foster care, and surrogacy, by casting uncertainty and suspicion on their desire for fatherhood (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007).

Sexual minority women often do not face the same challenges as men, as society expects women to desire motherhood and to be naturally skilled as mothers. But on the other hand, lesbian sexuality is often seen as incompatible with motherhood (Herman, 1996). The same is true for transsexuals of either sex and polyamorous families – society often views the transsexual and/or polyamorous lifestyle as unsuited for parenthood. Perhaps for this reason, family studies research has overlooked this aspect of trans-life thus far (Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Bettinger, 2006). Despite social concern, sexual minorities are forming families. The most widely researched group in this context has been lesbian stepfamilies as they were the most populous of all the sexual minority groups with children. Early research on this population found that lesbians with children were much happier and more satisfied in their relationships than lesbians without children (Koepke, Hare & Moran, 1992). However, after examination of the findings, Keopke et al. (1992) theorized that this may have been due to the fact that many of the lesbians studied had previously been in a heterosexual relationship with the child’s father before entering into their current homosexual relationship, and that their high ratings of satisfaction may have been magnified due to the comparison of how unsatisfied they had been in their previous heterosexual relationships.

While this finding initially seems positive for lesbian stepfamilies, it poses other questions about what, besides sexual orientation, leads women’s satisfaction to increase. As
discussed previously, the division of household labor is much more egalitarian in same-sex relationships which has been found to increase relationship satisfaction for these couples (Kurdek, 2007). However, most research on these families has focused on White, middle class lesbian stepfamilies. In an attempt to narrow this gap in this body of research, Moore (2008) conducted a study on Black, lower to middle class lesbian stepfamilies. Contrary to previous findings, Moore (2008) found that these families had less egalitarian ideologies about the division of household labor, finances, and parenting responsibilities. According to this study, the biological mother takes on the parent role, while her partner has only as much responsibility as the biological mother will allow. The biological mother also assumes the majority of the housework, sometimes assigning tasks to her partner. Despite this, the biological mother often expresses frustration at the imbalance of household labor, but also accepts the inequality. Moore (2008) suggested that this was due to a connection these women had made between being a good mother and heading a well-functioning household. Although this arrangement was often frustrating to the non-biological partner, it was accepted as a part of the relationship (Moore, 2008).

The style of parenting used by the individuals in Moore’s study may raise concerns for the children of these stepfamilies. However, a study by Wainright, Russell, and Patterson (2004) suggested that adolescents raised in various family types including gay and lesbian families all demonstrated positive adjustment when they perceived close relationships with their parents. The only significant difference the study was able to find between adolescents raised in same-sex versus opposite-sex families was that adolescents from same-sex families tended to feel more connected to school than their peers from opposite-sex families (Wainright et al., 2004). As for women who choose to create families within their same-sex relationships, they face some of the
same issues that heterosexual couples face during the transition to parenthood. Some of these changes include a decrease in the feeling of love and an increase in conflict as the women adjust to their new roles as parents (Goldberg & Sayer, 2006). Lesbian mothers of sons face added stress as they navigate the challenges of socializing a boy to be successful without also teaching him achievement at the cost of the subordination of women. These mothers are also closely scrutinized by society in instances where their son exhibits any sign of femininity (Biblarz & Savci, 2010). This scrutiny is familiar to all sexual minority parents, because if their child throws a tantrum in the middle of the store, or if a son prefers Barbie to Ken, the parents’ sexual orientation is often blamed which in turn fuels homophobic ideologies. For this reason, many sexual minority parents feel a sense of unease that many heterosexual parents do not comprehend. As Herman (1996) described, parenting for sexual minority individuals is not only a personal decision, but also a political statement. Despite these current problems faced by sexual minority families, research has consistently suggested that the quality of parent-child relationships is more influential over the children’s outcomes than parents’ sexual orientation (Patterson, 2006). Patterson (2006) cited the American Psychological Association’s unanimous vote in favor of the statement "Research has shown that the adjustment, development, and psychological well-being of children is unrelated to parental sexual orientation and that children of lesbian and gay parents are as likely as those of heterosexual parents to flourish" (p. 243). Patterson (2006) also noted similar statements by other professional organizations such as The American Bar Association, the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Psychiatric Association, among others.
Sexual Minorities as Members of Society

Sexual minorities are a relatively small percentage of the total population, with only 4.1% of U.S. citizens identifying as homosexual or bisexual (National Survey of Family Growth, 2002 as cited by Mayer et al., 2008). This percentage is approximately 4.5 million individuals, about 565,000 of which report cohabiting partnerships (U.S. Census data, 2000 as cited by Patterson, 2010). And approximately 0.3% of the U.S. Population is transgender or transsexual (Gates, 2011). However, as mentioned previously these numbers might not accurately represent the amount of sexual minority individuals in the U.S. due to the lack of reporting by some sexual minority individuals, especially those of lower socioeconomic status.

As sexual minorities are so few in numbers, it is necessary for the majority of individuals to stand up for the rights of the few within the U.S. system of government. Historically this has not been the case, but there are indications that this is changing. A poll in the Los Angeles Times in 2004 indicated that six of ten individuals polled were “sympathetic to the gay community” (Mehren, 2004). This poll also found that 59% of respondents believed that legal recognition of same-sex marriage was “inevitable” (Mehren, 2004). A more recent poll in 2010 found that the percentage of Americans that found homosexual relations as morally acceptable had risen to the 50% threshold, and that men were the demographic most changed since the last poll in 2009, moving from 46% to 53% (Saad, 2010). This change is important because men have been found to be much less accepting than women when it comes to homosexuals (Herek, 2002).

Mehren (2004) discussed how this change had come about in only one generation, as younger Americans were over four times as likely to have positive views about homosexuality as those over 65. This finding was mirrored by the 2010 Gallup poll, which found that, among men ages 18 to 49, 62% found homosexual relations as morally acceptable, whereas endorsement of
this view was only 44% among men 50 years of age and older. In the same poll, for women ages 18 to 49, 59% found homosexual relations morally acceptable, while that percentage was only 43% for women over 50 (Saad, 2010).

The trend of acceptance has also occurred in a more personal area – that of family. In the 2004 Times poll, 60% of those polled reported they would be upset if their child was homosexual. While this number may appear high, when compared to the 2000 estimates, 73%, and the 1983 estimates, 90%, one can see that Americans’ responses to having a homosexual child have become more accepting, on average (Mehren, 2004). I find this particular statistic to be of great importance because, as discussed previously, the lack of support from one’s parents can greatly affect the well-being of a sexual minority child or adolescent.

A Brief Overview of the Debate

As with every social movement, there is a political debate behind it. Current events in Washington have demonstrated this recently as the Supreme Court has now been set to the task of examining the constitutionality of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which was signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1996. This act prohibits the federal government from legally recognizing any marriage that is not between one man and one woman (GLAAD, 2010). While the Supreme Court is no stranger to such examinations, the court has not often seen a case in which the president has since apologized for signing a bill. President Bill Clinton has changed his mind in the years after this document became law, and now publicly admits that he was wrong, and that the bill is (and was) unconstitutional (Baker, 2013). Current President Barack Obama has publicly stated that he and his administration will not support DOMA. President Obama is also the first sitting president to be in favor of the legalization of gay marriage (Gast, 2012).
The real-life implication behind this political struggle for sexual minority individuals, however, is that a legally recognized marriage comes with 1,138 federal rights, protections and responsibilities that these Americans currently do not have. Some of these rights include:

- "Social Security benefits upon death, disability or retirement of spouse, as well as benefits for minor children.

- Family and Medical Leave protections to care for a new child or a sick or injured family member

- Workers' Compensation protections for the family of a worker injured on the job

- Access to COBRA insurance benefits so the family doesn't lose health insurance when one spouse is laid off

- ERISA (Employee Retirement Income Security Act) protections such as the ability to leave a pension, other than Social Security, to your spouse

- Exemptions from penalties on IRA and pension rollovers

- Exemptions from estate taxes when a spouse dies

- Exemptions from federal income taxes on spouse's health insurance

- The right to visit a sick or injured loved one, have a say in life and death matters during hospitalization” (National Organization for Women (NOW), 2012)

These rights and protections were put into place by the government in order to promote the institution of marriage. This promotion was created on the grounds that children thrive best in two-parent families, and that these families are less likely to experience poverty than single parent families (Cherlin, 2003). Some believe that by widening the definition of marriage to
include same-sex couples, the government would be attacking its own child-friendly policy, while others argue that it would only promote more stable marriages, which is what children really need to thrive. These fears are what sparked the idea of civil unions, but others argue that marriage and civil unions do not offer the same rights and protections under the law, and are therefore not equal (NOW, 2010). However, it is noteworthy that many proponents of small government find the government’s attempt to regulate the domestic sphere at all is regrettable (Baskerville, 2006).

Many Americans are also wary of changing the definition of such a foundational aspect of Western culture. They fear that if the government loosens its definition of marriage, that it will be a slippery slope to the legalization of other feared types of unions such as polygamy, pedophilia and bestiality. The point of DOMA, perhaps more than anything else, was to define marriage in the face of rising uncertainty. Because parents have the right to make decisions regarding their children’s care, custody and upbringing, the federal government has invested in the traditional definition of marriage as it also aligns with the value of parenting within a committed heterosexual union (Baskerville, 2006). Marriage laws, therefore, at the governmental level are a direct reflection of social values around procreation and appropriate contexts for childrearing. As Baskerville (2006) states: “once marriage becomes detached from procreation, the entire system of domestic and social stabilization that marriage exists to foster unravels” (pp. 61-62). Some social scientists argue that marriage is the key element in creating the socially constructed role of fatherhood, and that without it, children would be at risk of not having a father in their lives (Baskerville, 2006). Some feminist theorists, however, see marriage and fatherhood as a method of controlling women and continuing patriarchy, and argue that the government should not promote one method of family formation over any other (Cherlin, 2003).
Perhaps the strongest argument against same-sex marriage is one of religious and moral values. Although the U.S. government is supposed to function separately from religious values of any kind, in a democracy the government must comply with what the people want. And if the majority of people believe that homosexuality is bad, they can effectively vote against it. Therefore I will spend some time examining the religious argument to homosexuality; however it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss religious-based arguments in great depth.

The bottom line for many Christians is that they believe the bible defines a marriage as between a man and a woman, and such a union is a sacred covenant with God. The argument is that marriage is a holy institution in which to raise children. Some believe that same-sex unions are necessarily childless due to biological limitations, and that children reared within these unions are then denied either a father or a mother, which is not "God's plan" for how children should be raised (TFP Student Action, 2013). Religious persons also fear the government forcing them to accept something they view as morally wrong. They fear the implications of the government endorsing gay marriage, and what that would mean for their children and the moral backbone of society. Finally, religious opponents to gay marriage believe that this would infringe on their right to freedom of religion (Nance, 2013). There are other religious arguments against homosexuality, but these are the main arguments represented in the literature and they are the least contested within various religious communities. It seems that for some, the debate is about which fundamental right is going to be infringed upon, freedom of religion, or equality before the law.

**Discussion**

The following section is dedicated to my personal beliefs and attitudes about the topic of sexual minority discrimination, same-sex marriage, and gender roles and norms. While my
beliefs are informed by the research explained previously, the reader should be aware of the shift from research-driven conclusions to my personal opinions.

While the overarching theme of this paper has been the similarities between sexual minority individuals and heterosexual individuals, there are those in the sexual minority community who do not wish to be seen in this light. As is the case with many minority groups, the minority status itself has created a rich and protective subculture that many wish to have protected and validated. Some argue that by homogenizing the sexual minority community to gain heterosexual acceptance, they are putting their subculture at risk of vanishing (McNamara, 2004). Historically speaking, this concern has a strong basis. Minorities often have had to prove that they were “just like everyone else” in order to be accepted and given equal treatment. But at what cost? I worry about what this constant struggle says about our society – that we cannot accept others who are different from us until they prove that they are, in fact, just like us despite one little thing. Is it any surprise that our schools have such rampant bullying, when it is part of a child’s socialization to automatically see anyone who may be different from them as dangerous and worthy of invalidation?

To rule in favor of gay marriage would be a step towards equality, but I think it would be missing an opportunity to take a look at the larger picture of what equality really means. Does it mean that we slowly and laboriously begin to include more and more people into our narrow definition of what status is approved to receive certain benefits, or does it allow us to go back to the fundamental belief that all men are created equal? If anything, the U.S. should be on the leading edge of this revolution, as equality is what our country was founded on over 200 years ago. This could be an opportunity to start that revolution. This could be the turning point where we begin to teach tolerance and acceptance instead of fear and hatred. Then perhaps we could
have a generation of individuals who postpone judgment until they have the facts, and who seek to know someone before allowing fear of the unfamiliar to dictate their behavior. If that were to happen, then maybe Americans would finally embrace the diversity of their nation instead of allowing prejudice and discrimination to rule their thoughts.

Perhaps the real reason that this particular issue raises so much protest is that it challenges deeply held beliefs that are very personal in nature. In a nation that puts a premium on the wellbeing of children, a proposed change in how children can be raised causes nothing less than frenzy in some. I personally see a flaw in that logic, however, as children are already raised in a myriad of different situations which are not beneficial to them. And as the research suggests, children raised within gay and lesbian families do not differ significantly from children raised in heterosexual families. I see no reason why transsexual individuals could not be just as successful in raising a child as anyone else. I would also like to add that some polyamorous families are not significantly different from some blended families in which divorced parents are still on good terms. In my view, a child can never have too many adults that love him or her. Of course research still needs to be done on children of transsexuals and of polyamorous parents as well before any conclusions can be drawn.

So if we as a nation decide to become more accepting and understanding of sexual minority individuals and their romantic relationships, what would change? The most important thing that would change, in my opinion, is the removal of legal discrimination, such as allowing a person to be terminated from a job, or allowing someone to deny services to an individual simply due to sexual orientation. Once this is accomplished, the societal changes, such as changes in personal beliefs and attitudes, follow. Within a generation or two, children might no longer see sexual orientation as a thing to mock, much as children today are much less likely to
see ethnicity as a point of shame as perhaps their parents or grandparents did. Once this is the case, when these children become parents, they might not see their own children’s sexual minority status as something to fear and hate. And once parents are accepting of their children, regardless of anything that might make them slightly different, the children will grow up without fear of being different. They will be able to grow up in a world that treats them as people instead of a diagnosis or a status. These social shifts have the potential to drastically reduce the amount of depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems faced by sexual minority individuals today.

Equal rights for sexual minorities necessarily begin with the removal of legal discrimination based on sexual orientation. This would mean that marriage could no longer be a government-sponsored method of living. Society would need to begin anew with describing marriage, romantic relationships, and family life in a way that is inclusive. However, if the current definition of marriage cannot be made inclusive, then it has to be replaced with something that is. If that means doing away with tax breaks, social security benefits, and work and health benefits that go hand in hand with marriage – then that is what will need to happen. In my opinion, the benefits of equality far exceed the benefits of maintaining a system whereby only some groups receive extra rights and privileges. There are always going to be people who make good parents, and people who make not-so-great parents – being married is not going to change this. Perhaps society should focus more on training individuals on positive interpersonal relationships and good parenting practices instead of promoting one lifestyle over all others.

Finally, our society needs to become less strict when it comes to gender norms and gender roles. Fixed behavioral and social expectations based on one’s gender are not beneficial; they simply are used to fuel stereotypes and patriarchy. For example, the norm that girls should
be sweet and caring (and not assertive or strong) limits how girls can achieve athletically and
even professionally in many fields, while the norm that boys should be tough and strong (and not
sensitive or nurturing) keeps young men from understanding one another and being able to
express themselves. Every individual should have the power over their own body and mind; they
should be able to dress, act, and think the way they see fit. There is no need for the insecurity
that strict gender norms create. It is time to stop drawing lines between types and classes of
people and begin to recognize that we are all just people, trying to pursue our own ideas of
happiness. The suppression and shame that these imaginary lines make in our society is
detrimental to our future progress as a nation and a culture.

Conclusion

In the course of this paper, I have examined theories of sexual “deviance,” the existing
literature on sexual minorities in individual, relational, familial, and societal settings, the social
and political issues that create such uproar on this topic, and proposed some changes to help ease
the stress that this topic has on society. I hope that this review of the literature dispels any
negative stereotypes the reader may have had about sexual minorities. It also is my hope that this
paper informs and challenges the reader to consider various points of view and recognize that
some societal change is necessary in order to ensure that all U.S. citizens are seen equally in the
eyes of the law. Together, we can begin the process of inclusion and equality.
References


