

Anti-same-sex marriage amendments spark distress among GLBT adults and families, says new research

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Amendments that restrict civil marriage rights of same-sex couples – such as Proposition 8 that recently passed in California – have led to higher levels of stress and anxiety among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender adults, as well as among their families of origin, according to several new studies to be published by the American Psychological Association.

One quantitative and two qualitative studies on the impact of anti-GLBT legislation appear in a special issue of the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, published by APA. That issue of the journal, to be published in January, will be titled: "Advances in Research with Sexual Minority People."

The quantitative study was based on an online survey of 1,552 lesbian, gay and bisexual adults from all 50 states and the District of Columbia examining "minority stress," or the chronic social stress that minorities experience as a result of social stigmatization. Participants were grouped into those living in the seven states with an amendment on the ballot in November 2006 that did pass; those living in the 18 states with an amendment that passed before 2006; and those in the 23 states (plus D.C.) with no amendment. (Those living in Alabama, where an amendment passed in June 2006, were excluded because of the timing, as were those living in Arizona, where an amendment was defeated.)

The survey results documented increased minority stress, as well as more general psychological distress, among LGB individuals following the passage of a marriage amendment in 2006, compared to LGB people in states without an amendment on the 2006 ballot. The researchers, led by Sharon Scales Rostosky, Ph.D., at the University of Kentucky, found that those participants living in states that passed a measure in 2006 reported increased exposure to negative media messages and negative conversations.

"The results of this study demonstrate that living in a state that has just passed a marriage amendment is associated with higher levels of psychological stress for lesbian, gay and bisexual citizens," Rostosky said. "And this stress is not due to other pre-existing conditions or factors; it is a direct result of the negative images and messages associated with the ballot campaign and the passage of the amendment."

The qualitative studies, while much smaller in scope, give voice to some of the people directly affected by anti-gay marriage amendments. The first study, "Balancing Dangers: GLBT Experience in a Time of Anti-GLBT Legislation," focused on 13 GLBT people living in Memphis, Tenn., who were interviewed at length about their experiences during the 2006 ballot campaign. The researchers, led by Heidi M. Levitt, Ph.D., at the University of Memphis, grouped the respondents' reactions into eight major themes, or "clusters." These included, for example: "Initiatives lead to constant painful reminders that I'm seen as less than human by our government and public laws," and "The irrationality of anti-GLBT initiatives and movements is baffling, painful and scary: We are not who they say we are."

Participants reported feeling not just alienated from their communities, but fearful that they would lose their children, that they would become victims of anti-gay violence or that they would need to move to a more accepting community. Some of these anxieties were mitigated by social

support.

For instance, one interviewee said he became "petrified ...of being raped or roughed up or killed, you know, for doing nothing, basically. I worry about being picked out as a gay guy because my mannerisms are not entirely masculine." Another said the marriage amendment supporters were using the Bible "like a brick on us. They are beating us with it."

Social support from religious institutions, families, GLBT friends and heterosexual allies led most of the participants "to greater feelings of safety, happiness and strength," the researchers wrote.

And in the third study, 10 family members of GLBT people living in Memphis were interviewed regarding how anti-GLBT initiatives and movements had affected their family. Their responses were also grouped into clusters of similar themes.

"Some participants identified so deeply with their family member's experience that they felt equally attacked by these movements and policies," the researchers wrote. "They considered themselves members of the GLBT community and experienced rejection by others for being a GLBT family member."

"Typically, we tend to think of anti-GLBT policies such as marriage bans and Proposition 8 as affecting only GLBT people. However, our research suggests that others in addition to GLBT people are also impacted by this legislation and sometimes quite negatively. For example, we learned that some family members experienced a form of secondary minority stress. Although many participants displayed resiliency and effective coping with this stress, some experienced strong negative consequences to their mental and physical health," said Jennifer Arm, M.S.

Brent Mallinckrodt, Ph.D., editor of the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, said the three articles provide empirical evidence of the harmful psychological and emotional effects of such measures.

"This information is especially timely, as we see the emotionally charged reactions from GLBT people in the wake of the Proposition 8 passage in California," he said. "Psychologists serving GLBT clients and their families need to be aware of the real impact of these political forces on the everyday lives of the people most directly affected."

Source: American Psychological Association

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