

What's the relational toll of living in a sexist and heterosexist context?

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Relationships, and especially romantic relationships, are central aspects of our social lives and primary sources of support. For sexual minority (e.g., lesbian, bisexual, and queer) women, relationship quality may be hindered by the multiple oppressions they experience, such as sexist and heterosexist discrimination, as well as internalized sexism and heterosexism (i.e., incorporation of negative dominant societal attitudes and beliefs about women and sexual minority persons). Feminist-relational theories posit that experiences of oppression and resulting feelings of marginalization and powerlessness may fuel maladaptive relational schemas, such as silencing the self, which in turn harms relationship quality. Silencing the self occurs when an individual prioritizes the needs of others over their own in order to avoid conflict and maintain relationships with others. Women may be particularly susceptible to engaging in this restrictive way of relating because of their gender role socialization as second-class citizens.

In an article just published in the *Journal of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, Szymanski, Ikizler, and Dunn (2016) investigated the mediation or explanatory role of silencing the self in the links between gender- and sexual orientation-based oppressions and relationship quality. They surveyed 540 sexual minority women who were currently in a romantic relationship. Supporting feminist-relational models, they found that more experiences of sexist and heterosexist discrimination and higher levels of internalized sexism and heterosexism were each related to more self-silencing beliefs and behaviors, which in turn, were related to lower [relationship quality](#). In other words, it appears that

oppressive gender and sexual minority socialization manifests in romantic relationships by way of women thinking consciously or unconsciously that they need to behave in certain ways to keep their partners. Unhealthy self-silencing approaches to relationships, such as sacrificing one's own needs over their partners and judging themselves via external standards, may contribute to less satisfaction with their relationships.

These findings have practical implications for therapists working with [sexual minority](#) female clients. As a relational strategy, self-silencing may unintentionally result in not having one's needs and emotions heard and met, which may consequently generate inauthentic experiences and a disconnection within one's self. Thus, clinicians might (a) challenge these ineffective relational schemas, (b) foster an examination of the ways sociocultural factors and oppressive experiences work to maintain these beliefs, (c) help clients learn to balance the needs of self and others, (d) work with clients on ways to authentically express their needs and emotions (e.g. assertiveness skills training) and (e) promote skills to manage interpersonal conflict in ways that help their clients feel more authentic, more holistic, and less fragmented. Finally, these results support the importance of social justice and advocacy efforts aimed at eliminating sexism and heterosexism.

More information: Dawn M. Szymanski et al. Sexual minority women's relationship quality: Examining the roles of multiple oppressions and silencing the self., *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity* (2016). [DOI: 10.1037/sgd0000145](https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000145)

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