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Researcher finds link between weight status and concerns in female same-sex couples

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In their research spanning more than a decade, Rutgers–Camden psychology professor Charlotte Markey and her husband, Patrick Markey of Villanova University, have studied how romantic partners potentially influence one another's health. While their prior research found a link between weight status and concerns in heterosexual couples, they also learned that these weight-related issues had never been examined within the context of female same-sex relationships. "This is troubling, given that lesbian women are at a heightened risk of obesity, as well as a variety of other health risks," says Markey, an associate professor of psychology.

The husband-and-wife team focuses on this at-risk population in a pioneering new research study, titled "Weight Disparities between

Female Same-Sex Romantic Partners and Weight Concerns: Examining Partner Comparison." The study, forthcoming in *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, is currently available on the SAGE Journals website.

According to Markey, their research aims to advance their understandings of both sexual minority women's health, as well as the influences of romantic relationships on health. "We know that a lot of data suggests that same-sex couples function in most ways similar to heterosexual couples," says Markey, a resident of Swarthmore, Pa. "Given that women are more influenced by their partners, and are usually more concerned about their bodies than men, we wanted to determine if somehow that concern is intensified if their partner is a woman."

The researchers surveyed 144 women in monogamous, romantic relationships. The majority of the couples were cohabitating and romantically involved, on average, for about five years. According to their body mass indexes, 2 percent of the participants were underweight, 37 percent were normal weight, 23 percent were overweight, and 38 percent were obese. The couples tended to have similar body mass indexes, with 43 percent of the couples' body sizes categorized as the same. Of the couples who did not share the same category, one was an underweight-normal weight couple; 22 percent were normal-overweight couples; 12 percent were composed of normal-obese couples, and 22 percent consisted of overweight-obese couples.

The researchers found that, consistent with their previous research on heterosexual couples, there was a significant link between women's own weight status and concerns, and their partners' weight status and concerns. Their analysis revealed that when participants had low body mass indexes, their partners' body mass indexes were not related. However, when participants were overweight and had romantic partners who were relatively thin, they were more likely to express weight

concerns. "This is because the person you live with and compare yourself to is achieving something that is desirable in society, which is thinness," says Markey.

Markey notes that, although their findings replicate what they discovered with regards to heterosexual couples, this is the first research study to establish this similarity. She adds that this duplication is especially significant because it disproves some common stereotypes and misconceptions regarding sexual-minority women, including the notion that they don't care about their appearance or weight. "The fact that we rebuffed some of these popular stereotypes is worth taking note of," says Markey. "This can very well be an overlooked group that needs help with weight management. If everyone is working with the assumption that lesbian women just don't care about these issues, then that isn't a good place to start in terms of education or intervention."

Markey and her husband are currently working with Rutgers–Camden psychology professors Chris Nave and Kristin August to expand the research to focus on male same-sex couples. She stresses that additional research is necessary to examine the pronounced health risks facing individuals in same-sex relationships. She explains that the clinical implications of this research includes the potential role of couples' therapy in treating not only relationship problems, but also in addressing health challenges. "Being able to better document what is going on, and what services they need, is critical," says Markey. "It's pretty unchartered territory."

More information: intl-pwq.sagepub.com/content/e … 84313484128.abstract

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