

Internalized Homonegativity and Defensive Attachment in Women’s Same Sex Relationships

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Commentary

The purpose of this commentary is to further elaborate on the relationship between internalized homonegativity and warm intimate attachments in women’s same sex relationships. While we did not extend out research to explore the impact that such a correlation may play on relationship quality, it is reasonable to suggest that an individual’s ability to emotionally connect and non-defensively attach would be reflected on the health of the couple. While research supports a link between internalized homonegativity and relationship quality [1,2], factors underlying this association are less clear.

In a community sample consisting of lesbian, gay, or bisexual participants, Frost and Meyer [3] found that depression mediates the association between internalized homophobia and quality of same sex relationships. This is consistent with their hypothesis that internalized homophobia leads to depressive symptomatology which then impacts the quality of the intimate relationship [3]. Syzmanski and Hilton [4] found a positive correlation between internalized heterosexism and relationship quality in a sample of men in same sex relationships which were partially mediated by fear of intimacy. Their finding of a positive correlation between internalized heterosexism and fear of intimacy resembles our findings [4].

Using two-tailed Pearson correlations we found a significant association between the variable of Emotional Unresponsiveness, as assessed by the Adult Personality Assessment Questionnaire (Adult PAQ) [5], and total internalized homophobia, as assessed by the Lesbian Internalized Homophobia Scale (LIHS) [6,7]. A significant correlation was also shown between Emotional Unresponsiveness and two individual domains of internalized homonegativity, namely Personal Feelings about Being a Lesbian (PFL) and Public Identification as a Lesbian (PIL) [7]. Significant correlations between Emotional Unresponsiveness and dimensions of internalized homonegativity can be found in Table 1 [7]. Emotional Unresponsiveness is characterized by emotional constriction, emotional insulation, and defensive attachments [8]. PFL corresponds to feelings about being a lesbian, ranging from feelings of self-hatred to self-acceptance and PIL relates to how

one manages a lesbian identity, ranging from fear of discovery to comfort with self-disclosure [6]. It is reasonable to speculate that the inability to respond emotionally to another and form warm involved attachments could impact the intimacy and quality of a romantic relationship.

Table 1: Correlations of Personality Characteristic with Dimensions of Internalized Homonegativity.

Adult PAQ	LIHS					
	CLC	PIL	PFL	MRATL	ATOL	Total
Emotional Unresponsiveness	0.23	.34*	.38**	0.19	0.18	.31*
*p ≤ .05. **p ≤ .01.						
Note: Adult PAQ: Adult Personality Assessment Questionnaire; LIHS: Lesbian Internalized Homophobia Scale; CLC: Connection with the Lesbian Community; PIL: Public Identification as a Lesbian; PFL: Personal Feelings About Being a Lesbian; MRATL: Moral and Religious Attitudes Toward Lesbianism; ATOL: Attitudes Toward Other Lesbians.						

Anecdotal evidence from our study similarly suggests a connection between internalized homonegativity and relationship quality mediated by an emotionally constricted defensive attachment. When answering multiple choice demographic questions about how the participant’s current same sex partner, or her most recent same sex partner, self-identifies one participant circled the following: “Bisexual [Queer]”, “She does not identify,” and “Other.” Next to the “Other” category, the participant clarified, “She used to not self-identify, but is trying to get over her internalized homophobia and identify as ‘bisexual’ or ‘queer.’” In contrast, the participant indicated that she herself identifies as “Lesbian.” In response to an open ended question asking about the worst fight that she had had in the past month with her current same sex partner, or alternatively the worst fight she had had in the last month of dating her most recent same sex dating partner, this participant wrote:

We didn’t really fight because I didn’t confront her about anything. When we were going to have sex she ran away. I wasn’t angry at her, just confused. When she makes fun of my

beliefs, I am just amazed at how silly she is. When she ignores me because she is stressed, I'm annoyed, but I put up with it. And when she broke up with me, then invited me to her room and tried to cuddle with me, I just cried. Oh, and the time I slapped her was because she gave me a wedgie!! Ha.

In response to the same question another participant replied:

I told her that I felt as if she didn't put the same time, energy and love into the relationship that I was. She told me that I demanded too much and that she felt isolated from her family [she wasn't out]. She told me that I couldn't possibly understand her situation, I told her I did, and she replied that both I and our relationship embarrassed and shamed her because I was a lesbian.

The first vignette appears to depict a romantic relationship characterized by the partner's ambivalence, lack of warmth, and hostility. Of note is that the participant described her partner as having difficulty embracing a minority sexual orientation. The second vignette highlights the partner's deep feelings of shame with respect to her sexuality and her seeming difficulty being emotionally responsive. If a woman is unable to connect to her romantic partner in a non-defensive, warm, and meaningful way this may impact the quality of the relationship. This may also affect the well-being of her partner who is at risk of being the object of homonegative feelings and beliefs.

Limitations of our study include a homogeneous sample and a small sample size [7]. Further research is warranted with respect to understanding underlying factors related to the impact of internalized homonegativity on the quality of women's same sex intimate partner relationships, particularly the ability to form emotionally connected, non-defensive attachments. In addition, findings from our study further support the importance of addressing internalized homonegativity in the treatment of same sex couples.

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