A Qualitative and Quantitative Study of Sexual Minorities in Their Quest for Equality.

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A number of researchers have found that sexual minorities are at a significantly increased risk as compared to heterosexuals for a number of mental health issues including poorer overall psychological wellbeing, higher rates of depression, anxiety disorders and substance abuse (Meyer, 2003; McCabe, 2001; Bontempo, 2001). This may be due to a number of unique stressors associated with sexual minority status, including discrimination, felt stigma, and internalized homophobia (Herek, 2003). The study I began this summer and will continue throughout the 2012-2013 school year further explores these relationships by investigating the effects of discrimination against lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) Maine residents at the institutional level.

The referendum on marriage equality in the state of Maine, which is to be voted on this November, presents a unique opportunity to research the effects of institutional discrimination on LGB individuals. No matter the outcome of this vote, the fact that Maine residents will be voting on the human rights of LGB individuals has the potential to have a profound psychological effect on LGB Maine residents. This longitudinal, correlational study includes two phases of data collection, the first occurring before the referendum and the second occurring a few months after the referendum. Participants include lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals living in Maine either permanently or temporarily. The primary method of data collection is a questionnaire completed by all subjects, as well as an optional interview specifically focused on life-goal fulfillment. The study aims to investigate three main issues. First, the study investigates the psychological effects of the stress that LGB individuals face as a result of a specific instance of institutional discrimination, that is, fellow citizens voting on their human right to marriage equality. Some of the psychological variables that may be affected by this instance of discrimination include depressive symptoms, symptoms of anxiety, substance abuse, life and relationship satisfaction among others. Second, the study explores variables that may moderate the relationship between institutional discrimination and these psychological outcomes such as gender role beliefs, resilience and commitment to their sexual minority identity. Considerable research (Schmuck, 2001) indicates that the existence and fulfillment of life goals is significantly related to individuals’ psychological wellbeing. This study will springboard off these findings by examining the effects of sexual minorities not being able to participate in major life events such as getting married.

Although the first phase of data collection is not yet complete, I will continue collecting data this fall before the referendum and will complete the post-referendum phase in late January and February. I will then compare the pre- and post-referendum data to explore if and how this vote may have affected sexual minority Maine residents, regardless of the vote’s outcome. My long-term goal is to complete this study as an honors project and to present my findings at a psychological conference and possibly as an empirical research paper in a peer-review journal. The results of this study will undoubtedly be a valuable contribution to the existing literature on the psychology of sexual minorities and sexual minority stress.

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