

Reviews

Review of "Mental health and social connection among older lesbian and bisexual women" by Martinez et al.

Zhiqi Yi

University of Kansas

Highlights:

- Significant associations were found between loneliness, depression, happiness, and sexual orientation in older women. Lesbian and bisexual women had a higher prevalence of loneliness and depression and lower level of overall happiness.
- Bisexual older women were more likely to experience marital separation, a depression diagnosis, and a sense of isolation compared with heterosexual older women, and adverse mental health compared with lesbian older women.
- Social connection had a significant confounding effect on the association between sexual orientation and happiness. The feeling of loneliness and sense of isolation partially explains the association between sexual orientation and happiness.

Research on mental health disparities in the LGBTQ+ population is on the rise. Compared with heterosexual cisgender people, LGBTQ+ people were exposed to profound discrimination, stigmatization, and systematic and structural rejection, leading to worse mental health and a weaker social support system (National LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center, n.d.). However, compared with LGBTQ+ adolescents and young adults, LGBTQ+ older adults were less investigated and scrutinized. Older LGBTQ+ people were reported to have higher rates of social isolation, loneliness, anxiety, and depression (Yarns et al., 2016). Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are at higher risks of depression, anxiety, suicide, and other mental disorders than their heterosexual counterparts, and lesbian women and bisexual women are more vulnerable to mental health, substance use, and other health-related outcomes (King et al., 2008; Conron et al., 2010). Only a limited number of research intersected mental health with sexual orientation in sexual minority older women. For instance, Lytle et al. (2018) reported that older sexual minority people experienced sexual minority-specific anxiety and depression and older women had higher levels of aging anxiety. In their research, Koh and Ross (2021) found that compared with heterosexual people, sexual orientation and the 'coming out' status greatly impacted lesbian and bisexual women's emotional distress, bringing about a higher likelihood of adverse mental health and suicidal ideation. (Koh & Ross, 2021). There is a lack of large-scale research focusing on examining disparities in mental health and psychosocial well-being in lesbian and bisexual older women. To enrich the knowledge base in this field, Martinez and colleagues (2024) examined the relationships between sexual orientation and mental health, as well as overall happiness, and also tested the confounding effect of social connection.

Employing purposive sampling to collect data in The California Teachers Study, this study used the data from the 2017-2019 survey, which was the first survey that included sexual orientation and gender identity information. Martinez and colleagues recruited a sample of 36,814 sexual and gender-identified participants consisting of 253 bisexual women, 710 lesbians, and 35,846 heterosexual women aged 50 years and above. Demographic variables and sexual orientation were collected from the 1995-1996 baseline questionnaire and the 2017-2019 survey, respectively. Well-established questionnaires on social connection (The Short Scale for Measuring Loneliness in Large Surveys) and overall happiness (one question: All in all, how happy are you these days?) were used to measure psychosocial outcomes.

Depression was measured with a diagnosis history from health professionals. Bivariate analysis and logistic regression were conducted for quantitative analysis.

This large-scale sample study mainly reported four findings. The first result revealed significant associations between social connection, happiness, depression, and sexual orientation. Socio-demographic covariates demonstrated significant associations with sexual orientation except for race/ethnicity and household income. Subsequently, multivariable logistic regression was conducted. Lesbians and bisexual women were more likely to feel left out and unhappy compared with heterosexual women, while bisexual women were more likely to perceive 'a lack of companionship' and 'isolated from others'. Further, this study investigated the confounding effect of social connection on the association between sexual orientation and happiness. Including 'feeling left out' in the model, the odds ratio was attenuated when comparing bisexual women and heterosexual women. The attenuation appeared between lesbians and heterosexual women when 'isolated from others' was included. The last findings from the discussion section of the article revealed that bisexual older women were 2.5 times more likely to report 'a lack of companionship' and stronger odds ratios in terms of 'isolated from others' and 'feeling left out' than lesbians, although the associations were not statistically significant.

These results suggest that lesbian and bisexual older women experience lower levels of social connectedness and happiness and worse mental health, compared with heterosexual older women. Social connection measured with feelings of loneliness and isolation partially explains the association between sexual orientation and happiness. The findings echoed the previous research that from a minority stress perspective (Frost & Meyer, 2023), lesbians and bisexual older women were exposed to social stress and social isolation related to their sexual orientation, and thence experienced worse mental health and lower levels of happiness. This study filled research gaps in understanding nuanced psychosocial outcomes in bisexual older women by further offering discussions that bisexual older women were at higher risk of adverse mental health compared with older lesbians, and at higher risk of diagnosed depression, marital separation, and a sense of isolation compared with heterosexual participants, leading to worse psychosocial well-being in bisexual older women.

In summary, this study contributes to the understanding of associations between social connection, mental health outcomes, and sexual orientation, especially by advancing knowledge of the nuanced psychosocial health outcomes among bisexual and lesbian older women. Bisexual and lesbian older women have a higher prevalence of self-reported feelings of loneliness, isolation, lack of companionship, lack of happiness, and diagnosed depression, compared with heterosexual older women. Substantial insights were gained into understanding the unique psychosocial health needs of bisexual and lesbian older women. Further studies on the specific psychosocial needs of the sub-groups within LGBTQ+ older people are highly recommended.

For further reading:

Conron, K. J., Mimiaga, M. J., & Landers, S. J. (2010). A population-based study of sexual orientation identity and gender differences in adult health. *American journal of public health, 100*(10), 1953-1960.

Frost, D. M., & Meyer, I. H. (2023). Minority stress theory: Application, critique, and continued relevance. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 101*579.

King, M., Semlyen, J., Tai, S. S., Killaspy, H., Osborn, D., Popelyuk, D., & Nazareth, I. (2008). A systematic review of mental disorder, suicide, and deliberate self harm in lesbian, gay and bisexual people. *BMC Psychiatry, 8*, 1-17.

Koh, A. S., & Ross, L. K. (2006). Mental Health Issues: A Comparison of Lesbian, Bisexual and Heterosexual Women. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 51(1), 33–57.

Laramie, J. A. (2021). Issues in the Lives of Older Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and/or Queer Women. *Women's Health*, 37(4), 579-591.

Lytle, A., Apriceno, M., Dyar, C., & Levy, S. R. (2018). Sexual orientation and gender differences in aging perceptions and concerns among older adults. *Innovation in Aging*, 2(3), igy036.

Martinez, M. E., Felner, J. K., Shen, J., McDaniels-Davidson, C., Nodora, J. N., Lacey, J. V., ... & Hong, S. (2024). Mental health and social connection among older lesbian and bisexual women. *International Psychogeriatrics*, 1-10.

National LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center, a program of the Fenway Institute. (n.d.). *Understanding the Health Needs of LGBT People*. Retrieved from <https://www.lgbtqihealtheducation.org/publication/understanding-health-needs-lgbt-people/>

Yarns, B. C., Abrams, J. M., Meeks, T. W., & Sewell, D. D. (2016). The mental health of older LGBT adults. *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 18, 1-11.

Zhiqi Yi is a doctoral student in the School of Social Welfare at University of Kansas. Their research interests include LGBTQ+ aging, end of life care and mental health. Email: zhiqiyi135@ku.edu

