Relationship identities among lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults: An exploratory study

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Abstract

Relationship identities are established through romantic interactions and informed by sociohistorical context. The associations between lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) identities and identities in other domains, including relationship identities, has yet to receive sufficient attention by researchers. In this exploratory study, through a qualitative analysis of life history interviews from the *Generations Study*, we identified participants who described their identity in terms of a romantic relationship (e.g., partner, husband/wife). In describing their relationship identities, two themes emerged: 1) negotiation of a relationship identity with other identities, such as gender or race/ethnicity, and 2) navigating being visible or invisible within the LGB community and/or at the societal level. Together these themes suggest that relationships may be salient components of personal identity when sexual minority individuals in a couple either individually or jointly feel that they stand out (or that they become invisible).

Keywords: sexual minority, romantic relationships, identity, cohort

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Identity development involves the development of a sense of self and how the self is presented to others, including the subjective assessment of a person's sameness or difference in the context of the social world (Hammack, 2015). Identities develop across multiple domains, one of which is intimacy, where romantic and/or sexual relationship experiences can lead to the development of a relationship identity (Arnett, 2000). Relationship identities, or a sense of self derived from viewing a relationship as part of oneself, are established through thoughts and emotions about a partner, the context in which a relationship occurs, the lived experiences of the couple, and how the relationship is viewed as similar or different within their social world. These identities are critically important for relationship dynamics, such as relationship commitment and quality (Collins, 2003).

LGB individuals experience minority stress (Meyer, 2003; Meyer & Frost, 2013), including in the context of their relationships (Rostosky & Riggle, 2017a); LGB couples face societal stigma and discrimination, which can affect couple dynamics and wellbeing (LeBlanc & Frost, 2020). Yet, although LGB relationship identities have been studied (Rostosky & Riggle, 2017b; Sang et al., 2021), how LGB relationship identities are evaluated in juxtaposition to other salient personal and social identities remains unknown. Further, given the rapid pace of social change with respect to LGB lives, relationship identities and their expression in the context of relationship experiences, may be more or less important for recent generations of LGB individuals who have experienced more societal acceptance and visibility (Frost, Meyer, & Hammack, 2015; Hammack & Cohler, 2011), including greater opportunities for legal recognition of same-sex relationships.

This study takes advantage of data from life history interviews collected from three generations of LGB adults (Frost et al., 2019). Participants were asked to broadly describe their identities, and for some participants relationships emerged as central and salient in their identity narratives. In this exploratory study, we examined 1) who had a core identity based on a relationship, 2) how do those who have a relationship identity discuss their relationships, and 3) if there were generational differences in these narratives.

Relationship Identities

Identity continuously develops across the life span in a series of sequential stages; at each stage an individual must resolve an identity conflict unique to that developmental period (Erikson, 1968). For instance, young adults face the conflict of 'intimacy versus isolation' where they learn to establish intimacy in the context of (often romantic) relationships or risk feeling isolated from others. However, other identity theorists argue that identity development is instead a multidirectional process and identities in certain domains (e.g., romantic) can change throughout the life span (Hammack, 2015). In these instances, self-reflection, lived experiences, and identity development all contribute to the re-evaluation of an identity (Arnett, 2000).

The extent to which a relationship becomes part of one's identity is often dependent on how an individual perceives themselves to be part of a collective unit with their partner. According to *Interdependence Theory*, high-quality and committed relationships where romantic partners are invested and believe they have few romantic alternatives (Rusbult, 1983) lead to an individual becoming less focused on the self and more focused on the relationship (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). As individuals shift from thinking less about themselves, or "me," and more about themselves in the context of their relationship, or "we" – termed *cognitive interdependence*— they engage in more frequent plural thoughts, greater importance placed on these thoughts, and

an overall inclusion of the other in the self (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998). Individuals who have adopted a relationship identity frequently exhibit greater relationship maintenance behaviors (Davis & Weigel, 2020) and even report better health (Gamarel, Neilands, Golub, & Johnson, 2014).

The process of establishing and re-evaluating a relationship identity is further altered by the structural, social, and cultural contexts in which individuals live (Elder, 1998). Specifically, lives are experienced interdependently (*principle of linked lives*), certain events impact an individual's life differently depending on when they occur (*principle of timing*) and shifting contexts and social norms can influence behavior and/or perceptions of events (*principle of time and place*; Elder 1998; Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). Taken together, individuals construct a relationship identity through interactions with a partner, their perceived commitment to the relationship, and by interpreting and assigning meaning to this identity based on their lived experiences.

Individuals use stories and narratives to construct their relationship identities when engaging in self-reflection or when describing their relationships to others. In the same way that the creation and (re)telling of stories reflect a person's attempt to make meaning of their lived experiences (McAdams & McLean, 2013), the stories people tell themselves and others about their romantic relationships provide them with a sense of meaning regarding their relationships (Fiese & Spagnola, 2005; Frost, 2013; Koenig Kellas, 2005). Relationship stories are often central in guiding people's overarching life narratives (e.g., Josselson, 1996, 2007), which personality psychologists increasingly argue represent the narrative construction of identity (Bühler & Dunlop, 2019; Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2007). For these reasons, narrative perspectives and narrative methods have tremendous potential for researching and understanding

the relational nature of identity and experience of self in relational context (Bühler & Dunlop, 2019).

LGB Romantic Identities

The lived experiences of LGB individuals are further informed by experiences unique to their stigmatized minority status. From a minority stress theory perspective, LGB individuals and same-sex couples experience stressors in their daily lives that are not similarly experienced by heterosexual individuals (Meyer, 2003; Meyer & Frost, 2013) or different-sex couples (Neilands, et al., 2020), including prejudice and/or discrimination surrounding same-sex relationships (Frost, 2011, LeBlanc & Frost, 2020; Neilands, et al., 2020), greater relationship stigma (Rosenthal & Starks, 2015), or lack of social support for the couple (Neilands, et al., 2020). These stressors stem from their social position as a member of a disadvantaged minority group, where they also receive less social support and fewer coping resources than their heterosexual counterparts (Meyer, Schwartz, & Frost, 2008), and from being in a same-sex relationship where they experience additional stressors than simply being a sexual minority (LeBlanc et al., 2015). Under this perspective, LGB individuals who experience a major life event, such as being rejected from their family of origin (both personally and by not having their relationship acknowledged), might view a particular relationship as more meaningful and establish an identity surrounding that relationship. In addition to major life events, everyday stressors such as microaggressions could also impact one's relationship identity and subsequent relationship experiences. For instance, having a same-sex partner regularly misclassified in public spaces as a friend rather than as a romantic partner might contribute to a salient relationship identity for a person who wants their relationship to be seen by others.

Minority stressors are unique to historical time and place, and generational differences likely impact the relationship identities of LGB people. For instance, earlier generations who experienced less visibility in their relationships and received fewer legal protections for these relationships—such as employers offering domestic partner benefits or marriage of same-sex partnerships (Hammack & Cohler, 2011)—may have different relationship identity experiences than those in recent generations whose relationships have been afforded more social and legal recognition and support. Indeed, individuals who perceive that their relationships are more marginalized or stigmatized by those in their social network are less likely to be committed to that relationship (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2007; Rosenthal & Starks, 2015), suggesting that they might also be less likely to have a relationship identity. Conversely, it could also be that the commonalities across relationship development which are similar across generation, such as becoming increasingly more committed to a romantic partner over time (Tran, Judge, & Kashima, 2019), might offset any differences in individual or couple-level minority stress experiences, leading to similar relationship identities regardless of generation.

Current Study

The Generations Study was designed to study health and well-being across three generations of LGB individuals. In the context of life history interviews, participants were asked to describe "who you are" or facets of their identity. We identified those who described their identities in terms of a romantic relationship (partner, wife, boyfriend, etc.), examined how they discussed their relationship identities and the narratives they constructed around these relationships, and explored if these discussions of relationship identities differed between generations. This exploratory study addressed the following questions: Who among three diverse

LGB generations has a core identity based on a relationship? How are those with a relationship identity talking about their relationships? Are there generational differences in these narratives?

Method

Author Positionality

We acknowledge that our respective positions might contribute to how we interpret the participants' lived experiences. The authorship team is composed of a married cisgender heterosexual White woman in her mid-thirties, a single cisgender lesbian Mexican woman in her twenties, a partnered cisgender gay White man in his early forties, and a married cisgender gay White man in his mid-fifties. The authors collaborated closely as a team to ensure that their interpretations were guided by their collective insight and expertise.

Participants and Procedure

We used qualitative data from *The Generations Study* (n = 191), designed to study the health and well-being across three generations of sexual minorities in the United States (Frost, et al., 2019). *The Generations Study* was designed to reflect the experiences of three age cohorts that represented distinct sociohistorical climates for the transition from adolescence to young adulthood, a period crucial to (sexual) identity development (Erikson, 1968; Hammack, 2015). The older cohort (aged 52-59 during data collection in 2015) were adolescents shortly after the Stonewall Inn riots when LGB identities were public for the first time, but during a time when homosexuality was still considered a mental disorder. The middle cohort (aged 34 to 41 in 2015) were adolescents during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and jointly experienced both greater stigma and prejudice due to fear of HIV/AIDS, with associated increasing political activism and community engagement surrounding LGBT issues. Last, the younger cohort (aged

18 to 25 in 2015) were adolescents when the public discourse surrounding sexual minorities focused on inclusivity and equality.

Participants were recruited in four regions across the United States: the New York metropolitan area, the San Francisco Bay area, Tucson, Arizona, and Austin, Texas. The sites were selected to represent culturally distinct geographic regions of the U.S. and had a catchment area of 80 miles to include both urban and non-urban locations. Recruitment occurred in venues frequented by sexual minority individuals using a modified targeted nonprobability sample strategy (Meyer, et al., 2008) and through study advertisements placed on social media outlets. In-person venues included, but were not limited to, bars and clubs, restaurants and coffee shops, churches, and parks and other outdoor spaces; online venues included Facebook, Craigslist, local list servs and other websites. Recruitment did not occur in venues which over-represent those with mental health problems (e.g., 12-step programs). Individuals were deemed eligible for participation in the study if they 1) identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (although other terms, e.g., pansexual, could be used), 2) were a member of one of the cohorts described above, 3) resided in the U.S. since at least age 10, and 4) completed at least 5th grade. Interviews were conducted in English. The study design selected for equivalent numbers of participants across gender, race/ethnic group (White; African American or Black; Latino; Asian American or Asian Pacific Islander; Native American; and multi-racial/ethnic), and the three age cohorts.

Following eligibility screening, participants completed a semi-structured one-on-one in person qualitative interview lasting between 2-3 hours. Drawing from elements of narrative and phenomenological approaches, the interview protocol was open enough to capture lived experiences yet structured with specific content-oriented questions (see Frost et al., 2019 for complete description of the method). As part of the interview, participants completed an identity

map activity to gather information about their social identities. In this section, participants were provided with a piece of paper that was blank except for a circle labeled 'me'. They were asked to "…write down the identities and roles that describe who you are"; follow-up discussion between participants and trained interviewers focused on the identities and labels written on the identity map. The activity was designed to elicit discussions of the participants' racial/ethnic, gender, and sexual identity; additional identities labeled or discussed by participants were unprompted by interviewers. A professional transcription service transcribed the interviews, and they were uploaded to Dedoose Version 8.2.14 software.

Analytic Plan

The current study uses data from the identity map activity and subsequent narrative discussion. Out of the full sample of 191 interviews, we selected all interviews where participants wrote a relationship identity on the identity map (n = 33). Participants who labeled themselves as being a 'husband' (n = 3), 'wife' (n = 6), 'boyfriend' (n = 2), 'girlfriend' (n = 4), 'lover' (n = 11), and 'partner' (n = 11) were counted as mentioning a relationship identity (note: 4 participants labeled more than one identity, such as partner and husband). We excluded instances where discussions were not about a specific relationship (e.g., the participant identified as 'lover' but discussed being a 'lover of everything and everyone'; n = 4).

Participants who identified a relationship identity differed from the other participants in *The Generations Study* in several ways. They were more likely to be women (χ^2 = 4.19, p = .04), Latino/a (χ^2 = 5.25, p = .02), have a college education or more (χ^2 = 11.18, p = .001) and be from the Austin, Texas site (χ^2 = 4.80, p = .03); they were less likely to have a high school education (χ^2 = 4.40 p = .04). No other significant differences emerged with regards to generation or sexual identity.

Out of the 33 participants who mentioned a relationship identity, trained coders screened interviews for instances where participants discussed their current relationship within this section of the interview (all were in a romantic relationship at the time of the interview). Twenty participants discussed their relationship identity in their narrative whereas 13 participants wrote a relationship identity on the identity map but did not discuss it in detail (see Table 1). Those who mentioned a relationship identity only and those who mentioned and discussed a relationship identity did not significantly differ from each other in terms of their generation, sexual or gender identity, race, education, and location (except for Austin, Texas; $\chi^2 = 4.08$, $p = .04$).

Using consensual qualitative protocol (Hill, et al., 2005), 3 coders representing diverse genders, sexualities, and race/ethnicities generated a codebook. First, we screened all interviews where the participant mentioned a relationship identity and identified all excerpts that referenced a current or past romantic relationship. Second, we established inclusion and exclusion criteria for our analytic sample; we excluded excerpts that discussed general dating preferences (e.g., "I tend to date older men") or vague references to a relationship with no further discussion (e.g., "I am in a loving relationship"). Third, we coded the narrative data on relationships using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to elicit themes relevant to relationship identity. The study team open-coded all excerpts to identify initial themes. Lastly, we refined these initial themes through an iterative process of application and adjustment to the excerpts. This process occurred in our biweekly meetings where we built consensus, resolved discrepancies, and reflected on the content. Once we identified qualitative themes, we used Pearson chi-square tests to explore whether the frequency of themes differed between generational cohorts (older cohort vs. middle cohort; older cohort vs. younger cohort; middle cohort vs. younger cohort).

Results

In describing their relationship identities, two themes emerged: 1) negotiation of a relationship identity with other identities, such as gender or race/ethnicity (42 excerpts from 15 participants), and 2) negotiating being visible or invisible within the lesbian, gay, or bisexual community and/or at the societal level (34 excerpts from 13 participants).

Negotiation of identities. Fifteen participants described negotiating a relationship identity with other salient identities: race/ethnic identity, gender identity, sexual identity, and social class. Participants across all cohorts framed these discussions by describing how their other identities shaped their experiences in a current relationship, a few juxtaposed identity negotiations within their current relationship with similar negotiations in past relationships. Although we did not find statistical differences in the frequency of the negotiation of identities theme between older and middle cohort ($\chi^2 = 0.14$, $p = .71$), between the older and younger cohort ($\chi^2 = 0.35$, $p = .55$) or between the middle and younger cohort ($\chi^2 = 0.07$, $p = .80$), this theme was most common among the older cohort (46 % of excerpts), and least common among the younger cohort (17% of excerpts; 37% of excerpts were from the middle cohort).

Race/ethnic identities were often intertwined with romantic identities and served as a source of possible tension or comfort for participants ($n = 6$). Discussions of tension occurred primarily among participants of color whose partners were white. In these instances, their experiences navigating the world as a person of color were distinct from, and often not understood, by their partners. A Latina lesbian wife from the middle cohort (ID: 4010) stated:

> "[My wife] is white. There's times that I'm just—and [my wife] gets a lot of things, but there are times that she's just not gonna understand. Her white privilege blinds her to a lot. It's like I do keep a lot of stuff from her in terms of microaggressions that I experience. Sometimes she'll really see it, and other times she's, like, "Yeah, but—" She plays devil's advocate. I'm,

> like, "The devil doesn't need a fucking advocate. Honestly, the privilege is—it's not whether or not this was racism was the true motivation of this person being an asshole. Your privilege comes in and that someone can be an asshole to you, and you don't automatically wonder if it's because you're brown. Okay? The real motivation behind it is not the point." She's, like, "Oh, yeah, but I just don't want you to get stuck in this place of anger." I'm, like, "It is not your job to tell me how to deal with racism." [Laughter]. Like, "You are the most ill-equipped person to tell me how to deal with racism."

For this participant, her wife did not understand her experiences as a person of color. Similarly, a Latino gay husband from the middle cohort (ID: 4028) said:

> "It's been very hard for him to understand why I haven't come out earlier to my family. Then that goes, of course, I respond, 'Well, being Latino in a certain broader—being gay in a broader Latino Colombian community I think you're afraid of what people are going to say. What people are going to think…'".

This participant described feeling misunderstood by his husband in his decision to delay coming out to his family. Alternatively, some participants who shared similar racial/ethnic backgrounds with their partners described their racial/ethnic identities as a source of comfort in their relationships. A multiracial bisexual girlfriend from the younger cohort (ID: 4047) stated:

> "The girl that I'm dating now is mixed race as well, white and Hispanic. That's nice to share that experience with her."

In a few instances, participants mentioned actively seeking a partner with a similar racial/ethnic identity to share experiences. An Asian queer woman partner from the middle cohort (ID: 4125), said:

> "When I went to Michigan I knew I was very clear that any relationship I had… moving forward would be with a person of color. I was really invested in that.... Now I'm in a biracial relationship still but we are both people of color and have a shared experience in that way. I think that is a big part of what makes us so attuned to one another."

In these narratives, both participants highlight the comfort provided by sharing similar racial/ethnic experiences with their romantic partner.

Gender identities were negotiated with romantic identities primarily from women's narratives (n = 8). These discussions described how, as a couple, they were gendered by others in ways that were inconsistent with how they understand themselves and their partners. In describing her girlfriend, a Latina bisexual girlfriend from the younger cohort (ID: 4065) stated:

> "They expect that she's the masculine one in the relationship. She dresses kind of like a guy, and she has really short hair, so they just assume that she's masculine altogether, like she may have looked masculine, but she's not personality-wise. They see me as being the submissive one or whatever in that relationship."

For this woman, and many other women in the sample, their same-sex relationship was gendered by others in ways that differed from their own perceptions. A white lesbian partner and wife from the older cohort (ID: 156) said:

> "[My wife] is very butch in appearance. She's also very charismatic. In the lesbian world people frequently thought of me as '[My wife]'s partner' but couldn't remember my name because I'm white and I'm a fem. [My wife] was much more—she has a louder personality than I do."

In this instance, she goes beyond discussing how their relationship is gendered by others and describes how this process makes her invisible except as a partner.

Sexual identities were often described as ways of signalizing a relationship identity, either correctly or incorrectly (n = 6). A white gay man and lover from the older cohort (ID: 4053) described how he used his current relationship to explicitly disclose a sexual identity:

> "Once I got into my current relationship that became a way that I defined my gay identity. A lot of expressing myself was expressing that we were a couple. Whenever there was an opportunity to introduce myself, there would usually be an opportunity, at the same time, to say and this is my partner. That was a way of saying I am gay."

Similarly, a multiracial bisexual woman partner from the younger cohort (ID: 4008) echoed a way that others used her current relationship to make assumptions about her sexual identity, although the assumed identity differed from her reality:

> "When I say my partner, the first assumption is, 'Okay, you're a lesbian. Easy. I've got you in a box. You good? I don't have to worry about it.' As soon as you start saying you're bisexual, it becomes a Katy Perry song. People think of you as—a lot of the associations that go with it are that you're slutty, or that you're experimenting, or that you're greedy and you can't pick."

In this instance, others mistakenly assigned her a lesbian sexual identity when she disclosed a same-sex relationship, and, once her sexual identity was disclosed, she encountered biphobia.

Within relationships, discordant sexual identities could also be a source of relationship tension for participants. Several participants discussed how endorsing a bisexual identity caused issues within their relationship. Indeed, a Latina bisexual girlfriend from the younger cohort (ID: 2015) said:

> "I only ever regret saying it [disclosing a bisexual identity] to my current boyfriend, but it's only because he wants me to prove it. It just starts arguments every time..."

Such conversations were not exclusive to participants who identified as bisexual; those with a history of mixed-sex relationships faced similar issues:

> "Because I have a history of being with men and I'm not close to men—like I know [my partner] was always worried that I really wanted to be with a man..."

In this instance, a white lesbian partner and wife from the older cohort (ID: 156) discussed how, even though she identified as a lesbian, her prior experience with men caused relationship tension.

Social class operated within the context of the relationship for 3 participants—both family-of-origin experiences with class and current class membership. A white gay man and lover from the older cohort (ID: 4053) said:

> "One of my frictions that I have with my husband and his family is—my family is from poor origins, and his family, they're more, I would say, solidly middle class, though they imagine themselves as being upper middle class. They really have a certain affection for that that I really bristle against."

In another example, a white queer woman lover and partner from the older cohort (ID: 2151) expanded on class differences and how these differences created tension within her relationship:

> "One of the struggles we've had back and forth is about what do I pay for, what does she pay for? I have so much more money is what it feels like to me. We've had big fights about like we went on vacation to Cape Cod. I was like, "I'm not gonna go with you unless you let me pay for the cabin we're staying in cuz it doesn't make sense. I know you're just putting shit on credit cards." It's just been a big struggle. We both feel like there's nowhere to turn for that stuff. We don't know how to get support with it or help with it."

Both examples illustrated how class differences between partners—either in the past or current relationship—could be a source of ongoing relationship tension.

(In)visibility. Thirteen participants discussed how their relationship identities made them feel visible or exposed – and/or invisible or ignored – by society; we did not find statistical differences in the frequency of the (in)visibility theme between older and middle cohort (χ^2 = 1.35, p = .25), between the older and younger cohort (χ^2 = 0.06, p = .81) or between the middle and younger cohort (χ^2 = 0.62, p = .43). Yet, this theme was most common in the middle cohort (56% of excerpts) compared to the younger (20%) or older (25%) cohorts.

(In)visibility in society. Three participants described being visible in society in both positive and negative ways whereas 7 participants discussed feeling that their relationship was being ignored or misunderstood by people in society. A white lesbian partner in the middle cohort (ID: 4025) described:

> "My partner and I went to a Dwight Yoakam show recently in [town], which was just outside of [city]. We were dancing and there were people that were like, "Oh it's great." They went out of their way to tell us how great it was. Which was just as strange. As some of the good ol' boys that were probably standing around and not enjoying it as much. Or maybe they were because we were two women."

While this participant described feeling positively seen in her relationship by other people, other participants described feeling too visible in their relationship and, in 1 instance, unsafe. A Latina lesbian wife from the middle cohort (ID: 4013) said:

> "I feel like no one thinks twice when they see—or at least the places we go. No one thinks twice when they see two girls holding hands... I'm still a very cautious person 'cause I know there's a lot of hatred in the world. If it's late at night and we're walking on the streets

> downtown, it drives my wife crazy because she would just not care. I'm still really conscious, and some of that has to do with gay hate crimes…depending on where I'm at, the time of the day, the type of crowd, if people are drunk, I may not be as affectionate."

For this participant, being visible with her wife in some public settings makes her feel unsafe.

The narratives discussing invisibility in society frequently involved participants feeling that their relationship was not acknowledged or respected by others. For instance, a Latina lesbian wife from the middle cohort (ID: 4013) stated:

> "We did a vodka tour, and there was—I love meeting new people. There was a big group of guys that were on a work trip and they were really cool to hang out, but then you have that one guy that just doesn't take your marriage as seriously. If we were a man and a woman, they would never hit on the other person in front of them."

This lack of respect and acknowledgement for their relationship was common in many narratives provided by our female participants. Taken together, most of the women's narratives for (in)visibility in society frequently outlined the ways their same-sex relationships were sexualized and sometimes idealized by heterosexual men. As in this example, women often expressed in their narratives that heterosexual men were disrespectful to their relationship by attempting to flirt with their partner or with them. Or, as in the first narrative, the women in our sample would reference how heterosexual men might be enjoying their same-sex relationship.

Notably, when the few men in our sample discussed their relationships in society, they either mentioned that their relationships were commonly ignored by others or not viewed as being a problem. A Black gay boyfriend from the older cohort (ID: 294) simply stated:

> "Me and my boyfriend would be in a bar, nobody likely pays us that much attention."

Invisible within the LGB community. Six participants who mentioned a relationship identity reported feeling invisible within the lesbian, gay, or bisexual community. Several of these narratives described feeling like they, as a couple, no longer shared common interests with those in the broader LGB community. For instance, a multiracial bisexual woman and wife from the middle cohort (ID: 1187) stated:

> "I feel like my wife and I, we don't really go out or do anything. We don't go to Pride together… my impression of the [LGBT] culture, when I've gone to clubs or something that is it's not the family friendly culture for the most part. You're surrounded by drinking and hooking up. I haven't found people in the [LGBT] community that we relate to and connect to. It's just not really a part of our life in that way."

In this instance, she felt disconnected from the LGBT community because she had a wife and children and felt that the community activities did not reflect or include those identities and roles.

Other participants described how they felt invisible within the LGB community because their relationship identity and other identities were not respected. One Latina pansexual woman lover from the middle cohort (ID: 295) described participating in a 'women of color in conflict and collaboration group' that consisted primarily of queer participants:

> "Because my partner and I had gotten married, to get him immigration… I felt very judged. It was like they assumed that I was hetero. Because I'm lighter-skinned, so they assumed—but I wasn't lighter than everybody there. It was like I felt like I was constructed by them as whiter, not as Latina, and not queer. It was a very alienating space because they weren't nice."

In this example, she felt invisible in part because her relationship identity was not acknowledged within the LGB community, but also because her other salient identities were not acknowledged.

Discussion

In this exploratory study, we examined relationship identities in a diverse U.S. sample of LGB adults across three generations. Two primary themes emerged: negotiating identities and (in)visibility. Together these themes suggest that relationships are central to personal identity, especially in situations where partners must negotiate differences (or, in a few cases, similarities) among other salient personal identities, and in situations where their couple status is pronounced or even at odds with larger social and community norms.

An intersectionality perspective indicates that individuals have multiple identities through which they engage with society (Choo & Ferree, 2010) and we found evidence that relationship identities are salient for all generations when the couple relationship prompts awareness of differences within other social relationships—or across linked lives—with respect to other identities: racial/ethnic, gender, sexual, and social class. For instance, partnering with a different-sex partner led some participants to feel excluded from LGB spaces, but also feel that their sexual identity was not acknowledged or respected by a romantic partner or in the broader society. Indeed, bisexuality is often negatively associated with social wellbeing due to biphobia in LGB communities (Kertzner, Meyer, Frost, & Stirratt, 2010); at the same time, those with a bisexual identity in a different-sex relationship face the erasure of their identity because they are presumed to be heterosexual by society (Maimon, Sanchez, Albuja, & Howansky, 2019). While scholars highlight the need for more intersectional scholarship on LGB-parent families (Few-Demo, Humble, Curran, & Lloyd, 2016), we recommend that relationship scholars also consider relationship identities when adopting an intersectional framework.

We also found that relationship identities are informed by interactions with others in community settings. Our participants frequently mentioned couple-level minority stressors (Frost

et al., 2018; Neilands, et al., 2020), particularly stigma, in these everyday interactions; participants often did not feel seen as a couple, or, in instances where they mentioned feeling seen, discussed a heightened awareness of others who may or may not react negatively to their relationship. Past studies have linked experiences of stigma with negative relationship outcomes, particularly for internalized stigma (e.g., Doyle & Molix, 2015), such as lower-relationship quality (Feinstein, McConnell, Dyar, Mustanski, & Newcomb, 2018; Rostosky & Riggle, 2017a) and difficulty establishing intimacy (Frost, 2011), suggesting that being devalued as a couple could have important implications for a couple's relationship dynamics. Interestingly, participants across all generations described experiences navigating their relationship publicly, suggesting that, despite an increasing acceptance of same-sex couples and greater access to legal rights and protections (Hammack & Cohler, 2011), experiences with stigma persist.

Because relationship identities are grounded in an individual's thinking about themselves in the context of their relationship (Agnew, et al., 1998), it is not surprising that subgroups who construct a sense of self that is more relational (e.g., women; Marshall, 2010) or one that emphasizes a collective community (e.g., Latina/o; Campos & Kim, 2017) were more likely to mention a relationship identity than others. In Austin, Texas, the legalization of marriage between same-sex couples was a topic of national discourse during the time of data collection in 2015 (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015). Marriage between same-sex couples was already legal in the other locations: Arizona since 2014 (*Connolly v. Jeanes*, 2014; *Majors v. Horne*, 2014), New York since 2011 (*Marriage Equality Act*, 2011), and California since 2013 (when the ruling *Hollingsworth v. Perry*, 2010 went into effect; marriage for same-sex couples was briefly legalized in 2008 under *In re Marriage Cases 43 Cal. 4th 757*, 2008). Perhaps the national discourse contributed to more awareness surrounding these participants' relationships and greater

reflection on the meaning behind a relationship identity for these Texans. Further, participants with higher education were more likely to report and discuss relationship identities, which is consistent with the finding that educational attainment is positively linked with marital expectations and rates (Lesthaeghe, 2010).

Our study is novel in identifying relationships as a salient identity component for some LGB people and contributes to understanding the experiences of people for whom their relationship is central to personal identity. However, we acknowledge some limitations. Relationship identities were not prompted by interviewers, and, thus, we have limited information on the characteristics of the relationships discussed. Additionally, our analytic sample was relatively privileged in terms of socioeconomic status. While some participants discussed how social class differences between themselves and their partner affected their relationship dynamics, consistent with existing research (Perry, Huebner, Baucom, & Hoff, 2016a), these narratives might differ depending on the socioeconomic status of the sample. Because social class has important implications for both relationship behaviors and health (Perry, Huebner, Baucom, & Hoff, 2017b), future research should explore relationship identities among different samples with greater socioeconomic diversity.

Implications and Applications. The concept of relationship identity could be a strategic focus for psychological support for LGB individuals and couples. For instance, supports for LGB individuals and same-sex couples might consider how one assigns meaning to a particular relationship in social and historical context—and whether the relationship is a salient aspect of one's identity. Other efforts could focus on fostering ways to make meaning of lived experiences characterized by discrimination, stigma, or other minority stressors. Helping same-sex couples cope with these negative experiences could reduce tension in relationships, particularly if

couples could lean on one another for support. Indeed, having a supportive partner is associated with better relationship outcomes, such as greater relationship commitment and satisfaction (Haas & Lannutti, 2019).

We draw from a study of LGB lives, and thus focus on LGB relationship identities, but similar themes might be relevant to heterosexuals and have similar clinical implications. Certainly, many different-sex couples negotiate differences between partners in key social statuses and personal identities; we expect that such negotiation may make relationship identities equally salient for different-sex couples. Yet the theme of (in)visibility may be distinct to persons in same-sex couples precisely because the meaning derives from feeling (in)visible within dominant social settings where their same-sex couple status stands out – or from feeling invisible within LGB communities. Understanding how relationship identities are established alongside other key identities and how interactions and societal opportunities and constraints sustain them in other populations, including heterosexuals, could be a fruitful avenue for further investigation.

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Table 1. *Demographic characteristics of The Generations Study (n = 191)*			
	Relationship Identity Mentioned and Discussed (*n* = 20)	Relationship Identity Mentioned (*n* = 33)	No Relationship Identity (*n* = 158)
Cohort			
Identity Formation (aged 52-59)	6 (3%)	10 (5%)	36 (19%)
Institutional Advancement (aged 34-41)	9 (5%)	14 (7%)	55 (29%)
Cultural Inclusion (aged 18-25)	5 (3%)	9 (5%)	67 (35%)
Relationship Identity			
Partner	7 (4%)	9 (5%)	-
Lover	3 (2%)	9 (5%)	-
Boyfriend/Girlfriend	4 (2%)	6 (3%)	-
Husband/Wife	6 (3%)	9 (5%)	-
Sexual Identity			
Gay/lesbian	11 (6%)	18 (9%)	95 (50%)
Bisexual/pansexual	6 (3%)	11 (6%)	44 (23%)
Queer	3 (2%)	4 (2%)	17 (9%)
Two-spirit	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (1%)
Gender Identity			
Female	13 (7%)	20 (11%)	65 (34%)
Male	6 (3%)	11(6%)	77 (40%)
Genderqueer	1 (1%)	2 (1%)	16 (8%)
Race			
White	5 (3%)	8 (4%)	39 (20%)
Black	1 (1%)	3 (2%)	35 (18%)
Latinx	8 (4%)	12 (6%)	29 (15%)
Asian	2 (1%)	3 (2%)	24 (13%)
American Indian	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	13 (7%)
Multiracial	4 (2%)	6 (3%)	18 (9%)
Education			
Less than high school	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (3%)
High school	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	19 (10%)
Some college	4 (2%)	10 (5%)	74 (39%)
College or more	16 (8%)	23 (12%)	60 (31%)
Location			
San Francisco Bay	4 (2%)	10 (5%)	48 (25%)
Tucson, Arizona	2 (1%)	3 (2%)	38 (20%)
Austin, Texas	10 (5%)	12 (6%)	30 (16%)
New York City	4 (2%)	8 (4%)	42 (22%)
Note. Percentage out of *The Generations Study* sample (*n*=191).			