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Understanding How Emerging Same-Sex Couples Make Meaning of Minority Stress:  
A Narrative Approach

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## Abstract

Minority stress—in the form of experiences of prejudice and discrimination—can have negative consequences on individuals in same-sex relationships. However, little is known about the ways in which members of same-sex couples make meaning of minority stress, especially in the context of newly formed relationships that may be most vulnerable to minority stressors. The present study draws upon emerging understandings of couple-level minority stress to investigate the ways in which newly formed same-sex couples make meaning of their minority stress experiences jointly as a couple. A narrative analysis was conducted using data from dyadic interviews, with 40 same-sex couples who had been together for at least 6 months but less than 3 years. Analyses highlighted 6 distinct narrative strategies utilized by couples when making-meaning of their minority stress experiences: “minority stress made couples stronger”, “minority stress contaminates positive experiences”, “minority stress is not a big deal”, “couples resign in the face of minority stress”, “minority stress is worse than expected”, and “couples hope minority stress experiences will get better”. These findings not only provide valuable evidence for couple-level minority stress constructs, but crucially give a nuanced insight into how same-sex couples that are in the early stages of relationship development, make meaning of their minority stress experiences. Findings have important implications for the design and implementation of effective clinical and counselling interventions aimed at reducing negative outcomes among individuals in same-sex relationships, and the potential for relationship dissolution resulting from minority stress experiences.

*Keywords: Minority Stress; Stress Process; Relationships; Same-sex; Stigma*

Whilst general acceptance for same sex marriage is globally increasing (McGee, 2016), the most recent public opinion poll suggested that 67% of Americans support same-sex marriages, 31% oppose and 2% are indifferent (Gallup, 2018). Policies inhibiting same-sex marriage represent a form of structural stigma (Hatzenbuehler, 2014) which supports the denial of equal rights to sexual minority populations. In short, structural stigma leads to anti-civil rights policies that view same-sex relationships as inherently “different” (Raifman, Moscoe, Austin & McConnell, 2017), and thus less deserving of societal recognition and support than are heterosexual relationships.

Since the legalization of same-sex marriage in the US, teenage suicide rates have fallen (Raifman et al., 2017). Rates fell by 7% for the general teenage population, however they fell by 14% within lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) populations. The legalization of same-sex marriage has often been accompanied by an increased visibility of sexual minorities through media coverage, which has been linked to feelings of increased social support and acceptance (Chomsky & Barclay, 2010). However, in contrast, it has also been found that this increased visibility can have adverse effects, especially in unsupportive or rejecting families, which may have negative mental-health consequences (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz & Sanchez, 2009). Nonetheless, despite its correlational design, the research by Raifman et al. (2017) clearly illustrates the benefits of reducing the stigma associated with sexual orientation at the structural level.

Despite this, negative health outcomes in sexual minority populations are vastly understudied in relation to those in other ethnic and racial minority groups (Levahot & Simoni, 2011). This is of concern, especially because research has consistently demonstrated a high level of mental health problems within individuals identifying as LGB (Cochran, 2001; Gilman et al., 2001; Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2011). Moreover, victimization as a consequence of an individual’s sexual orientation is more predictive of negative mental

health outcomes than victimization pertaining to experiences unrelated to sexual orientation (Herek, Gillis & Cogan, 1999). This mental health disparity is believed in part to be attributable to subjection to minority stress (Frost & LeBlanc, 2014; Frost, Levahot & Meyer, 2015; Levahot & Simoni, 2011; Meyer, 1995, 2003; Meyer & Frost, 2013). For example, it has been evidenced that internalized homophobia is linked to negative mental health indicators such as psychological distress (Meyer, 1995) and increased alcohol consumption (Amadio, 2006; Heffernan, 1998).

### **The Relevance of Minority Stress for Same-Sex Couples**

The minority stress framework (Meyer, 2003), emanating from general theories of social stress (Dohrenwend, 2000; Pearlin, 1999), can be employed in the current context to understand the repercussions of social stigma for the well-being of stigmatized populations. In particular, the minority stress framework argues that sexual minority individuals are exposed to additional and unique social stressors stemming from their stigmatized minority status in society, which places them at added risk for health and well-being problems relative to their heterosexual peers (Meyer, 2003). These unique social stressors include discrimination, stigma or expectations of rejection, stress associated with stigma concealment, and the internalization of negative beliefs about one's sexual identity (Meyer, 1995, 2003).

Due to the stigmatization and marginalization of their relationships, in and of themselves, people in same-sex relationships experience additional stigma from society at large, which appears to be associated with both relationship quality and individual well-being (Gamarel, Reisner, Laurenceau, Nemoto, & Operario, 2014; Lehmler & Agnew, 2006; 2007; Rosenthal & Starks, 2015). This has led some to label a new domain of *couple-level* minority stress in emerging studies of same-sex couples (Frost et al., 2017; LeBlanc, Frost, & Wight, 2015). For example, an individual-level indicator of minority stress might be the

denial of a promotion at work because of one's sexual orientation. In contrast, an example of a couple-level minority stressor might be, exclusion from a family reunion because siblings do not want their children to be around a same-sex couple. Unique couple-level minority stressors are theorized to add an additional dimension to the potential for negative experiences for those identifying as sexual minorities. Attempts to more fully articulate this construct of couple-level minority stress, as distinguished from individual-level minority stress, can deepen existing understandings of how people in same-sex relationships (and other stigmatized relationship forms) – as a stigmatized relational unit – are both individually and jointly affected by this societal-level stigma.

### **Developmental Risk for Newly Formed Same-Sex Couples**

Any couple in a newly formed relationship is at risk of exposure to a selection of additional stressors. For example, the beginnings of new romantic relationships are volatile due to uncertainty surrounding the future of the relationship (Swann, De La Ronde & Hixon, 1994). Furthermore, newer relationships are less stable (Arriaga, 2001; Simpson, 1987), less satisfying (Katz, Anderson & Beach, 1997) and less intimate (Campbell, Lackenbauer & Muise, 2006; Katz et al., 1997; Swann et al., 1994) than longer-term relationships. Such research focusing on newly formed couples describes some of the early stressors that emerge through the process of relationship formation, some of which may have become too temporally distal for longer-term couples to remember.

Thus far, research on minority stress and its impact on health and well-being, has largely focused on meaning making within more “established” couples (e.g. Frost, 2011; Frost & Gola, 2015). It has yet to focus on understanding the experiences of newly formed same-sex couples. Such knowledge is needed, given minority stress is thought to play a role in relationship dissolution of same-sex couples (Frost & LeBlanc, in press) and stress has

been shown to be a risk for dissolution and diminished relationship quality in newly formed couples, regardless of sexual orientation (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009).

### **Narrative Psychology**

Narrative psychology offers a useful position from which to understand how newly formed same-sex couples make meaning of their minority stress experiences. Most adults within modern societies devise narrative understandings of both themselves, and their societal role as a means of investing their lives with meaning and purpose (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten & Bowman, 2001). The structure of stories distinctively reflects a sense of self integrated with the contexts of their lives. Systematically analyzing which aspects of social context are included into an individual's narrative, highlights the meaningful aspects that have become part of their lived experience (McAdams & Pals, 2006); thus, indicating the process whereby individuals make meaning from their life experiences.

Studying relationship stories offers a valuable unit of analysis that researchers can use to form deeper understandings of meaning making in interpersonal relationships (Fiese & Grotevant, 2001; Fiese & Spagnola, 2005; Frost, 2013; Kellas, 2013; Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2007). More specifically, narratives have been particularly useful to demonstrate the ways in which societal stigma influences meaning-making constructions in individuals' relationships (Frost, 2011; Rostosky, Riggle, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2016). Narrative approaches have been valuable to identify how social and cultural issues influence identity development and thus, allow a general understanding of the lives of sexual minority individuals (Hammack, 2005). This process of understanding how LGB individuals make meaning of their experiences of minority stress is vital to enhancing the existing literature base of the ways in which it impacts their lived experiences. Although it is well understood that minority stress can have negative implications for the well-being of those experiencing it (Frost & LeBlanc, 2014; Frost et al., 2015; Levahot & Simoni, 2011; Meyer, 1995, 2003;

Meyer & Frost, 2013), previous research has largely focused on the individual-level minority stressors and the impacts that these have on health and wellbeing. The published literature so far has yet to focus on couple-level meaning-making processes of minority stress. Ignoring the additional unique stressors identified at the couple-level could be detrimental to gaining a fuller insight into how minority stressors are perceived within the relational context and their associated consequences. Moreover, identifying couple-level meaning-making strategies is useful for the development and implementation of clinical and counselling interventions aimed at both the individual and couples. Thus, it is critical to extend understandings of couple-level minority stress through the examination of the narratives that couples jointly construct. The current study therefore aims to address this gap by utilizing narrative qualitative research methods to provide a much-needed theoretical depth to the existing literature.

### **The Current Study**

The research question guiding the current study was “how do newly formed same-sex couples make meaning of minority stress within the context of their relationships?” Employing dyadic narrative interviewing and analysis to add couple-level meaning-making to minority stress theory (Meyer, 1995, 2003) was intended to enable an improved understanding of couples’ lived experiences of minority stress. Moreover, by focusing on newly formed couples (who had been together for a duration of between 6 months and 3 years), the current study also attempts to provide valuable insights into the enhanced vulnerability towards negative understandings of minority stress experiences that these couples have.

### **Method**

## Sample

To investigate this research question, data were drawn from Project SHARe (Frost et al., 2017). A total of 120 same-sex couples were recruited equally across two study sites; the San Francisco Bay and Greater Atlanta (US) areas. Within a venue based, ethnographic community sampling strategy, a range of recruitment venues were used such as websites, supermarkets, bars and parks. Participant's ages ranged from 21-78 years old. The average age for male couples was  $M=41.6$  years and the average age for female couples was  $M=38.3$  years. Quota-based sampling was utilized to ensure the sample reflected equal numbers of male and female couples, in addition to an equal representation of three different categories of relationship duration; 6months to 3years, 3years to 7years, and 7years or longer. The sample was ethnically and racially diverse with 47% ( $n = 56$ ) of the couples comprising of two white partners, 24% ( $n = 29$ ) of the couples comprising of two racial/ethnic minority partners, and 29% ( $n = 35$ ) comprising of one white partner and one racial/ethnic minority partner. For the purposes of the present analysis, only couples who fell into the "newer" relationship category, (6months to 3years;  $n = 40$ ), were included in the analysis.

Eligibility criteria were that: (1) both partners were at least 21 years of age; (2) both individuals identified each other to be their partner, and of themselves as a "couple"; (3) that they had been involved in a sexual relationship with each other at some point in their shared history. Inclusion was not restricted to couples who cohabited to ensure the presence of a range of relationship arrangements. Couples completed an online screening questionnaire comprising of questions regarding their age, gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, location of residence and relationship characteristics to ensure that they met the criteria. To verify eligibility and sincerity, partners' responses were then compared to one another. Couples were paid \$60, or an individual was paid \$30, as an incentive to participate.



## **Procedure**

Each couple met with an interviewer on one occasion for approximately two hours for an audio-taped interview, which was later transcribed. The interviews were centered around the couples' joint formation of a "relationship timeline", on which key periods and events from the duration of their relationship so far (and events anticipated for the future) were identified, plotted and discussed. The relationship timeline method was designed to generate discussion of both perceived positive and negative experiences (de Vries et al., 2017). Couples then collaboratively rated the stressfulness of each period or event on a scale of 0-4 (whereby 0= not at all stressful, and 4= very stressful). Minority stressors were only instructed to be of focus after every event on the timeline had been labelled and rated. Couples were next asked to revisit and identify events containing experiences of minority stress. Four periods or events were then chosen by the interviewers to be discussed in detail. These were: 1) the most stressful (highest rated) period/event closest to the day the couple met, 2) the most stressful period/event closest to the date of the interview, 3) the most stressful anticipated future period/event, 4) and one period/event chosen by the couple. Two further events identified by the couple to contain minority stress experiences were then discussed if they had not been already.

The interviewers had all been trained extensively in research with same-sex couples. They employed a series of narrative prompts when asking each couple to describe the details of what happened during each period or event, what they were thinking and feeling at the time, and any lasting impact it has had on their daily lives as a couple. Project SHARe (Frost et al., 2017) received favorable ethical approval from the University of Surrey.

## **Analytic Strategy**

The analysis was an iterative process inherent to a narrative approach (Frost 2011; McAdams et al., 2001; McAdams & Pals, 2006). The transcript files pertaining to the couples

in the “newer” relationship duration category were imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software to facilitate the subsequent analytic procedures.

The analytic process involved two main phases; a content analysis and a narrative analysis. The content analysis enabled the identification of narratives containing minority stress experiences. In line with understandings of couple-level minority stressors, these were defined as “those stressors that were unique to the experiences of individuals in same-sex relationships or the shared experiences of partners in same-sex couples” (Frost et al., 2017). Initial content analysis identified that from the 40 couples, 36 couples’ interviews contained discussions of minority stress. Therefore, the 4 couples that did not identify any experiences of minority stress were excluded from further analysis. Within the remaining 36 couples’ transcripts, a total of 72 separate narratives contained experiences of minority stress.

A narrative analysis was then conducted of couples’ meaning-making strategies used in the retelling of minority stress experiences. For the purposes of this analysis, a ‘narrative’ was defined as being the storied discussion of a specific event or period of time containing an experience of minority stress. The narrative analysis involved looking at the overarching characteristics of the narrative structure, rather than the content. Stage 1 consisted of an open coding pass, identifying, developing and grouping together initial important concepts within the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). At this stage, some preliminary patterns across the narratives were identified. Consideration was given to both recurring and unique meaning-making strategies used by the couples. Stage 2 involved the second coding pass, in which the narratives were analyzed with a more focused approach, based on the initial interpretations of the narratives. This entailed analyzing all the transcripts and noting how different strategies emerged within narratives and how in some cases the same narrative strategy could be presented across different narratives in different ways. This generated the formation of a draft code-book, containing the identified narrative strategy codes. This draft code-book was then

administered in the third coding pass (stage 3). A revised code-book was then applied to the narratives and was refined during the fourth coding pass (stage 4). Increased familiarity with the data and method at this point led to unique strategies being highlighted that had not been previously identified. This led to a finalized code-book which could be applied to the data during the fifth and final coding pass (stage 5).

### **Methodological Integrity**

Several steps were taken in striving toward methodological integrity as described by APA reporting standards for qualitative research (Levitt et al., 2018). Credibility and trustworthiness were enhanced via the involvement of a team of experts in both same-sex relationships and qualitative research in all stages of the study design, data collection, and analysis process (see Frost et al., 2017 for more details). Furthermore, coding meetings between the first and second author were organized throughout the process to ensure clarity surrounding the coding process and consistency in code definition and application. This helped to ensure that the administered codes were pertaining to the overarching structure of the narratives, rather than the thematic content of each story. Given the interpretative nature of a narrative analysis, it was not methodologically appropriate to calculate a statistical indicator of inter-rater reliability (Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman & Marteau, 1997). Instead, issues with consistency were addressed by reaching agreement at coding meetings.

### **Results**

The narrative analysis identified six distinct narrative strategies utilized by the couples. These were: “minority stress made couples stronger”; “minority stress contaminates positive experiences”; “minority stress is not a big deal”; “couples resign in the face of minority stress”; “minority stress is worse than expected” and “couples hope minority stress experiences will get better”. These strategies illustrate how same-sex couples make meaning of their minority stress experiences, and in some cases how this understanding is integrated

within utilized coping mechanisms. The dyadic data reflected a broad range of strategies, that were at times contradictory, thus, representative of the diversity of lived experience. The number of narratives including experiences of minority stress provided by the couples varied from zero to 4. Strategies were identified at the level of each event narrative, rather than within the general context of each interview. Each strategy will be discussed in turn and examples of each strategy are presented in Table 1.

**“Minority Stress Made Couples Stronger” (18 narratives from 17 couples)**

These narratives were characterized by affectively negative stories transforming into a positive experience that results in the couple feeling that the experience has made them “stronger” as a couple. These stories indicated feelings of love and support resulting from an increased relationship closeness as a direct result from negative experiences of discrimination.

For example, one white female lesbian couple, both aged 27, clearly described the experience of “coming out” to have a positive impact on their relationship (see Table 1). It is first described how their relationship was kept secret because neither of them were “out” yet. Both partners generally agreed that lying to their close friends and family did not feel right, “Like nobody knew what we were doing, so it was pretty stressful” (Partner B). The narrative then transformed from this affectively negative experience to describing how the couple perceive it to have made them “stronger” due to “the release and freedom”; it granted them the ability to be honest. The presence of minority stress within this story was acknowledged to have had a significant impact upon both themselves and their relationships. However, the positive “made us stronger” conclusion is what shapes the overall narrative, rather than an overwhelming negative opinion of the experience. This therefore suggests that this couple make meaning of their minority stress occurrences as opportunities to strengthen and solidify their relationship.

This strategy is synonymous to broader strategies of redemption highlighted within the works of McAdams et al. (2001) and McAdams (2006) whereby negative scenes transform into good outcomes. It is suggested that these strategies are good indicators of general wellbeing and life satisfaction (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin & Mansfield, 1997). It also mirrors the benefits of coming out as sexual minority individuals (Ragins, 2004; Wells & Kline, 1987) and more specifically as sexual minority couples (Mohr & Fassinger, 2006).

**“Minority Stress Contaminates Positive Experiences” (18 narratives from 17 couples)**

Although many couples understood experiences of minority stress to be characterized by feelings of acceptance and joy, in contrast, couples also utilized strategies referencing minority stress to be negative contaminative experiences. These narratives were characterized by what should be positive experiences, being overshadowed by negative minority stress incidences. The narratives indicated feelings of expectations being violated. “Positive” experiences were assumed even when it was not explicitly stated; attending a wedding was presumed to be a positive experience unless it was specifically stated otherwise.

For example, one interracial gay male couple aged 34 and 44, described the experience of a family holiday, what should have been a positive event, to have been contaminated by negative feelings of being treated differently (see Table 1). The family holiday was interpreted as what should have been a positive experience. However, the narrative goes on to describe how the couple felt like they were being ostracized at times, “I felt kind of more like it was us against them in some way...Like we had to band together and be strong to survive like in dealing with – with the family” (Partner A). This narrative clearly illustrated this holiday to be an experience that did not correspond to their prior expectations. Overwhelming feelings of not being supported are prioritized in the overarching narrative. This negative affect is reinforced at the end of the narrative and is indicative of the lasting

impact it has had on them as a couple, “I don’t want to do that again” (Partner B). This event should have been an affirming experience; however, the prominence of discriminatory feelings has diminished this.

Contamination strategies have also been identified in the works of McAdams et al. (1997) and McAdams et al. (2001). Additionally, it has been highlighted to be a prominent strategy utilized by same-sex couples when discussing experiences of stigma (Frost, 2011).

**“Minority Stress is Not a Big Deal” (17 narratives from 14 couples)**

Some couples contrastingly described narratives that recognized the existence of minority stress within their lives, but instead the narratives were characterized by minority stress having a general lack of meaningful impact. Stories identified the presence of minority stress and discrimination; however, these experiences were not described to have long-lasting effects on their relationship or being overwhelming in nature.

An example of this strategy comes from a gay couple aged 49 and 65 (see Table 1). “There’s prejudice [...] and stigma like there is anyplace else” (Partner B). Here, this Partner B describes how prejudice is everywhere. “[...] but if you’re comfortable in your own skin being who you are, that you can, you know, be that way and other people will accept you [...] things aren’t perfect [...]” (Partner A). Partner A joins in agreement that minority stress is present, however neither partner describes these instances of minority stress to have a significant impression upon them. Research by Ruggerio and Taylor (1997) has evidenced that perceived control is positively associated with minimizing discriminatory experiences. This strategy might therefore serve as a form of a self-protection coping mechanism through which feeling in control of experiences of minority stress positively affects wellbeing.

**“Couples Resign in the Face of Minority Stress” (9 narratives from 8 couples)**

Some couples described narratives generally indicative of negative minority stress experiences, however were predominantly characterized by an acceptance of it being “just the

way it is". Narratives were suggestive of beliefs that things will not change and include implicit elements of helplessness of the stigmatizing conditions surrounding same-sex couples living in the US.

For example, one white gay male couple aged 29 and 27 (see Table 1) described how one partner's Mother is not truly accepting of their relationship and how the distress that this causes them is largely due to the likelihood of this not changing. "That's not how I wanted it to be... I think the part that stresses me out still is the idea that my mom's not gonna change" (Partner B). The narrative clearly demonstrated feelings of discontent with the situation, however it is the acceptance of the unchanging nature of the situation will not change that is the overarching focus of the narrative. Whilst some narratives in the data-set describe proactive attempts to tackle experiences of minority stress by means of organized marches and campaigns, these narratives were implicitly characterized by a more passive approach, whereby feelings of helplessness and "giving-up" govern a lack of action. This unique strategy has not been previously identified within research investigating minority stress experiences of same-sex couples, consequently highlighting a novel insight into the lives of same-sex couples.

#### **"Minority Stress is Worse Than Expected" (5 narratives from 5 couples)**

Some couples narrated events that were experienced to be more difficult than had previously been anticipated due to underestimating the existence of minority stress. These narratives described some of the first experiences of minority stress for the couples, and therefore the experiences were often described as being "unexpected". These narratives tended to communicate negative feelings progressively as the story unfolded.

An example can be found in one interracial female lesbian couple aged 21 and 25, who described their first experience of homophobic discrimination to be a surprising, negative encounter (Table 1). In this narrative, and indeed others that were identified as

employing this strategy, it was *assumed* that the couple had prior negative anticipations of the direct experiences of minority stress because it was not suggested otherwise. This couple mentioned how they receive general daily derogatory comments from people, however when speaking about a particular instance in which discrimination was directed at them as a couple, Partner A said, “I don’t – I think that I was expecting that reaction.” This demonstrates how this direct encounter was unexpected and was perceived to be different to other more general discriminatory comments. The narrative frames this experience as getting progressively negative, evidenced by the statement of an emotional response from Partner B, “I just got angry,” who also later states “I haven’t had that personally, like, that discrimination”. This strategy was only identified among female couples in the study.

**“Couples Hope Minority Stress Experiences Will Get Better” (5 narratives from 5 couples)**

Some couples described narratives that are characterized by a general sense of hope for the future. Stories largely described negative discriminatory experiences, understanding them to be a product of time and demonstrated a belief that as time goes on the situation will improve. This strategy appeared to provide couples with comfort and reassurance that times will change for the better.

For example, one interracial gay male couple aged 45 and 34 described the impact of coming out to family (see Table 1). This narrative generally gave the impression that minority stress is clearly manifested within their relationship, however is not an ever-present, overwhelming burden upon their lives. For example, Partner B in this couple stated, “I’m still hoping and praying that one day, you know, especially when we live together again that my family would accept the fact and would accept him wholeheartedly.” Hope has been identified by Kwon (2013) to contribute to resilience against minority stressors in LGB individuals. Therefore, this explicit statement of hope that in the future his family will



become more accepting of their relationship and his partner, may act as a form of self-protection and a coping mechanism. This suggests that this couple make meaning of their minority stress experiences to be the consequences of the situation and time. Thus, are subject to change.

This strategy is somewhat comparable to the strategy, “minority stress is not a big deal” in that both strategies describe specific instances of minority stress being present, but without having an overpowering impact on their lives. However crucially, these narratives characterized by “hope” differ because they demonstrate understandings of experiences of minority stress to be externally attributed and include optimism for the future.

#### **Partners Use Different Meaning-Making Strategies (10 narratives from 10 couples)**

In some cases, narratives were characterized by each partner having distinctive differences in their minority stress experiences. Stories sometimes highlighted elements of a disagreement between partners as to how they make meaning of the experience. In some cases, it was described as one partner experiencing long-lasting effects of the incidence of discrimination, where the other partner did not feel these long-lasting effects, which might be problematic for the couples.

#### **No Clear Strategy (7 narratives from 6 couples)**

Additionally, some couples identified specific experiences of minority stress, however their narratives were not indicative of the use of any particular strategy. These narratives often contained casual mentions of minority stress experiences whereby the couples feel they are treated differently to other heterosexual couples (e.g. legalities and rights surrounding marriage). However, these experiences were not truly reflective of any distinguishable narrative strategy and were somewhat disorganized in their structure. For example, one narrative was characterized by the couple struggling to make clear meaning of the experience of minority stress. There were conflicting positive and negative ideas surrounding the

experience of discrimination. It might be that narratives not illustrating a clear strategy were reflective of the couple struggling to come to a clear understanding and fully make meaning of the experience.

### **Discussion**

The primary aim of this research was to investigate how newly formed same-sex couples make meaning of minority stress within the context of their relationship. The present narrative analysis illustrated that same-sex couples employ a number of strategies when making-meaning of their minority stress experiences. These strategies are valuable units of analysis because they reflect the variability in how same-sex couples understand their experiences. Findings are consistent with prior literatures on minority stress experiences at the individual-level (Frost, 2011; Meyer, 1995, 2003; Morocco et al., 2007). These strategies can be broadly categorized to be either affectively positive or negative. In general, the data were more reflective of negative strategies than positive strategies. The affectively negative strategies included: “Minority stress contaminates positive experiences”; “minority stress is worse than expected” and to a lesser extent “minority stress is not a big deal”. These strategies were largely synonymous with prior research demonstrating the complex and enduring outcomes of minority stress for same-sex couples (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Frost, 2011; Gamarel et al., 2014; Lehmilller & Agnew, 2006; 2007; Rosenthal & Starks, 2015; Todosijevic, Rothblum & Solomon, 2005). These strategies also closely paralleled the literature on minority stress experiences at the couple-level (Frost et al., 2017; LeBlanc et al., 2015), and of minority stress theory (Meyer, 1995; 2003). There was clear evidence of minority stress theory within the data, specifically in the descriptions of experiences of discrimination and how these, in conjunction with minority identity contribute to coping mechanisms (Meyer, 1995; 2003). The remaining strategies were considered to be affectively positive and were inclusive of: “minority stress made us stronger” and “couples hope

minority stress experiences will get better”. In both cases, the negative experience of minority stress was generally considered secondary to the rewarding relational consequences of overcoming and coping with instances of minority stress as a couple. These strategies are consistent with and build upon prior literatures demonstrating that minority stress can be understood as an affectively positive experience at the individual-level (Crocker & Major, 1989; Frost, 2011) and additionally illustrate that this is also the case at the couple-level. According to Pals (2006), constructing positive narrative resolutions such as these are representative of heightened well-being. Therefore, the findings from this study suggest that some sexual minority couples have found methods of coping that are successful in buffering the adverse consequences of minority stress. This is largely compatible with Meyer’s minority stress theory (2003) who suggested that community coping and social support can diminish negative mental health outcomes resulting from experiences of stigma.

The identified strategy of “couples resign in the face of minority stress” was particularly novel and thus, worthy of further discussion here. Evidence for LGB persons resigning from their minority stress experiences is yet to be found at either the individual or couple-level. This novel finding has potentially detrimental consequences for those persons. Due to a lack of research specifically investigating this phenomenon within the lived experiences of LGB couples, the extent to which resigning from discrimination affects their lives is unclear. It is therefore vital for future research to further investigate the impact that resignation from minority stress has on same-sex couples.

Also, of significant note were the findings regarding couples who utilized different meaning-making strategies or no clear strategy at all. These findings are of particular interest and importance because they demonstrate a clear lack of harmonious meaning-making between the couple. Incongruence in couples coping (both partners using contrasting coping strategies) has previously been associated with more intense feelings of distress than

occasions demonstrating congruence in couple's coping (both partners using similar coping strategies; Revenson, 1994). Moreover, coherence has been demonstrated to be a central narrative indicator of general wellbeing (Adler, Wagner & McAdams, 2007). It might be that this lack of coherence within the narratives echoes a range of negative psychological outcomes within the lives of these couples. Couples who utilized these types of strategies are potentially at the highest risk of experiencing distress within the context of their relationship as a consequence of experiences of minority stress. It might be these types of couples who are perhaps most in need of counselling and clinical therapeutic interventions to promote congruence.

Not only have these findings provided support for couple-level minority stress constructs (Frost et al., 2017; LeBlanc et al., 2015), but crucially have also extended our understanding of how newly formed same-sex couples make meaning of their minority stress experiences. Specifically, this research indicates the increased vulnerability newly formed same-sex couples have for negatively experiencing minority stress experiences. Prior research has demonstrated the vulnerabilities for experiencing additional stressors that newly formed couples are liable to (Arriaga, 2001; Campbell et al., 2006; Katz et al., 1997; Simpson, 1987; Swann et al., 1994). However, previous research has largely overlooked the impact of minority stress as one of these additional stressors for emerging same-sex relationships. This research has therefore extended the current literature base regarding newly formed relationships and the associated stressors. It is suggested that minority stress is indeed an additional stressor for newly formed sexual minority relationships, therefore providing a promising base for future research aimed at further understanding newly formed same-sex relationships.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Although this study has provided a valuable contribution to the existing literature base, it is not without limitations. It is important to highlight that the data in this study was collected before the legalization of same-sex marriage in the US. This therefore limits the extent to which these findings can be applied to the current legal and political environment within the US. Moreover, San Francisco and Atlanta were originally selected for sample locations due to the diversity of the two cities (Frost et al., 2017). However, choosing two urban locations means that the sample cannot reflect the experiences of same-sex couples residing in rural areas. Research has documented that in general, those who live in more rural areas are perceived to be more homophobic (Snively, Kreuger, Stretch, Watt & Chadha, 2004). Therefore, it is likely that couples' meaning-making strategies might differ somewhat depending on location of residence. It would be useful for future research to address this by recruiting samples from more diverse sample locations.

This was the first study to focus on couple-level minority stress (Frost et al., 2017; LeBlanc et al., 2015) through investigating how newly-formed same-sex couples jointly make meaning of their minority stress experiences. Using narrative research methods to answer the research question has provided a rich and unique grounding for further quantitative research to form and test hypotheses. Such research could take a longitudinal form, which would foster our understanding of how couples' meaning-making of minority stress experiences might change over time according to the political and legal climates (Raifman et al., 2017). Although this research has been wholly focused on the experiences of minority stress within sexual minority populations, the notion of couple-level minority stress can be extended further into the study of any marginalized or stigmatized relationship. For example, this research could be a useful basis for understanding how interracial or interfaith couples might make meaning of their minority stress experiences.

### **Implications for Practice and Policy**

Research demonstrating an increased level of mental health problems within sexual minority populations is abundant (Cochran, 2001; Gilman et al., 2001; IOM, 2011). Moreover, research has consistently suggested that one of the underlying attributions for this health disparity is due to minority status and the subjection of minority stress (Frost & LeBlanc, 2014; Frost, Levahot & Meyer, 2015; Levahot & Simoni, 2011; Meyer, 1995, 2003; Meyer & Frost, 2013). Therefore, understanding how same-sex couples make meaning of their minority stress experiences holds essential implications for both practice and policy. For example, health professionals cannot attempt to devise and implement successful intervention programs aimed at reducing the mental health consequences of minority stress, unless these experiences are holistically understood.

### **Conclusion**

The current study provides a much-needed extension to minority stress theory (Frost et al., 2017; LeBlanc et al., 2015) through the investigation of how same-sex couples jointly make meaning of their minority stress experiences. Findings indicated that some same-sex couples generally perceive minority stress to be a positive experience, bringing the couple closer together. Contrastingly however, many couples understood minority stress to be affectively negative experiences which have long-lasting impacts upon their lives. Evidence was found for some couples resigning from their minority stress experiences, which might ultimately result in negative psychological outcomes. This novel contribution to the existing literature base provides a useful foundation for future research aimed at fostering our understanding of the diverse nature of minority stress experiences. Understanding this is vital for the design and implementation of successful counselling and intervention programs aimed at both individuals and couples.

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Table 1. Identified Narrative Strategies and Examples Across Genders

Narrative Strategy	Male Couples			Female Couples			Total	
	f	%	Example	f	%	Example	f	%
<p>“Minority stress made couples stronger”</p> <p><i>Narratives are characterized by affectively negative stories transforming into a positive experience resulting in the couple feeling that the experiences made them “stronger” as a couple. They indicate feelings of love and support resulting from an increased relationship closeness as a direct result from negative experiences of discrimination.</i></p>	12	16.7	<p>Partner B (age 29): You know just the experience driving down is going through territory that’s not so friendly. [...]</p> <p>Partner A (age 27): Yeah, yeah but it was a good experience. So, like overall it was a good experience. [...] We really got to talk a lot like we actually got to spend a lot of quality time with each other and realize that we –</p> <p>Partner B: It solidified the beginning of our relationship.</p> <p>Partner A: Yeah.</p>	6	8.3	<p>Partner A (age 27): It kind of came from a deceptive place [...] you know kind of lying and sneaking around.</p> <p>Partner B (age 27): Feeling like we weren’t doing the right thing. [...] Like nobody knew what we were doing, so it was pretty stressful.</p> <p>Partner B: [...] I think it just made our bond a lot stronger [...]</p> <p>Partner A: It has made us stronger too [...] I guess, the release and freedom of being able to, you know, be together and be honest with everyone in our lives.</p>	18	25.0
<p>“Minority stress contaminates positive experiences”</p> <p><i>Narratives are characterized by what should be positive experiences being overshadowed by negative minority stress incidences. The narratives indicate feelings of expectations being violated. Positive experiences were assumed even when not explicitly stated. For example,</i></p>	5	6.9	<p>Partner B (age 44): Um, I had to sleep on the - on the pull-out sofa bed in the living room. And my sister and her boyfriend got the second bedroom. [...] It did kind of feel like oh, um, we get the - we get the Ricky and Lucy beds because they don’t want to have us all getting</p> <p>Partner A (age 34): No gay people [...] I kind felt kind of more like it was us against them in some way. [...] Like we had to band together and be strong to</p>	1 3	18.1	<p>Partner A (age 25): I would include Jane’s wedding in this one -</p> <p>Partner B (age 23): Yeah. [...] And I kind of like could see this apprehension, like, oh, my gosh, Wanda. Please don’t be like gay in front of like all these people -</p> <p>Partner A: All the family – [...]</p> <p>Partner A: Yeah. It was - it was really uncomfortable.</p> <p>Partner B: So, yeah.</p>	18	25.0

<i>attending a wedding was presumed to be a positive experience, unless it was specifically stated otherwise.</i>			survive like in dealing with - with the family. [...] Partner B: like we were the black sheep.					
“Minority stress is not a big deal” <i>Narratives are characterized by minority stress having a general lack of meaningful impact on the couple. Stories identified the presence of minority stress and discrimination; however these experiences were not described as having long-lasting effects or being overwhelming in nature.</i>	9	12.5	Partner B (age 49): There’s prejudice like there is and stigma like there is anyplace else. [...] Partner A (age 65): [...] And I sort of feel like -- obviously, this is, you know, not universally so, but if you’re comfortably in your own skin being who you are, that you can, you know, be that way and other people will accept you. [...] yeah, you know, things aren’t perfect. [...]	8	11.1	Partner A (age 25): I tend to put myself in situations where I’m not going to be confronted with. [...] Partner B (age 36): Comfort-less. Partner A: [laugh] Right. Or for - whatever. Um, so yeah, I mean, that’s why I live in [...] areas where it’s super acceptable. [...] There’s so many other areas that - raising kids and being in a marriage that are stressful enough already. Like that adds another layer to it, where it’s like I don’t want that layer.	17	23.6
“Couples resign in the face of minority stress” <i>Narratives generally describe negative experiences of minority stress, however are characterized by an acceptance of it being “just the way it is”. Narratives are suggestive of beliefs that things will not change and have implicit elements of helplessness.</i>	3	4.2	Partner B (age 29): My mother does not deal well with – she still doesn’t like it when I talk about getting married [...] Unfortunately it ended on the feelings of, “Glad we’ve done that, we don’t have to do it again” which is not how I wanted it Partner A (age 27): And that’s what my mom said. Partner B: That’s not how I wanted it to be you know, [...] I think the part that stresses me out still is the idea that my mom’s not gonna change.	6	8.3	Partner B (age 33): He came up and asked if we were together. [...] So, he kind of said that, and then he did this whole thing like, "Yeah." You could tell it was a dare. He was like, "Yeah, I’m gay too." [...] Partner A (age 42): Um, well, at the time it was kind of incredulous [...] But by the same token, boys are boys and peer pressure and all the social nonsense and bullying and all of that. That just goes on.	9	12.5
“Minority stress is worse than expected”	0	0	N/A	5	6.9	Partner A (age 21): We have daily occurrences of people saying stuff to us [...] we kiss each other and	5	6.9

<p><i>Narratives are characterized by events that were anticipated to be affectively difficult due to the presumption of the existence of minority stress. These narratives often described some of the first experiences of minority stress for the couple. The actual experiences were deemed to be worse than expected due to feelings of discrimination.</i></p>			<p>just have a lot of um, comments [...] A guy came up to me [...] he went off about how disgusting that was [...] that was my first experience of somebody saying something about us because we're same sex. [...] I don't – I think that I was expecting that reaction [...] I didn't know how to handle it. Partner B (age 25): [...] he started talking more [...] I just got angry at that point. Yeah. Um, I haven't had that personally, like, that discrimination.</p>
<p>“Couples hope minority stress experiences will get better” <i>Narratives are characterized by the general sense of hope for the future as a specific coping strategy. Stories described a negative discriminatory experience and understood them generally to be a product of time, and that as time goes on the situation will improve. They appear to provide couples with comfort that times will change for the better.</i></p>	<p>2 2.8</p>	<p>Partner B (age 45): With my family it's not really that easy. Because when I came [...] And it wasn't easy because my family is straight Catholic. And through the culture, the Filipino culture, it was really hard for them to accept that I was gay. [...] Partner A (age 34): I think his mom might someday warm up. But, you know, for me, it is the societal inequality, you know. Especially, yeah, there's precedence where gay couples adopt kids but it's far more difficult than if a straight couple wanted to.</p>	<p>3 4.2 5 6.9</p> <p>Partner A (age 31): My parents had a really hard time with me coming out. And uh threw me out of my house. [...] Uh but yeah it was – um it's been a long process. That is okay now, um mom is still fighting it, um but she made the decision, she made the decision to come here and I think it was pretty huge from her part. [...] Partner B (age 40): So this is one of those things that I knew it – it's going to take time and patience and her mom will get there.</p>

*Note.* This table provides examples and descriptions of each narrative strategy. It also contains the frequency and percentage in which each strategy appeared within the narratives containing minority stress experiences. These statistics are included for the sole purpose of describing the



dataset and are not intended to be generalizable outside of the context of the current study. Narratives were condensed for clarity of presentation, ensuring that only the most relevant extracts were included; brackets have been used to indicate where this has been done.