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## Theoretical Extensions of Minority Stress Theory for Sexual Minority Individuals in the Workplace: A Cross-Contextual Understanding of Minority Stress Processes

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### Abstract

Minority stress theory posits that stress processes specific to a sexual minority orientation can affect the psychological health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer-identified (LGBQ) individuals. In the workplace, LGBQ employees experiencing minority stress report poor mental health outcomes and decreased job satisfaction and commitment. However, few scholars have examined the cross-contextual effects minority stressors that individuals experience in the workplace may have on couples. That is, given the literature highlighting the work-family interface, how do minority stressors at work affect the sexual minority employee within the family dynamics of same-sex couples at home? The purpose of this article is to propose a multi-theoretical approach which includes elements of minority stress theory and work-family border theory to guide future research in examining the cross-contextual effects of minority stress for couple- and family-level outcomes.

### Keywords

LGBTQ populations; minority stress theory; same-sex couples; sexual minority; work-family border theory; workplace context

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People who identify as a sexual minority—predominantly lesbian, gay, bisexual, or other queer-identified (LGBQ) individuals—face disproportionate barriers and discrimination in the workforce compared to heterosexual adults. Using Ilan Meyer’s (1995) minority stress theory, researchers have documented the negative personal impacts that discriminatory experiences and minority stress processes can have on LGBQ individuals. In the workplace specifically, LGBQ victimization has been linked to poorer mental health outcomes (e.g., Velez, Moradi, & Brewster, 2013) and decreased job satisfaction and commitment (e.g., Button, 2001; Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007). However, much of what we know about minority stressors in the workplace for LGBQ employees is limited to individual outcomes in the work context. This may be a product of scholars’ singular contextual approach and/or the limitations of minority stress theory.

Less is known about how experiences of minority stress processes in the workplace can affect LGBQ individuals outside of this context at home, specifically within their romantic

relationships. Scholars have demonstrated a link between work and family for many employees (Mercier, 2008; Perrone, 2005; Tuten & August, 2006). Nevertheless, only a few studies have examined the cross-contextual, couple-level effects of workplace environments for LGBQ employees in same-sex partnerships (e.g., Rostosky, Riggle, Gray, & Hatton, 2007). Given the amount of time employed adults spend in the workplace and the importance that family studies scholars place on supporting romantic couples, there is a need to theoretically extend the tenets of minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) to more fully understand the ways in which minority stress processes can affect couples and families, as well as individuals across these contexts.

The purpose of this article is to propose a multitheoretical approach, the minority stress border theory, which includes elements of minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) and work-family border theory (Clark, 2000) to guide future research in examining the cross-contextual effects of minority stress for couple- and family-level outcomes. Toward this end, I begin with a review of the literature showing that LGBQ employees are discriminated against in the workplace. Next, I examine the research on workplace discrimination using minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) explicitly. Following a general critique of the limitations of this literature, I propose a cross-contextual, couple-level approach to understanding minority stress experiences, for instance, by incorporating elements of the work-family border theory as posited by Clark (2000). Work-family border theory (Clark, 2000) provides a framework for understanding the ways employees find balance between their distinct work and family domains, characteristics of the border between these domains, and the constraints on and supports for this border. By examining and integrating the literature on minority stress theory in the workplace and the work-family border for sexual minority individuals, this article has the potential to enrich our understanding of minority stress processes for LGBQ individuals, thus encouraging scholars to examine variables across contexts and across actors.

## LGBQ Discrimination in the Workplace

Scholars have documented a variety of disproportionate barriers to employment and discriminatory practices in the workplace against LGBQ individuals. Several quantitative experiments matched résumés or job candidates on skill level but altered one key characteristic: implied sexual orientation (Ahmed, Andersson, & Hammarstedt, 2013; Bailey, Wallace, & Wright, 2013; Barron & Hebl, 2013; Drydakis, 2009; Hebl, Foster, Mannix, & Dovidio, 2002; Mishel, 2016; Tilcsik, 2011; Weichselbaumer, 2003). In all these studies, compared to the heterosexual job candidates, the LGBQ job candidate received fewer interview invitations and was deemed less qualified for the position. Gaining employment can be difficult when potential employers view LGBQ candidates as less desirable or suitable for a position.

Furthermore, LGBQ employees are vulnerable to direct and indirect forms of victimization in the workplace, such as being passed up for promotions or terminated from their position (Sue, 2010), as well as experiencing verbal or physical harassment, derogatory comments, and discriminatory attitudes (Embrick, Walther, & Wickens, 2007; Herek, 2009). One policy report released in 2007 claims that anywhere between 7% and 41% of LGBQ people

surveyed had been either physically or verbally abused in the workplace or had their property vandalized at work (Badgett, Lau, Sears, & Ho, 2007). LGBTQ employees reported receiving harassing emails or faxes, and hearing antigay jokes or comments in the workplace (Badgett et al., 2007; Colvin, 2004; Velez et al., 2013). Interpersonal discrimination, or more subtle acts of homophobia or heterosexism (Hebl et al., 2002), also occur in the workplace. Heterosexism has been defined as “an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any nonheterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship or community” (Herek, 1992, p. 89). In this sense, LGBTQ employees may feel discriminated against if work colleagues assume that everyone has a heterosexual identity or uphold belief systems that devalue nonheterosexual identities (Button, 2001; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001).

Further examination of sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace has been guided primarily by minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003). This approach has provided evidence for links between workplace discrimination and negative personal and career outcomes for LGBTQ employees.

## Minority Stress Theory

As conceptualized by Meyer (2003), minority stress theory explicates stressors particular to those with minority status. Individuals who identify as LGBTQ may experience increased stress specific to their sexual identity above and beyond general stressors experienced by heterosexual individuals. These stressors and the additional coping mechanisms they warrant have deleterious effects on an individual’s mental health (Meyer, 1995). Furthermore, minority stress is considered both chronic and socially based; the underlying heterosexism that is continually reproduced in cultural interactions sets the stage for feeling marginalized (Meyer, 2003).

Meyer (2003) posits an intricate web of factors that influence the link between minority stress processes and mental health outcomes. Specifically, circumstances in the environment, in a workplace for example, must be explored to understand the context in which an LGBTQ person is identifying as a sexual minority. General stressors must also be considered, as they will undoubtedly affect one’s mental health. Distinct from these general stress processes, minority stress processes are categorized as either distal (occurring externally to the LGBTQ person) or proximal (occurring internally within the LGBTQ person). These stressors can include prejudice events, expectations or fear of rejection, concealment, and internalized homophobia. Finally, Meyer (2003) discusses the ways these stress processes relate to mental health outcomes, as well as the ways in which social supports and characteristics of the minority identity can moderate this relationship.

## Minority Stress Theory as Applied to Sexual Minority Individuals in the Workplace

### Environmental Circumstances

Workplaces can vary greatly in terms of an LGBTQ-supportive environment for employees. To date, 22 states (and the District of Columbia) have employment nondiscrimination laws protecting sexual minority individuals against discrimination in the workplace (Human

Rights Campaign, HRC, 2016). Even in those states, though, the laws do not cover individuals in small, private businesses (i.e., fewer than 15 employees) and religious institutions. There is no federal nondiscrimination law protecting those in the workplace solely on the basis of sexual orientation. This patchwork of protection across the United States leaves many LGBQ employees vulnerable to discrimination.

However, many large organizations have taken it upon themselves to create a supportive and protective environment for LGBQ employees through company policies and practices (HRC, 2013). Scholars have identified a host of organizational practices as supportive for sexual minority employees, including an organization-wide policy prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation; inclusion of sexual orientation in company diversity statements or diversity trainings; extending domestic partner benefits to same-sex couples; offering sexual minority resource-support groups; public support of LGBQ issues; and a general sense of acceptance, such that same-sex partners are welcome at company social activities (Button, 2001; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). Each of these factors can send a signal to LGBQ employees that they are welcomed, valued, and supported within that particular organization.

Research shows these supportive elements in the workplace do, in fact, have significant effects on the experiences of sexual minority employees. The presence of an antidiscrimination law at the state level, for example, has been associated with a more positive sense of self, feeling more supported in the community, and feeling more comfortable disclosing one's sexual orientation (Riggle, Rostosky, & Horne, 2010), as well as reduced reports of discrimination (Barron & Hebl, 2013). At the organization level, LGBQ employees have reported significantly less interpersonal discrimination in their workplace when the company implemented antidiscrimination policies, or offered diversity training that included sexual minority issues (Button, 2001).

### **General Stressors**

In these environmental work circumstances, all employees may experience some level of general stress, whether that is job stress, daily hassles, or work-family conflict specifically. Despite the documented stressors in the work environment for many employees (Michel, Kotrba, Mitchelson, Clark, & Baltes, 2011), scholars investigating sexual minority specific stressors in the workplace rarely take general stressors into consideration. Rather, it seems, most investigations have presumed some level of stress for all as the baseline and simply focused on the characteristics and consequences of minority stressors. In fact, only one study using minority stress theory in the workplace included a measure of workplace stress in general as a control variable (Waldo, 1999). However, individuals who are under various levels of other work stress may experience and internalize minority stressors in the workplace differently; thus, it is important that studies begin to include measures of variables like this from Meyer's (2003) model.

### **Minority-Specific Stressors**

The premise of minority stress theory is that those with a stigmatized social identity may experience stressors relative to that identity, above and beyond the general stressors experienced by all individuals (Meyer, 2003). It is this social position that puts sexual

minority individuals at risk for the deleterious results of additive stressors. Meyer calls these LGBQ-specific stressors minority stressors and distinguishes between those that are distal and those that are proximal to the individual.

A *distal stressor* refers to a more objective conceptualization of marginalization, that is, stigmatization or victimization that is perpetrated by another actor toward the LGBQ individual (Meyer, 2003). This may include directed acts of verbal or physical harassment, as discussed earlier (Badgett et al., 2007; Embrick et al., 2007; Herek, 2009). Heterosexist belief systems that promote heterosexuality and different-sex relationships and family structures can also devalue and further marginalize those with a non-heterosexual identity (Hebl et al., 2002). This can often take the form of microaggressions, or subtle, derogatory acts that imply prejudice (Nadal, 2008). Described as “death by a thousand cuts” (Nadal et al., 2011, p. 234), microaggressions are so commonplace and embedded in larger social systems that often these individual slights go unnoticed. Colleagues’ tone of voice, facial expressions, or intentions behind ignoring one particular (sexual minority) coworker are difficult to precisely identify and measure as prejudice events.

Although these acts of discrimination may occur in other contexts as well, it seems that victimization and stigmatization in the workplace result in job-related outcomes. In addition to direct wage disparities (Baumle & Poston, 2011; Cushing-Daniels & Yeung, 2009; Elmslie & Tebaldi, 2007), LGBQ employees who experience discrimination in the workplace report decreased job satisfaction, stronger intentions to leave the position, and withdrawal from the workplace (i.e., increased absenteeism; Ragins et al., 2007; Velez et al., 2013; Waldo, 1999).

*Proximal stressors*, compared to distal stress processes, can be considered a more subjective form of stigma in that the processes occur within the individual rather than from something that is done to them. Meyer (2003) included three distinct stress processes in this category: internalized homophobia, expectations or fear of rejection, and concealment.

**Internalized homophobia.**—Hearing negative messages from others about one’s social position can be directly damaging (see distal stressors), but it may also shape an individual’s own beliefs about that social identity. Internalization of socially generated meanings can result in self-devaluation for some sexual minority individuals (Frost, 2011). Though critical to the conversation about sexual identity development, the concept of internalized homophobia has been minimally studied specifically with respect to LGBQ employees in the workplace. One study found that internalized homophobia was positively correlated with concealment of sexual identity at work and personal distress but not significantly linked to job satisfaction (Velez et al., 2013).

**Expectations and fear of rejection.**—Even in the absence of direct or overt discrimination from a known perpetrator, LGBQ individuals can experience stigma-related stress as a result of chronic expectation or anticipation of rejection or harassment (Frost, 2011). One study of postsecondary students about to enter the job force found that individuals who identified as a sexual minority expected significantly lower starting salaries as compared to heterosexual participants (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2012). Indeed, a

qualitative study of work discrimination among 17 LGBTQ employees found only incidences of perceived discrimination, and no reported experiences with distal stressors (Chung, Williams, & Dispenza, 2009). Anticipated negative reactions from work colleagues have also been correlated with increased psychological distress, decreased job satisfaction, less organizational and career commitment, and less workplace participation compared to those with fewer fears of rejection (Dispenza, 2015; Ragins et al., 2007; Velez et al., 2013).

**Concealment.**—Individuals vary in the degree of openness about their sexual orientation in various contexts (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005; Ragins, 2004), including the workplace (Chung, 2001), and may choose to conceal their sexual identity for a variety of reasons. Meyer (2003) conceptualized concealment both as a minority stressor and as a coping mechanism in the face of other forms of stigmatization. In the LGBTQ workplace literature, concealment has been examined as a predictor, moderator, and an outcome variable, thus making it difficult to tease apart the role of concealment or disclosure in the workplace. As a stress process, increased concealment in the workplace has been linked to decreased job satisfaction and increased job anxiety (Button, 2001; Driscoll, Kelley, & Fassinger, 1996; Ellis & Riggle, 1996; Griffith & Hebl, 2002) and increased psychological distress (Velez et al., 2013); it may also exacerbate the fear of rejection or experiences with discrimination and victimization (Trau & Härtel, 2007) discussed previously. Scholars have also identified predictors of concealment or disclosure in the workplace. Specifically, perceived support among supervisors and coworkers is positively correlated with levels of disclosure in the workplace (Ragins et al., 2007). Conversely, those who experience heterosexist discrimination in the workplace are more likely to avoid discussing their sexual orientation with coworkers (Velez et al., 2013).

### Mediating and Moderating Variables

Several studies of minority stress processes in the workplace have also included variables that measure social supports, which Meyer (2003) theorized would moderate the relationship between stress processes and mental health outcomes. LGBTQ employees who felt less supported in the workplace were less likely to disclose in that context, reported more experiences of discrimination, and felt less satisfied with their job (Huffman et al., 2008; Ragins et al., 2007; Waldo, 1999). For some sexual minority parents, feeling supported by work supervisors was associated with fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety (Goldberg & Smith, 2013). In fact, social supports are so important in the workplace that one study found the relationship between disclosure of sexual orientation and job satisfaction to be fully mediated by coworker reaction (Griffith & Hebl, 2002).

Meyer (2003) also indicated that varying aspects of the minority identity can affect the way in which individuals internalize and make sense of the minority stress processes they experience, including salience or importance of one's sexual orientation or integration of one's sexual identity as part of the total self-identity. Despite Meyer's inclusion of these moderating factors, the literature examining LGBTQ employees' experiences in the workplace through minority stress theory has given little attention to individual differences in identity traits. One theoretical piece addresses the ways LGBTQ employees may utilize identity switching or identity redefinition to avoid workplace discrimination (Shih, Young, &



Bucher 2013). Likewise, Ragins (2008) theorized the ways in which internal psychological factors, such as the centrality or prominence of an identity, can have an impact on disclosure decisions in the workplace. However, neither of these articles presented empirical data to test the models.

## Outcomes Related to Minority Stress Processes

### Individual-Level Outcomes

Meyer's original model (1995) linked minority stressors to mental health outcomes only, and in fact many scholars have demonstrated those relationships. Hatzenbuehler and colleagues found minority stressors to be predictive of depressive symptoms and risk behaviors (Hatzenbuehler, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Erickson, 2008). Experiences with minority stress processes have also been linked to increased levels of anxiety (e.g., Goldberg & Smith, 2011). Recently, scholars have begun to examine the mediating pathways between minority stress processes and poorer mental health, specifically finding increased emotion dysregulation, interpersonal problems, feelings of shame, and perceived burdensomeness (Baams, Grossman, & Russell, 2015; Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Mereish & Poteat, 2015).

Many studies of the workplace context specifically have shown an association with job-related outcomes, as noted earlier. For example, experiences with minority stress processes at work have been linked to decreased job satisfaction, increased job stress, lower levels of organizational commitment, and turnover intention (e.g., Dispenza, 2015; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Ragins et al., 2007; Velez et al., 2013).

### Couple-Level Outcomes

Outside of the workplace, other studies of same-sex couples show that relationship outcomes are additionally affected by minority stressors (LeBlanc, Frost, & Wight, 2015). In general, being in a stigmatized or marginalized relationship with little social recognition may lead same-sex couples to simply invest less in the relationship, making it more unstable (Cohen, Byers, & Walsh, 2008; Fingerhut & Maisel, 2010; Lehmilller & Agnew, 2006). Internalized homophobia, specifically, has been linked to decreased relationship quality overall (Balsam & Szymanski, 2005; Otis, Rostosky, Riggle, & Hamrin, 2006), decreased relationship attractions and satisfaction (Mohr & Daly, 2008), and fearful or preoccupied adult attachment styles (Sherry, 2007). An individual's stress and ability or inability to cope with minority stress processes can also mediate the relationship between these stress experiences and negative relationship outcomes (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Otis et al., 2006). Researchers found that poorer psychological health in one partner was related to decreased relationship satisfaction, feelings of support and intimacy, and relationship commitment in the other person in the couple (Otis, Riggle, & Rostosky, 2006).

Rarely, though, do these studies of same-sex couples also include an investigation of workplace-specific minority stress. Only a few studies have examined both workplace stress related to LGBQ identity and same-sex relationship outcomes. Dispenza (2015), for example, found that proximal stressors in the workplace were related to relationship functioning for 202 sexual minority men in same-sex relationships. Another dyadic-level

analysis of 40 same-sex couples' conversations regarding support or discrimination against their relationship found that more than half of the couples perceived institutional discrimination, including in the work environment (Rostosky et al., 2007). A third, qualitative study of same-sex dyads found that couples did experience homophobia and discrimination from a variety of social sources, including coworkers, and that this stigma exacerbated the normal stresses experienced by any couple working to form and maintain a committed relationship (Dudley et al., 2005). Together, these findings demonstrate that a workplace environment for LGBQ employees, whether supportive or discriminatory, can have effects on the employees' partners and their relationships as well as their own psychological well-being or job satisfaction.

## **Limitations of the Current Literature on Minority Stress Theory in the Workplace**

Overall, minority stress theory is a useful framework for considering the minority specific stressors LGBQ employees face. In the work context specifically, this theory has been utilized to address LGBQ employees' experiences with supervisors and coworkers, individuals' decisions to disclose or conceal sexual orientation, and the impact of support or hostility in the workplace on job satisfaction and individual mental health. Although Meyer has arguably made great contributions to the field of LGBQ studies with this theory, there are some limitations to minority stress theory that cut across the literature summarized here. Specifically, minority stress theory does not fully explore the importance of other actors in the model or acknowledge the various contexts an LGBQ person may inhabit from day to day.

### **Minority Stress Theory Focuses on an Individual Actor**

As originally hypothesized and utilized by researchers to examine workplace discrimination, minority stress theory focuses solely on an individual actor—the LGBQ person experiencing minority stress—without giving full consideration to other people in the actor's environment. Meyer (2003) included social supports in addition to the implied perpetrators of prejudice events; however, there was no mention of the ways in which characteristics of these other individuals or their relationships to the LGBQ person may have an impact on the outcomes of minority stress processes. LGBQ employees may internalize homophobic comments differently if coming from a supervisor, colleague, or a same-sex partner, for example.

The ability to regulate concealment of a minority identity may also be affected by one's relationship status or work position. Being in a same-sex relationship may highlight a sexual minority identity and therefore draw more discrimination in a way that single LGBQ individuals do not have to negotiate. According to Driscoll et al. (1996):

Perhaps having a partner necessitates some level of disclosure, as a lesbian in a partnered relationship needs to decide how to manage or navigate work-related functions such as company parties or picnics as well as workplace discussions focusing on personal issues.



Even in measurement, these other actors are often only considered from the perspective of the participant. Ragins et al. (2007) asked participants if they worked with other sexual minority individuals, yet no confirmation measurement was taken among the work colleagues. It seems inconsistent, in a study of sexual identity concealment at work, to assume that participants are aware of others' sexual orientations and that no other colleague may also be concealing a sexual minority identity. Similarly, among studies examining minority stress processes for same-sex couples, many researchers have not collected dyadic-level data and reported relationship satisfaction outcomes for only one partner (Balsam & Szymanski, 2005; Frost & Meyer, 2009). To fully understand relationship outcomes, it is important to collect data from both partners. Thus, the scope of examination remains limited to the LGBQ employee's individual perceptions in the workplace and individual outcomes related to minority stress process.

### **Minority Stress Theory Focuses on an Individual Context**

Additionally, minority stress theory gives little attention to the cross-contextual experiences of everyday life. LGBQ employees encounter other contexts and institutions with varying environmental circumstances, as well as personal situations with friends, family, or same-sex partners. Each of these contexts may have different stressors and supports present. It is unrealistic to think that the effect of each context will remain in that context (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Rather, the cross-contextual effects of minority stressors should be considered. Stressors in the workplace may affect someone differently than the same stressors do when at home with family members; supports at work may buffer stressors at home differently than the reverse. Further, individuals may change their presentation in various contexts. That is, characteristics of the minority identity, as Meyer (2003) describes it, can shift on the basis of the individual's surroundings. For example, an LGBQ parent may feel their sexual orientation to be more salient in a group of other LGBQ parents and less salient in their role as an employee at work (Holman & Oswald, 2011). These minority identity characteristics as described by Meyer (2003) should not be considered stagnant traits.

In thinking about LGBQ individuals holistically and the myriad contexts they inhabit, researchers need to acknowledge the possible cross-contextual transference of minority stress processes and their effects. Yet scholars who focus on the workplace environment for LGBQ employees rarely look beyond this context. While studies have highlighted stress processes experienced by sexual minority individuals, few researchers have examined the effects of stressors in one context, such as sexual orientation harassment at work, on relationships in another context, such as with family at home.

### **Recommended Theoretical Extensions**

Given these critiques of minority stress theory and the limitations of examining this line of research with such a narrow scope, future research on this topic would benefit from a more comprehensive examination of minority stress processes in the workplace. Specifically, a multitheoretical approach, denominated minority stress border theory, which combines the concepts outlined in work-family border theory (Clark, 2000) with minority stress theory

(Meyer, 2003), will enhance research of LGBTQ employees' experiences by acknowledging other actors in the LGBTQ employee's life, as well as the interactional and cross-contextual nature of minority stress. Work-family border theory (Clark, 2000) makes detailed note of the various people involved with between-domain stress transmissions that are notably absent in Meyer's (2003) minority stress theory. Indeed, this intentional focus on the multiple domains of life experiences—both work and family—bolsters any analysis using minority stress theory. I now outline the concepts proposed by Clark (2000), to show how an integrated theoretical approach can expand our understanding of minority stress processes and their effects on couples across contexts.

## Work–Family Border Theory

As posited by Clark (2000), work-family border theory provides insight into the mechanisms by which people find a balance between their work context and family context. Clark (2000) defined balance as “satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home” (p. 751). The author described the active management strategies people use to negotiate both contexts and the borders between them, as well as the constraints and the supports for the border management strategies. The model developed by Clark to explain these processes includes four main factors: the domains of work and family, the border between those domains, the border crosser, and other domain members including border keepers. By acknowledging these multiple domains and multiple actors, work-family border theory is a strong complement to extend minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003).

### Domains

Work-family border theory rests on the theoretical assumption that for most people, work and family domains are separate contexts with disparate goals and cultural patterns and expectations. The family domain is considered a place to attain close, personal relationships and individual happiness, whereas activities in the work context provide sustainability (i.e., income) and a sense of accomplishment (Clark, 2000). Roles, values, and behavioral expectations in each domain vary in the degree to which they overlap. For example, individuals may feel in control at home to make decisions about their actions and how to use their time, but in the workplace feel subordinate as other manage these behaviors. To avoid distress, individuals must find a way to balance their role expectations and identities in these distinct domains. Clark (2000) draws on the work of Nippert-Eng (1996) to describe the ways that people may either integrate these domains by using the same roles and identities at work and home, or segment them, essentially compartmentalizing work and family contexts. Clark made clear that no one way is the ideal path to balancing work and family; rather, individuals must find for themselves the level of integration and segmentation that fits best (Edwards & Rothbard, 1999).

### Borders

Clark (2000) has defined borders as “[physical, temporal, or psychological] lines of demarcation between domains, defining the point at which domain-relevant behavior begins or ends” (p. 756). Physical borders divide where work and family activities occur. Temporal borders separate when one is in the family role and when one conducts work activities.

Psychological boundaries are complex rules that an individual creates to determine what identity, culture, thought, or behavioral patterns take the forefront in each domain; psychological boundaries delineate the work self from the family self.

Characteristics of these borders vary, as do the ways in which individuals may use them to separate the work and family domains or blend them together (Clark, 2000). On one end of the spectrum, highly permeable and flexible boundaries allow for transfer of thoughts, tasks, and people between work and family life. The spillover of emotions may occur; individuals may post pictures of family members in the workplace or share work issues with family members. On the other end, inflexible boundaries are less permeable and clearly differentiate what belongs at work and what belongs at home. Someone with inflexible work-family borders may choose not discuss their family dynamic with coworkers at all.

### **Border Crossers**

Clark (2000) used the term *border crosser* to describe those individuals who transition between the work and family domains and utilize border management techniques to control their various roles and contexts. Characteristics of the border crosser of interest include the individual's power and influence in each domain, identification with the values in each domain, and salience of the various roles played at work and in the family.

### **Border Keepers and Other Domain Members**

Finally, work-family border theory also takes into account the potential influence of other actors in each domain in addition to the individual desires and border management strategies of the border crosser (Clark, 2000). Specifically, "border and domain creation and management become an intersubjective activity in which several sets of actors... negotiate what constitutes the domains and where the borders between them lie" (Clark, p. 761). In the workplace, colleagues, supervisors, or human resources representatives have some say on how permeable and flexible the work-family border can be or should be; at home, partners and/or children may influence work-family border characteristics.

### **The Work-Family Border Applied to Sexual Minority Employees**

Despite the lack of research that directly cites work-family border theory (Clark, 2000), there is literature that provides evidence to support the theories' tenets with sexual minority populations. In fact, applying the concepts of work-family border theory provides a fresh understanding of sexual minority employees' experiences by looking specifically at the work-family interface. For example, LGBQ employees can be considered the border-crosser when scholars examine their unique transitions between experiences in the work domain and at home with a same-sex partner. LGBQ employees are particularly interesting border crossers, as they may be negotiating minority-specific stressors in one or both domains and using border management techniques to cope with domain differences related to their sexual minority identity. For instance, several studies provide evidence that LGBQ employees in same-sex relationships actively utilize border management strategies as hypothesized by Clark (2000). For many sexual minority workers, assessment of the work domain for hostility or support and regulating personal identities (i.e., sexual orientation) is standard practice (Madera, King, & Hebl, 2012; McDermott, 2006; Mercier, 2008). LGBQ

employees, it seems, are making conscious decisions about when to actively identify as a sexual minority at work. Two qualitative studies provide stories from lesbian mothers about their border management strategies (McDermott, 2006; Mercier, 2008). One participant in particular described her impermeable boundaries: “Well, I’ve not really told anyone that I’m lesbian. I work with all men... [so I] keep my personal life, my personal life and my work life, my work life” (Mercier, 2008, p. 39). Additionally, sexual minority employees report being extremely “planful” and “very calculated” in maneuvering the work-family border in an attempt to manage information across domains (O’Ryan & McFarland, 2010, p. 74).

However, the findings of several studies have shown that strong, impermeable boundaries and extreme domain segregation may not be the most beneficial border management strategy for LGBQ employees (Day & Schoenrade, 2000; Madera et al., 2012; McDermott, 2006; Mercier, 2008; Tuten & August, 2006). The process of maintaining such an inflexible work-family border can be psychologically draining and create work-family conflict (McDermott, 2006; Mercier, 2008). Scholars have also examined the role of power in the workplace to understand LGBQ employees’ abilities to negotiate the work-family border. LGBQ employees in managerial positions experience more control over the organization’s culture and ability to shift the work side of the work-family border to find a comfortable balance of domain integration or segregation (Heintz, 2012; McDermott, 2006; Mercier, 2008). LGBQ employees without this power are greatly influenced by the presence (or lack) of managerial support at work, with supervisor support related to less work-family conflict (Day & Schoenrade, 2000; Mercier, 2008).

Finally, research has supported the idea that the fit between individual preferences and actual boundary characteristics predicts satisfaction and well-being. A few quantitative studies of LGBQ employees tested the person-organization fit as a mediator of the correlation between the characteristics of the work domain and job satisfaction (Lyons, Brenner, & Fassinger, 2005; Velez & Moradi, 2012). Sexual minority employees who felt supported in their work environment perceived that their value systems aligned with the organization’s values more closely and this fit increased job satisfaction. Conversely, experiences with discrimination in the workplace decreased person-organization fit, which related to intentions to quit. Although these studies do not address the work-family border specifically, their findings highlight the importance of examining the individual fit of boundary preferences and boundary characteristics.

The studies cited here provide evidence that LGBQ employees who act as border crossers between the work and family domains do, in fact, negotiate those borders (by integrating or separating domains) to find a balance that fits their needs and desires in relation to their sexual orientation. Future research in this area could be enhanced by overtly utilizing a work-family border theory lens and incorporating the concepts put forth by Clark (2000). Specifically, work-family border theory sheds light on multiple contexts simultaneously, as well as various other actors in each domain that may interact with and influence the LGBQ border crosser. This model complements minority stress theory (Meyer, 1995) nicely by addressing multiple actors in multiple domains. Unlike minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), work-family border theory acknowledges the possibility of cross-contextual transference of minority stress processes and negative outcomes.

## Critique of the Literature

Work-family border theory (Clark, 2000) is still limited on its own. The model lacks a complete conceptualization of which variables specifically in the work or family are of most interest. Rather, the focus is on the hyphen—the border between work and family—more than on the domains on either side of the hyphen. Given this theoretical lens alone, little is known about the influential aspects of work and the affected variables in same-sex relationships, or vice versa. Instead, findings inform the understanding of border management strategies and the work-family relationship. Mercier (2008), for example, asked lesbian employees about the work-family relationship. Although some described the work-family interface as tenuous or strained, the data did not detail specific relationship variables affected. McDermott (2006) examined border negotiations among lesbian workers but did not address exact relationship factors affected in the family. Future research in this area utilizing the work-family border theory (Clark, 2000) should place more emphasis on characteristics in both domains, in addition to highlighting border negotiation strategies. In connection with minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), scholars have an indication of what stress processes and outcome variables to examine in these contexts.

Finally, although Clark (2000) included other border keepers as possible supports or constraints, there is little theoretical focus on the social positions or actual agency of the border crosser that may influence the border management strategies. Under the premises of work-family border theory, border crossers negotiate or manipulate the work-family border to meet their needs and desires. The literature depicts a slightly different image, though: Only those LGBQ employees with status and power in an organization truly have the ability to negotiate the boundary between work and family in a way that suits their needs (Heintz, 2012; McDermott, 2006; Mercier, 2008). Therefore, when utilizing Clark's (2000) work-family border theory, it is as important to give adequate emphasis to the social positions of the border crosser. Social class, position in the organization, occupation, gender, race, and other identities may inhibit or assist LGBQ employees' attempts at negotiating the work-family border and the transference of stressors across this border. Thus, an understanding of identity characteristics as discussed by Meyer (2003) would also benefit future investigations.

## Benefits of a Multitheoretical Approach

Despite the limitations of each theory discussed, both models provide a valuable view of the possible cross-contextual effects of workplace experiences for LGBQ employees on their partners and romantic relationships. Although each theoretical approach independently misses a part of the bigger picture, taken together, minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) and work-family border theory (Clark, 2000) complement each other in a way that more completely captures the stress process. By extending the tenets of minority stress theory (Meyer) to include multiple contexts and multiple actors (as highlighted by Clark), we can capture a more comprehensive view of these processes in what I term *minority stress border theory*.

Minority stress theory more fully formulates the variables of interest in each domain (i.e., specific minority stress processes at work and health and relationship outcomes in the

family). Meyer's (2003) inclusion of characteristics of individual's identities (i.e., integration, valence, salience) can inform LGBQ employee's sense of agency or desire in using various border management strategies (Clark, 2000). Further, Clark's emphasis on multiple contexts and the multiple actors in each context will push the many scholars using Meyer's theory to examine the reverberating effects of minority stress processes for partners and family members outside the domain in which the experience occurs. Therefore, future studies in this line of research would benefit from taking a multitheoretical approach that incorporates aspects of work-family border theory with minority stress theory.

As an integrated model, minority stress border theory would theoretically extend our understanding of minority stress processes, particularly the ways in which experiences in one context (e.g. the workplace) may affect other actors in other contexts (e.g., same-sex partners at home). Like the original minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), these minority stress processes sit adjacent to the general stressors experienced in this context; although this is not an addition to the original theory, it is important to acknowledge that general stressors should not be excluded from data collection as many previous studies have done. In addition to looking at individual mental health outcomes, an integrated model suggests that researchers should be examining the effect on relationship outcomes, both as a direct effect from these stress processes and as mediated through individual mental health variables. The model also highlights the importance of taking a holistic view of individuals. Rather than isolating the sexual minority identity, this integrated approach would view individuals' sexual orientation in relationship to other intersecting identities, such as race, sex, status, job role and career sector, and geographic location. Additionally, drawing from work-family border theory (Clark, 2000), this integrated model highlights the border between work and family domains, centering the LGBQ employee as a border crosser. In this way, the model acknowledges that an LGBQ employee's use of border management strategies may influence the cross-contextual effect of minority stress process from work to family, but one's ability to negotiate this border is also influenced by other domain members, such as colleagues and same-sex partners.

The elements of Clark's (2000) work-family border theory that complement and enhance Meyer's (2003) minority stress theory may complicate the model in many ways, yet it also draws a more realistic image of an LGBQ employee's lived experience. People live, work, and interact in multiple domains while playing various roles. Work-family border theory acknowledges this movement. Although some criticize this theory for focusing too much on the hyphen between work and family, it is important to remember that people live in that in-between. To fully understand the lived experiences of LGBQ employees in same-sex relationships, researchers must recognize that individuals continually manage these borders and that minority stressors in one context are not necessarily contained to that context alone, and that other family members and relationships may be affected as well.

The research utilizing minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) has given us much insight into the individual effects of minority-specific stressors. However, incorporating the cross-contextual view proposed by Clark (2000) will open the door to understanding the complex links between work environment and family life for same-sex couples.



## Limitations

Broadly speaking, the literature using minority stress theory and work-family border theory to study the experiences of LGBQ employees is limited in several ways. First, most studies are cross-sectional and quantitative (e.g., Day & Schoenrade, 2000; Frost & Meyer, 2009; Madera et al., 2012; Ng et al., 2012). Although it provides valuable statistical information about the current state of affairs, this research cannot provide causal relationships. It is possible that organizations with nondiscrimination policies and welcoming attitudes may draw more LGBQ employees (Florida, 2003) and enhance positive outcomes related to job, mental health, and relationship. In contrast, LGBQ individuals with supportive same-sex relationships and a secure sense of self may have pushed their employers to adopt nondiscrimination policies and even led the way to a more LGBQ-friendly work environment. Relying solely on correlational relationships severely limits what we know about the impact of workplace experiences on same-sex couples, yet this multitheoretical approach still lends itself to cross-sectional analysis. Studies utilizing the proposed theory will further our understanding of the cross-contextual linkages between minority stress in the workplace and couple-level outcomes, but they may not identify causal influences.

Furthermore, it should be noted that this multitheoretical approach, despite giving consideration to individuals' intersecting identities, still centers sexual orientation. That is, by focusing on employees' sexual minority identity to understand the stress processes related to that social position, scholars are inherently giving more weight to that identity. Thus, in any attempt to understand the cross-contextual effects of LGBQ-specific stress processes, scholars should be aware to consider individual's multiple identities, not just multiple domains of daily living. Undoubtedly, social class, age, race, gender, education, geography, and occupational classification will also play a role and therefore should be included in analysis.

It should also be noted that the literature reviewed for this article is itself limited by focusing solely on sexual minority individuals in same-sex relationships. Sexual minority individuals in romantic relationships are not necessarily coupled only with same-sex partners, yet for clarity in this paper, same-sex couples have been highlighted. Similarly, the focus of review was narrowed to look only at the literature examining the experiences of sexual minorities in the workplace (i.e., LGBQ participants). Although scholars have found that transgender employees also experience minority-related stress (e.g., Kattari et al., 2016), it is important to recognize the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity. Scholars should give credence to the experiences of LGBQ individuals in different-sex relationships and the transgender community independently. Finally, workplace has been described broadly to understand the tenets of the proposed multitheoretical approach. However, future work should test the reach of application by investigating different job sectors.

## Implications and Future Directions

Theoretically, this important line of research has been limited up to this point. Although several scholars have examined the work-family border for LGBQ employees (Madera et al., 2012; McDermott, 2006; Mercier, 2008; Tuten & August, 2006), none has overtly utilized

Clark's (2000) work-family border theory. An atheoretical approach to research in this way leaves many studies ungrounded and unfocused on the border management strategies LGBQ employees use and the way that other border keepers influence this negotiation. Minority stress theory, while cited much more frequently in the literature, is often used in a distorted form; key variables are pulled out of the theory and considered independent of other aspects highlighted by Meyer (2003). Many of the underlying associations may not be accounted for when a theory is divided this way. Use of minority stress border theory, which includes aspects of both theories, provides a stronger theoretical foundation for this line of research.

While LGBQ scholars have widely accepted the tenets of minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) and the damaging effects of minority stress processes, little work has been done to understand the cross-contextual effects of such processes on same-sex couples. Scholars are encouraged to expand their viewpoint to consider the multiple contexts in which people live their lives (Marks, 2006). It is clear that outcome variables are not limited to the work context if that is where one is experiencing minority stress. Examining couple- and family-level outcomes at home will enrich our understanding of how minority stress processes may have implications across the work-family border and affect people who did not directly experience the stress in the work domain. Using a multitheoretical approach that also draws from Clark's (2000) work-family border to examine multiple domains, or contexts an individual inhabits, furthers not only the theoretical approach to studying minority stress in the workplace but also the larger body of knowledge regarding stress and supports. Thus, future research in this field should utilize a contextualized minority stress theory of this nature.

### Research Directions

Extending the tenets and use of minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) as suggested here could help address many of the theoretical and empirical gaps in the literature. Indeed, embedding the analysis of minority stress processes in context (e.g. Dispenza, Brown, & Chastain, 2016), for example by integrating work-family border theory (Clark, 2000), will enhance our understanding of additional influential factors as well as potential outcomes and effects. Using minority stress border theory to consider the multiple domains and actors in the LGBQ individual's life will contribute to the understanding of family- and couple-level effects of minority stress in the workplace for LGBQ individuals.

Indeed, many studies of same-sex couples fail to measure and acknowledge important contexts influencing the relationship, such as individuals' work environments (Umberson et al., 2015). Studies that work to understand the effects of minority stress processes for same-sex couples should consist of an investigation of these stressors across all areas of their lives, including family, work, community, and so on. Specifically, scholars should conduct studies that examine the direct and indirect pathways (through individual mental health outcomes) for LGBQ employee's experiences in the workplace on relationship satisfaction with same-sex partners. Further, this knowledge area will advance with studies that explore the border negotiation strategies used by sexual minority employees and the ways in which these processes influence the cross-contextual effects of minority-related stressors.

Beyond the couple relationship, future studies can also examine the effects of workplace support or discrimination on other domain members, including children or other family members. Parenting may also be influenced by individual experiences with minority stress processes outside the family. Indeed, studies have documented the effects of parental stress on children (e.g., Berryhill, 2016; Parks et al., 2016). Therefore, it is recommended that future studies look into the direct and indirect effects of minority stress processes in children's exosystem (e.g., parental workplace; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Essentially, this type of theoretical approach could open the door to exploring all the cross-contextual pathways of minority stress processes in the workplace that can affect LGBQ individuals and their families.

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