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How does sexual orientation influence intergenerational family solidarity? An exploratory study

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ABSTRACT

In the present cross-sectional study, we used a self-report online survey to assess the perceptions of intergenerational solidarity among sexual minority (lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals) ($n = 239$) and heterosexual ($n = 291$) childless adults from Portugal. Gender differences were also explored among sexual minority individuals, regarding their perceptions of received solidarity both from their mothers and fathers. Although sexual orientation had a minor impact on most of the assessed dimensions, compared to heterosexuals, sexual minority participants reported lower levels of normative and affectual solidarity and higher levels of conflictual solidarity. In addition, sexual minority participants experienced higher levels of conflictual solidarity from their fathers compared to their mothers. Among sexual minority participants, women reported lower levels of received functional solidarity compared to men. Findings lend support to interventions to reduce discrimination and improve intergenerational relations among families with LGB adult children.

KEYWORDS

Intergenerational family solidarity; sexual minorities; gender

Intergenerational solidarity may be defined as the mutual support between different family generations and the awareness that generations should do so (Thijssen, 2016). In times characterized by instability in the labor market and lack of welfare support (Barbieri, Bozzon, Scherer, Grotti, & Lugo, 2015), solidarity between generations plays an important role. This is particularly true in societies where there is insufficient political/public provision and familistic values prevail (Haberkern & Szydlik, 2010), such as the case of Portugal, where the present study was conducted.

One of the most popular and well-established conceptualizations of the relations between parents and adult children is provided by the paradigm of intergenerational solidarity (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Lowenstein, 2007). Intergenerational solidarity includes behavioral and emotional dimensions of interaction, cohesion, sentiment, and support between

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generations (Bengtson, 2001). Intergenerational solidarity was first proposed using six dimensions: structural solidarity (geographic proximity), associational solidarity (shared activities), functional solidarity (exchanges of support and resources), effectual solidarity (quality of the relationship), consensual solidarity (sharing of beliefs, values and attitudes), and normative solidarity (commitment regarding family roles and obligations; Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). Later, since conflict is a normal part of family relations and needs to be considered, a seventh dimension was added – conflict (Connidis & McMullin, 2002a; 2002b; Lowenstein, 2007).

The intergenerational family solidarity paradigm is traditionally normative (Coimbra, Ribeiro, & Fontaine, 2013; Connidis & McMullin, 2002a, 2002b; Lowenstein, 2007) and has only recently begun to consider sexual diversity within families (e.g. Hank & Salzburger, 2015; Knauer, 2016; Lyons, Pitts, & Grierson, 2013; Ocobock, 2013; Reczek, 2014; Sumontha, Farr, & Patterson, 2016; Tornello & Patterson, 2016; Vaccaro, 2009). Society privileges heterosexuals over sexual minorities and this study seeks to understand the process of intergenerational support as a mechanism to buffer this experience of societal discrimination.

Sexual minority individuals may suffer additional stress because they are potential targets of prejudice and discrimination (Meyer, 2003), including within their families (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Knauer, 2016; Needham & Austin, 2010; Pistella, Salvati, Ioverno, Laghi, & Baiocco, 2016). Thus, lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals may be more likely to experience ambivalence regarding intergenerational family solidarity (Connidis & McMullin, 2002b).

This work aims to compare the perception of intergenerational family solidarity among sexual minority (LGB) and heterosexual childless adults. Moreover, given the influence of gender in intergenerational solidarity patterns, we aimed to explore how this variable is associated with the perceptions of sexual minority individuals (sexual minority women vs. sexual minority men), regarding received solidarity both from their mothers and fathers.

Gender, sexual orientation, and intergenerational family solidarity

Gender is a strong predictor of intergenerational support both for the caregiver and the receiver of support (Coimbra et al., 2013). Silverstein and Bengtson (1997) verified that solidarity relations with mothers are more effective and characterized by closer and more frequent interactions when compared to the interactions with fathers. In turn, women perceive more support from their family than their male peers (Haberkern, Schmid, & Szydlik, 2015; Lynch, 1998). On the other hand, parents in need are more

likely to receive care from their daughters than their sons (Haberkern et al., 2015). Particularly, young and middle-aged women have a higher sense of obligation (e.g. Spitz & Logan, 1992) and provide more instrumental and emotional support than men (e.g. Stein et al., 1998). This general pattern, in which women are often regarded as the main caregivers and receivers of intergenerational solidarity, is moderated by many variables, such as the sibling network composition, parental civil status and health, geographic distance, and the nature of the relationship between both children and parents (Coimbra et al., 2013). The association of sexual orientation with this general pattern among families with LGB adult children is a question that was explored in this study.

Perceptions of LGB individuals regarding intergenerational ties and support are still understudied. Lyons et al. (2013) found that gay men seemed to expect more support from friends than from families; friends' support also predicted higher levels of mental health (Lyons et al., 2013). More recently, Knauer (2016) focused on elder care among LGBT adults in the United States, and the results also highlighted the importance of friendship networks for these individuals: relatives provided only 11% of all elder care.

Other studies suggest, however, that the family of origin has a preponderant role in the lives of LGB persons. In this regard, Ocobock (2013) verified that, even when their sexual orientation was rejected, married gay men wanted to maintain contact with their parents. Furthermore, when LGB individuals become parents themselves, family relations with older generations seem to be enhanced (Bergman, Rubio, Green, & Padrón, 2010; DeMino, Appleby, & Fisk, 2007; Gianino, 2008; Goldberg & Smith, 2011; Power et al., 2012). Hank and Salzburger (2015) observed that the relationship of adult gay men and lesbian women with their parents did not differ substantially from their heterosexual counterparts, but sexual minority participants showed lower levels of closeness to both parents and less frequent contact with their fathers.

Finally, Reczek (2014) identified three dimensions of intergenerational relationships among families with lesbian and gay adult children: social support, conflict, and ambivalence. Participants reported that at least one of their own/their partners' parents provided them with social support. At the same time, they identified the relationship with at least one of the parents as conflictual; not surprisingly, ambivalence was also reported.

In sum, intergenerational family solidarity seems to assume an important role in individuals' lives, regardless of their sexual orientation. Given the fact that LGB persons potentially face more stress due to stigma (Meyer, 2003), it is crucial to understand the dynamics of intergenerational solidarity in families with LGB adult children. Thus, we aimed to explore the

impact of sexual orientation and its possible interaction with gender in the different dimensions of family solidarity.

Method

Participants

Our sample was composed of 530 childless adult participants from Portugal. Sexual orientation was assessed with a categorical measure that asked participants to identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual or heterosexual, and 45% of the participants ($n = 239$) identified themselves as LGB. Concerning gender, 268 participants were women (50.6%). Participant's age ranged from 19 to 64 years old ($M = 31.78$; $SD = 9.43$). Education level was coded according to the years of school attendance [1 = less than 9 years; 2 = 9 to 12 years; 3 = BSc/BA (university degree); 4 = Masters; 5 = Doctorate] and 70.9% of all participants had a higher educational level. The majority of participants lived in an urban area (88.1%); 57.3% reported to have a full-time or a part-time job (and the remaining are students or unemployed); and 64.2% were in a committed relationship. Regarding religious values, 57.9% of participants considered it as less important in their lives.

Measures

To assess perceptions of intergenerational solidarity we used four dimensions of the intergenerational solidarity index (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991).

Functional solidarity is composed of nine items measured with a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 6 (*Daily*). This subscale comprises the given ($\alpha = .92$) and received ($\alpha = .93$) care among different family generations (e.g. "household chores", "financial assistance", or "assistance with personal care"). The normative solidarity subscale ($\alpha = .72$) includes expectations regarding parenting and filial obligations as well as family values (e.g. "A person should talk over important life decisions – such as marriage, employment, and residence – with family members before taking action."). A Likert-type scale was used ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*). Conflictual solidarity ($\alpha = .89$) includes four items and corresponds to the level of criticism, tension or agreement between parents and their children (e.g. "How much does this child argue with you?). A Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 6 *(A great deal*) was used. Finally, affectual solidarity ($\alpha = .94$) comprises five items related to feelings and positive perceptions that relatives have about their relationships with other family members (e.g. "How well do you feel you understand your

mother/father"). A Likert-type scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 6 (*Extremely*) was used. All reliability coefficients were calculated for the present sample.

Procedure

The present study is a part of a larger project regarding attitudes towards parenting among heterosexual and LGB individuals. To guarantee the participation of sexual minority individuals, in addition to advertising the study on general social media, we resorted to LGB oriented websites, Facebook pages, etc., using the following recruitment text: "To have or not to have (more) children? This is a question many people ask themselves. Would you be able to help us make a difference in awareness and understanding of what influences peoples' decision to parent or, if you are already a parent, what influences your decision whether or not to have more children? To participate you must be over at least 18 years of age and we are interested in your opinion regardless of your gender, sexual identity or parental status. By clicking the following link, you will find more information about this survey which is being conducted at (host institution)."

Data was collected online in March and April of 2015. The confidentiality of the data was ensured, given that the survey link was hosted on a server of the host institution. Informed consent was presented electronically on the first page of the survey and participants indicated that they had read and understood the consent information by checking a box at the start of the questionnaire. The study was approved and authorized by the Ethics Committee of the host institution.

Data analysis

We conducted factorial ANOVAS, with sexual orientation and gender as factors, and intergenerational solidarity dimensions as dependent variables. In order to inspect the homogeneity of groups defined in terms of sexual orientation, regarding gender, age, place of residence, education level, employment status, relational status, and religious values, we deployed *t*-tests and chi-square tests. Whenever differences were detected, follow-up ANOVAs and *t*-tests were conducted. In order to reduce the chance of a Type I error, a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level was used for all between participants effects. Preliminary analyses revealed that the distribution of the dependent variables yielded values within the normality range regarding both skewness (−0.403 to 0.317) and kurtosis (−0.676 to −0.183).

Table 1. Differences between groups in function of sexual orientation (LGB vs heterosexuals).

	LGB	Heterosexuals	
Gender	49.8% women; 50.02% men	51.2% women; 48.8% men	$\chi 2$ (1) = 0.746, $p = .793$
Age	$M = 34.27$; $SD = 10.20$	$M = 29.73$; $SD = 8.20$	t (451.270) = −5.549, $p < .001$
Place of residence	89.1% urban area; 10.9% rural area	87.3% urban area; 12.7% rural area	$\chi 2$ (1) = 0.526, $p = .590$
Education level	24.7% ≤12 years of school; 75.3% university level	32.4 ≤ 12 years of school; 67.6% university level.	$\chi 2$ (1) = 0.050, $p = .054$
Employment status	64.8% work; 35.2% don't work	51.2% work; 48.8% don't work.	$\chi 2$ (1) = 0.002, $p < .001$
Relational status	64.4% in a relationship; 35.6% not in a relationship	63.9% in a relationship; 36.1% not in a relationship	$\chi 2$ (1) = 0.902, $p = .928$
Religious values	63.18% not considered religious values as important or considered little important.	53.61% not considered religious values important or considered little important.	$\chi 2$ (1) = 0.026, $p = .027$

Results

As seen in Table 1, groups defined by sexual orientation (LGB vs. heterosexuals) differed regarding age, employment status, and religious values. In our sample, LGB participants were older; attributed less importance to religious values, and more of them were employed, when compared to heterosexual participants.

We controlled the effect of these variables (results are available upon request) and an interaction effect between sexual orientation and age was only found for the variable effectual solidarity [$F(1,340) = 5.812$, $p = .035$, $\eta^2 = .019$]. A subsequent ANOVA revealed age differences only among LGB participants [($F(2,150) = 8.949$, $p < .001$)], with the group of older LGB participants perceiving higher levels of effectual solidarity ($M = 4.97$; $SD = 1.41$) than the younger age group ($M = 3.98$; $SD = 1.17$). No differences were detected between the former groups and the middle group ($M = 4.15$; $SD = 1.21$).

As seen in Table 2, an interaction effect between sexual orientation and gender was found regarding functional solidarity (both received and given). Concerning the first, a subsequent t-test revealed differences only in the LGB group [(t (147) = −2.554, $p = .012$, $d = -.21$)] with lesbian and bisexual women reporting lower levels of received functional solidarity ($M = 3.90$; $SD = 1.26$) compared to gay and bisexual men ($M = 4.46$; $SD = 1.41$). Concerning given functional solidarity, despite the significant interaction effect, a subsequent t-test did not reveal differences among the LGB group [(t (148) = −1.677, $p = .096$, $d = -.28$)], nor among heterosexuals [(t (193) = 1.316, $p = .190$, $d = .10$)].

Both sexual orientation and gender had significant main effects on normative solidarity. Thus, LGB participants reported lower levels ($M = 4.38$; $SD = 1.03$) on this variable compared to their heterosexual peers ($M = 4.70$;

Table 2. Main and interaction effects of sexual orientation and gender on functional solidarity received, functional solidarity given, normative solidarity, conflictual solidarity, and affectual solidarity.

	df	*F*	*p*	H^2	*d*	Observed power
Functional solidarity received						
Sexual orientation	1, 337	1.81	.180	.005	.10	.268
Gender	1, 337	2.39	.123	.007	−.13	.338
Sexual orientation *Gender	1, 337	5.97	.015	.017	.43	.683
Functional solidarity given						
Sexual orientation	1, 341	.348	.555	.001	.06	.091
Gender	1, 341	.197	.657	.001	−.02	.073
Sexual orientation *Gender	1, 341	4.594	.033	.013	.29	.570
Normative solidarity						
Sexual orientation	1, 364	9.682	.002	.026	.32	.874
Gender	1, 364	4.552	.034	.012	−.21	.567
Sexual orientation *Gender	1, 364	.925	.337	.003	.20	.160
Conflictual solidarity						
Sexual orientation	1, 351	7.898	.005	.022	−.30	.800
Gender	1, 351	.008	.930	.000	−.03	.051
Sexual orientation *Gender	1, 351	3.692	.055	.010	.50	.483
Affectual solidarity						
Sexual orientation	1, 345	6.119	.014	.017	.27	.614
Gender	1, 345	1.211	.272	.003	.30	.195
Sexual orientation *Gender	1, 345	1.265	.262	.004	.39	.202

$SD = 0.92$); as for women, they reported lower levels ($M = 4.45$; $SD = 1.02$) compared to men ($M = 4.66$; $SD = 0.94$).

A significant main effect of sexual orientation was detected both for conflictual and effectual solidarity. LGB participants reported a higher level of conflictual solidarity ($M = 3.96$; $SD = 1.41$) than heterosexuals ($M = 3.55$; $SD = 1.36$); the opposite was true for effectual solidarity: LGB persons reported lower levels ($M = 4.38$; $SD = 1.34$) compared to their heterosexual counterparts ($M = 4.70$; $SD = 1.10$).

Regarding differences in perceptions of intergenerational solidarity as function of the gender of the parent (mothers versus fathers), we only found differences for conflictual solidarity [(t (159) $= -3.651$, $p = <.001$, $d = -.32$)], with LGB individuals presenting higher levels of conflict with their fathers ($M = 4.23$; $SD = 1.75$) than with their mothers ($M = 3.70$; $SD = 1.59$).

Discussion

This work addressed the perceptions of intergenerational family solidarity in a sample of LGB and heterosexual childless adults. Globally, as found by Hank and Salzburger (2015), LGB and heterosexual individuals in our study did not differ substantially in their perceptions of intergenerational solidarity. However, despite modest effect sizes, some differences were observed: LGB participants reported lower levels of normative and effectual solidarity and higher levels of conflictual solidarity (mainly with their fathers) when compared to their heterosexual peers. Among LGB

individuals, lesbian and bisexual women reported lower levels of received functional solidarity compared to gay and bisexual men.

To understand these results, it is important to take into account the structural inequality (Connidis & McMullin, 2002a; 2002b) and consequent prejudice and discrimination associated to a sexual minority status (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Knauer, 2016; Meyer, 2003; Needham & Austin, 2010; Pistella et al., 2016). In the present study, even though the magnitude of the differences in the results is small, LGB individuals perceive less normative and effectual solidarity and, at the same time, more conflictual solidarity when compared to heterosexuals. Interestingly, no differences were found regarding functional solidarity, which suggests that the existence of a conflict in family relations does not compromise the willingness to give support. These results may also be explained by the fact that our study was conducted in Portugal, a country where state policies tend to be perceived as ineffective and familistic values are prevalent (Haberkern & Szydlik, 2010).

Interestingly, we verified that sexual minority women reported lower levels of received functional solidarity when compared to their male counterparts. Research on intergenerational solidarity suggests that women are both the main caregivers and receivers of support, reflecting traditional gender roles that prescribe that women are more nurturing and dependent than men (Campbell & Martin-Matthews, 2000). Because stereotypes regarding lesbians and gay men postulate that they possess traits of the opposite sex (Kite & Deaux, 1987), sexual minority women may have been perceived as more independent than sexual minority men, and less in need of instrumental support.

Older sexual minority participants reported higher levels of effectual solidarity when compared to their younger peers. It may be that older individual may be considering getting married and/or having children, which seem to positively influence the quality of parents–children relationships (Bergman et al., 2010; DeMino et al., 2007; Goldberg & Smith, 2011; Power et al., 2012), while younger LGB generations might be facing some vulnerable transitions that affect family relations, such as the coming-out process.

Regarding parental gender, sexual minority individuals reported higher levels of conflictual solidarity with their fathers than with their mothers. This result is in line with studies that suggested that relations with mothers are generally more effective and with closer interactions than those with fathers (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997) and that mothers seem to be more involved in family life (LaSala, 2010). Furthermore, mothers have been found to be more open to their children's sexual minority identity (Cramer & Roach, 1988) and to have closer contact with their non-heterosexual children than fathers (Hank & Salzburger, 2015).

Several limitations to the generalization of our results warrant mention. First, since a convenience sample was used, a self-selection effect might have occurred. Second, there is an over-representation of highly educated individuals. Therefore, the study might be replicated in the future with a more diverse sample in terms of educational level. Third, several aspects of sexual minority individuals' lives that may have an impact in intergenerational solidarity were not considered, such as disclosure about one's own sexual orientation (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). Finally, since age seems to influence the perception of intergenerational relationships (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997) taking into consideration the broad age range in our sample, results should be interpreted with caution. We suggest the use of methodologies (e.g. qualitative methods, dyadic analysis) to explore in greater depth the challenges faced by families with LGB adult children regarding intergenerational solidarity.

Regardless of the small magnitude of differences found, this study highlighted the vulnerability of LGB individuals within their families, when compared to their heterosexual counterparts. In line with the assertions of both Lowenstein (2007) and Connidis and McMullin (2002a, 2002b), our study showed that some individuals (i.e. sexual minorities) might be in disadvantage regarding family ties and solidarity. Since a consistent and supportive family network may be particularly important to assure the psychological well-being of LGB individuals (Feinstein, Wadsworth, Davila, & Goldfried, 2014; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010), individual and community interventions specifically designed to decrease minority stress and to increase social belonging should also take intergenerational relations into consideration.

In this regard, beyond national level policies, the creation of community support and educational programs (Ji, Haehnel, Muñoz, & Sodolka, 2013; Mallon, 2007) not only for LGB individuals but also for their parents, could represent an important step to guarantee their psychological well-being and enhance their intergenerational relationships. In addition, the promotion of other social support networks (e.g. friends and LGB community) (Knauer, 2016) can play an important role as a new type of caregiving (Knauer, 2016; Stacey, 2006; Weston, 2005).

Disclosure statement

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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