

Relationship Matters - Podcast Number 10

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Host: From Champlain College in Burlington, Vermont, *this* is Relationship Matters!

Hello and welcome to Relationship Matters, the podcast of the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships. I'm your host, Dr Bjarne Holmes. Welcome to podcast number 10! Today we're going to be talking about some of the detrimental effects of being in a relationship that others disapprove of, both how it affects our emotional lives and our physical health. With us on the phone today, from Boston, we've got Dr Justin Lehmler. He's an instructor in the Psychology Department at Harvard University. Dr Lehmler, welcome to Relationship Matters!

Respondent: Thanks for having me here – my pleasure.

Host: Now I've heard some gossip that you recently won a teaching award at Harvard, is that right?

Respondent: I did, I received a Certificate of Teaching Excellence.

Host: That must be a wonderful feeling – congratulations.

Respondent: Thank you. It's nice to know that your teaching is valued and appreciated.

Host: The paper we're going to talk about today is titled 'Perceived marginalisation and its associate with physical and psychological health' - and it's free to download from the website of the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, courtesy of Sage publications.

Now Justin, what do you mean exactly by being in a relationship where you feel marginalised?

Respondent: What I mean by that is that you're in a relationship that your family or your friends or society at large just does not approve or support. So different people might have different experiences with that; for some people the disapproval really just comes from their parents but for other people it might be their parents and their friends and for some people it might be society at large, it just kind of depends on the person and their specific relationship.

Host: Can you give us some examples?

Respondent: Sure. So there are lots of different relationships that are subject to social disapproval and when I talk about this research most people kind of assume that I'm talking about only same sex couples but that's not the case at all – certainly same sex couples are subject to social disapproval

but we also have inter-racial couples, couples where there are big age differences between the partners, couples from different religious backgrounds, different social class backgrounds, there are lots and lots of relationships that experience this social disapproval.

Host: Alright, so what was this paper about?

Respondent: Okay, so what I wanted to do in this study was examine the potential health implications of belonging to one of these relationships that our family and friends and society don't necessarily come from, was that our romantic relationships actually become extensions of ourselves and so what this means is that when other people reject my relationship they're really rejecting me because my relationship has become a very central part of who I am and as a result it's probably going to make me feel badly when other people don't accept my partner or my relationship and we know from a variety of studies that experiencing social rejection because of a personal characteristic, like your race or your sexual orientation, we know that that can undermine your health - so when you experience rejection because of your relationship, do you experience the same *kinds* of negative health effects? – and that's really what I wanted to test here.

Host: Do we have any ideas about percentages in society that might be feeling like that?

Respondent: Well I think that's a great question but unfortunately we don't really have a good way of answering it because it's not like this is a question that's been asked in nationally representative surveys. So we know it's something that's likely to affect a large number of couples but the real scope of this we don't necessarily know.

So in order to test these ideas I recruited a sample of over 800 participants, all of whom were currently involved in relationships and most of the participants came from Facebook or other online resources and I had each of them complete an online survey in which they answered questions about themselves, their current relationship and their current health status and behaviours.

Host: So was this people from just all over the place, basically, a sort of a normal population?

Respondent: Yeah, so it's a sample of internet users, it's not necessarily representative of people as a whole but it's a more diverse sample than you could get simply by recruiting from a college student subject cohort.

Host: Okay, so what did you find out?

Respondent: So what I found in this work was that the more people felt like their family and friends and society didn't approve of and support their relationship, the worse their health was – so specifically, these

participants reported lower self esteem (so they felt worse about themselves) and they also reported more health symptoms; things like headaches, nausea, loss of sexual interest. And more disapproval was also linked to feeling more stressed and I found some evidence that stress might actually be driving some of these negative health impacts – so it might be the case that the reason this perceived disapproval is linked towards health is *because* experiencing disapproval is stressful. So one of the things that emerged from the study that was particularly interesting was that people who experienced more of this disapproval also engaged in more risky health behaviours, including more cigarette smoking and less frequent condom use – and we can't say exactly why that was the case but it might be a function of a stress coping mechanism, so people might turn to unhealthy behaviours because they think it relieves stress.

Host: Matt wants to ask a question - go ahead Matt.

Matt: So Doctor, is that like a snowball effect; people are thinking you're doing something wrong, so why not do a whole bunch of bad things?

Respondent: [Laughs] That could be the case, we don't necessarily know. We do know from some other research that when people experience stress that that sort of lowers their self control resources, so they're not as able to resist impulses, to engage in destructive behaviour, so it might be something similar to that happening here; it's not that they're consciously thinking 'oh well I'm engaging in one bad behaviour, why don't I engage in a whole bunch of other ones', it could just be that this disapproval lowers their self control abilities in general and predisposes them to engaging in these other unhealthy behaviours.

Host: But admittedly there could also be third variables that we don't know about yet that could be influencing ... is that right, or what do you feel about that?

Respondent: Sure, and that's one of the things that is a limitation of this research, is that we can't say for certain why people who are in these marginalised relationships experience worse health – is it because the experience and disapproval are stressful and that undermines their health or is it because people who are in worse health to begin with, maybe there's something different about them and maybe they just pay more attention to negative information from their environment and that's why they're reporting more disapproval. So certainly there are other explanations for it.

Host: So if you're out and you re-recognise yourself in one of these relationships where you don't feel that your relationship is as accepted as it should be, what kind of advice do you have for that person?

Respondent: What I can tell you is that we know from research that some people who are in these marginalised relationships are able to make it work.

Host: So do we know what the different is between those couples who make it work versus those who don't?

Respondent: No, unfortunately we don't. That's something that researchers are looking at now and we're trying to look at whether that's an individual characteristic that keeps these relationships going, so maybe those people are just better at coping with or dealing with stress, or maybe it's just a case that the relationships that last are the ones that were really high functioning to begin with – so maybe for couples who experience a lot of this disapproval, if they didn't have a really strong relationship to start with, maybe for them it's much worse.

Host: I'm going to ask you to go way out on a limb for a researcher – if you were hypothesising a study that was trying to test that, what do you suspect it is?

Respondent: I guess what I would say would be ... this is the answer that scientists always give ... it's a mix of things, it's not just one factor that explains it, so it probably has something to do with the people themselves but also the characteristics of their relationship, so I don't think you can just boil it down to one specific factor.

Host: Do you think that society is becoming or has become more accepting of relationships that aren't perfectly in the mainstream?

Respondent: Absolutely. Society *has* become more accepting of different kinds of relationship – so, for example, if we look at data from the Pew Research Centre, where they've conducted nationally representative surveys at different points in time, asking people their opinions on same sex couples and inter-racial couples, you see that there is a strong trend such that in recent years people are *much* more accepting of different types of relationship.

Host: What's your final message to people who are in a marginalised relationship? – is there a ray of hope out there?

Respondent: Yes. I mean, I would not look at this research and say 'oh, my relationship is doomed, why should I even bother, I should probably just break up', that's absolutely not the message to take away from this. It's important to keep in mind that we're talking about general trends here and that yes, in general, more disapproval is linked to worse health outcomes for the people involved but that's not the case for everybody; there are some people who don't experience these negative health effects; so it's an individual circumstance that depends upon the specific qualities of your relationship. So I wouldn't look at this and necessarily get discouraged by it.

Host: And is there anything that couples who are in a relationship where they feel marginalised can be specifically doing or thinking?

Respondent: Yeah, so I don't think there's an easy answer for that, you know, one solution ... if you have the financial wherewithal and ability to do it, you could move to another part of the country, where relationships of your type are more widely accepted, so that you could be in an environment where you could get more of that social support. Now that wouldn't necessarily change what's going on at home, so, you know, a geographical move isn't necessarily going to change how your family feels about the relationship but it at least might put you in a place where the social network around you is more accepting and supporting.

Host: Now Justin, I happen to know that you have a new and exciting web page up and running that's focused on sex research, can you tell us a little bit more about that web page?

Respondent: Absolutely! So it's the Psychology of Human Sexuality.com and I run a blog and website that provides people with the latest news and information on sex research and relationships research from a psychological perspective and I try to make it a mix of things that are interesting and funny and just generally fun to read - so I encourage you to check it out!

Host: What was that URL again?

Respondent: It's the Psychology of Human Sexuality.com.

Host: Alright, hear that everybody, go check it out! Well Justin, I want to thank you so much for your time, I really, really appreciated you coming on and talking about this very important topic.

Respondent: Thanks so much for having me.

Host: Alright, you take care.

Respondent: Alright, thank you.

Host: You're listening to Relationship Matters, I'm your host Dr Bjarne Holmes. Now, Matt, do you recognise any of what Dr Lehmillier was talking about today?

Matt: You guys are heady, smart, sensitive guys! To me, if somebody said to me, 'hey, I don't like your wife', I'd just be done with them, I would not be ruminating over 'how should I deal with this?'. If my parents said to me 'you know what, we really hate your wife', I would say 'great, well we're not going to talk any more'.

Host: What did you take out of today's interview?

Matt: What I took out of it was an interesting thing – the health aspects of it *really* were interesting, not only is this bringing stress in your life but the domino effect from that stress is leading to like major health issues. It's

like it's something that needs to be tackled right away or it's a downhill rollercoaster of a situation.

Host: Well, to everyone who might have been touched from today's content, the word from Vermont is to just stick with it but make sure to keep loving that person that you're loving. And with that, until next time.

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