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Systematic Review of Literature Concerning Lesbian and Gay Work-Life Balance

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Abstract

This paper seeks to define the gaps in research concerning Lesbian and Gay (LG) experiences in personal life and in the workplace. Work-life balance is the field of psychology related to the study of employees' satisfaction with work in relation to contentment at home or with family. I use Bronfenbrenner's 1977 theoretical framework of bidirectional spheres of influence between the developing individuals and the developmental context to organize current research and identify gaps in the literature. This review finds research lacking when considering systematic oppression of nonwhite races, interracial familial prejudice, unconventional family dynamics, obscure or vague definitions of sexual minority orientations, entrenched discrimination versus anti-discriminatory policies, community hostility or bias, LG parenting issues, children and partner problems, family of origin acceptance, and self-labeling and self-esteem related to LG identities. Hopefully highlighting these literature gaps will open up a discussion on various social issues inherent in the LG community. The field of work-life balance should expand future research to be more inclusive of nontraditional participants and integrate relevant variables that impact such individuals.

Systematic Review of Literature Concerning Lesbian and Gay Work-Life Balance

Urie Bronfenbrenner published a paper in 1977 titled, “Toward an Experimental Ecology of Human Development”. Bronfenbrenner outlined what would become a standard model for categorizing the bidirectional influences between context and child development.

Bronfenbrenner describes five different levels in which the interaction between individual and context can occur and how this interaction can have an effect on the individual child’s development (See Figure 1). Recently, this theoretical framework for development has been adapted to many different areas of study including adult populations (e.g., Brooks, 2006; Neal, 2008; Skinner, 2010). The outermost circle is the Macrosystem and encompasses societal norms, culture, traditions, and laws. The Exosystem consists of contextual characteristics that influence individuals close to the developing person, but do not involve the individual directly, such as parent’s work, church community, neighborhood committees, school system, and local politics. The Mesosystem represents the relationship of two other structures, such as the child’s parents’ and teachers’ relationship with one another. The Microsystem directly influences the developing person, comprised of his or her peers and immediate family. I applied Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theoretical framework to current research on the study of Lesbian and Gay (LG) adults and work-life balance in order to better understand the complexities of LG work and family life as well as to direct scholars to gaps in the literature for future research.

In this paper, I define Bronfenbrenner’s Macrosystem as societal assumptions and systematic devaluing of nonwhite races, bisexual erasure (i.e., combining data of those who identify as bisexual with those who identify as gay, or eliminating data concerning bisexual individuals all together), legal issues and laws concerning lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender/sexual (LGBT) discrimination, and public opinion. The Exosystem is conceptualized

as local LG social organizations, such as Pride committees, public LG role models, and other support groups, overall community homophobia, and workplace homophobia. The Mesosystem incorporates the individual's partner's workplace and family support as well as their children's experience at school. The Microsystem includes factors such as individual characteristics (e.g., individual's degree of "outness" or publicly acknowledging their sexual orientation) or contextual factors which directly impact the individual, e.g., his or her familial support, the division of household labor, method of child-rearing, marital history (e.g., divorce, remarriage) and, specifically for lesbians, the dichotomy of motherhood versus their sexual orientation.

Using these applied systems from Bronfenbrenner's model, I categorize the current literature available on Lesbian and Gay work-life balance which allows gaps in the empirical research to be more pronounced.

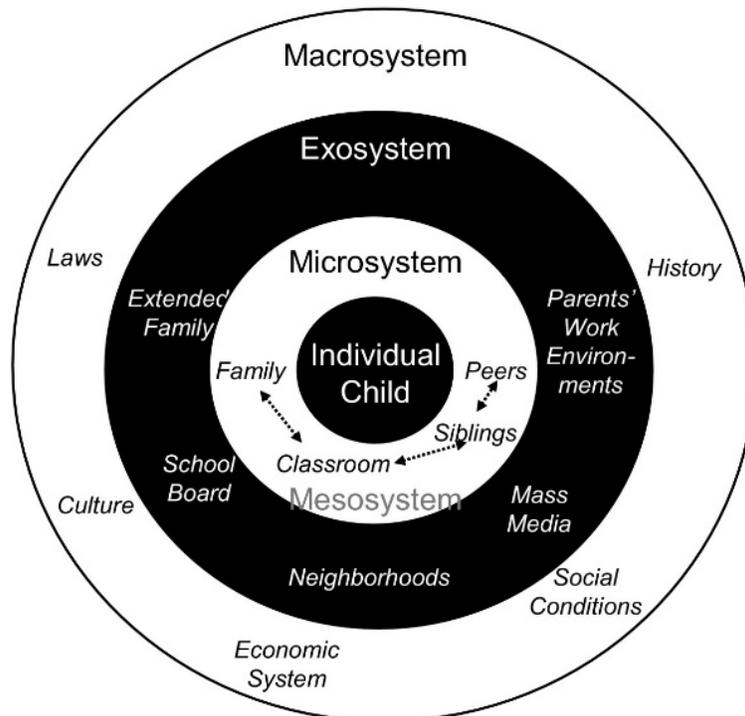


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Socioecological Model

“Work-life balance” is a broad term integrating the roles of the separate domains of personal, recreational time and paid, work time into a balancing act performed by employed individuals. The term has been divided into two separate constructs, equilibrium of and conflict between the two domains. In an effort to better understand worker productivity and efficiency, as well as keeping employees mentally strong through healthy family relationships, work-life balance has been an area of great interest to academics in recent years. Chang, McDonald, and Burton (2010) found that while attention to the concept has been growing, only in the last decade or so have women become an interest, and very rarely have nonnuclear or nonwhite families been considered for work-life balance studies. In this paper I outline the various ways that work-life balance research involving lesbian and gay individuals lacks adequate depth and exploration. Issues of overall racial diversity as well as mixed race families, differing definitions of sexual orientation, institutionalized prejudice along with antidiscrimination laws, community homophobia and opinion, circumstances relating to children in the home, family of origin environment, and whether or not an individual still considers him or herself “closeted” (i.e., not publicly identifying as LG) all interact and provide a lesbian or gay individualized experiences with their work-life balance.

Current Research

While there are many studies already published in the field of work-life balance, those concerning LG participants are proportionately small in number. As time passes, those few studies also risk become more irrelevant as public opinion and legislature change to become more inclusive. Expanding current knowledge to incorporate individualized LG characteristics will help both academics and mental health specialists better serve the needs of the population.

Macrosystem

The Macrosystem of LG work-life balance focuses on laws, stigmas, and public forms of acceptance, such as known LG communities and role models. Patterson (2007) explores individual's experience of discrimination, outlining how modern day public opinion and newly enacted laws have created diverse environments for LG individuals to work and live. In the past when a gay lifestyle in Western society was stigmatized, individuals were more likely to experience a blanket form of discrimination. This involved denying their identity and keeping silent about their lifestyles for fear of ostracization or punishment from their community, their family, and legislature. While certain publications assert that it is possible for LGBT individuals to assimilate into the majority (Savin-Williams, 2010), others highlight that dominant social opinions within the majority of the population tend to be more hostile and less accepting of sexual minorities (Haldeman, 2010). Today, certain parts of Western society have not only passed relevant human-rights affirming laws in the form of equal opportunity and antidiscrimination, but have also created an atmosphere of acceptance and support that was nonexistent a few decades prior. The American Civil Liberties Union website states that Wisconsin, New Hampshire, and New York have passed laws protecting sexual orientation only, and nineteen other states in America have laws preventing discrimination based on both sexual orientation and gender identity. However, in other parts of the country, the backlash from preliminary signs of support has created an even more toxic environment for LG individuals, even if the national overall effect is positive (e.g., Culhane & Sobel, 2005; Kaplan, 2006; Haider-Markel, 2007).

Bradford, Ryan, and Rothblum (1994) discuss the societal aftershocks of the AIDS epidemic as another factor to consider when assessing social climate for same-sex oriented

individuals. AIDS disclosure and treatment is still stigmatized and often associated exclusively with the gay community. Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum's (1994) study of lesbian healthcare, including qualitative and quantitative survey sections, state that one participant, "had AIDS. [...] She reported feelings of isolation from the community, lack of support for lesbians with AIDS, and fear of infecting her lover and son." Medical problems associated with the virus, such as rapid weight loss, migraines, extreme fatigue, and infections, dovetail with mental health problems that can stem from the shaming of someone for their sexual orientation. Substance abuse, depression, suicidality, anxiety, and eating disorders, along with unaddressed trauma from physical or sexual abuse, are all disproportionately high in Bradford et al.'s sample group of lesbians. Perceived discrimination related to sexual orientation also enhances a fear of exposure and limits an individual on the available sources of therapy or counseling (Schank, Helbok, Haldeman, & Gallardo, 2010).

My application of the Macrosystem incorporates the amount of public support, determined by availability of social groups tailored for LG individuals. The inclusion of such groups has a positive impact on the emotional and psychological wellbeing of LG people in the community. The social stigma associated with being gay, and to a lesser extent, the misinformed fear surrounding AIDS, negatively works against LG acceptance in the community and contributes to segregation and feelings of isolation. Current LG related legislation can either institutionalize discrimination or prevent against it. Homophobia in the workplace is a major concern for LG individuals; many need the protection offered through anti-discriminatory office policies (Rostosky & Riggle, 2002; Velez, Moradi, & Brewster, 2013). In order to properly account for an LG employee's experience, corporations must account for these comprehensive factors.

Exosystem

Bronfenbrenner's original Exosystem incorporates external environments that influence a child indirectly. In terms of lesbian and gay work-life balance research, I define the Exosystem as research about pay gaps and workplace discrimination, how accepting an individual's workplace is of "out" LG people, and the level of the local community's homophobia and general bias or hostility towards "out" gay and lesbian individuals. Badgett (1995) found that openly gay and bisexual men earned 11% to 27% less than openly heterosexual men of similar skill and experience. Croteau (1996) conducted a review of nine studies involving LGB workplace experiences, determining five separate variables that influence an individual's job experience. "The pervasiveness of discrimination in the workplace, formal and informal types of discrimination, fear of discrimination, variability of workers in their openness about sexual orientation, and correlates of workers' degree of openness versus concealment of sexual orientation" are the main categories researchers have focused on, but are still in their early stages (Croteau, 1996). Later, Chung (2001) developed six different traits for conceptual frameworks that LGB workers exhibit in their work environment and how each is related to the atmosphere of the company itself. Real versus perceived, potential versus encountered, and formal versus informal work discrimination all affect individuals differently both implicitly and explicitly.

However, data is irregular and nonconclusive. For example, Driscoll, Kelley, and Fassinger (1996) found that whether or not lesbians disclose their orientation at work had little influence on occupational stress, coping, or satisfaction. What did have an influence was the workplace climate and how LGB (Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual) friendly its policies and staff were. Ragins and Cornwell (2001) found that a company's antidiscrimination policies have the largest effect on an LGB individual's experience at work. A study of lesbian working mothers by

Tuten and August (2006) concluded that managers were the major influence on an individual's ability to maintain work-life balance. Positive role models and enforcers of protective legislation and antidiscrimination policies contributed to a less stressful and more fulfilling work experience. More recently, Velez and Moradi (2013) as well as Velez and Moradi (2012) determined that a work environment's inherent heterosexism, as well as an LGB individual's internalized heterosexism, contributed to how satisfied one was with his or her job, the effect of workplace stressors, and psychological distress.

Sobočan (2011) further explores a lesbian couple's internal conflict with identifying as queer women but also with the more traditional role of mothers. In terms of parenting, Goldberg and Smith (2014) have found that overall community homophobia relates to parental involvement in school and parent-teacher relationships of LG couples.

Within the domain of the Exosystem LG work-life balance, there is a need to examine workplace discrimination as well as the individual's degree of "outness" and relationship with coworkers. LG individuals have the choice of being open about their orientation at work, but face institutionalized discrimination in the form of pay gaps, fewer chances for promotion, and hostility from homophobic coworkers. Individuals can avoid such consequences by concealing their orientation, but in many cases experience personal distress over hiding their identity. In addition, conflicting identities involving gender roles versus sexual orientation and fear of community judgement concerning LG parents can contribute to mental stress in an individual's personal life.

Mesosystem

The Mesosystem refers to the relationship between two separate Microsystems. I include current LG research on long-term influence of gay parents on their children, including academic

performance, disciplinary issues, sexual orientation, and romantic relationships, as well as how involved lesbian and gay parents are in their child(ren)'s school system. Wainright and Russell (2004) and Patterson (2006) found no notable differences between children with opposite-sex parents and children with same-sex parents; instead, the greatest influence in the child's life was the health of his or her family relationships. Patterson also noted that there is very little research on children adopted by gay fathers. Rostosky and Riggle (2002) delineate the influence of an individual's partner's experience at work, including factors such as the partner's "outness" and the partner's workplace discrimination policy.

More studies in general need to be conducted on familial relationships of LG individuals. Studies involving children in LG families should widen the participant pool to include a diverse sample of family types, as current data is very limited. Most LG parents studied have been lesbian couples with children from a previous heterosexual relationship. Research should also be concentrated on partners or spouses and how their personal struggles affect the individual. Few studies have explored the effect of the partner's experience as a sexual minority and how it relates to the individual.

Microsystem

According to Bronfenbrenner, the Microsystem is the combination of factors that directly influence a child, such as immediate family, peers, home life, and classroom setting. Literature around my definition of the LG Microsystem involves self-identifying variables and their correlates, self-acceptance and self-confidence in a chosen identity, household duties and domestic chore distribution, and decisions on parenting as an individual and as a couple. Button (2001) closely examined work relationships of LG employees and found that individuals take on one of three identity management techniques, including pretending to be straight, keeping quiet,

and being “out”. All three identity managements have various pros and cons for the psychological well-being and social comfort of LG employees. Counterfeiting allows an individual to join discussions about relationships, but is based on blatantly lying about her or his orientation. Avoiding helps circumvent confrontation, but again forces the individual to hide certain parts of his or her identity. Integrating is the closest to authenticity, but invites unabashed anti-gay attitudes and discrimination from coworkers and management. However, disclosing at work is found to be an overall positive experience, as long as the company is known for its LG acceptance, according to Griffith and Hebl (2002). Home life is another area of little research, as only recently Perlesz et al. (2010) conducted research to determine how same-sex couples and opposite-sex couples split household chores and divide parenting duties. In a personal setting, Berkowitz and Ryan (2011) held qualitative interviews with lesbian mothers and gay fathers to explore the expectations and pressures they face when deciding how to raise their children in a gendered setting.

Current research is comprised of various identities LG individuals may associate with, along with the positive and negative effects of each. There is little research on how LG households differ in division of labor, if at all. Some studies qualify LG individuals’ experiences as parents, but more work will need to be done as public opinion of sexual minorities and gender stereotypes change.

Areas of Future Research

The areas of work-life balance for Gay and Lesbian couples has a moderate body of research. However, when examining the data through Bronfenbrenner’s theoretical framework, gaps in the literature become apparent. Specifically, there are several areas of future research that

would move forward LG life-work balance scholarship and enable scholars and practitioners to better serve and understand the needs of this population.

Macrosystem

A recurring area of oversight is the issue of race. As much research is done on college campuses, many studies are victim to sampling convenience wherein the predominantly white, middle-to-upper class, heterosexual, young students are used as participants. In studies of both straight and gay couples, the overwhelming majority is Caucasian. Patterson (1992) points this out in his paper on children of lesbian and gay parents: “Despite the diversity of gay and lesbian communities, [...] samples of children studied to date have been relatively homogenous.” This becomes more complicated when considering that gay and lesbian parents often look to adoption as a means to start a family. Oftentimes, children that do not match the race of their adoptive parents face their own unique forms of interracial discrimination. Goldberg & Smith’s (2014) study on perceptions of stigma noted that, while 88% of their parents identified as white, 59% of the couples’ children were listed as nonwhite. Few studies specifically research nonwhite lesbian and gay participants’ life experience. Liddle (2007) identified that nonwhite lesbians have a more difficult experience with their community and families. Citing Bradford et al., (1994) in her book, Liddle writes that, “Lesbians of color are less likely than White lesbians to report being out to family of origin.” Ragins & Cornwell mention that 67.6% of their participants were white, but do not specify the other portion, allowing for dirty data with which employees benefited from their racial privilege and which were likely discriminated against based on their race in addition to or despite their orientation. The system as a whole needs diversified sampling to create an accurate representation of participants proportional to census data.

The reduction or removal of a “bisexual” category, or re-categorizing bisexual individuals into gay or lesbian, also serves to muddle current data. Badgett (1995) combined bisexual men with gay men and lesbian women with bisexual women in his study of wage effects. He does not distinguish between bisexual and gay in the statistics involving participants, making it impossible to control for sexual orientation’s influence. Meanwhile, Ragins & Cornwell (2001) were careful to make a distinction between gay/lesbian and bisexual when delineating the participants, but combined bisexual men, bisexual women, lesbians, and gay men all under the term “gay” for their conclusions. Velez, Moradi, & Brewster (2013) and Velez & Moradi (2012) also combine bisexual individuals and gay and lesbian into one sexual minority group, discriminating only on gender in their conclusions. Bisexual erasure is the removal of evidence of bisexuality by redefining, re-categorizing, or ignoring data or studies that define bisexual individuals. By combining the bisexual participants with the gay and lesbian ones, not only is bisexuality not being independently measured, but the data from the gay and lesbian participants is being diluted with individuals who do not identify as such.

Gay and lesbian antidiscrimination legislation, as well as overall public opinion, has also changed drastically in recent years. Civil Unions, a placeholder for marriage in sexual minority couples, was passed in Hawaii in 1997. While other states in America followed suit, it was not until 2013’s case of *United States v. Windsor* that marriage defined as a union of one man and one woman was deemed unconstitutional. Many of the most cited studies of legal LG couples, especially in regards to gay fathers, are both rare and archaic at this point in time. Patterson (1992), in a paper from the early nineties, lists major relevant studies in terms of lesbian and gay parents. Unsurprisingly, they are all from the eighties with one paper from the seventies, well before LGBT politics became an openly talked about subject. Badgett’s (1995) wage effects

study, Button's (2001) research on the relationship between job satisfaction and sexual minority identity, Croteau's (1996) study on lesbian, gay, and bisexual work experiences, Driscoll's (1996) work on lesbian identity and disclosure in the workplace, Griffith & Hebl's (2002) research on employer policies and sexual identity, Ragins & Cornwell's (2001) overview of workplace discrimination, and Rostosky & Riggle's (2002) paper on workplace policy and internalized homophobia, while all solid studies in their own right, are completely outdated at this point in time. As more states pass laws that protect sexual identity from discrimination in the workplace, as more companies openly identify as queer-friendly, as more workers openly identify as LG, and as public acceptance of sexual orientation minorities continues to climb, these studies will become even more irrelevant.

Race continues to be a factor in both demographic samples and as a variable that affects encountered discrimination. The majority of studies involving work-life balance are comprised of disproportionately white participants; this trend continues into areas of research dedicated to LG individuals. LG people of color also face unique intersecting forms of prejudice. Couples who adopt children who are not the same race likewise face racial discrimination in addition to prejudice against sexual minorities. In addition to race, sexual orientations should be well defined and established when recruiting participants. Many studies either ignore a bisexual or other category, or combine non-heterosexual orientations into broad "gay" categories. Studies specializing in workplace environments for LG individuals should also be updated, as legislation as well as public opinion concerning anti-gay discrimination is quickly changing to become more inclusive and enforced.

Exosystem

Workplace discrimination is another obvious issue LGBT people face. While there have been some studies, (Badgett, 1995; Croteau, 1996; Chung, 2001; Driscoll, Kelley, & Fassinger, 1996; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Tuten & August, 2006; Velez & Moradi, 2012; Velez & Moradi, 2013), they are proportionately few and limited in data compared with the large field of work environment research. Recent meta-analyses of work-life balance studies have emphasized the need for diversity and inclusion of minority groups. Casper, Eby, Bordeaux, Lockwood, and Lambert (2007) mention the need for multisource data and redefining “family” to include LGBT people as well as more racially and ethnically diverse participants. Chang, McDonald, and Burton (2010) also state that research could be enhanced by including both same-sex and single parent families, as well as underlining most studies’ failure to include why the researchers chose a particular target group.

Schank, Helbok, Haldeman, and Gallardo (2010) all mention issues involving being a therapist in a rural or small community. Haldeman in particular works specifically with LGBT individuals and mentions that, “the importance of the community has been incorporated into all theoretical models of identity development for LGBT people,” citing Fassinger and Arsenau (2006). Haldeman mentions that “coming out” can be the end of a lonely, marginalized path, and identifying with a social group can help one’s self-esteem and confidence. How the individual’s community views LGBT people also has an impact on how open one feels he or she can be. Patterson (2007) describes the differences between jurisdictions, mentioning that, “in Vermont, a same-sex couple in a civil union with children may also complete a second-parent adoption and in this way achieve many of the benefits and protection afforded to married heterosexual couples and their children. In Colorado, however, and in a number of other states, neither civil unions nor second parent adoptions are available to same-sex couples and their children”.

Many studies have found benefits from a tight support network (e.g., Kawachi & Berkman, 2001; Heaney & Israel, 2008), however LG parents are distinctly lacking in role models and exposure. Patterson (1992) specifically states that, “[o]f the many other ways in which children might come to be brought up by lesbian or gay parents (e.g., through foster parenting, adoptive parenting, co-parenting, or multiple parenting arrangements), no systemic research as yet appeared.” Later, Patterson (2006) mentions that children born to gay fathers and LG parents who adopt children have very little research done as well. Most studies center around lesbian mothers who had children in a previous heterosexual relationship, often a marriage.

Social science research moves faster than even heterosexual couples can keep abreast. In vitro fertilization is a relatively new method of conception and is rarely talked about openly, even less so with sexual minority couples. In Schmidt’s dissertation on lesbian experience with IVF, she mentions that, “it is apparent that many of the challenges faced by lesbian families are compounded by social stigma and homophobic attitudes.” This becomes even more exclusionary and isolating when Schmidt references McCrohan (1996), mentioning that results from a national survey show that most lesbian women who responded agreed that interventions, support groups, and information about lesbian parenting, adoption, and IVF, would be extremely helpful, in addition to methods for gaining community support.

Current data has strict parameters of what constitutes a family; for example, a heterosexual man and woman and the children they have together. As LG couples become more accepted into the dominant culture, more role models and support systems for non-nuclear families will become available. Including various definitions of “family” and incorporating nontraditional set ups, such as LG parents, IVF births, adoptions, fostering, shared custody, and single parenthood, will allow data to more closely represent actual populations. An emphasis on

local social context should be incorporated as well, as the support, or lack thereof, an LG individual feels from his or her community plays a large role in self-esteem, mental stress, and “outness”.

Mesosystem

Present studies regarding children of lesbian and gay parents are lacking in detail. As Patterson (1992) points out, most studies use lesbian parents who have children from a previous opposite-sex relationship. Although some studies strive to compare children of divorced lesbian mothers with children of divorced heterosexual mothers, the restructuring of the family itself can adversely affect children. Adding in the variable of divorce changes how the children behave in school as well as at home. Jeynes’s (2006) meta-analysis of parental impact on children shows that in all cases, remarriages, divorces, or widowhood, children suffer academic shortcomings. Patterson’s (2006) and Wainright, Russell, and Patterson’s (2004) data concludes that it is the health of the familial relationships that determines children’s psychosocial health, school performance, and romantic experiences, not the sexual orientation of the parents. In Patterson (1992), gay parents who have divorced the child’s biological opposite-sex parent also face legal discrimination in the forms of completely losing custody and heavily restricted visitation. All these factors have an effect on the child’s life and upbringing, yet studies that seek to compare them to children of straight couples fail to include such influences.

Variables that influence child development should be taken into consideration when studying LG families. LG couples can often have children from adoption or foster care, or after divorce. All three situations have subtle negative impacts on the child’s psychosocial health that must be accounted for when comparing LG parents to heterosexual ones.

Microsystem

An individual's own family of origin can play a large role in his or her psychological wellbeing. Bradford, Ryan, and Rothblum (1994) used the National Lesbian Health Care Survey to determine that the majority of participants sought social support in the lesbian community as relatively few had "come out" to their families. An interesting intersection noted in the study also reported that lesbians of color were far less likely to be out to family than white lesbians. Liddle (2007) determined that the act of being closeted to one's family is not necessarily harmful itself, but the reason for remaining closeted, a hostile home environment, can be detrimental to an individual's mental health. As Griffith and Hebl (2002) indicate in their limitations, any studies using LG individuals as participants rely heavily on those who are "out" and may not be able to reach those still "closeted".

Future research should include the type of familial support an individual is receiving or received while growing up. A hateful, homophobic family of origin and whether or not the individual is "out" to them can imbibe several negative effects on self-esteem, self-identification, and mental health. Those who have support systems in their family are more likely to openly identify as gay or lesbian, be "out" publicly, participate in studies more, and may report healthier psychologically. Such factors affect studies on LG life satisfaction and self-identity.

Conclusion

As work-life balance continues to grow as an area of interest in the field of psychology and other social science disciplines, contemporary definitions and social climates need to be taken into account. Specifically, when it comes to Lesbian and Gay individuals who both have families and are part of the workforce, the current research does not account for myriad factors exclusive to them. Issues involve devaluation of nonwhite races, interracial family discrimination, non-nuclear family structures, dichotomous sexual orientation and gender role definitions,

institutionalized prejudice versus anti-discriminatory policies, community homophobia, concerns of parenting, children and partner problems, family of origin acceptance, and self-identifying as LG. In order to collect systematic data on work-life balance, all lifestyles and their individual influences must be considered. As the LG population of workers and parents continues to grow and become accepted into the dominant culture, research will need to expand its parameters and definitions or risk pigeonholing itself as historically non-inclusive.

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