

Same-Sex Sexuality and the Duration of First Marriages

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Introduction: Our recent research provides evidence that, among the once-married, same-sex sexuality is associated with an increased risk of different-sex divorce. Once-married individuals who report experiencing any of the three components of same-sex sexuality—attraction, behavior, and/or identity—are more likely to see their different-sex marriages end in divorce. To date, no research of which we are aware examines whether same-sex sexuality affects different-sex marital duration. Theoretically, it is possible that same-sex sexuality could be associated with either short or longer marital duration.

Research Questions

1. Is same-sex sexuality associated with shorter or longer marital durations, on average, net of demographic and background variables?
2. To what extent do age at marriage and/or current marital status, particularly divorce (i.e., the timing of entrance into and the volitional dissolution of a marriage) mediate any observed associations between the components of same-sex sexuality and marital duration?
3. Among the once-married, once-divorced, how strongly is same-sex sexuality associated with marital duration net of other variables?

In supplemental analyses, we also examine whether there are gender differences in the associations between same-sex sexuality and marital duration, and whether differences exist between those reporting exclusively same-sex versus bisexual attraction and identity.

Methods: We used two different samples from the 2011-2013 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG): one, for research questions one and two, that includes all once-married persons, including the currently married, the separated, divorce, and widowed (N=3351); and a second, for research question three, that includes only the once-married, once-divorced (N=617). Below, we present the results from multivariate ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses of the association between each measure of same-sex sexuality and the number of months the different-sex marriage lasted.

Results: Our results indicate that same-sex sexuality does shorten different-sex marital duration by 27-29 months, on average. Controlling for a broad range of exogenous demographic and background variables and year of data collection does reduce the associations between each measure of same-sex sexuality and marital duration somewhat; however, all associations remain large and statistically significant. Our results also indicate that the associations between same-sex attraction and identity, respectively, and marital duration are both mediated by current marital status; the association between same-sex behavior and marital duration is partially mediated by marital status. Given the size of the divorce coefficient, and the prevalence of divorce, we conclude that divorce is the most important factor in the explaining these associations. Finally, our results indicate that those who experience any of the three aspects of same-sex sexuality divorce at shorter marital durations, on average, compared to those with no such experience. Same-sex attraction is associated with marital durations that are approximately 20 months shorter, same-sex sexual behavior is associated with durations that are approximately 24 months shorter, and identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual is associated with durations that are approximately 18 months shorter. Results of supplemental analyses suggest that these associations do not differ by sex/gender, but do differ in nuanced ways for individuals who are bisexually attracted or identified compared to those who report only same-sex attraction or gay/lesbian identity, respectively.