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OF THE BEREAVED

Effects of Gender and Sexual Orientation on Perceptions of the Bereaved

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Departmental Honors Thesis

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

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# EFFECTS OF GENDER AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION ON PERCEPTIONS OF THE BEREAVED

## Abstract

The loss of a spouse is different for everyone who experiences it. There is no universal pattern for bereavement, and there is a wide variation in what is considered normal or healthy grieving (Hooyman & Kramer, 2010). Researchers have found that spousal bereavement is associated with increased risk of mortality, decrements in physical health, and diverse psychological reactions; some experience ongoing, disabling levels of stress, some experience symptoms that gradually decrease over time, and many experience little to no interference (Bonanno et al. 2004; Stroebe et al., 2007). The loss of a spouse or romantic partner affects most individuals at some point in their life, regardless of sexual orientation. Despite the increased support for same-sex relationships, many still face bias and prejudice throughout all periods of life, and can be exacerbated during the loss of a spouse or life partner. However, little research has explored the differences in perceptions of bereavement experiences of gay and straight individuals. In addition, little research has explored the difference of experiences between perceptions of the perceptions of bereavement experiences between men and women. Using 160 participants, I will assess the perceptions of bereavement experiences of gay men, straight men, lesbian women, and straight women. I hypothesize that the experiences of women will be perceived differently than those of men. I also hypothesize that the experiences of straight individuals will be perceived differently than those of gay/lesbian individuals.

## BEREAVEMENT EXPERIENCES

In a study that followed participants after a loss for over six years, over two-thirds of people were found to be resilient, while 7.4% fell into the pre-existing depression class, 13.2% fell into the chronic grief class, and 11.2% fell into the depressed-improved class (Maccallum et al. 2015, Bonanno et al. 2004). This study was composed of data from the Health and Retirement

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Study, specifically focusing on participants who lost their partner while participating in the study, taking into account their pre-loss assessment and the subsequent data collected every two years up to six years later. While many do fall into the resilient category, many do not, and the type and amount of support offered to the bereaved may vary greatly due to various factors, including their gender and/or sexual orientation. Among those more likely to fall into the class “pre-existing chronic depression” were women, those who had poor financial standing, and those who had not graduated high school; the latter two are more likely to be experienced by the LGBT+ population (Maccallum et al. 2015). Thus, women and members of the LGBT+ population are more likely to face a difficult grieving process.

## LGBT BEREAVEMENT EXPERIENCES

Previous research regarding the grieving process has mainly involved those in opposite-sex relationships, tending to pay little attention to the grieving process for LGBT+ people; those few that do study LGBT+ relationships tend to focus on addressing grief in HIV/AIDS-related deaths among gay males (e.g., Almack et al., 2010). In keeping with the tone of LGBT+ bereavement research, gay men are more likely to face HIV/AIDS-related stigma concerning the death of their partner regardless of whether their partners’ deaths were, in reality, due to HIV/AIDS (O’Brien et al., 2002). In fact, gay men who have been interviewed about the loss of their partner have noted that others assumed their partner died of AIDS when that was not the actual cause of their partner’s death (O’Brien et al., 2002). Similarly, many LGBT+ individuals face stigmas around suicide. Regardless of how their partner died, bereaved LGBT+ people in general are more likely to be treated differently based on their sexual orientation during the grieving process (Ferlatte et al., 2019).

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The dearth of research regarding LGBT+ bereavement has omitted bereavement experiences of lesbian women and gay men whose partners' deaths were not suicide- or HIV/AIDS-related. Bereaved members of the LGBT+ community have found themselves in a situation where support was offered for LGBT+ individuals whose partner had died of AIDS, but not for those whose partner died of a non-AIDS-related cause (Hornjatkevyc & Alderson, 2011). However, those who do experience the loss of a partner due to AIDS are more likely to experience increased personal focus on the issues of multiple losses within their community, concerns about one's own HIV status, stigma or discrimination around AIDS, and taking care of friends and lovers who die from AIDS (Campbell, 1999). LGBT+ people are, indeed, likely to have experienced multiple losses, whether that be friends, partners, or members of their "chosen" family (Campbell, 1999).

While some report negative associations and serious psychological symptoms with their experience in caring for a dying partner, some report positive associations (Stein et al., 1997). Many gay men have reported feeling as though they were not ready for the loss and felt alone or that the relationship did not last long enough, while others described the loss as beautiful and calming (Hornjatkevyc & Alderson, 2011). LGBT+ people, particularly in older cohorts of the LGBT+ community, tend to experience additional difficulties due to internalized homophobia and social isolation throughout their lives, and can experience this in an even more intense form during the loss of a partner; this may be particularly true for those that are still "closeted" and have not revealed their sexual orientation to friends, family, and others. (Campbell, 1999). Many who are "out" also believe that their relationship is recognized and accepted, only to find that their family and friends do not recognize and/or accept the relationship after the death of a partner (O'Brien et al., 2002).

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A systematic review article of available research on the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender bereaved individuals by Bristowe and colleagues (2016) found that these individuals reported experiencing a lack of acknowledgement of their relationship, rudeness, homophobia, and separation from partner's family. While the LGBT+ population experiences more setbacks in their ability to grieve properly, research shows little, if any, significant differences in the grieving process between straight and gay men (O'Brien et al., 2002). Research does show, however, that organized religion was an important source of comfort during the grieving process among straight men who had lost a partner, but not among gay men; this is more than likely due to most religions advocating against homosexuality and therefore not offering the support which straight men receive (O'Brien et al., 2002).

In addition to a lack of support from various religious outlets, LGBT+ members of society are unlikely to receive support from other mainstream sources due to the fact that these services have been tailored to meet the needs of straight clients (Whipple, 2006; Jacobs et al., 2008). Due to the stigma around members of the LGBT+ community and their relationships, many people are treated quite differently due to their LGBT+ identity, as shown and caused by the stigma around HIV/AIDS, religious doctrines, societal backlash against gay marriage, hate crimes, homophobia, and more. This has a significant impact on the grieving process for the LGBT+ community, as social support from family and friends has been found to play an important role in the bereavement process (Logan et al., 2017).

## DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF

Past researchers have found that social and emotional support can serve as a buffer to aid in coping with harsh life events and help cushion the emotional blow (Stroebe et al., 2007). However, some research shows that same-sex partners are more likely to experience

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disenfranchised grief in the grieving process. Disenfranchised grief is experienced when one “incur[s] a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported” (Doka, 1999, p.37). LGBT+ people have experienced and still experience various forms of mistreatment, discrimination, and social isolation/exclusion, all of which may contribute to feelings of invisibility in the grieving process (Green & Grant, 2008). LGBT+ people may find that their relationship to the deceased has been deemed illegitimate by legal authorities, medical professionals, friends, their own family, and the family of the deceased—disenfranchising them and illegitimizing their grieving experience (Cave, 2000; Green & Grant, 2008; Ingham et al., 2016).

Many family members either do not accept their loved one’s sexuality or do not accept their loved one’s same-sex relationship as a valid relationship, therefore, many LGBT+ people find themselves excluded from family mourning practices, which reduces social support that would otherwise be available to them during their grieving period (Bent & Magilvy, 2006). In a study by Hornjatkevyc and Alderson (2011), participants noted that family members can also perceive themselves as more entitled to the possessions of their dead partner, giving the bereaved less power and creating obstacles as they continue to grieve. Outside of the family, organizations offering or facilitating memorial or funeral services may elect not to acknowledge the bereaved in their services (Whipple, 2006). In addition, this can happen within work/social environments as well, creating obstacles that would not otherwise exist (O’Brien et al., 2002). However, there are exceptions and positive experiences. Whipple (2006) documented experiences of a lesbian widow who reported feeling “touched” that her coworkers attended the visitation for her lost partner, as well as being “fully included” in the grieving ceremonies, even the honor of sitting with the family during the funeral.

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In addition to intentional lack of support, there are also cases in which the individual may be “closeted,” and therefore they experience a lack of support, which can lead to the triggering of internalized homophobia and feelings of shame (Shernoff, 1997). One gay man explained that he could not fathom coping with the loss of a partner while closeted, noting that many would not be able to understand the severity of the loss without seeing the relationship; he also stated that in certain areas, it would be extremely difficult, as many would not understand that same-sex partners can have an emotional relationship in addition to a sexual relationship (Hornjatkevyc & Alderson, 2011). Many LGBT+ men in one study chose to avoid support groups, noting that they found it difficult to feel validated in a group of straight people (O’Brien et al., 2002); one man in a separate study even noted his experience being discounted as “only [losing] a friend,” (Glackin, 2008, p.300). Due to a lack of support from non-LGBT+ individuals in their lives, many LGBT+ individuals turn to their fellow LGBT+ friends for support (Whipple, 2006). Because there is debate as to the legitimacy of their relationships, as well as bias and stigma against them, LGBT+ people are less likely to receive social support during the grieving process (Doka, 1999).

### GOAL OF STUDY

The goal of this study was to explore how perceptions of the bereaved might vary based on the sexual orientation and gender of the bereaved. Due to the lack of research on perceptions of bereaved members of the LGBT+ community, this study utilized an experimental research design to determine if there are differences in perceptions of a bereaved person presented in a vignette. Specifically, participants were randomly assigned to report their perceptions of the vignette target across four different scenarios: a straight woman who had lost her partner, a straight man who had lost his partner, a lesbian woman who had lost her partner, and a gay man who had lost his partner. In examining the responses to these questions, I was able to better

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ascertain whether the gender or sexual orientation of the bereaved played a significant role in the attitudes toward the bereaved and the amount of social support the general population would offer.

## Methods

### Participants

A total of 160 participants, who ranged in age from 55-71 years old ( $M=56.93$ ,  $SD=2.85$ ), were recruited through Amazon MTurk. Those who participated in the study received a \$2 reward as compensation for their participation in the study. For demographic information, please see Table 1.

### Procedure

Before the survey, participants reviewed an informed consent document which explained the purpose of the study and ensured participants that all information is confidential. In addition, they were given the option to opt out at any time they desire if necessary. Participants took the questionnaire/survey hosted on QuestionPro. Participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, read a scenario, and respond to questions measuring their perceptions of the person depicted in the scenario (e.g. empathy, social support).

### Measures

**Empathy.** Participant empathy was measured utilizing a 3-item likert scale. Sample questions included: "I feel sorry for the person in the scenario." Questions will be rated from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 3 (*strongly agree*).

**Expected Grief Time.** Each participant was asked to rate the amount of time they expect the person in the scenario will need to grieve, on a 9-point scale from 3 months to 2 years.

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Response options began at 3 months and increased in increments of 3 months until the last option of “more than 2 years.”

**Social Support.** Participant’s willingness to offer social support was measured using a 3-item likert scale. Sample questions included: “How likely would you be to offer social support (e.g., offering comfort).” Questions will be rated from 0 (*not at all likely*) to 3 (*extremely likely*).

**Scenario.** The study randomly assigned each participant a scenario in which they read about a straight man, a gay woman, a straight man, or a lesbian woman who had lost their spouse/partner. Below is an example of the scenario with a man who has lost his male partner.

Michael is 76 years old and lost his partner of 48 years, Arthur. Arthur battled an aggressive cancer and passed 11 months after his diagnosis. Michael is struggling to move on from this loss and regrets the things he did not get to do with Arthur. He struggles to find a reason to get out of bed in the morning, no longer finds joy in the activities he once loved, and does not always remember to eat.

### Results

#### Hypothesis One

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if there was an interaction between sexual orientation and gender of the target on participant levels of social support. There was one outlier in the participant social support distribution for participants in the straight woman condition, the lesbian woman condition, and the gay man condition as assessed by the inspection of boxplots.

Social support scores were normally distributed in five of the six cells, with skewness and kurtosis statistics between -2 and +2; however, participant social support scores in the lesbian woman condition were slightly leptokurtic with a kurtosis statistic of 2.94. After removing the outliers and finding similar results, we determined the outliers did not exert a significant enough impact on the data to delete them. There was a homogeneity of variances, as assessed by the

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Levene's test for equality of variances ( $p > .05$ ). My first hypothesis was not supported. There was no statistically significant interaction between gender and sexual orientation on participant levels of social support. Additionally, there were no main effects for either independent variable. See Table 3 for results. The means, standard deviations, and N sizes for each group can be found in Table 2.

### **Hypothesis Two**

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if there was an interaction between sexual orientation and gender of the target on participant levels of sympathy. There were no outliers in the participants in the gay or lesbian conditions. There was one outlier in the participants in the straight male condition, and two in the straight woman condition, as assessed by the inspection of boxplots.

Sympathy scores were normally distributed in five of the six cells, with skewness and kurtosis statistics between -2 and +2; however, participant social support scores in the straight woman condition were slightly leptokurtic with a kurtosis statistic of 3.80. After removing the outliers and finding similar results, we determined the outliers did not exert a significant enough impact on the data to delete them. There was a homogeneity of variances, as assessed by the Levene's test for equality of variances ( $p > .05$ ). My second hypothesis was not supported. There was no statistically significant interaction between gender and sexual orientation on participant levels of sympathy. Additionally, there were no main effects for either independent variable. See Table 5 for results. The means, standard deviations, and N sizes for each group can be found in Table 4.

### **Hypothesis Three**

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if there was an interaction between sexual orientation and gender of the target on participant levels of expected grief time. There

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were seven outliers in the participants in the straight man condition, and six outliers in the gay man condition, as assessed by the inspection of boxplots.

Expected grief time scores were normally distributed in all six cells, with skewness and kurtosis statistics between -2 and +2. After removing the outliers and finding similar results, I determined the outliers did not exert a significant enough impact on the data to delete them. There was a homogeneity of variances, as assessed by the Levene's test for equality of variances ( $p > .05$ ). My third hypothesis was not supported. There was no statistically significant interaction between gender and sexual orientation on participant levels of expected grief time. Additionally, there were no main effects for either independent variable. See Table 7 for results. The means, standard deviations, and N sizes for each group can be found in Table 6.

### **Discussion**

The results I received were unexpected. Past researchers' work sharing the experiences of bereaved members of the gay and lesbian community would suggest a difference in perceptions of individuals based on sexual orientation and gender. Specifically, I had expected to find a significant difference in social support levels, empathy levels, and that of expected grief time. However, there was no support for our hypotheses with the current sample of participants.

The results of this study show a lack of differences in perceptions based on gender and sexual orientation, signifying a possible lack of differential perception based on sexual orientation and gender. However, this does not align with previous research and must be more thoroughly investigated. A cohort of people age 55 or older is more likely to have a different perspective on bereavement, as members of this cohort are likely to have experienced or witnessed bereavement more than members in a younger cohort. In addition, generational differences, especially those related to bereavement, between an older cohort and that of a

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younger cohort should be taken into account. The lack of significant interaction in these results could also be due to the misunderstanding of the questions, as Amazon Mturk recruits from across the globe, and some participants were not from countries where English is spoken as a first language. In addition, the lack of a manipulation check may have led to inaccurate responses. Finally, the sample included a large amount of bisexual participants, which may have skewed results.

### **Future Research**

Future researchers should consider investigating the impact of other factors, such as religion or affiliation with the LGBT+ community on perceptions of members of the LGBT community. Future research should also consider performing research on other platforms than Amazon Mturk alongside integration of a manipulation check to insure accurate answers. In addition, future research should include the measurement of perceptions of the bisexual and transgender community. Future research should include the comparison of an older sample with that of a younger sample, as the recruitment of undergraduate students to participate during the time of this study was difficult due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, future research should consider the comparison of responses from straight participants with those of bisexual, lesbian, and gay participants.

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APPENDIX A

**Table 1**

	Frequency	Percent
<b>Race</b>		
Asian/Pacific Islander	6	3.75%
Black/African American	22	13.75%
White	124	77.5%
Indigenous/Aboriginal	1	.63%
Multiracial	3	1.88%
Other	1	.63%
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>		
Straight	118	73.75%
Gay/Lesbian	5	3.13%
Bisexual	35	21.88%
Prefer not to disclose	1	.63%
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Hispanic or Latino	31	19.38%
Not Hispanic or Latino	123	76.88%
Other	3	1.88%
<b>Income</b>		
Under \$10,000	1	.63%
\$10,000-\$19,999	4	2.5%
\$20,000-\$29,999	14	8.75%
\$30,000-\$39,999	19	11.88%
\$40,000-\$49,999	34	21.25%
\$50,000-\$74,999	53	33.13%
\$75,000-\$99,999	28	17.5%
Over \$100,000	6	3.75%
<b>Education</b>		
High school	7	4.38%
Some college	2	1.25%
2-year degree	10	6.25%
4-year degree	90	56.25%
Master's degree	45	28.13%
Professional degree	6	3.75%

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APPENDIX B

**Table 2**

*Descriptives - Social Support*

<b>IV1</b>	<b>IV2</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>N</b>
Man	Gay	23.696	3.147	46
	Straight	24.382	2.775	34
Woman	Gay	23.744	3.513	43
	Straight	24.919	3.244	37

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APPENDIX C

**Table 3**

*Social Support ANOVA*

<b>Variables</b>	<b><i>df</i></b>	<b>Mean Square</b>	<b><i>F</i></b>	<b><i>p</i></b>	<b><math>\omega^2</math></b>
Gender	1	3.375	0.330	0.567	0.000
Sexual Orientation	1	34.160	3.337	0.070	0.015
Interaction	1	2.348	0.229	0.633	0.000
Residuals	156	10.235			

EFFECTS OF GENDER AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION ON PERCEPTIONS OF THE BEREAVED

APPENDIX D

**Table 4**

*Descriptives - Sympathy*

<b>IV1</b>	<b>IV2</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>N</b>
Man	Gay	4.891	1.741	46
	Straight	5.588	1.743	34
Woman	Gay	5.140	1.407	43
	Straight	5.162	2.048	37

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APPENDIX E

**Table 5**

*Sympathy ANOVA*

<b>Variables</b>	<b><i>df</i></b>	<b>Mean Square</b>	<b><i>F</i></b>	<b><i>p</i></b>	<b><math>\omega^2</math></b>
Gender	1	0.312	0.103	0.748	0.000
Sexual Orientation	1	5.104	1.691	0.195	0.004
Interaction	1	4.483	1.485	0.225	0.003
Residuals	156	3.018			

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APPENDIX F

**Table 6**

*Descriptives – Expected Grief Time*

<b>IV1</b>	<b>IV2</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>N</b>
Man	Gay	4.696	2.308	46
	Straight	4.735	1.847	34
Woman	Gay	4.884	2.107	43
	Straight	5.054	2.160	37

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APPENDIX G

**Table 7**

*Expected Grief Time ANOVA*

<b>Variables</b>	<b><i>df</i></b>	<b>Mean Square</b>	<b><i>F</i></b>	<b><i>p</i></b>	<b><math>\omega^2</math></b>
Gender	1	2.532	0.559	0.456	0.000
Sexual Orientation	1	0.435	0.096	0.757	0.000
Interaction	1	0.168	0.037	0.847	0.000
Residuals	156	4.530			