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The Negative Impacts of Cishet Values: An Exploration of LGBTQIA+ Representation

Within Emerging Adult Relationship Research

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## Abstract

The hegemony informs epistemological assumptions within the field of psychology, and thus, psychological research is informed by the heteropatriarchy. Emerging adult relationships are rooted in cishet values, heteronormative and cisnormative values, erasing LGBTQIA+ romantic relationships. Emerging adult relationship research promotes cishet values by disregarding gender and sexuality spectrums through the expectations of binary gender and sexualities which produces data that cannot be generalized (Brassard et al., 2018; James-Kangal et al., 2019). Future research must utilize sample groups that include multidimensional social identities and researchers must internalize the importance of examining their dichotomized biases. Metanalytic studies and a broader critique are needed to measure the effects of the cishet paradigm on relational research.

*Keywords:* LGBTQIA+, emerging adult, relationship, gender

## The Negative Impacts of Cishet Values: An Exploration of LGBTQIA+ Representation Within Emerging Adult Relationship Research

Cishet values are the foundation of the dominant epistemic system, which shapes society and subsequently, academic research, which normalizes the erasure of the LGBTQIA+ community. The term cishet refers to the combination of heteronormative and cisnormative values. Those within the LGBTQIA+ community observe heterosexual relationship standards and practices that do not represent their worldview and often negatively impact their sense of self and interactions within romantic partnerships, therefore, it is important to include LGBTQIA+ individuals within academic conversations, including research on emerging adult (ages 18 to 29) relationships. Emerging adults are empowered through social climates, neurological development, and access to broad-scale communication thus making them more likely to challenge cultural and societal norms despite psychological research reflecting the current paradigm. Due to the impact emerging adults may have on cultural norms, I believe it is important to understand the population's interpersonal dynamics because emerging adults are the future. However, research on emerging adult relationships does not represent the population as the hegemony leaves out individuals outside of the “norm”, thus the 30% of emerging adults who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community are not represented within psychological research (LGBT Demographic Data Interactive, 2019). I argue that research must reflect the target population thus altering cultural discourses that oversimplify complex relationships within the emerging adult population. More than that, as a 21 year-old myself, I argue that emerging adults have the capability of changing the dominant paradigm and therefore it is important to fully understand those who can change the future of cultural and societal norms. The current dominant epistemic paradigm negatively impacts psychological research on emerging adult

relationships because it is rooted in cishet values, therefore erasing LGBTQIA+ romantic relationships.

Approximately 14,807,921 people in the United States identify as a part of the LGBTQIA+ population (LGBT Demographic Data Interactive, 2019). Historically, President Bill Clinton approved the *Defense of Marriage Act* which banned same-sex marriage in 1996 and President Trump approved a policy to ban transgender people from serving in the military, LGBTQIA+ individuals have been historically stigmatized and continue to fight for equality (LGBT Rights Milestones Fast Facts, 2019). The dominant paradigms propelled by cultural and social values shape institutional and individual worldviews. The field of psychology has, also, endorsed the marginalization of the LGBTQIA+ community by supporting conversion therapy and dangerous “research” done on gay men such as lobotomies, castration, and testicular transplants leaving patients with physical and psychological trauma (Blakemore, 2018). Further, the *American Psychiatric Association* (APA) reflects the hegemonic norms that thrive within the dominant paradigm, and thus, what is categorized as "abnormal" is rooted in cultural and social values. Individuals (e.g. citizens, Psychiatrists, researchers, psychologists, therapists, etc.) internalize the norms portrayed in academia as fact and further perpetuate these destructive stigmas through the development of cultural and social values – thus creating a cyclical pattern. The APA did not remove homosexuality in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders* (DSM) as a personality disturbance until 1973 which allowed detrimental stigmas to not only thrive within but define the field of psychology. Additionally, while the APA publicly claimed to support the transgender community in 2013, “transvestism” remains in the DSM (American Psychiatric Association, 2017). To change how the APA represents societal

norms, the dominant paradigm's negative impact on psychological research on emerging adult relationships must be transformed.

In order to review the historical and current relevant literature related to the question “how do cisgender values impact LGBTQIA+ representation within emerging adult relationship research” the author used a PRISMA framework that is frequently used in literature reviews followed by a review of the methodology used by the studies examined. The author chose to conduct a qualitative synthesis of emerging adult relationship research because relationship research is methodologically and conceptually diverse. As emerging adults are the drivers to social climates continuing to change, it was determined important to review all research rooted in emerging adult relationships. The author has examined the following issues in designing their review framework: search strategy, inclusion-exclusion criteria, study selection, and data extraction and classification. The author conducted searches in the following databases for the systematic review: EBSCO, ProQuest, Springer, Science Direct, Sage, and Google Scholar. This search was conducted in 2019, in English, by utilizing the syntax: subject terms - ("emerging adult" OR "young adult" OR "emerging adults" OR "adolescence" OR "college age") AND subject terms - ("relationship" OR "romantic relationship" OR "commitment") AND abstract - ("research" OR "review" OR "meta-analysis"). The author only included peer-reviewed articles between the years 2009 and 2019. From the 81 initial records, the author reduced the search to 11 articles which they studied in full text. The criteria used for the exclusion of the articles is as follows: year of publication (older than 2009); relevance of the article regarding the main topic (i.e., the impact of cisgender values on emerging adult research); focus on issues related to the main topic (e.g., gender, sex, relationships, LGBTQIA+ identities, participant exclusion, participant

details, etc.); impossibility to find the full text of the article; full-text articles available but poorly written.

Research on emerging adult relationships is rooted within a cishet paradigm therefore samples are often composed of heterosexual and cisgender individuals, which produces data that excludes LGBTQIA+ voices and relational experiences (Allison, 2016; Brassard, Perron-Laplante, Lachapelle, De Pierrepont & Péloquin, 2018; James-Kangal, Weitbrecht, Francis, & Whitton, 2018; James-Kangal, & Whitton, 2019; Lee, Ylioja & Lackey, 2016; Macapagal, Greene, Rivera & Mustanski, 2015). The dominant cishet paradigm operates from the assumption that gender and sexual orientation are binary. Contrastingly, the LGBTQIA+ community acknowledges that gender and sexual orientation exist on a spectrum. The LGBTQIA+ community offers a more dynamic understanding of gender and sexual identity, acknowledging that both are social constructs derived from a complex intersection between self-identification and sociocultural values. The gender spectrum acknowledges that gender, as a social construct and identity, does not exist as two binary possibilities (male and female). Rather, the gender spectrum is a dynamic and flexible spectrum that includes a myriad of gender identities including gender-nonconforming, agender, transmen, transwomxn, etc. An individual's gender identity does not always overlap with their gender expression (masculine, femme, queer, etc.) and while a person may identify within a gender category, they may express gender differently (e.g. genderqueer but femme presenting). Therefore, research must recognize the different spectrums that people live on within a society.

Cishet sociocultural values color how biological sex is understood. Biological sex is the physiological composition of sex organs, which is often depicted as binary (female = vulva and male = penis). Despite binary cultural assumptions, biological sex also exists on a spectrum and

approximately 1 in every 100 people born in the United States is intersex (Parenthood, 2019). Similarly, sexual orientation exists on a spectrum including many dynamic and multifaceted orientations such as asexual, pansexual, gray-sexual, demisexual, bi-flexible, etc. Despite misconceptions, sex, biological sex, and gender are not interchangeable concepts and should be understood as separate identities that have the potential to overlap or remain separate. Despite socio-cultural acceptance and commonality, present emerging adult relational research is largely composed of studies that operate from the dominant cis-het paradigm, ultimately leading to narrow epistemological assumptions that lack LGBTQIA+ voices and excludes LGBTQIA+ romantic relationships. The LGBTQIA+ community understands that biological sex, gender, and sexual orientation are dynamic socio-cultural constructions and therefore, those within the community have unique insights, which should be included in research.

Binary gender expectations are illustrated in a study conducted by Brassard et al., (2018) who examined intimacy and over-sexualization within the emerging adult population. Even though 30%+ of the emerging adult population exists outside the gender binary, Brassard et al. (2018) used a sample composed of 494 women and 93 men for a total of 587 individuals (LGBT Demographic Data Interactive, 2019). Similarly, James-Kangal et al., (2019), who studied conflict management in emerging adult relationships, exhibited a binary understanding of gender by including 18 men and 27 women for a total of 45 individuals within their sample group. Additionally, Lee et al., (2016), who studied the impact of parental divorce on children's romantic relationships during emerging adulthood, also presented an archaic binary view on gender by using a sample composed of binary options (woman and man). Allison (2016) examined family impact on emerging adult intimacy and utilized a sample group comprised of 63% women and 37% men, exhibiting yet another binary sample within emerging adult



relational research. By contrast, James-Kangal et al., (2018) not only used a binary sample but overrepresented female participants as well. James-Kangal et al., (2018) used a group of 248 participants of which 72.6% identified as female (180 participants) leaving the reader to assume what gender(s) comprises the remaining 27.4%. Similarly, Brassard et al., (2018) used a sample where 82% identified as female -- a non-nationally representative sample as gender ratios in the United States are approximately equal (Duffin, E 2019). Binary sample groups are rooted in the cishet values that are considered the dominant perspective within academic research. By utilizing binary sample groups, LGBTQIA+ relational experiences are ignored by academic research. Erasing the LGBTQIA+ community from relational research impacts the knowledge that is generated from these studies. Relational research findings that come from binary gender samples aid in the development of narrow theories that dismiss the complexities of the relational dynamics of those who exist on the gender spectrum. Furthermore, research is cyclical therefore knowledge that is developed from the dominant paradigm produces findings that reinforce cishet values rather than challenging them. Cishet research and findings have a cascade effect as cishet findings are often reported by mass media sources, which results in the subsequent production and circulation of cishet knowledge and the erasure of LGBTQIA+ voices, thereby exacerbating marginalization.

Psychological data on the course and nature of emerging adult relationships is not generalizable to the target population as approximately 30% of emerging adults identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community (LGBT Demographic Data Interactive, 2019). However, it is imperative to remember that percentages regarding the LGBTQIA+ population are rough approximations due to family relations and social norms; furthermore, the approximations are skewed due to stigma and marginalization. Family relations and social norms impact population

approximations due to the marginalization and stigmas that individuals in the LGBTQIA+ population may experience both within family and public settings. Due to this, not all individuals are comfortable with their sexual or gender identities being public. If more queer voices were represented within academic research, stigmas may lessen, and more individuals will feel safe living their truth. With nearly nine million emerging adults in the LGBTQIA+ community, and in addition to an unknown number who remain suppressed, academic literature should include LGBTQIA+ individuals. Without including this community within academic research, 30%+ of the population is disregarded in data sets on emerging adult relationships. When entire identities are not represented within a sample set, it is impossible for the data to be generalized to the range of relationships present within the target population. Individuals are multidimensional, for this reason, all identities must be represented due to their unique perspectives and experiences. Therefore, academic research must include all identities appropriately within samples to adequately represent the target population (i.e. the sample group used must represent the realistic identity proportions that are within the target population that data is being produced for). It is important to include sexual and gender minority emerging adults in research because their life experiences may alter the course of relationships. Further, when researchers acknowledge the multidimensional nature of a population, their research questions and designs may become more inclusive thus reducing the production of research with poor external validity. As a researcher becomes more informed about a population they are studying, their schemas may also develop, potentially impacting the rate at which assimilation and confirmation bias may be seen. Additionally, by recognizing the multitude of identities within a population, researchers may also develop a more complete understanding of the degrees of causation within their study. Therefore, sexual and gender minority emerging adult identities are beneficial to furthering the

understanding of emerging adult relationships, this is only possible if the research becomes generalizable to the target population.

The removal of asexual is a result of not recognizing the orientation spectrum within relational research. The orientation spectrum represents the range of sexual and romantic orientations, it also allows for the understanding that despite vocabulary being used synonymously between sexual and romantic orientations an individual's sexual and romantic orientation may not necessarily be identical. For example, an individual may identify as asexual (an individual who feels no sexual attraction) however, they may still take part in romantic relationships. Approximately 23% of emerging adults report not engaging in intercourse within the last year, there are a multitude of reasons as to why this is – it is still important to represent this (Smith, Davern, Freese & Morgan 2018).

Not representing the asexual portion of emerging adults is a representation of cis het values that is present within research. For example, Brassard et al. (2018) states that “most participants reported having had intercourse at least once in their lifetime (98.1%)” (p. 238). Including only 1.9% (11 individuals) who did not report having intercourse is a poor representation of the population. By not elaborating the reason that the 1.9% have not had intercourse, Brassard et al., (2018) is not only removing asexual as a sexual orientation from the population but also disregarding the 23% of emerging who have not engaged in intercourse. It is important to recognize that asexuality is not synonymous with celibacy, and there are asexual individuals who do/have engage in sexual activities with themselves as well as others (Williams College Davis Center, n.d.). Ignoring these individuals does not accurately represent the emerging adult population and is damaging to the social understandings of sexuality. Similarly, Macapagal et al., (2015) studied the progression of 36 LGBTQIA+ relationships using dyadic

interviews, excluded participants from the sample group who were not sexually active, which removes asexual demographics from the LGBTQTIA+ community. If relational research begins recognizing the orientation spectrum, more LGBTQTIA+ individuals will see their identities being represented and may be more willing to both live their truth publicly and take part in relational research. Researchers make pivotal choices on what society should consider important enough to study. As researchers deliberately choose to include suppressed groups, their societies may begin to consider minority populations as meaningful factors in their lives. By doing this, it may create a safer and more inclusive environment where all individuals may thrive.

Metanalytic studies and a broader critique are needed to measure the effects of the cishet paradigm on relational research. The exclusion of those within the LGBTQTIA+ community in research can be explained by three factors. To avoid the further perpetuation of cishet norms in academia there should be more research conducted to better understand the evolution of LGBTQTIA+ emerging adult relationships. The purpose of research is to answer unexplored questions and the applicability of the data produced is directly reliant on researchers developing a study design and sample groups that are representative of the target population. The presence of the cishet paradigm is related to the erasure of LGBTQTIA+ individuals. First, researchers struggle to develop consistent, universal, operational definitions of identities within the LGBTQTIA+ community. However, if researchers provide clear operational definitions, specific to their research, it will help prevent misunderstandings and aid the sample group in being able to correctly identify themselves. Furthermore, developing standard definitions within official surveys (i.e. census) would aid in creating consistency in sexual orientation and gender identity definitions in all fields. Creating operational definitions that go beyond psychological research would aid individuals questioning their identities, medical professionals attempting to determine

the best care options, population research, etc. Second, LGBTQIA+ individuals may be reluctant to disclose their sexual and gender orientations based on the threat of social ostracization, stigma, and violence. This dilemma can be mitigated by creating a research environment that ensures confidentiality and/or anonymity. By ensuring confidentiality/anonymity more LGBTQIA+ individuals may choose to take part in emerging adult relationship research (Beskow, Check & Ammarell 2014; Kaiser, 2009). If the participants identity must be disclosed within a research study, ensuring a participant's response within a study stay confidential may aid in increased participation. Finally, researchers are often not equipped with an appropriate understanding of the target population, resulting in the perpetuation of stigmas. Researchers should take part in education courses that not only challenge the cishet paradigm but is multiculturally inclusive and representative of the target population. Education courses that may be beneficial may include training in the use of inclusive language and understanding the historical injustices and violence enacted by psychologists toward the LGBTQIA+ community. Beyond producing metanalytical studies, I recommend specific qualitative studies focused on the emerging adult LGBTQIA+ relational experience be conducted. Questions within these studies should be focused on the multidimensionality of romantic relationships. Specifically, the emerging adult human experience within the LGBTQIA+ community.

The field of psychology claims to be diverse and inclusive; however, psychological research on emerging adult relationships does not reflect this claim. LGBTQIA+ individuals have unique and indispensable experiences that may change the course of relational research. An examination of LGBTQIA+ relationships will offer a broader, more holistic view of relational development and present unique aspects of romantic relationships that have not yet been considered. Furthermore, when relational research includes those within the LGBTQIA+

community, data will be distributed through mass media sources, therefore challenging the dominant cis-het paradigm, and disrupting outdated binary assumptions. However, LGBTQIA+ relational representation can only happen if psychological research on emerging adult relationships is no longer rooted within cis-het values, thereby ending the erasure of LGBTQIA+ relationships. Emerging adult relational research is crucial in better understanding human interactions and creating inclusive research will provide applicable knowledge for every form of individual within the emerging adult population.

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