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Life satisfaction and sexual minorities: Evidence from Australia and the United Kingdom

Nattavudh Powdthavee^a, Mark Wooden^{b,*}^a Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics, and Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, University of Melbourne, Australia^b Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, University of Melbourne, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Very little is known about how the differential treatment of sexual minorities could influence subjective reports of overall well-being. This paper seeks to fill this gap. Data from two large surveys that provide nationally representative samples for two different countries – Australia and the UK – are used to estimate a simultaneous equations model of life satisfaction. The model allows for self-reported sexual identity to influence a measure of life satisfaction both directly and indirectly through seven different channels: (i) income; (ii) employment; (iii) health (iv) marriage and de facto relationships; (v) children; (vi) friendship networks; and (vii) education. Lesbian, gay and bisexual persons are found to be significantly less satisfied with their lives than otherwise comparable heterosexual persons. In both countries this is the result of a combination of direct and indirect effects.

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1. Introduction

There is an emerging new approach to studying the empirical determinants of life satisfaction (and subjective well-being more generally). By applying structural equation modeling techniques on life satisfaction data, researchers have been able to identify and explicate the potential mechanisms that underlie an observed relationship between life satisfaction and its predictors (e.g., [Layard et al., 2014](#); [Powdthavee et al., 2015](#)). This paper continues that avenue of research, but in a different sphere. It focuses on the relatively unexplored links, as well as the potential underlying mechanisms, between sexual identity and life satisfaction.

Why should economists care about the existence and the underlying processes of such links? Beginning with the seminal works of [Myrdal \(1944\)](#) and [Becker \(1957\)](#), economists have long been interested in the welfare implications of taste-based discrimination, but with most research focused on its consequences for women, racial minorities and older people. Only relatively recently have economists attempted to address whether there exists discrimination based on an individual's sexual preferences, behavior or identity, with most attention focused on wage differentials ([Klawitter, 2015](#)). There have also been a small number of relatively small-scale experimental studies showing that sexual minorities face discrimination in domains other than pay, including the probability of getting a call-back for a job interview (e.g., [Weichselbaumer, 2003](#)), access to housing ([Ahmed and Hammarstedt, 2009](#)), and access to quality health care ([Heck et al., 2006](#)). Nevertheless, and despite

* Corresponding author at: Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, Level 5, FBE Building, University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia. Tel.: +61 3 83442089.

E-mail address: m.wooden@unimelb.edu.au (M. Wooden).

these recent advances, the implications of someone's sexual orientation for their well-being continues to be imperfectly understood.

In this paper we take a different approach to studying the well-being of sexual minorities. Rather than focusing on a single outcome from one domain of a person's life, we attempt to assess the overall well-being of people with different sexual orientations. Overall well-being is, for example, often measured with a global cognitive evaluation of life satisfaction (Cummins, 2013). Certainly this has been the approach most favored by economists and policy makers who are interested in public policies designed to improve people's overall quality of life (Dolan et al., 2008). However, and despite the vast number of studies that have examined determinants of life satisfaction, we are unaware of any serious research quantifying differences in life satisfaction between the lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) population and the heterosexual population. Further, to the best of our knowledge, there have only been two previous studies that have tried to quantify the differences between LGB and heterosexual populations using other global measures of well-being, both of which analyzed a measure of happiness. Using cross-sectional data from the 2007 Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey in the UK, Chakraborty et al. (2011) examined associations between sexual orientation and a range of measures of psychological well-being, including a simple binary measure of happiness. They found that homosexuals in the UK were significantly less likely to report being "fairly or very happy" than heterosexuals, with estimated adjusted odds ratios ranging from .67 to .75.¹ This analysis, however, involved the inclusion of very few controls (just gender, ethnicity and education). Very different is the earlier analysis of pooled cross-section data from the US General Social Survey (covering the period 1988–2002) by Blanchflower and Oswald (2004). Using an extensive set of controls they did not find any statistically significant differences in the self-reported happiness of Americans with same-sex partners and those with partners of the opposite sex.

In short, we know relatively little about the quantitative differences in life satisfaction of people with different sexual orientations. Filling this research gap is the principal aim of this study. Specifically, we use data from two large population surveys, which contain similar self-reported measures of both sexual identity and overall life satisfaction, to estimate a structural equations model of the predictors of life satisfaction that distinguishes some of the channels through which life satisfaction might be affected. This is an important contribution and sets our work apart from most previous research into subjective well-being (SWB). We are thus interested in not just whether sexual minorities report being more or less satisfied with their lives, but in identifying the relative importance of the different predictors of well-being (and ill-being) that might contribute to any differential between sexual minorities and the heterosexual population.

The analysis is also distinctive in its use of data providing nationally representative samples for two countries – Australia and the UK – which, while different, have broadly similar contextual characteristics; they share a common language and cultural heritage, and have similar political and legal institutions. We also suspect that the general attitudes of the broad population toward sexual minorities are similar in both countries. The Pew Research Centre (2013), for example, reports cross-country survey evidence from 2013 showing the proportion of persons who agree that society should accept homosexuality was similarly high in both Australia and the UK (79% and 76%, respectively).² Finding results that are consistent across these two country-specific samples would thus provide added confidence that the results obtained are not simply the result of chance.

2. Conceptual framework and related research

To be useful, a model of life satisfaction of sexual minorities should allow life satisfaction to be proximally affected by other outcomes that are potentially related to an individual's sexual orientation. These include, but are not necessarily limited to, those that can be called 'economic' (e.g., income, employment, educational qualifications), those that are 'social' (e.g., family status, children, social networks), and those that are 'personal' (e.g., health) (Layard et al., 2014).

Fig. 1 illustrates the model that underlies our analysis. Life satisfaction is the measure of the overall quality of life of an individual, and is determined partly by intermediate outcomes and partly by the person's sexual orientation (represented here by a measure of sexual identity). But these intermediate outcomes also have to be explained by the sexual orientation of the respondent, with the key issue being the relative importance of the different links in the chain that predict life satisfaction of sexual minorities.³ We select seven intermediate outcomes as potential mediators of sexual orientation. These are: (i) income; (ii) employment; (iii) marriage and other forms of cohabiting partnerships (or de facto relationships); (iv) children; (v) health; (vi) friendship networks; and (vii) education.

We do not pretend that these seven intermediate outcomes is an exhaustive list of all possible mediating influences. Rather this choice reflects in part what the separate literatures on life satisfaction and on sexual minorities suggest are likely to be the most important channels, and in part what is available in the datasets at our disposal. There is, for example, considerable evidence that sexual minorities are at greater risk of being victims of physical and sexual violence and other forms of aggression and abuse (e.g., Moracco et al., 2007; Conron et al., 2010; Rothman et al., 2011), which could then lead to

¹ Chakraborty et al. (2011) employed two different measures of sexual orientation; one based on sexual identity and one based on the sex of the respondent's sexual partners. Choice of measure had relatively little influence on the results.

² Governments in the UK, however, appear to have been much more supportive of homosexuality than in Australia. This is reflected in legislation that came into force in March 2014 permitting same-sex marriage.

³ For simplicity, we assume that all of the variables in the SEM model are observed rather than latent variables.

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