



Border identities: Intersections of ethnicity and sexual orientation in the U.S.–Mexico borderland

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ABSTRACT

The U.S. census data reveal high concentrations of same-sex unmarried partners in areas along the U.S.–Mexico border. In this article, I consider whether the above-average prevalence rates of same-sex unmarried partners along the U.S.–Mexico border can be attributed to measurement error, whether they provide evidence of enclave-like areas for Hispanic same-sex partners, or some combination thereof. Drawing on descriptive statistics and logistic regression analyses, I examine data validity issues, as well as possible explanations for the high presence of gay men and lesbians in these particular residential locations. In doing so, I pay particular attention to the role of ethnicity, language, and household size in creating potential measurement error, as well as in generating attractive enclave characteristics. These findings provide insight into both the validity of the U.S. census data on same-sex unmarried partners, as well as the role of the intersection of sexual orientation and Hispanic ethnicity in determining residential choice. Although undoubtedly measurement error is a contributing factor, findings nonetheless support the existence of actual gay and lesbian enclaves and further suggest that immigration could play a role in generating these high concentration areas.

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1. Introduction

Previous research has employed the 1990 and 2000 United States Census data on same-sex unmarried partners to provide quantifiable evidence of a phenomenon already well-known and observed: Gay¹ men and lesbians are not evenly distributed throughout the country (Gates and Ost, 2004; Baumle et al., 2009). Data reflect that there are a number of areas in the U.S. that contain notably high concentrations of gay men and lesbians. Some of these areas are well-known, such as the Castro and Mission Districts of San Francisco, Seattle's Capital Hill, and the Montrose neighborhood of Houston (Abrahamson 2002). The census data, however, reflect other high concentration areas that are less widely known and, in some cases, quite unexpected. Solely within the Lower Rio Grande Valley Area of Texas, one can find three Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) with above-average concentrations of partnered gay men and lesbians: McAllen, Laredo, and Brownsville. These three areas have also been

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¹ I refer to respondents to the census and in our interviews as either same-sex partners or "gay men" and "lesbians" (Baumle et al., 2009). I select this particular terminology at a time when they are both common and accepted labels in the gay and lesbian community, as well as in the academic literature. Nonetheless, I remain cognizant that for some individuals, the terms "gay" or "lesbian" do not capture their sexual identities. For some, lesbian suggests a politicized identity (Zita, 1992) and for others, identity differs based on class and race distinctions (Valocchi, 1999). When referring to census data, however, I do not have information on a preferred sexual identity, and I choose not to identify our interview subjects by varying identities for both consistency and confidentiality purposes. Finally, I note that many have argued against the use of the term "homosexual" as a noun, suggesting that this phrase carries negative connotations reflecting issues and dimensions of psychological abnormality (Risman and Schwartz, 1988; Boswell, 1980; Foucault, 1978). Consequently, I have avoided using "homosexual" or "gay" as nouns, due to this possible interpretation; instead, homosexual and gay are used only as adjectives (Risman and Schwartz, 1988; Boswell, 1980).

identified as the top three “metropolitan statistical areas with the highest concentration of Hispanic same-sex couples among all households”² in the nation (Gates and Ost 2004). The presence of above-average concentrations of same-sex partners in the MSAs that border Mexico likely comes as a surprise to many. Indeed, the data reflect the presence of 42 above-average MSAs in the states falling on the U.S.–Mexico Border (Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas).

The validity of the census data on same-sex couples has been the subject of much debate (see e.g. Black et al. 2000; O’Connell and Gooding 2006, 2007; Baumle et al. 2009). In 1990 and 2000, the U.S. census captured data on same-sex couples via the “unmarried partner” category. The category permits individuals with a close romantic relationship to identify themselves as “unmarried partners;” this option is available for individuals in a relationship with someone of the same sex or opposite sex. Many have questioned whether respondents understand the implications of the “unmarried partner” response, including its connotations of a “marriage-like” relationship (see e.g. Black et al. 2000; Baumle et al. 2009). Further, concerns regarding the existence of an undercount of the gay and lesbian population, as well as related validity issues, have been raised. Many of these concerns have been previously addressed, and most findings suggest that they do not appear to foster a bias that would suggest the data are inappropriate for such analyses (Black et al. 2000; O’Connell and Gooding 2006, 2007; Baumle et al. 2009).

Although this might be true of the census data as a whole, the data may be more problematic when attempting to examine subparts of the gay and lesbian population. Specifically, the aforementioned high prevalence of gay men and lesbians in U.S. border towns comes as a surprise to many, and raises a question as to whether Hispanic individuals living in these areas are perhaps failing to understand the meaning of the Bureau’s “unmarried partner” category. The above-average prevalence rates in border towns could be attributable to language and/or cultural barriers which cause confusion in responding to the census questionnaire. If this is the case, then these data reflect concentrations of gay men and lesbians that are not, in fact, present.

Conversely, if the rates are accurately gauging gay male and lesbian prevalence in the border towns, then the motivation for same-sex partners to reside in these particular towns is unclear. The same-sex partners living in these areas could be immigrants from Latin America, under the (perhaps mistaken) belief that they will find a more accepting environment in the U.S. borderland. It is also possible that the border towns are simply a destination for Hispanic gay men and lesbians from throughout the U.S., who choose these particular enclaves as symbolic of their ethnic and sexual identities.

In this article, I explore whether the above-average prevalence rates for MSAs on the U.S.–Mexico border are attributable to measurement error, and/or whether they provide evidence of enclave-like areas for Hispanic same-sex partners. Drawing on descriptive statistics and logistic regression analyses, I examine data validity issues, as well as possible explanations for the high presence of gay men and lesbians in these particular residential locations. In doing so, I pay particular attention to the role of ethnicity, language, and household size in creating potential measurement error, as well as in generating attractive enclave characteristics. These findings provide insight into both the validity of the U.S. census data on same-sex unmarried partner, as well as the role of the intersection of sexual orientation and Hispanic ethnicity in determining residential choice. Although undoubtedly measurement error is a contributing factor, findings nonetheless support the existence of actual gay and lesbian enclaves and further suggest that immigration could play a role in generating these high concentration areas.

2. High prevalence areas on the border: fact or fiction?

In this article, I draw on data from the five percent Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) from the 2000 United States Census.³ In the 1990 and 2000 censuses, the “unmarried partner” response was added to other categories (husband, wife, son, grandfather, etc.) on the census question asking the respondent about his/her “relationship to the head householder.” The “unmarried partner” response permits the identification of persons in the household who are not related to the person identified as the head householder, but who have a “marriage-like” relationship with this person. Census procedures allow respondents to check the “unmarried partner” category, regardless of their sex or the sex of the head householder. It is assumed that these data represent same-sex households (male–male or female–female) occupied by partnered gay men, or by partnered lesbians since the “unmarried partner” response is meant to reflect a “marriage-like” relationship between the two persons (Baumle et al., 2009; Black et al., 2000, 2002; Simmons and O’Connell, 2003a,b; Walther and Poston, 2004; Gates and Ost, 2004).

Drawing upon the census data, one can examine the prevalence of same-sex unmarried partners within the United States. The prevalence of same-sex partners within the MSAs can be measured via a gay and lesbian index that indicates the number of same-sex households in a MSA per 1000 total households in the MSA (Gates and Ost 2004). Using this index, the census data reflect above-average concentrations of same-sex couples in 39 of the MSAs that fall within states on the U.S./Mexico border (see Table 1). Out of the 139 MSAs with an above-average prevalence of same-sex partners, approximately 30 percent fall within the four states on the U.S./Mexico border. Further, it is notable that almost all of the high concentration MSAs in the border states are located within the southern portions of these states, close to the U.S./Mexico border.

² This includes only those MSAs with more than 50 Hispanic same-sex couples.

³ The data for this study were obtained from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), maintained by the Minnesota Population Center at the University of Minnesota (Ruggles et al., 2004).

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