

Erin Lavender-Stott

Research Statement

My overarching research interests lie in gender and sexuality within the context of family diversity. Currently my research focuses on sexuality development, sexual minority individuals across the life course, and singlehood. I have had extensive training in both qualitative and quantitative methods. My current research primarily uses qualitative methods, as well as feminist theoretical framework and life course theory.

One of the main projects I am working on is the intersection of singlehood and being an older adult for sexual minority women. Singlehood status for women primarily has taken on a deficit discussion within the academic literature as well as lay discussions. Singlehood, historically, has meant not being in a heterosexual relationship and lesbian women were considered single, as their relationships were not legally recognized. Single and sexual minority women have more choices to live outside heterosexual marriage financially and socially in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Single lesbian women of the baby boom generation, in particular, came of age during the time of greater acceptance and are beginning to plan for and enter old age. My primary focus is studying how single sexual minority women of the baby boom generation define family and plan for their later years.

Another project that I have worked on, with colleagues at my current institution, is on the experiences of Black sexual minority individual's within their families, the Black community, and the LGBTQ+ community. The challenges related to multiple minority statuses could be buffered by informal support systems, such as affinity communities, but many are rendered invisible within the communities. This project focused on the intersecting identities of racial and sexual minority individuals and their sense of belongingness or invisibility within the community groups or fictive kin networks they belong to. The aim of the project was to understand this sense of belongingness to social support networks of communities and families and how that can influence individuals' health decisions.

Within the sexuality development focus, I am interested in how individuals gain an understanding about sex and sexuality as well as identity development within sexuality. One of the long-term studies I worked on focused on the lived experiences of sexual minority youth and their decision to disclose their sexual identity to their families and their family's experiences with the disclosure. Studying the decision process of how sexual minority youth have in coming out can aid in a better understanding of the process in which people of all ages go through before coming out. The long-term goal of the study is to find better ways for youth, particularly in rural areas, to discuss the decision process and the actual events of disclosing one's sexual identity. This has resulted in posters and papers presented at regional and national conferences. The challenges we faced while recruiting and interviewing youth in a rural area has produced a paper that is currently under review.

Another project within the area of sexuality development is how young men and women gain an understanding about sex through seeing sexual images for the first time. Young men and women from human sexuality courses were asked to respond to prompts about the first time they saw a sexual image, the context around the experience, and how they responded to seeing the

image. This project has resulted in a publication in *Family Relations*, a manuscript under review, and one in progress.

Earlier in my training, I studied similarity and how that in relation to one's gender influenced kin investment, including physical and personality similarity and naming practices within families. This project was funded through the Virginia Federation of Independent Colleges and resulted in research presented at regional and international conferences. Following this work and within my interest in similarity, my interest in sexual minority individuals also took shape. I focused on assortative mating in same-sex couples during my master's work. This project resulted in posters presented at regional and national conferences and a paper in progress. In these projects, I used frameworks stemming from evolutionary theory, as well as used quantitative methods and online survey procedures.

An additional aspect of my training beyond my family research interests, was through the College of Health and Human Services, particularly the School of Nursing, at University of North Carolina Wilmington, where I worked on projects related to educating future health and human service workers and community nurses. The aim was to evaluate applied learning and critical thinking for students within the Bachelor's of Nursing program. The project provided me a broader base of working with qualitative and quantitative research. Working with the School of Nursing provided a cross-disciplinary understanding of human services work as well as pedagogical methods. The projects primarily were used to develop new directions in teaching and learning across the university. The findings were also presented at an international teaching and learning conference as well as a publication.

In the future I plan to continue working within the three areas of focus that I have. Within sexuality development, I will extend my work on sexual identity development, particularly for older sexual minority adults, including those who have previously been in heterosexual relationships. For some, this includes having a shift in sexual identity in adulthood following a previous heterosexual relationship. Additionally, as there is an assumption in the literature on sexual minority older adults is that they are not in contact with their families of origin and that they are single and childless. I hope to do more work on the family lives of sexual minority older adults. Finally, within singlehood, the number of individuals who are single at any given time has grown in the past decades to approximately 51%, thus understanding and learning more about individuals who are single is important. Thus, I hope to learn more about the family lives and social supports of individuals who are ever-single and are not seeking out partners, across the life course.

The research I have done before has led me to where I am now within the topics of interest as well as the theoretical frameworks and methods. My interest in familial similarity and partner similarity led me to sexual minority partnership research. Then, I turned to sexual identity development, which led me to my current primary project of single sexual minority women and sexual minority older adults. The research skills and focus areas will carry me to my next projects.