

Marital Dissolution and Mental Health:

A Study of Divorcing Women in Same-Sex and Different-Sex Couples

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Abstract

Several studies from Nordic countries have shown that women in same-sex couples are more likely to experience divorce than their peers in different-sex marriages. Nevertheless, surprisingly limited evidence is available on changes in the wellbeing of women before and after divorce, based on whether they were married to men or women. Such findings could enhance our understanding of the intersections of family and gender norms and how they influence wellbeing over the life course. Using population-based data of divorcing women of same-sex and different-sex couples, the present study assessed changes in women's mental health—as measured by using antidepressants—for three years before and after divorce. The study employed longitudinal data for Finland and repeated-measures logistic regression analyses. Three years before divorce, the annual prevalence of using any antidepressants was higher for divorcing women in same-sex couples than for divorcing women in different-sex couples. Both groups of women experienced elevated levels of antidepressant use in the year before divorce and in the year of divorce. The increase associated with divorce appeared somewhat higher for women in same-sex couples. The differences were relatively small, however. The results align with prior qualitative studies, indicating that women who divorce women may have more mental health problems associated with divorce, given that their grief may be less recognized and supported by their family members.

Introduction

There is qualitative evidence to suggest that same-sex couples may receive less social support and recognition for their grief over a failed relationship, given that heteronormativity may still operate by marginalising emotions of women who divorce women (Lahti & Kolehmainen, 2020). This could cause larger negative effects on their mental health during the transition to divorce. Empirical studies on changes in mental health for women in same-sex couples are seldom available, however. On the other hand, for women in same-sex relationship, “it might be easier to distance oneself from the cultural ideal that the longer a relationship lasts, the better it is” (Lahti & Kolehmainen, 2020). This could help to buffer the negative health effects of divorce. Women in same-sex couples are known to have elevated divorce risks (Andersson & Kolk, 2016; Einiö & Ponkilainen, 2025).

The aim of the current study is to assess changes in women’s mental health—as measured by antidepressant use—for three years before and after divorce, distinguishing between same-sex and different-sex couples.

Data and Methods

The data sample was based on the total population data of female same-sex couples and different-sex couples who formed their registered partnership or different-sex marriage in Finland from March 1, 2002, to December 31, 2015. I restricted the data to couples, in which at least one spouse was born in Finland, formed a first marriage or partnership, and lived in Finland in the year of registration or marriage. I included only couples whose marriages or registered partnerships lasted at least three years and who divorced between 2005 and 2018, to allow for a three-year follow-up of antidepressant use (2002-2021). The data on demographic characteristics derived from Statistics Finland and the data on antidepressant purchases derived from the prescription register maintained by the Social Insurance Institution. I included annual purchases of antidepressants (Anatomical Therapeutic Chemical code: N06A) and of antidepressants in combination with psycholeptics (code: N06CA01).

The time surrounding divorce was divided into seven one-year observation windows around the year of divorce (i.e., years -3, -2, -1, 0, +1, +2, +3). I used repeated-measures logistic regression analysis (i.e., population-averaged logit models) with an outcome of one if an individual had used antidepressants and zero otherwise.

Results and Discussion

Three years before divorce, the annual prevalence of using antidepressants was higher for divorcing women in same-sex couples than for women in different-sex couples. The difference was large. This aligns with prior studies of minority stress (Meyer, 2003). On the other hand, both groups of women experienced increases in antidepressant use in the year before divorce and in the year of divorce. This is in line with empirical studies of different-sex couples' divorce and its negative consequences (Metsä-Simola & Martikainen, 2013). In our study, the increase in mental health problems, as measured using antidepressants, associated with divorce was somewhat higher for women in same-sex couples than different-sex couples. The difference was small. However, this aligns with prior qualitative evidence, indicating that same-sex couples may receive less social support and recognition for their grief over a failed relationship, given that heteronormativity may still operate by marginalising emotions of women who divorce women (Lahti & Kolehmainen, 2020). This could have caused their somewhat larger negative health effects of divorce.

References

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