

The content of this research brief summarizes the main results of a literature review carried out in Summer/Fall of 2017 on chosen families and social networks, and expands on the important concepts to remember. This content will be used to produce research material for and analyze the results of the UNIE-LGBTQ Project.

CHOSEN FAMILY AND SOCIAL NETWORKS: HOW ARE THEY IMPORTANT TO LGBTQ PEOPLE?

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Chosen families and social networks are important concepts to consider when studying the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or queer (LGBTQ) people, in particular when we are interested in their stories of social inclusion and exclusion. The following pages will detail the ways in which LGBTQ people can have more distant relationships to their families of origin when their identities are not accepted and how social networks can be a significant source of support.

Chosen Families

A chosen family can be defined as a group of individuals with whom a person maintains relationships based on trust and solidarity. **The principle characteristics of these relationships are a shared history and high availability among these individuals which manifest as material and emotional support, among other things** (Weeks, Heaphy & Donovan, 2001; Weeks, 2011; Weston, 1991). The members of an individual's chosen family can therefore be viewed as the people with whom he/she/they have developed meaningful ties which are translated, among other things, into mutual aid and concern (e.g. sharing tasks, providing care). The meaning of these relationships for an individual has more to do with how he/she/they perceive them, rather than with any body or institution they may be a part of or from which they have been excluded. Members belong to an individual's chosen family because he/she/they consider themselves to be a part of it (Weeks, 2011; Weston, 1991). It's possible for members of an individual's family origin to be a part of their chosen family or to not be part of it.

The matter of friendships among LGBTQ people is also important to discuss when studying chosen families. These relationships are elective, that is, they are not obligatory. They illustrate the nuance between relationships based on intimacy, commitment and the choice to be in a relationship, as opposed to relationships based on obligatory connections or duties related to pre-determined roles (e.g. co-workers or members of our family of origin who we would not see if we did not have to go to work or to family gatherings). The ties that exist between so-called "traditional" family members (people with whom we have biological relationships or with whom we have grown up) can be perceived as too restrictive or not strong enough for some people to view them as relationships that are as meaningful as other deeper relationships they have developed over time. For many LGBTQ people who say they have a chosen family, it can also be seen as a strong affirmation of their feelings of belonging to a community. It has often been observed that this family is coupled with an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity. Friendships between LGBTQ people can be intense and be extremely meaningful. For LGBTQ people, they are also often perceived as the stablest and most durable form of relationship (Weeks et al., 2001). Despite the fact that most people continue to hold a fundamental distinction between friendship and kinship in terms of obligations and commitments, many LGBTQ people assign friendship with a meaning and depth that surpasses conventional patterns. They distinguish friends of their "chosen family" from those they consider simply as "friends" based on, for example, the support that they offer in an emotional (e.g. listening, empathy, intimacy) or material (e.g. driving someone to the airport, lending books, clothes or tools, feeding their pets when they are away) sense, in addition to the fact that they share a common history (e.g. rituals such as regularly preparing meals or celebrating Christmas together) (Weston, 1991). These characteristics also distinguish chosen family members from other individuals in their social network.

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It should be noted that many of the studies on LGBTQ chosen families focus on older people because they generally do not have informal social resources as solid as those of senior cisgender (that is, people who identify as the gender they were assigned at birth, as opposed to the term "trans") heterosexuals (Harley, Gassaway & Dunkley, 2016). Many older LGBTQ people are not in contact with their families of origin. As elder LGBTQ people age, their systems of social support become essential since they are more at risk of suffering from isolation. Therefore, older LGBTQ people benefit in particular from being able to invest more time and energy into their chosen family, including friends, neighbours or members of their family of origin.

Social Networks

A social network can be defined as the collection of relationships an individual maintains with people in his/her/their immediate or extended social circles, as well as representatives of various social institutions (Boucher & Laprise, 2001). A social network is continuously changing. The dynamic of an individual's personal networks can be the result of multiple processes that depend on 1) the characteristics of these networks, 2) the nature of the relationships uniting the people who make up these networks or

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3) significant events that change the course of someone's life (e.g. separation, moving, birth or adopting a child). These processes often lead to relationships being reorganized (Bidart, Degenne & Grossetti, 2011). For example, a separation can lead to the loss of contact with the ex-partner's social circle, leading an individual to mourn the loss of some of these close friends and to rebuild his/her/their personal network.

An important aspect to understand when it comes to experiences of social inclusion and exclusion of LGBTQ people is the functions of a social network or, in other terms, the types of support that a social network can provide. A social network provides **four main types of support:**

1. **Emotional support**, which translates into demonstrations of empathy, kindness and approval that satisfy emotional needs (e.g. loving and being loved) and self-worth needs, such as self-esteem and confidence (Beauregard & Dumont, 1996; Boucher & Laprise, 2001).
2. **Material support**, which includes different types of practical assistance, such as means of transportation, assistance in running errands and assistance when moving, as well as financial support (Beauregard & Dumont, 1996; Boucher & Laprise, 2001; Caron & Guay, 2005).
3. **Informational support**, which consists of providing and receiving information, opinions and advice (Beauregard & Dumont, 1996; Boucher & Laprise, 2001; Caron & Guay, 2005; Carpentier & White, 2001).
4. **Social companionship**, a form of support related to mentoring or socialization which can work to prevent isolation (Beauregard & Dumont, 1996; Boucher & Laprise, 2001; Carpentier & White, 2001).

Social media can also provide vectors for these forms of support. The internet has changed the meaning that gender and sexual minorities give to the LGBTQ community thanks to an increase in the number of online groups and resources which, for example, enable them to contact others living in rural areas where there are few (or smaller) LGBTQ associations (Chamberland, Blais, Corriveau, Lévy, Richard & Ryan, 2010). More and more authors are questioning the gap that usually exists between concrete relationships based in space-time and "virtual" relationships (Bidart *et al.*, 2011). They note, for example, how it is now possible to maintain strong relationships across vast geographic divides thanks to modern telecommunications.

All of these forms of assistance can be mobilized in a moment when an individual is in need of it (Boucher & Laprise, 2001). Social support can be viewed as the sum of all the actions taken to come to the aid of this person (Beauregard & Dumont, 1996). In other words, social support is a complex phenomenon that provides individuals, groups and communities with the benefits associated with giving, receiving and feeling the positive effects of a diverse range of given or received helpful actions (Boucher & Laprise, 2001). Because of this, despite the fact that studies on relationships of mutual support generally make a wide distinction between family and non-family networks (Mercklé, 2004), it is clear that an individual's family can be included in these social networks.

Relationships of support are often found in an individual's social networks. **Support networks** are made up of individuals with meaningful close relationships that create a feeling of belonging and recognition, and result in an exchange of emotional, instrumental or informational resources (Caron & Guay, 2005). They are the subsection of an individual's social network that he/she/they can turn to in order to obtain assistance (Beauregard & Dumont, 1996).

For gender and sexual minorities, feeling integrated into the LGBTQ community can lead to an increased feeling of social and psychological well-being. (Kertzner, Meyer, Frost & Stirratt, 2009). Another form of support networks that exists, particularly for youth, are ones tied to sexuality (sexuality-related social support) that is, support networks that are specific to issues related to sexuality (Snapp, Watson, Russell, Diaz & Ryan, 2015). Obtaining support from family members, friends and the community in this regard can have positive impacts. The LGBTQ community, for example, can provide a feeling of belonging (Johns, Pingel, Youatt, Soler, McClelland & Bauermeister, 2013). Youth can discuss their LGBTQ identities among themselves and feel they are understood and recognized and accepted just as they are. For senior LGBTQ people who are more at risk of isolation, extending their support network can have a positive impact on their physical and mental health (Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kim, Shiu, Goldsen & Emler, 2015). In short, the LGBTQ community and an individual's social network can be considered as significant sources of social support for LGBTQ people (Johns *et al.*, 2013).

The impact that social inequalities can have in this context are rarely envisaged and yet the community in which we are brought up, the education we pursue, the profession we practice, the events in our lives and the personal choices we make all leave their mark on and shape our networks (Bidart *et al.*, 2011).

Unfortunately, the social support received by an individual can at times have negative impacts. For example, a partner, parents or co-workers can put stressful demands on a person that cancel out the beneficial effects of the support they may provide (Carpentier & White, 2001). The tendency when thinking of an individual's social networks is to picture a world of solidarity and reciprocity. The impact that social inequalities can have in this context is rarely envisaged. Yet the community in which we are brought up, the education we pursue, the profession we practice, the events in our lives and the personal choices we make all leave their mark on and shape our networks (Bidart *et al.*, 2011). People tend to surround themselves with others similar to themselves (Schaefer, 2010). The result is that their social circles generally offer resources they already have access to. In addition, the extent to which these social circles have an influence on the circulation of available resources for an individual can bring about inequalities (Bidart *et al.*, 2011). The importance of this context in the study of social support is becoming increasingly recognized. The way in which received support is perceived and appreciated often varies according to the position an individual holds in society (Carpentier & White, 2001). In other words, unequal relationships between people within a network can be directly linked to social inequalities. This reality is particularly important to consider in a context where, as in our society, LGBTQ people may still face a variety of forms of exclusion.

These definitions of the concepts of chosen family and social networks can assist in better understanding not only certain situations of exclusion, but also of inclusion particular to the experiences of LGBTQ people. They are therefore essential concepts to consider when analyzing experiences of social inclusion and exclusion recounted by LGBTQ people of different age groups, which we will soon be carrying out as part of the UNIE-LGBTQ Project.

For more information on the Understanding Inclusion and Exclusion of LGBTQ People (UNIE-LGBTQ) Project of the Chaire de recherche sur l'homophobie at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM):

savie-lgbtq.uqam.ca

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