

Are Gay and Lesbian Cohabiting Couples *Really* Different From Heterosexual Married Couples?

Both partners from gay and lesbian cohabiting couples without children were compared longitudinally with both partners from heterosexual married couples with children (N at first assessment = 80, 53, and 80 couples, respectively) on variables from 5 domains indicative of relationship health. For 50% of the comparisons, gay and lesbian partners did not differ from heterosexual partners. Seventy-eight percent of the comparisons on which differences were found indicated that gay or lesbian partners functioned better than heterosexual partners did. Because the variables that predicted concurrent relationship quality and relationship stability for heterosexual parents also did so for gay and lesbian partners, I conclude that the processes that regulate relationship functioning generalize across gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples.

Despite the current controversy surrounding same-sex marriage in the United States, there are no reliable estimates of the number of American gay and lesbian couples. Survey data indicate that between 40% and 60% of gay men and between 45% and 80% of lesbians are currently involved in a romantic relationship (Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994; Falkner & Garber, 2002; Morris, Balsam, & Rothblum, 2002). Data from the 2000 United States Cen-

sus (Simmons & O'Connell, 2003) indicate that of the 5.5 million couples who were living together but not married, about 1 in 9 (594,391) involved same-sex couples. Other survey data indicate that between 18% and 28% of gay couples and between 8% and 21% of lesbian couples have lived together 10 or more years (*The Advocate* sex poll, 2002; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Bryant & Demian, 1994; Falkner & Garber, 2002; Kurdek, 2003a). Because presenting oneself publicly as part of a gay or lesbian couple opens the door for discrimination, abuse, and even violence (Bryant & Demian; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001; Meyer, 2003), these numbers are likely to be underestimates. Nonetheless, it is clear that despite a general social climate of prejudice against gay men and lesbians, being part of a couple is integral to the lives of many gay men and lesbians.

As one indication of the importance of identifying oneself as part of a couple, some gay and lesbian citizens of the United States are currently arguing that they, just like heterosexual citizens, are entitled to the privileges associated with having their relationships legalized as marriages. These privileges include access to spousal benefits from Social Security; veterans', health, and life insurance programs; hospital visitation rights; the ability to make medical decisions for partners; and exemption from state inheritance taxes. They also argue that being deprived of these privileges is unjust because it involves discriminating against a defined class of individuals (Eskridge, 1996). In response, some legislators have counterargued that same-sex marriages violate the sanctity of marriage as a union between a man and a woman, and that

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legal steps are needed to protect that sanctity. In that vein, 38 states to date have approved Defense of Marriage Acts ensuring that those states need not recognize the legality of same-sex unions effected by other states, and support is growing for an amendment to the Constitution that will define marriage as the legal union of a man and a woman.

Despite extensive media coverage of the same-sex marriage issue, the voice of relevant research is rarely heard. Consequently, my premise is that the complex controversy surrounding same-sex marriage can be examined, in part, as an *empirical* question of the extent to which gay and lesbian partners differ from heterosexual spouses on variables that matter to long-term relationships. I make no claims that answers to this question will provide a definitive resolution to the controversy, but I do submit that answers to this question will help to inform reasoned discussion of the controversy. If marriage is to be reserved for only unions of a man and a woman, it seems reasonable to assume that opposite-sex relationships work in ways that are radically different from the way that same-sex relationships work. Comparing partners from gay and lesbian couples to spouses from heterosexual couples on variables already known to be relevant for relationship health affords one way of testing this assumption.

Addressing the same-sex marriage issue on empirical grounds is complicated, however. Despite an increased scientific interest in gay and lesbian couples (e.g., see reviews by Patterson, 2000; Peplau & Beals, 2004; Peplau & Spalding, 2000), systematic comparisons of partners from gay or lesbian couples to spouses from heterosexual couples have been characterized by several methodological and statistical problems. These include studying only one partner from the couple; averaging individual scores from both partners; using measures with unknown psychometric properties; not taking into account whether the couples had children living with them; not quantifying the size of any differences found among couples; comparing couples without first ensuring that the members of these couples were equivalent on demographic characteristics such as age, education, income, and length of relationship; and treating members of the couples as independent units of analysis.

These problems are redressed in this article by my reporting of findings from a longitudinal

project involving psychometrically sound measures completed by both members of gay cohabiting, lesbian cohabiting, and heterosexual married couples. Further, I conducted comparisons between partners from both gay and lesbian couples and heterosexual couples with controls for potentially key demographic variables (i.e., age, education, income, and years living together). I assessed the size of the effects associated with type-of-couple differences, and I employed statistical analyses that took partner interdependence into account.

In the samples I recruited, partners from gay and lesbian cohabiting couples did not live with children. Because children are known to affect marital functioning (e.g., Erel & Burman, 1995), partners from heterosexual married couples were divided into those with children and those without children. In view of the complexities associated with living with stepchildren (Ganong & Coleman, 1994), the group of heterosexual couples identified as having children was restricted to those who lived only with their biological children.

I defend the selection of childless gay and lesbian couples on the basis of reports that the majority of gay and lesbian couples do *not* live with children. Using data from the 2000 Census, Simmons and O'Connell (2003) estimated that 33% of female same-sex householders and 22% of male same-sex householders lived with their own children who were under the age of 18. By extension, one can assume that the majority of gay and lesbian couples wanting to get married also would be childless. Indeed, Solomon, Rothblum, and Balsam (2004) reported that of 212 lesbians and 123 gay men who obtained same-sex civil unions in Vermont, only 30% and 18%, respectively, had children. Although Solomon et al. did not report the percentage of lesbians and gay men actually living with their own children, such percentages are likely to be lower than the percentages of lesbians and gay men who have children.

I conducted type-of-couple comparisons using married couples with children as the reference group for four reasons. First, an important topic in the study of cohabitation among heterosexual couples is whether such cohabitation provides a lasting arrangement in which to raise children (Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004). Second, some scholars (e.g., Amato, 2004) have argued that married couples—including, potentially, gay and lesbian couples—should

receive state-funded services only if they are raising children. Third, based on the 2000 Census (Simmons & O'Connell, 2003), 46% of married householders had at least one biological child, adopted child, or stepchild living with them. It is safe to assume that the number of married householders who have *ever* had children is well over 50%. Finally, legislators who have lobbied for constitutional amendments to ban same-sex marriage have done so to promote the best interests of children. For example, in calling for a constitutional amendment protecting marriage, President Bush stated that "Ages of experience have taught humanity that the commitment of a husband and wife to love and to serve one another promotes the welfare of children and the stability of society" (Office of the Press Secretary, 2004). In sum, I compared typical partners from gay and lesbian couples not living with children to typical partners from married heterosexual couples living with their own children. For reviews of literature regarding children raised by gay, lesbian, or heterosexual parents, see Patterson (2000) and Stacey and Biblarz (2001).

A General Model for Studying Close Relationships

Relationships are complex systems. One consequence of this complexity is that multiple factors are needed to understand how relationships begin, are maintained, and end. In a recent account of these factors, Huston (2000) argued that relationships need to be studied at three levels. The first level involves the *individual partner* and refers to the personal characteristics that each partner brings to the relationship, as well as the ways in which each partner actively filters information about the relationship. The second level involves *partner interactions* and refers to how partners behave toward each other. The final level involves *societal forces* and underscores the fact that relationships exist within the context of other social relationships.

Because Huston explicitly intended his social ecological model to apply to any marriagelike union, it is especially appropriate for framing the study of same-sex relationships. Huston's model is also particularly relevant for comparing the relationships of gay and lesbian partners to those of heterosexual partners because Huston derived 10 axioms from his model that can be empirically tested. I adapted four of Huston's

axioms to organize findings from the current project:

- Partners bring stable attributes to the relationship that influence how they behave in and experience their relationships.
- On the basis of their experiences in the relationship, partners construct working psychological models involving how they appraise and evaluate each other and the relationship.
- Partners' stable attributes and working models influence how they respond to each other's behavior, and in particular, how they resolve the inevitable conflicts that arise in the relationship.
- The partners' relationship is embedded in other relationships—such as those with family members and friends—that affect how partners behave toward one another.

I use this set of axioms to justify the selection of five domains of variables on which I compare partners from both gay couples and lesbian couples to spouses from heterosexual parent couples. I chose the domain of *psychological adjustment* and the domain of *personality traits* because each of these domains reflects stable predispositions that likely antedate the current relationship. Whereas personality traits can be regarded as vulnerabilities that influence one's response to relationship stress, psychological adjustment can be regarded as how well one adapts to relationship stress (Beach, 2001; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). I chose the domain of *relationship styles* in light of arguments that relationship maintenance involves balancing levels of intimacy, autonomy, and equality (Cochran & Peplau, 1985; Neff & Harter, 2003). I regard appraisals of these three dimensions as ways in which partners filter information about themselves and each other into working models of the relationship that influence how partners behave in their relationship. I selected the domain of *conflict resolution* because it highlights the interactions between partners and because the successful resolution of conflict is widely regarded as one of the central tasks of any close relationship (Means-Christensen, Snyder, & Negy, 2003). Finally, I chose the domain of *social support* because it shows that couples are embedded in social contexts that involve family members and friends, and that

the forces from these social contexts affect the stability of relationships (Milardo & Helms-Erikson, 2000).

I review the findings from the project in three sections that represent increasing levels of conceptual and methodological sophistication. For each section, the key issue is whether partners from gay couples and partners from lesbian couples differ from parents from heterosexual married couples. Differences between nonparents from heterosexual married couples and parents from heterosexual married couples are noted, but are not of central interest (see Kurdek, 2001, for findings regarding this comparison). In the first section, I address differences in average levels of variables from the five domains described earlier. The findings relevant to this section provide a snapshot picture of how partners from the "typical" gay or lesbian couple compare with spouses from the "typical" heterosexual couple with children. Because the variables from each domain are relevant to relationship health, type-of-couple differences can be interpreted as one index of the likelihood of relationship distress.

In the second section, I address differences in how the variables from each of the five domains are linked to global appraisals of the relationship. These global appraisals represent commonly used outcome variables in the marital literature (e.g., Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000) that reliably change over the course of the relationship career (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001; Karney & Bradbury, 1997). The findings relevant to this section indicate whether the predictors of global appraisals of the relationship generalize across different types of couples. Evidence of such generalization would be consistent with the view that the mechanisms that regulate relationship health work in the same way for different types of couples.

In the third section, I address differences in relationship stability, the ultimate outcome of whether a relationship works. Of particular interest here is whether change in relationship quality distinguishes couples who separate from those who do not. Heterosexual couples on the road to divorce show a reliable decline in relationship quality over time (Huston et al., 2001; Karney & Bradbury, 1997). The findings in this section indicate whether the link between declines in relationship quality and relationship stability generalizes across type of couple. Evidence of such generalization would be con-

sistent with the view that the mechanisms that regulate relationship stability work in the same way for different types of couples.

Participants in the Project

Participants were drawn from two separate longitudinal studies, one in which heterosexual married couples were participants, and the other in which gay and lesbian cohabiting couples were participants. In both studies, annual assessments were obtained by mailed surveys. Up to 11 assessments were available for heterosexual couples, whereas up to 14 assessments were available for gay and lesbian couples. Heterosexual couples were initially recruited as newlyweds from marriage licenses published in the *Dayton Daily News*. Partners from gay and lesbian couples were recruited through requests for participants published in periodicals for gay men and lesbians, and from couples who had already participated in the survey. At the sixth and eighth assessments, additional couples (recommended by couples already participating) were added to the sample. Unlike the heterosexual couples who were first studied shortly after their wedding, gay and lesbian couples were first studied at different points in their relationship careers. There were no requirements for how long gay and lesbian partners had to be cohabiting, and none of the couples lived with children.

To compare partners from different types of couples on psychological adjustment, personality traits, relationship styles, conflict resolution, and social support requires that the same measures be completed by all participants. Because variables from these domains were measured over eight of the available assessments, eight subsamples of participants were used. For the heterosexual married couples, the measures of interest began with the fourth assessment, which occurred well beyond the critical early years of marriage. For the gay and lesbian partners, the measures of interest began with the first assessment.

I describe partners from heterosexual parent, heterosexual nonparent, gay, and lesbian couples with regard to age, annual personal income, percent with a bachelor's degree, percent White, percent employed, and years living together in Table 1 for each of the eight assessments. For the parent couples, the mean age of children and the mean number of children are also

TABLE 1. MEANS FOR PARTNERS' DEMOGRAPHIC SCORES BY TYPE OF COUPLE FOR EACH ASSESSMENT

	Parent		Nonparent		Gay	Lesbian
	Husband	Wife	Husband	Wife		
Assessment 1						
Age	30.45	27.98	34.00	32.36	36.39	35.54
Personal income	7.66	3.97	7.89	5.88	6.88	6.08
% baccalaureate	45	46	38	49	32	35
% White	93	96	96	98	93	93
% employed	95	62	90	81	88	91
Years living together		3.76		3.61	7.12	4.86
Age of children		1.61		–	–	–
Number of children		1.25		–	–	–
N of couples		80		146	80	53
Assessment 2						
Age	31.70	29.29	36.37	34.77	41.48	40.16
Personal income	8.71	4.71	8.84	6.95	8.22	8.48
% baccalaureate	41	51	37	45	32	34
% White	93	95	96	98	93	93
% employed	93	75	88	81	80	91
Years living together		4.60		4.74	10.64	7.12
Age of children		1.64		–	–	–
Number of children		1.32		–	–	–
N of couples		90		108	75	51
Assessment 3						
Age	32.44	30.05	38.01	36.83	42.59	41.19
Personal income	9.41	4.95	8.98	7.48	8.88	8.92
% baccalaureate	44	53	37	38	31	35
% White	94	97	98	100	93	92
% employed	97	75	85	83	83	88
Years living together		5.55		5.73	11.69	8.88
Age of children		2.13		–	–	–
Number of children		1.53		–	–	–
N of couples		88		88	66	46
Assessment 4						
Age	33.32	31.51	39.90	38.12	44.45	43.04
Personal income	9.58	6.10	9.42	6.93	8.98	9.98
% baccalaureate	40	46	39	34	30	35
% White	93	97	98	100	94	91
% employed	97	78	83	73	78	90
Years living together		6.68		6.81	13.00	10.48
Age of children		2.66		–	–	–
Number of children		1.62		–	–	–
N of couples		75		59	61	42

TABLE 1
CONTINUED

	Parent		Nonparent		Gay	Lesbian
	Husband	Wife	Husband	Wife		
Assessment 5						
Age	34.24	32.45	41.08	40.00	46.33	44.57
Personal income	10.24	5.18	9.52	7.68	9.24	10.46
% baccalaureate	42	46	40	34	29	34
% White	94	98	100	100	96	92
% employed	93	62	82	84	78	95
Years living together		7.65		7.63	15.25	11.10
Age of children		2.96		–	–	–
Number of children		1.81		–	–	–
N of couples		66		50	60	36
Assessment 6						
Age	35.08	33.62	42.45	41.05	46.32	43.12
Personal income	11.24	4.26	10.10	8.12	9.57	10.02
% baccalaureate	44	47	35	35	34	33
% White	93	98	97	100	97	94
% employed	98	54	87	80	75	88
Years living together		8.62		8.66	14.34	10.31
Age of children		3.08		–	–	–
Number of children		1.82		–	–	–
N of couples		61		40	57	54
Assessment 7						
Age	36.55	34.73	44.12	43.15	48.00	43.66
Personal income	11.42	5.07	9.97	8.03	9.74	9.90
% baccalaureate	46	48	36	33	32	34
% White	96	100	100	100	98	92
% employed	98	55	81	78	75	88
Years living together		9.72		9.75	15.31	11.24
Age of children		4.06		–	–	–
Number of children		1.96		–	–	–
N of couples		56		33	37	45
Assessment 8						
Age	39.86	37.66	47.76	46.45	49.75	46.19
Personal income	12.10	6.58	10.44	8.62	11.62	10.48
% baccalaureate	34	48	31	27	27	30
% White	96	100	100	100	93	92
% employed	92	66	86	72	75	90
Years living together		12.11		12.47	14.69	13.63
Age of children		4.04		–	–	–
Number of children		4.20		–	–	–
N of couples		50		29	33	52

Note: – indicates that a value was not relevant.

provided. In all groups, participants were predominantly White and college educated. Partners from gay couples in particular had cohabitated for a relatively long period of time.

Plan of Analysis

Because scores from partners in the same couple are likely to be correlated, analyzing data in which both partners from the same couple provide information requires special techniques to accommodate nonindependent observations (Kashy & Snyder, 1995; Kenny, 1996). Accordingly, analyses in this study were conducted by means of hierarchical linear modeling (Bryk & Raudenbush, 2002) with the multilevel program available in LISREL 8.54 (Jöreskog, Sörbom, du Toit, & du Toit, 2001).

Specifically, I estimated two-level random-intercept models with restricted maximum likelihood methods such that individual partners (level 1) were nested in couples (level 2). The level 1 model was a *within-couple* model that used information from both partners to define one parameter—an intercept—for each couple. The partner-level covariates at level 1 include age, education, and income. The intercept reflected the average value of the outcome score for a couple, and was treated as a random variable based on the assumption that the couple-level intercepts from the sample were derived from a larger population of couple-level intercepts. The level 2 model was a *between-couple* model that explained variability in the intercepts derived at level 1 in terms of type of couple, while taking into account the extent to which partner scores from the same couple were interrelated. The couple-level covariate at level 2 was years cohabiting.

In the level 2 model, I captured information about type of couple by three dummy-coded variables (i.e., variables with values of either 0 or 1) that represented membership (a value of 1) or lack of membership (a value of 0) in the group of gay couples, lesbian couples, or heterosexual nonparent couples, respectively. Because the dummy-coded variable that represented membership in the group of heterosexual parent couples was not used, this group served as the reference group (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). I first tested effects associated with the three dummy variables with a single multivariate test within the LISREL program. This test indicated whether any overall differ-

ences among the types of couples were evident with controls for age, education, and income at the partner level, and controls for years cohabiting at the couple level. This statistic is distributed as a χ^2 statistic. It was used to reduce the likelihood that any individual differences were due to chance.

The unstandardized coefficient associated with each dummy variable represents the difference between the mean for partners from the targeted group of couples (i.e., gay, lesbian, or heterosexual nonparent) and the mean for partners from the reference group of couples (i.e., heterosexual parent). A *positive* sign for the coefficient associated with each dummy variable indicates that the mean for partners from the targeted group of couples was *higher* than the mean for partners from the heterosexual parent couples, whereas a *negative* sign for this coefficient indicates that the mean for partners from the targeted group of couples was *lower* than the mean for partners from the heterosexual parent couples. The *t* test associated with each coefficient is a test of whether the difference between the relevant pair of means is reliably different from 0 (Cohen et al., 2003). I converted *t* ratios for significant effects to Pearson correlations (*r*'s) to estimate the strength of those effects (based on Rosenthal and Rosnow, 1984, p. 217, $r = \sqrt{t^2 / (t^2 + df)}$). Following Cohen (1988), cutoff values for small, medium, and large effects were represented by *r*'s of .10, .30, and .50, respectively.

Average Levels of Variables From Five Domains

Psychological adjustment. I obtained information about psychological adjustment from two measures. At the first assessment, participants completed Derogatis's (1994) Symptom Checklist by rating how much they were distressed during the past 7 days by 90 problems in the areas of somatic complaints, obsessions/compulsions, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, hostility, phobias, paranoid ideation, and psychoticism. Cronbach's alpha, denoted by α , is a numerical index of the internal consistency or reliability of a summed composite score, with values greater than .70 indicating good reliability. I present alpha values based on the total sample for all summed composite scores. For the global severity of distress score, $\alpha = .97$. At the second assessment, participants

completed the five-item Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985) Life Satisfaction Scale, a widely used measure of subjective well-being (sample item: In most ways, my life is close to ideal; $\alpha = .85$).

In Table 2, I present the means for all outcome scores, controlling for all covariates, by type of couple. I present the unstandardized coefficients for the four control variables (age, education, income, and years living together) and the three dummy variables (gay vs. heterosexual parent, lesbian vs. heterosexual parent, and heterosexual nonparent vs. heterosexual parent) for each outcome score in Table 3. The multivariate χ^2 value representing the overall type-of-couple effect is shown in the last column of Table 3. Although the effects for the control variables were often significant, I do not

interpret them because they were not of central interest. I interpret the effects for individual dummy variables only when the overall type-of-couple effect was significant. Further, I report the size of the effect associated with a dummy variable only when that effect was significant.

As shown in the first panel of Table 3, the overall type-of-couple effect for both *global severity of distress* and *life satisfaction* was not significant. Thus, partners from gay couples and partners from lesbian couples did not differ from heterosexual parents in levels of psychological adjustment. At first glance, the lack of type-of-couple effects for psychological adjustment are inconsistent with findings (Cochran, Sullivan, & Mays, 2003; Meyer, 2003) that gay men and lesbians report more psychological adjustment problems than their heterosexual

TABLE 2. MEANS FOR PARTNERS' PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT, PERSONALITY TRAITS, RELATIONSHIP STYLES, CONFLICT RESOLUTION, AND SOCIAL SUPPORT OUTCOME SCORES BY TYPE OF COUPLE WITH CONTROLS FOR AGE, EDUCATION, INCOME, AND YEARS COHABITING

Score	Assessment	Gay	Lesbian	Nonparent	Parent
Psychological adjustment					
Global severity	1	0.84	0.86	0.81	0.82
Life satisfaction	2	23.95	23.88	23.27	23.42
Personality traits					
Neuroticism	4	32.39	31.92	33.46	33.11
Extraversion	4	40.42	42.94	40.50	40.47
Openness	4	35.77	36.29	31.19	30.83
Agreeableness	4	43.19	44.27	42.90	42.16
Conscientiousness	4	45.21	45.81	45.58	44.24
Relationship styles					
Intimacy	2	58.00	58.38	56.45	55.24
Autonomy	2	46.15	47.84	41.82	38.70
Equality	2	58.83	62.55	58.40	55.46
Conflict resolution					
Ineffective arguing	2	15.96	14.93	16.01	17.25
Demand/withdraw	6	16.26	17.65	15.21	19.14
Symmetrical positive	6	24.46	24.47	24.03	20.94
Social support					
Satisfaction	2	30.44	31.71	30.97	30.22
Own family	5	6.44	6.61	7.68	7.82
Partner's family	5	6.52	6.56	7.54	7.64
Own friends	5	8.51	8.81	8.18	8.40
Partner's friends	5	8.79	9.10	8.56	8.80

TABLE 3. UNSTANDARDIZED COEFFICIENTS FOR DEMOGRAPHIC AND TYPE-OF-COUPLE PREDICTORS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT, PERSONALITY TRAITS, RELATIONSHIP STYLES, CONFLICT RESOLUTION, AND SOCIAL SUPPORT OUTCOME SCORES

Score	Assessment	Age	Education	Income	Years Cohabiting	Gay	Lesbian Versus Parent	Nonparent	Multivariate χ^2
Psychological adjustment									
Global severity	1	0.00	-0.05**	-0.01**	0.00	0.03	0.04	0.01	1.29
Life satisfaction	2	0.05*	0.10	0.02	-0.01	0.53	0.45	-0.15	1.20
Personality traits									
Neuroticism	4	-0.04	0.15	-0.29**	0.05	-0.81	-1.19	0.34	1.80
Extraversion	4	0.02	-0.03	0.13	-0.16*	-0.04	2.47*	0.02	8.27*
Openness	4	0.01	1.60**	-0.06	-0.03	4.94**	5.46**	0.36	40.47**
Agreeableness	4	0.02	0.60*	-0.08	-0.13*	1.02	2.10*	0.73	5.45
Conscientiousness	4	-0.03	0.38	0.06	0.05	0.96	1.57	1.33	3.95
Relationship styles									
Intimacy	2	0.06	-1.35**	-0.11	0.12	2.75*	3.13*	1.20	5.92
Autonomy	2	-0.06	1.22**	-0.10	-0.32**	7.45**	9.14**	3.12**	43.72**
Equality	2	0.05	-0.33	-0.02	0.11	3.36*	7.09**	2.94*	21.32**
Conflict resolution									
Ineffective arguing	2	-0.02	0.24	0.00	-0.06	-1.29	-2.32*	-1.23	5.57
Demand/withdraw	6	0.00	-0.06	0.16	0.08	-2.87**	1.48	-3.93**	10.15**
Symmetrical positive	6	-0.02	0.02	-0.10*	-0.02	3.38**	3.42**	-2.85**	27.53**
Social support									
Satisfaction	2	0.00	-0.23	0.08	0.04	0.22	1.49*	0.75	7.36
Own family	5	0.00	0.09	-0.03*	0.02	-1.37**	-1.20**	0.12	33.43**
Partner's family	5	0.01	-0.06	0.01	0.001	-1.11**	-1.08**	-0.09	23.20**
Own friends	5	-0.02**	0.12*	-0.04**	0.00	0.10	0.41*	-0.21	9.35**
Partner's friends	5	-0.02**	0.02	-0.02	0.00	-0.01	0.29	-0.24	7.75

Note: The multivariate χ^2 value represents an overall type-of-couple effect.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

counterparts. Both Cochran et al. and Meyer, however, speculate that the reason gay men and lesbians experience relatively high levels of psychological distress is that the stigma, prejudice, and discrimination associated with homosexuality creates a stressful social environment. Because being a member of a couple is known to confer a psychological health advantage in heterosexual persons (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999), it is plausible that the *coupled* gay men and lesbians studied here did not differ from heterosexual parents because relatively well-adjusted gay men and lesbians are selected into couplehood. Alternatively, aspects of couplehood, such as social support from the partner

and from other gay or lesbian couples, buffer gay men and lesbians against the negative effects of minority stress (see Bell & Weinberg, 1978).

Personality traits. I obtained information regarding personality traits from five scores, all obtained during the fourth assessment, when participants completed Costa and McCrae's (1989) measure of the Big Five personality characteristics. Each personality trait was assessed by 12 items. The Big Five model of personality is arguably the best validated model of personality. It posits that the adult personality can be comprehensively described by five traits:

neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. *Neuroticism* represents susceptibility to psychological distress, inability to control urges, proneness to unrealistic ideas, and inability to cope with stress (sample item: I often feel inferior to others; $\alpha = .87$). As shown in Table 3, because the overall effect associated with neuroticism was not significant, partners from gay and lesbian couples did not differ from heterosexual parents on this dimension of personality.

Extraversion represents the disposition toward positive emotions, sociability, high activity, agency, and self-efficacy (sample item: I like to have a lot of people around me; $\alpha = .81$). The overall effect associated with extraversion was significant. As seen from the coefficients in Table 3, relative to heterosexual parents, lesbian partners had higher scores, although the effect size was small, $r = .15$. Lesbian partners may be more likely than heterosexual parents to see themselves as extraverted because lesbians are more likely than heterosexual women to describe themselves in terms of the masculine attributes indicative of agency and self-efficacy (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986), which are aspects of extraversion (Lippa, 1995). Relatedly, Bem (1998) proposed that high activity levels and a consequent tendency to be "tomboyish" distinguished girls who later identify as lesbians from those who do not. Alternatively, the experience of motherhood may enhance heterosexual mothers' tendency to define themselves in feminine rather than masculine terms (Feldman, Biringen, & Nash, 1981). Thus, findings regarding the relatively high levels of extraversion in lesbian partners may be due to general differences between lesbians and heterosexual women in the personality traits that they ascribe to themselves.

Openness represents a proclivity toward variety, intellectual curiosity, and aesthetic sensitivity (sample item: I have a lot of intellectual curiosity; $\alpha = .76$). As seen in Table 3, the overall effect associated with openness was significant. Relative to heterosexual parents, both gay partners and lesbian partners had higher scores, and the effect size for each comparison was medium in size, $r = .30$ and $.32$, respectively. Because openness is characterized by a proclivity toward variety as well as intellectual curiosity (Costa & McCrae, 1989), it is plausible that gay and lesbian individuals who are high on openness would be predisposed to act on unconventional feelings

and attractions to members of the same gender, and to explore ways of defining roles in their relationships independent of biological gender.

Agreeableness represents an inclination toward interpersonal trust and consideration of others (sample item: I try to be courteous to everyone I meet; $\alpha = .77$). *Conscientiousness* represents a tendency toward persistence, industriousness, and organization (sample item: I keep my belongings clean and neat; $\alpha = .82$). As shown in Table 3, the overall effect for both agreeableness and conscientiousness was not significant. Thus, partners from gay and lesbian couples did not differ from heterosexual parents on these two dimensions of personality.

In sum, of the five personality traits within the Big Five model, type-of-couple effects were found for only extraversion and openness. Although it is plausible that levels of extraversion and levels of openness change as a result of relationship experiences, the relatively high stability found for each of the Big Five traits (Costa & McCrae, 1989) makes it more likely that both gay and lesbian partners come to their relationships with different predispositions than heterosexual parents do. It is of note, however, that having relatively high levels of extraversion and openness—as opposed to relatively high levels of neuroticism—does not make gay and lesbian partners especially susceptible to relationship distress.

Relationship styles. I obtained information regarding relationship styles from three scores obtained at the second assessment, when participants completed my measure of relationship appraisals (Kurdek, 1995b). This measure involved appraising levels of intimacy (eight items, sample item: I spend as much time with my partner as possible; $\alpha = .75$), autonomy (eight items, sample item: I have major interests of my own outside the relationship; $\alpha = .71$), and equality (eight items, sample item: My partner and I have equal power in the relationship; $\alpha = .90$) in the relationship. As shown in Table 3, type-of-couple effects occurred for both autonomy and equality, but not for intimacy. Relative to heterosexual parents, gay partners perceived higher levels of autonomy and higher levels of equality in the relationship, with small effect sizes, $r = .27$ and $.12$, respectively. Relative to heterosexual parents, lesbian partners also perceived higher levels of autonomy and higher levels of equality in the relationship, with the effect size for

autonomy being medium in size, $r = .32$, and the effect size for equality being small in size, $r = .25$.

In sum, the findings regarding relationship styles indicate that gay partners and lesbian partners reported *more positive* working models of their relationships than heterosexual parents did. Additional evidence from Table 3 indicates that this finding might be attributed to the fact that gay partners and lesbian partners did not live with children. As seen in this table, and consistent with evidence that parenting stress may spill over to marital stress (Erel & Burman, 1995), heterosexual nonparents also reported higher levels of autonomy and equality than heterosexual parents did, with associated effect sizes being small, $r = .14$ and $.13$, respectively.

Conflict resolution. I obtained information regarding conflict resolution from three scores obtained from two measures. At the second assessment, participants completed my eight-item inventory of *ineffective arguing* (Kurdek, 1994), which tapped partners' dysfunctional style of resolving conflict with each other (sample item: Our arguments are left hanging and unresolved; $\alpha = .87$). At the sixth assessment, participants completed the Communication Patterns Questionnaire, Short Form (Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993), which yields two scores: *demand/withdraw* and *symmetrical positive communication*. The six-item demand/withdraw score tapped the extent to which one partner demands, whereas the other partner withdraws (sample item: I try to start a discussion, whereas the other partner withdraws; $\alpha = .70$). The three-item symmetrical positive communication score tapped the extent to which both partners use positive communication (sample item: We both suggest possible solutions and compromises; $\alpha = .91$).

As seen from Table 3, type-of-couple effects occurred for both demand/withdraw and symmetrical positive communication, with each effect being small in size, $r = .15$ and $.29$, respectively. Relative to heterosexual parents, gay partners reported less frequent use of the demand/withdraw pattern, and more frequent use of symmetrical positive communication. Effects involving lesbian partners occurred for only symmetrical positive communication with a medium effect size, $r = .30$. Relative to heterosexual parents, lesbian partners reported more frequent use of symmetrical positive communication.

In sum, the findings regarding conflict resolution indicate that gay partners and lesbian partners are better at resolving conflict in their relationships than are heterosexual parents. Gottman et al. (2003) also found that gay and lesbian partners were more likely than heterosexual spouses (parent status not distinguished) to present and to receive information about a conflictual issue in a positive manner. Future studies of conflict resolution might routinely separate parent from nonparent couples because in the current study, heterosexual nonparents used the demand/withdraw style less frequently, and the symmetrical positive communication style more frequently than heterosexual parent couples did. The effect size r 's of $.20$ and $.24$, respectively, were small. Additional evidence is needed to determine whether gay and lesbian partners are especially good at resolving relationship conflict, or whether the experience of parenting places heterosexual partners at risk for resolving relationship conflict poorly.

Social support. Information regarding social support was obtained from five scores derived from two measures. At the second assessment, a single social support score was obtained from Sarason, Sarason, Shearin, and Pierce's (1987) six-item Social Support Scale. For this measure, participants rated their overall satisfaction with levels of perceived social support (sample item: Think of the people you can count on to be depended upon when you need help. How satisfied are you with the support you receive in this area?; $\alpha = .92$). At the fifth assessment, participants rated perceptions of support for their relationship from each of four sources: members of their own family, members of their partner's family, their own friends, and their partner's friends, using a measure developed by Sprecher and Felmlee (1992). One item was used to obtain a score for each source of support (sample item: To what degree does your family approve and support your relationship?).

As shown in Table 3, type-of-couple effects occurred for three of the four sources of support: own family, members of partner's family, and own friends. Gay partners perceived less support for their relationships from their own family and from their partner's family than did heterosexual parents, with the effect for family being medium in size, $r = .32$, and the effect for partner's family being small in size, $r = .28$. Lesbian partners perceived less support for their

relationships from their own family and from their partner's family than heterosexual parents did, with both effects being small in size, $r = .28$ and $.25$, respectively. Lesbian partners also perceived more support for their relationships from their own friends than heterosexual parents did, with the effect being small in size, $r = .14$. Heterosexual nonparents and heterosexual parents did not differ on any of the social support variables.

In sum, the findings indicate that gay and lesbian partners perceive little support for their relationships from family members. In light of previous research revealing this same pattern (Bryant & Demian, 1994; Kurdek, 1988; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987), this result is not surprising. That lesbian partners were especially likely to perceive support from their friends is consistent with evidence that women in particular are socialized to prize their connections with others (Burch, 1985; Cross & Madson, 1997). Because heterosexual nonparents and heterosexual parents did not differ on any social support score, problems regarding social support from family members are especially salient for members of gay and lesbian couples. Although partners from gay and lesbian couples may insulate themselves against the negative effects associated with the lack of support by reducing or relinquishing contact with family members, by doing so, they also forfeit any positive stabilizing effects that support from family members provides (Milardo & Helms-Erickson, 2000).

Summary. In summary, these first analyses addressed type-of-couple differences on average levels of variables relevant to relationship functioning. For half of the comparisons, partners from gay couples without children and partners from lesbian couples without children did not differ from heterosexual parents. When differences were found, 78% of these differences indicated that gay partners and lesbian partners functioned *better* than heterosexual parents did, although most effects were small in size. The only area in which gay partners and lesbian partners fared *less* well than heterosexual parents was in perceived levels of social support from family members. Thus, with the exception of findings for social support, there is no evidence that gay and lesbian partners functioned at problematic levels for psychological adjustment, personality traits, relationship styles, or conflict resolution.

Predicting Relationship Quality

Although information from the first set of analyses is important in characterizing the qualities of average partners from gay, lesbian, and heterosexual parent couples, it does not address whether the relationships of gay and lesbian partners *work* the same way that the marriages of heterosexual parents do. I examined this issue in the second set of analyses. I asked whether the predictors of relationship quality were the same for partners from gay and lesbian couples as they were for heterosexual parents.

Because scores within each domain are likely to be related to each other, analyses for separate scores within each domain would lead to similar results. Thus, to simplify the presentation of the analyses, I selected only one score from the psychological adjustment, personality traits, relationship styles, conflict resolution, and social support domains. In each case, I chose the score consistently linked to relationship quality. I used this selected score to predict a global evaluation of the relationship that was assessed at the same time. I chose global evaluations of the relationship because they avoid methodological problems associated with having similar content appear in both predictor and outcome variables (Bradbury et al., 2000; Huston, 2000).

I was interested in two issues for each domain. First, what was the strength of the link between the selected predictor and the global appraisal of the relationship? Analyses answering this question verified that the selected predictor was indeed linked to a global appraisal of the relationship. Second, and of critical interest here, did the strength of this link for gay partners and for lesbian partners differ from the strength of this link for heterosexual parents? Analyses answering this question addressed whether the processes that regulate relationship functioning for heterosexual parents were similar to those that regulate the relationships of gay men and lesbians.

I examined the strength of the link between predictors and outcomes using a two-level (partner/couple) random-intercepts hierarchical linear regression in which global appraisal of the relationship was the outcome variable. At level 1, the predictor of interest was entered along with age, education, and income as control variables. I calculated effect-size r 's as in the first set of analyses. I examined the relationship comparison issue using a two-level random-intercepts analysis. I modified the first analysis at level 2, adding

the three dummy variables representing the overall type-of-couple effect so as to account for variability in both *the intercept* and *the link* involving the relation of interest. I designated heterosexual parents as the reference group, and used years cohabiting as a control variable at level 2. I interpret effects associated with individual dummy variables only if the multivariate type-of-couple effect was significant. Because coefficients for the control variables were not significant, I do not report them.

Psychological adjustment. I selected global severity of distress from the first assessment because frequent psychological symptoms place one at risk for marital distress (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Spanier's (1976) 10-item dyadic satisfaction score was the outcome score (sample item: Describe the degree of happiness in your relationship; $\alpha = .80$). As expected, for the total sample, global severity of distress was negatively related to dyadic satisfaction, unstandardized coefficient = -2.22 , $p < .01$, $r = .18$ (a small effect), such that high levels of distress were linked to low levels of satisfaction. Because the multivariate test associated with type-of-couple differences in this link was not significant, psychological adjustment predicted dyadic satisfaction as well for heterosexual parents as it did for gay partners and lesbian partners.

Personality traits. I selected neuroticism from the fourth assessment because of all of the Big Five variables, neuroticism provides unique information regarding relationship distress (Kurdek, 1997b). Sternberg's (1988) eight-item commitment score was the outcome score (sample item: I view my relationship with my partner as permanent; $\alpha = .94$). As expected, for the total sample, neuroticism was negatively related to commitment, unstandardized coefficient = -0.14 , $p < .01$, $r = .14$ (a small effect), such that high levels of neuroticism were linked to low levels of commitment. Because the multivariate test involving this link was not significant, neuroticism predicted commitment as well for heterosexual parents as it did for gay partners and lesbian partners.

Relationship styles. I selected equality from the second assessment because relationship styles in general can be conceptualized as responses to contextual features of power in the relationship (Neff & Harter, 2003). Sternberg's (1988) com-

mitment score was the outcome score. As expected, for the total sample, equality was positively related to commitment, unstandardized coefficient = 0.27 , $p < .01$, $r = .65$ (a large effect), such that high levels of equality were linked to high levels of commitment. Because the multivariate test involving this link was not significant, equality predicted commitment as well for heterosexual parents as it did for gay partners and lesbian partners.

Conflict resolution. I selected ineffective arguing from the second assessment because it is a key aspect of both relationship maintenance and relationship stability for gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples (Gottman et al., 2003; Julien, Chartrand, Simard, Bouthillier, & Bégin, 2003; Kurdek, 1994; Snyder & Abbott, 2002). Schumm et al.'s (1986) three-item satisfaction score was the outcome score (sample item: I am satisfied with my relationship; $\alpha = .97$). As expected, for the total sample, ineffective arguing was negatively related to satisfaction, unstandardized coefficient = -0.43 , $p < .01$, $r = .83$ (a large effect), such that high levels of ineffective arguing were linked to low levels of satisfaction. Because the multivariate test involving this link was not significant, ineffective arguing predicted satisfaction as well for heterosexual parents as it did for gay partners and lesbian partners.

Social support. I selected satisfaction with social support from the second assessment because it is a stable individual difference variable linked to social competence (Sarason, Sarason, & Shearin, 1986). Schumm et al.'s (1986) satisfaction score was the outcome score. As expected, for the total sample, satisfaction with social support was positively related to satisfaction, unstandardized coefficient = 0.21 , $p < .01$, $r = .25$ (a small effect), such that high levels of satisfaction with social support were linked to high levels of satisfaction with the relationship. Because the multivariate test involving this link was not significant, satisfaction with social support predicted satisfaction with the relationship as well for heterosexual parents as it did for gay partners and lesbian partners.

Summary. The findings regarding the prediction of relationship quality replicated previous reports that global severity of distress, neuroticism, perceptions of equality, ineffective arguing, and

satisfaction with social support were reliable concurrent predictors of relationship quality. Of greater importance, the lack of type-of-couple differences in the strength of these predictions provides evidence that the relationships of gay partners and the relationships of lesbian partners work in much the same way that the relationships of heterosexual parents do. Consistent with the axioms derived from Huston's (2000) social ecological model, variables from the psychological adjustment, personality, relationship styles, conflict resolution, and social support domains are robust predictors of relationship quality in that the links involving these variables and relationship quality generalize across partners from diverse types of couples.

Predicting Relationship Stability

Dissolution rates. From a methodological standpoint, analyzing type-of-couple differences in both average levels of variables relevant to relationship functioning and the extent to which such variables predict relationship quality is not too difficult because both types of analyses require only one wave of data collection. In contrast, assessing both relationship stability and type-of-couple differences in the predictors of relationship stability is more difficult because multiple waves of data collection are needed. The difficulty in obtaining information on relationship stability is highlighted by noting the relatively low number of divorced couples identified in previous prospective longitudinal studies of heterosexual couples who provided data shortly before their divorce. Karney and Bradbury (1997) had information from 18 such couples, Huston et al. (2001) from 10 couples, and Davila, Karney, and Bradbury (1999) from 9 couples.

Obtaining data on the relationship stability of gay and lesbian couples is further complicated because partners from these couples need to be assured that the identifying information needed to conduct longitudinal assessments will be held in confidence. It is not too surprising that there are few longitudinal studies of gay and lesbian couples in the United States. In fact, other than the current project, only Blumstein and Schwartz's (1983) large-scale survey study of 3,656 heterosexual married couples, 658 heterosexual cohabiting couples, 969 gay couples, and 788 lesbian couples involved a longitudinal component that included information on relationship stability. Blumstein and Schwartz administered

a single 18-month follow-up survey that was completed by members of 1,021 heterosexual married couples, 233 heterosexual cohabiting couples, 493 gay couples, and 335 lesbian couples. On the basis of responses to the follow-up survey, the percentage of dissolved couples was 4%, 14%, 13%, and 18%, respectively. Although the highest dissolution rate was obtained for lesbian couples, the authors did not report dissolution rates with controls for key demographic variables such as age, education, income, and length of cohabitation. They also did not report statistical comparisons for type-of-couple differences in these dissolution rates.

I had information regarding stability for 353 nonparent couples and 130 parent couples (over 11 annual assessments), and for 126 gay couples and 101 lesbian couples (over 12 annual assessments). I note three major limitations of this information. First, aside from dissolution, couples either left the study voluntarily, or they were dropped from the study because they did not return completed surveys. Once couples withdrew or were dropped from the study, they were not contacted further. Thus, information regarding dissolution was restricted to those couples in which at least one partner indicated that surveys for a particular year would not be returned because the relationship had ended. The resulting dissolution rates are not *absolute* dissolution rates because couples who left or were dropped from the study were not contacted further. Couples who left the study could have ended their relationships after they withdrew, and couples who were dropped could have ended their relationships during the year that completed surveys were not returned, or sometime later. In other words, the last assessment obtained from withdrawn and dropped couples occurred when partners were together. Second, although the dissolution rates were calculated in the same way for heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples, they were not directly comparable because all heterosexual couples were assessed first shortly after their wedding, and again throughout the early critical years of marriage (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001). Gay and lesbian couples, however, were assessed first at different points in their relationships. Third, because gay and lesbian couples were added to the sample at two points over the entire assessment period, gay and lesbian couples did not have the same number of possible assessments. Despite these limitations, I report dissolution

rates because this may be the only longitudinal project involving multiple follow-up assessments in which diverse types of couples from the United States have participated.

Over the 11 annual assessments, 3.1% of the heterosexual parent couples and 18.7% of the heterosexual nonparent couples reported that their relationship had ended. I assessed differences in the dissolution rates of parent and nonparent heterosexual couples using a logistic regression in which dissolution (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*) was the outcome score. I used age, education, income, and years living together—averaged over both partners at the last assessment available for the couple—as control variables, and a type-of-couple dummy variable (0 = *parent*, 1 = *nonparent*) as the main predictor of interest. The coefficient associated with this dummy variable was negative and significant, unstandardized coefficient = -1.12 , $p < .05$, indicating that the probability of dissolution for nonparent heterosexual couples was higher than that for parent heterosexual couples. The relatively low dissolution rate for parent couples is consistent with other evidence that, for heterosexual couples, children are a major barrier to ending a marriage (Previti & Amato, 2003; Waite & Lillard, 1991).

Over the 12 annual assessments, 19.0% of the gay couples and 23.8% of the lesbian couples reported that their relationship had ended. These dissolution rates based on multiple annual assessments are understandably higher than the rates of 13% and 18%, respectively, reported by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) for a single 18-month follow-up assessment. Differences in the dissolution rates of gay and lesbian couples were assessed by a logistic regression in which dissolution (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*) was the outcome score. Again, I used age, education, income, and years living together—averaged over both partners at the last assessment available for the couple—as control variables, and a type-of-couple dummy variable (0 = *gay*, 1 = *lesbian*) as the main predictor of interest. Because the coefficient associated with this dummy variable was not significant, the probability of dissolution for gay and lesbian couples was equivalent. That is, gay couples were no more likely to dissolve than were lesbian couples.

The link between change in relationship quality and stability. Although the dissolution rates for heterosexual and gay and lesbian couples were

not directly comparable, it was possible to explore whether the processes that *led to dissolution* were the same for these three types of couples. On the basis of evidence from prospective longitudinal studies conducted with married heterosexual couples (Huston et al., 2001; Karney & Bradbury, 1997), relative to spouses from stable marriages, those who eventually separate or divorce show a pattern of decreasing relationship quality in the period preceding the separation or divorce. I have already shown that the relationships of gay and lesbian partners function in much the same way as those of heterosexual partners. Even more compelling evidence for this view would come from evidence that patterns of change in relationship quality distinguish stable from unstable couples for gay and lesbian couples, as well as for heterosexual couples.

Because the number of dissolved couples was relatively small, I simplified the analyses by combining parent and nonparent heterosexual couples into a heterosexual group ($N = 483$), and by combining gay and lesbian couples into a gay and lesbian group ($N = 227$). I assessed relationship quality with the total score from Spanier's (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale, a widely used global assessment of relationship quality. Over the course of the project, partners from 5 heterosexual couples and partners from 14 gay and lesbian couples died. I did not consider data from these couples because change in relationship quality for these couples might have been attributed to the partner's illness. Thus, the sample for this analysis involved 691 couples. Of the 118 couples who separated, 48 were gay or lesbian couples.

I analyzed the data using a three-level hierarchical linear regression model. For this model, assessments (level 1) were nested in partners (level 2), which in turn were nested in couples (level 3). The major advantages to this analysis were that all available data (6,510 assessments) could be used, change could be assessed even though partners were assessed at different points in the relationship, and the error covariance matrix associated with longitudinal assessments could be modeled. The outcome score for this analysis was relationship quality. Predictors or covariates of relationship quality were derived from level 1, level 2, and level 3 of the model. At level 1, I used years of cohabitation at the time of the assessment as a predictor. The intercept reflected relationship quality at the

start of cohabitation, and the slope represented change in relationship quality over years of cohabitation. As is common with growth-curve analyses (Kurdek, 2003b), I allowed error variances to differ at each assessment, and error covariances were estimated at adjacent assessments (e.g., year 1 with year 2, year 2 with year 3, and year 3 with year 4). At level 2, I used age, education, and income as covariates for both the intercept and the slope. At level 3, I used type of couple (0 = *heterosexual*, 1 = *gay or lesbian*), dissolution (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*), and the interaction between these two dummy variables as predictors of both the intercept and the slope. The intercept was a random variable at level 2 and at level 3, whereas the slope was a random variable at only level 3.

I asked whether the link between years of cohabitation and relationship quality was moderated by an interaction involving type of couple and dissolution. Such a moderated effect would indicate whether the rate of linear change for partners from dissolved couples versus that of partners from stable couples was the same for gay and lesbian couples as it was for heterosexual married couples. Because all heterosexual couples were sampled in the early years of marriage, when the prevalence of divorce is high (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001), it was plausible that the rate of linear decline in relationship quality for partners from dissolved couples would be steeper for heterosexual couples than it would be for gay and lesbian couples. Nonetheless, my central question was whether dissolution could be predicted by a linear decrease in relationship quality for both heterosexual couples and for gay and lesbian couples.

I found that the link between years of cohabitation and relationship quality was indeed moderated by an interaction involving type of couple and dissolution, unstandardized coefficient = 7.43, $p < .01$. This interaction was interpreted by two simple slope analyses in which I determined the manner in which the link between years of cohabitation and relationship quality was moderated by dissolution, first for both gay and lesbian couples, then for heterosexual couples. These analyses indicated that the interaction involving years in the relationship and dissolution was significant for gay and lesbian couples, unstandardized coefficient = -2.30, $p < .01$, and for heterosexual couples, unstandardized coefficient = -9.73, $p < .01$. This effect was moderated by type of couple

because, as expected, it was stronger for heterosexual couples than for gay and lesbian couples. Thus, although the rate of decline in relationship quality was larger for heterosexual couples than it was for gay and lesbian couples, eventual dissolution was preceded by a decline in relationship quality for *both* gay and lesbian couples and heterosexual couples.

CONCLUSION

My major premise in this article is that the complex controversy surrounding same-sex marriage can be examined, in part, as an empirical issue. I asked whether and the extent to which partners from the most likely type of gay and lesbian cohabiting couples—those without children—differ from partners from the most likely type of heterosexual married couples—those with children. My findings are of note because both partners from gay cohabiting, lesbian cohabiting, and heterosexual married couples were assessed repeatedly with psychometrically sound measures. Further, I employed statistical techniques appropriate for analyzing data obtained from both partners of the same couple. Finally, I examined the critical issue of the extent to which gay and lesbian partners differ from heterosexual parents over a range of issues. I studied average levels of variables known to be linked to relationship health, concurrent predictors of relationship quality, and predictors of relationship stability. These issues rarely have been addressed together, even in prospective longitudinal studies of married heterosexual couples (Davila et al., 1999; Huston et al., 2001; Karney & Bradbury, 1997).

Despite these positive features, the data I collected were limited. I make no claim that the samples of couples are representative, all measures were open to the biases associated with self-report, partners from the different types of couples were not matched on demographic variables, and gay and lesbian partners who were also parents were not studied. Further, had I selected different variables either from the domains of interest or from different domains (e.g., sexual behavior) and used different methodologies (e.g., interviews and direct observations), I might have obtained different findings. In the context of the current controversy over same-sex marriage, however, the nonrepresentative nature of the samples in particular may not

be problematic. Opponents of same-sex marriage have not indicated that marriage should be denied to only *some* types of gay and lesbian couples (such as those in short-term relationships or those living with children). Rather, opponents have objected to marriage for *any and all* same-sex couples. Because opponents of same-sex marriage have targeted gay and lesbian partners as a class of individuals, the data reported here are relevant because the gay and lesbian partners studied are members of that class.

The overall pattern of findings across the range of issues studied here is clear: Relative to heterosexual parents, partners from gay couples and partners from lesbian couples do not function in ways that place their relationships at risk for distress. In particular, there is no evidence that gay partners and lesbian partners were psychologically maladjusted, that they had high levels of personality traits that predisposed them to relationship problems, that they had dysfunctional working models of their relationships, and that they used ineffective strategies to resolve conflict. The only area in which gay and lesbian partners fared worse than heterosexual parents was in the area of social support: Gay partners and lesbian partners received less support for their relationships from family members than heterosexual parents did.

Although the rates of relationship dissolution for the heterosexual couples and gay and lesbian couples were not directly comparable, it is safe to conclude that gay and lesbian couples dissolve their relationships more frequently than heterosexual couples, especially heterosexual couples with children. Perhaps a positive side of *not* having same-sex marriage is that gay and lesbian partners confront no *formal* institutionalized barriers and obstacles to leaving unhappy relationships. Lawyers need not be consulted, court action is not required, religious vows are not broken, and no recognized kin-by-marriage ties are severed. As a result, the relatively high rate of dissolution for gay and lesbian couples might indicate that gay and lesbian cohabiting partners are less likely than heterosexual married partners to find themselves trapped in empty relationships (Adams & Jones, 1997). Nonetheless, the absence of formal institutionalized barriers for members of gay and lesbian couples does not mean that partners from gay and lesbian couples do not perceive barriers to leaving their relationships, and that gay and

lesbian partners easily exit from their relationships. To the contrary, I have reported elsewhere that partners from gay and lesbian cohabiting couples are similar to partners from heterosexual married couples in both appraisals of barriers to leaving their relationships (Kurdek, 1995a) and in the personal emotional turmoil experienced subsequent to dissolution (Kurdek, 1997a).

Given the current lack of formal institutionalized barriers to leaving a same-sex relationship, perhaps the most remarkable finding from this project (see also Lewin, 1998; Marcus, 1998; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984) is that gay men and lesbians nonetheless build and sustain durable relationships. At the time of the last available assessment, 52% of the 125 gay stable couples and 37% of the 100 lesbian stable couples had been together for more than 10 years. Further, 14% of the 125 gay stable couples and 10% of the 100 lesbian stable couples had been together for more than 20 years. To the extent that marriage is regarded as a social and legal institution, conferring the right of marriage to gay men and lesbians might actually defend their relationships against the stresses that plague any couple in the early critical stages of the relationship, stresses that may lead to premature dissolution (Clunis & Green, 1988; Huston et al., 2001; McWhirter & Mattison). Because involvement in a close relationship is linked to overall well-being (Diener et al., 1999), protecting same-sex relationships is tantamount to protecting the well-being of the partners involved in those relationships.

That concurrent relationship quality was predicted with variables from the psychological adjustment, personality traits, relationship styles, conflict resolution, and social support domains equally well for heterosexual parents as compared to gay partners and lesbian partners is strong evidence that the processes regulating close personal relationships are robust. These findings provide empirical documentation for Huston's (2000) claim that the axioms derived from his social ecological model apply to both marriages and marriagelike unions. Further, that change in relationship quality discriminated unstable couples from stable couples for both heterosexual and gay and lesbian couples is additional evidence that models of marriage and marriagelike unions should recognize change as a core relationship process (Huston et al., 2001; Karney & Bradbury, 1995, 1997).

The findings reported here should not be taken to mean that gay and lesbian cohabiting couples and heterosexual married couples do not differ from each other in any regard. Indeed, the findings regarding social support from family members signify that gay and lesbian couples function in a social context that is very different from that of heterosexual couples (Meyer, 2003). Further, because gay men and lesbians cannot use the gender of the partner to fashion the content of their relationships, they must negotiate common couple-level issues such as household labor (Carrington, 1999) and family rituals (Oswald, 2002) in creative ways that do not involve gender. The findings reported here can be taken as one basis for claiming that gay men and lesbians are entitled to legal recognition of their relationships not only because, as gay and lesbian citizens, they deserve the same rights and privileges as heterosexual citizens, but also because the processes that regulate their relationships are the same as those that regulate the relationships of heterosexual partners.

NOTE

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