



# The Close Relationships of Lesbians and Gay Men

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Annu. Rev. Psychol. 2007. 58:405–24

First published online as a Review in  
Advance on August 11, 2006

The *Annual Review of Psychology* is online  
at <http://psych.annualreviews.org>

This article's doi:  
10.1146/annurev.psych.58.110405.085701

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0066-4308/07/0110-0405\$20.00

## Key Words

division of household labor, gay-related stressor, power, second-parent adoption, sexual orientation, homosexuality, social stigma, social support, stress-related psychological disorders

## Abstract

This article reviews empirical studies of same-sex couples in the United States, highlighting consistent findings, drawing comparisons to heterosexual couples, and noting gaps in available research. U.S. Census data indicate that there were more than 600,000 same-sex couples living together in 2000. Research about relationship formation, the division of household labor, power, satisfaction, sexuality, conflict, commitment, and relationship stability is presented. Next, we highlight three recent research topics: the legalization of same-sex relationships through civil unions and same-sex marriage, the experiences of same-sex couples raising children, and the impact of societal prejudice and discrimination on same-sex partners. We conclude with comments about the contributions of empirical research to debunking negative stereotypes of same-sex couples, testing the generalizability of theories about close relationships, informing our understanding of gender and close relationships, and providing a scientific basis for public policy.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the past half century, the close relationships of lesbians and gay men have moved from the shadows of society as a “love that dares not speak its name” to center stage in a national and international debate about same-sex marriage. The increasing visibility of same-sex couples has challenged researchers to provide scientific information that can illuminate the relationship experiences of lesbians and gay men. Research findings can also inform legal and policy questions that have been raised by ongoing efforts to achieve equal rights for same-sex couples.

This review focuses on the experiences of same-sex couples in the United States. We begin with up-to-date estimates about the number of same-sex couples. Next, we review the research literature on same-sex couples and

identify major empirical findings. When possible, we compare the experiences of same-sex couples to those of heterosexual couples in order to indicate areas of commonality and of difference. It is noteworthy that research on same-sex couples began slowly in the 1970s, grew in the 1980s, and then diminished as researchers shifted their attention to the impact of the AIDS epidemic on the gay community. Much of the research we review was conducted 10 or 20 years ago.

In the past few years, however, research on same-sex couples has been revitalized and has shifted to a new set of topics. We highlight three recent research directions: the legalization of same-sex relationships through civil unions and same-sex marriage, the experiences of same-sex couples raising children, and the impact of societal prejudice and discrimination on same-sex partners. We conclude with general comments about the role of empirical research in four areas: debunking negative stereotypes about same-sex couples, testing the generalizability of theories about close relationships, informing our understanding of gender and close relationships, and providing a scientific basis for public policy.

## COUNTING SAME-SEX COUPLES

Although same-sex couples have a clear and growing presence in American society, several factors make it difficult to provide an accurate estimate of the number of lesbians and gay men who are currently in a same-sex relationship. First, some lesbians and gay men are reluctant to reveal their sexual identity or the nature of their romantic attachments. Second, lacking the equivalent of legal heterosexual marriage and divorce, we have no public records of how many lesbians and gay men are currently in a serious relationship or have experienced the loss of a serious relationship through breakup or the death of a partner. Third, researchers have used differing and noncomparable questions to

assess the relationship status of lesbians and gay men, asking, for instance, if an individual is in a romantic/sexual relationship, has a steady partner, has been together with a partner for six months or more, or currently lives with a romantic partner.

Nonetheless, available evidence suggests that many gay men and lesbians are in couple relationships. Recently, the U.S. Census and other national surveys added the category "unmarried partner" to their household roster, making it possible to estimate the number of gay and lesbian adults who live together with a same-sex partner. According to the 2000 Census, there were approximately 600,000 same-sex couples living together in the United States, with roughly equal numbers of men and women (Gates & Ost 2004). Approximately 16% of same-sex couples included at least one Hispanic partner, and 14% included at least one black partner. One estimate is that about 28% of gay men and 44% of lesbians are currently living with a same-sex partner (Black et al. 2000). Although same-sex couples are more common in urban areas, they are located in all parts of the United States.

## **BASIC FINDINGS ABOUT SAME-SEX COUPLES**

In the sections that follow, we review major findings from research on same-sex couples and offer suggestions about areas in need of further investigation. Prior to turning to these findings, it is useful to comment briefly on the sources of data that have been used in research on same-sex couples. Most studies have been conducted in the United States with individuals who self-identify as gay or lesbian, for instance by volunteering to participate in a study about gay and lesbian couples. Like many studies of heterosexual couples, studies of same-sex couples have typically recruited younger, well-educated, middle-class, white volunteers. Many studies have relied on questionnaires and have obtained reports from only one partner in a couple.

In addition to many small-scale studies, there have been a few major research programs focusing on same-sex couples. For example, in a project known as the American Couples Study, Blumstein & Schwartz (1983) obtained responses to lengthy questionnaires from both partners in 957 gay male, 772 lesbian, 653 heterosexual cohabiting, and 3656 heterosexual married couples. A subset of participants also completed an 18-month follow-up questionnaire. More recently, Kurdek conducted two longitudinal studies involving repeated assessments of both partners in same-sex couples and married heterosexual couples (see reviews in Kurdek 1994a, 2004a). Our review encompasses both small-scale studies and larger programs of research.

## **Relationship Formation**

Several studies have compared the qualities that lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals seek in romantic partners (see review by Peplau & Spalding 2000). Regardless of sexual orientation, most individuals value affection, dependability, shared interests, and similarity of religious beliefs. Men, regardless of sexual orientation, are more likely to emphasize a partner's physical attractiveness; women, regardless of sexual orientation, give greater emphasis to personality characteristics. Like their heterosexual counterparts, lesbians and gay men report that they often meet potential dates through friends, at work, at a bar, or at a social event (e.g., Bryant & Demian 1994). Urban areas with visible gay and lesbian communities provide expanded opportunities to meet potential partners. In addition, the Internet has rapidly become a way for gay men and lesbians to meet each other. There is some evidence that lesbians and gay men, like their heterosexual counterparts, rely on fairly conventional scripts when they go on dates with a new partner (Klinkenberg & Rose 1994).

For lesbians and gay men, the boundaries between friendship and romantic or sexual relationships may be particularly complex (e.g., Diamond & Dube 2002, Nardi 1999).

Rose et al. (1993), for example, found that many lesbian romantic relationships began as a friendship, then developed into a love relationship, and later became sexual. Some women reported difficulties with this pattern of relationship development, such as problems in knowing if a relationship was shifting from friendship to romance and in gauging the friend's possible sexual interest. In addition, lesbians and gay men may be especially likely to remain friends with former sexual partners (Solomon et al. 2004, Weinstock 2004). In a recent study (Harkless & Fowers 2005), lesbians and gay men were more likely than were heterosexuals to agree, "When a relationship is ending, one of my biggest fears is that I will lose the friendship" or that it is important "to remain friends with someone with whom I've had a serious relationship." Lesbians and gay men were also more likely than were heterosexuals to report continued phone calls and social contacts with ex-partners. The factors that encourage same-sex ex-partners to remain friends are not well understood but may include the small size of some gay and lesbian social networks, the norms of particular gay and lesbian communities, and the benefits that can accrue from transforming ties with ex-lovers into friendship (Nardi 1999, Weinstock 2004).

### **The Division of Household Labor and Power**

Traditional heterosexual marriage is organized around two basic principles: a division of labor based on gender and a norm of greater male power and decision-making authority. Researchers have investigated how same-sex couples, who lack biological sex as a basis for assigning tasks and status, organize their lives together (see review by Peplau & Spalding 2000).

Turning first to the division of labor, it is important to emphasize that most gay men and lesbians are in dual-earner relationships, so neither partner is the exclusive breadwinner and each partner has some measure

of economic independence. When it comes to housework, same-sex couples are likely to divide chores fairly equitably. For example, Kurdek (1993) compared the division of housework (e.g., cleaning, cooking, and shopping) in cohabiting same-sex couples and married heterosexual couples, none of whom had children. In heterosexual couples, wives typically did most of the housework. In contrast, lesbian and gay couples divided the household tasks more equally (see also Kurdek 2006). Lesbian partners tended to share tasks; gay male partners were more likely to have each partner specialize in certain tasks. In a review of research on this topic, Kurdek (2005, p. 252) concluded that "although members of gay and lesbian couples do not divide household labor in a perfectly equal manner, they are more likely than members of heterosexual couples to negotiate a balance between achieving a fair distribution of household labor and accommodating the different interests, skills, and work schedules of particular partners."

Questionnaire studies may not capture the nuanced complexities of domestic work for cohabiting couples. An in-depth study of dual-earner heterosexual families (Hochschild & Machung 1989) showed that although most wives did the bulk of housework, many couples found ways to characterize their allocation of housework as balanced. Similarly, based on in-depth interviews and home observations, Carrington (1999) suggested that same-sex couples' reports of equal sharing of household activities may reflect their ideals but often mask substantial observable differences between partners' actual contributions. He found that equal sharing of domestic activities was far from universal: It was most common among affluent couples who relied on paid help, and when both partners had less demanding jobs with more flexible schedules.

When researchers assess power in close relationships, they typically try to characterize the overall pattern of dominance to determine whether one partner is more influential than the other is. The lesbians and gay men who

participate in psychological research tend to be advocates of power equality in their relationships. In an early study, 92% of gay men and 97% of lesbians defined the ideal balance of power as one in which both partners were "exactly equal" (Peplau & Cochran 1980). In a more recent study, partners in gay and lesbian couples rated power equality as important in an ideal relationship, although lesbians scored significantly higher on the value of equality than did gay men (Kurdek 1995a). This strong endorsement of power sharing may reflect, in some measure, the tendency for researchers to recruit participants who are well educated and generally liberal in their attitudes.

Not all couples who strive for power equality achieve this ideal. Reports of the actual balance of power vary from study to study. For example, when Peplau & Cochran (1980) asked lesbians and gay men "who has more say" in your relationship, only 38% of gay men and 59% of lesbians characterized their current relationship as "exactly equal." Equal power was reported by 59% of the lesbians studied by Reilly & Lynch (1990) and by 60% of the gay men studied by Harry & DeVall (1978).

Social exchange theory predicts that greater power accrues to the partner who has relatively greater personal resources, such as education, money, or social standing. Studies of gay men have supported this hypothesis. For example, Harry found that gay men who were older and wealthier than their partner was tended to have more power (Harry 1984, Harry & DeVall 1978). Blumstein & Schwartz (1983, p. 59) concluded that "in gay male couples, income is an extremely important force in determining which partner will be dominant." For lesbians, research results are less clear-cut, with some studies finding that income is significantly related to power (Caldwell & Peplau 1984, Reilly & Lynch 1990) and others not (Blumstein & Schwartz 1983). Dunne (1997, p. 180) concluded that "lesbian women are comfortable neither with dominating nor with being dominated in their partnerships." Further research on the balance of power is needed to clarify these incon-

sistent results and to broaden our knowledge about correlates of power imbalances.

## Love and Satisfaction

Stereotypes depict gay and lesbian relationships as unhappy and dysfunctional, especially in comparison with heterosexual relationships (e.g., Crawford & Solliday 1996, Testa et al. 1987). In fact, empirical research finds striking similarities in the reports of love and satisfaction among contemporary lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples. Peplau & Cochran (1980) found no significant differences in scores on standardized Love and Liking scales among matched samples of lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals who were all currently in a romantic/sexual relationship. In a longitudinal study of married heterosexual and cohabiting homosexual couples, Kurdek (1998) found similar results. Controlling for age, education, income, and years cohabiting, the couples did not differ in relationship satisfaction at initial testing. Over the five years of this study, all types of couples tended to decrease in relationship satisfaction, but no differences were found among gay, lesbian, or heterosexual couples in the rate of change in satisfaction. A survey of African American lesbians and gay men in committed relationships (Peplau et al. 1997) also found high levels of relationship satisfaction and closeness. Further, the partner's race was unrelated to relationship satisfaction: Interracial couples were no more or less satisfied, on average, than same-race couples.

Researchers have begun to identify factors that enhance or detract from satisfaction in same-sex relationships. Like their heterosexual counterparts, gay and lesbian couples generally benefit when partners are similar in background, attitudes, and values (Kurdek & Schmitt 1987). Additionally, consistent with social exchange theory, happiness tends to be high when partners perceive many rewards and few costs from their relationship (e.g., Beals et al. 2002, Duffy & Rusbult 1986). A study of lesbian relationships found

support for another exchange theory prediction, that satisfaction is higher when partners are equally involved in or committed to a relationship (Peplau et al. 1982). For lesbian couples, greater satisfaction has also been linked to perceptions of greater equity or fairness in the relationship (Schreurs & Buunk 1996). Finally, several studies of lesbians and gay men have found that satisfaction is higher when partners believe they are relatively equal in power and decision-making (reviewed by Peplau & Spalding 2000).

## Sexuality

Sexuality has been a popular topic of investigation in studies of gay and lesbian couples. A comprehensive review of this literature is provided by Peplau et al. (2004). Research on the frequency of sex in relationships has identified several consistent patterns. Among same-sex and heterosexual couples, there is wide variability in sexual frequency and a general decline in frequency as relationships continue over time. In the early stages of a relationship, gay male couples have sex more often than do other couples. Further, research consistently finds that lesbian couples report having sex less often than either heterosexual or gay male couples.

Considerable attention has been given to the low frequency of sex reported by lesbians, in part because this pattern may reflect broader issues about female sexuality (Fassinger & Morrow 1995, Peplau & Garnets 2000). One suggestion is that gender socialization leads women to repress and ignore sexual feelings, and this effect is magnified in a relationship with two female partners. Another view is that women have difficulty taking the lead to initiate sexual activities with a partner, resulting in low levels of sexual activity. A third possibility is that men are generally more interested in sex than are women, leading to higher levels of sexual activity in couples that include a male partner. A fourth possibility is that traditional conceptions of sexuality, which equate "sex" with pe-

nile penetration, may not adequately capture lesbian women's sexual experiences. Finally, there may be methodological problems with the ways researchers have asked questions about women's sexuality (Rothblum 2000).

In addition to studying sexual frequency, researchers have also investigated sexual satisfaction in gay and lesbian couples. High levels of sexual satisfaction have been reported in studies of students and young adults (e.g., Peplau & Cochran 1981, Peplau et al. 1978), predominantly white adult samples (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz 1983, Kurdek 1991, McWhirter & Mattison 1984), and samples of African American lesbians and gay men (e.g., Peplau et al. 1997). Not surprisingly, sexual satisfaction and sexual frequency are linked. In the American Couples sample, for example, the correlation between sexual frequency and sexual satisfaction was  $r = 0.50$  for gay men and  $r = 0.48$  for lesbians (controlling for age and duration of relationship). Sexual satisfaction is also associated with global measures of relationship satisfaction in gay and lesbian as well as heterosexual couples (e.g., Bryant & Demian 1994, Eldridge & Gilbert 1990, Peplau et al. 1997).

Research has documented differences between gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples concerning the issue of sexual exclusiveness versus openness. First, there are differences in attitudes about monogamy (Bailey et al. 1994). In the American Couples Study, only 36% of gay men indicated that it was important to be sexually monogamous, compared with 71% of lesbians, 84% of heterosexual wives, and 75% of husbands. Second, there are major differences in reports of actual behavior (Bryant & Demian 1994, McWhirter & Mattison 1984). In the American Couples Study, only a minority of lesbians (28%), wives (21%), and husbands (26%) reported having engaged in extradyadic sex, compared with 82% of gay men. Third, among those individuals who had engaged in extradyadic sex, gay men reported having a greater number of sex partners. Finally, Kurdek (1991) found that sexual fidelity was positively related to relationship

satisfaction for lesbian and heterosexual couples, but not for gay male couples. This may reflect the norms of the gay male community and the fact that some male couples have agreements that extradyadic sex is acceptable (Hickson et al. 1992).

We know little about possible changes in sexual attitudes and behavior that may have occurred among lesbians and gay men in recent years, both in response to the AIDS epidemic and the greater attention being given to same-sex marriage. Rutter & Schwartz (1996) suggested that from the 1970s to the 1990s gay men's attitudes shifted toward greater endorsement of monogamy but their actual sexual behavior did not undergo a corresponding change.

### **Conflict and Partner Violence**

Few couples avoid occasional disagreements and conflicts. Lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual couples report a similar frequency of arguments and tend to disagree about similar topics, with finances, affection, sex, criticism, and household tasks heading the list (Kurdek 1994a, 2005, 2006; Metz et al. 1994). How well do lesbians and gay men solve problems that arise in their relationships? Available research indicates that their problem-solving skills are at least as good as are those of heterosexual couples. In a study of homosexual and heterosexual couples, Kurdek (1998) found no differences in the frequency of using positive problem-solving styles such as negotiating or compromising. Nor were differences found in the use of poor strategies, such as launching personal attacks or refusing to talk to the partner. A study that observed couples discussing relationship conflicts in a laboratory setting found that gay and lesbian partners used somewhat more positive communication styles than did heterosexual couples (Gottman et al. 2003). Finally, as with heterosexual couples, happy lesbian and gay male couples are more likely than are unhappy couples to use constructive problem-solving approaches (Kurdek 2004, Metz et al. 1994).

Recently, researchers have begun to document the existence and nature of violence in same-sex relationships (see review by Potoczniak et al. 2003). It is impossible to estimate accurately the frequency of same-sex domestic violence, not only because of underreporting to the police but also because research studies have been based on small, unrepresentative samples. Interviews with abused gay and lesbian individuals (e.g., Potoczniak et al. 2003, Renzetti & Miley 1996) have documented a cycle of escalating abuse in some same-sex couples. This pattern, in which one partner uses violence and threats of violence to intimidate and control the other, bears many similarities to violence in heterosexual couples that Johnson (2006) has characterized as "intimate terrorism." We know less about other types of violence in same-sex relationships, including violent resistance to abuse by a partner and situational violence that occurs when a verbal conflict turns physical. We also lack information about the correlates of domestic violence among same-sex couples. In male-female couples, traditional attitudes about gender roles, differences in physical size and strength, and differences in financial resources can all contribute to patterns of abuse. How do these factors affect same-sex couples? In addition, are there other factors unique to lesbians and gay men that contribute to violence, including experiences of discrimination or the stress of belonging to a sexual minority group (Balsam & Szymanski 2005)?

### **Commitment and Relationship Stability**

Three general factors contribute to partners' psychological commitment to each other and to the longevity of their relationship; all three appear to be relevant to same-sex couples (see reviews by Kurdek 2000, Peplau & Spalding 2000). Of obvious importance are positive attraction forces, such as love and satisfaction, that make partners want to stay together. A second factor is the availability of alternatives to the current relationship, most often a more

desirable partner. Partners who perceive few alternatives are less likely to leave a relationship. Finally, barriers that make it difficult for a person to leave a relationship also matter (Kurdek 1998, 2000). Barriers include investments that increase the psychological, emotional, or financial costs of ending a relationship, as well as moral or religious feelings of obligation or duty to one's partner. A model including all three predictors of commitment was tested by Beals et al. (2002) using data on lesbian couples from the American Couples Study. Their analyses found that relationship satisfaction, the quality of alternatives, and investments each predicted psychological commitment, which in turn predicted relationship stability.

There is evidence that married heterosexual couples perceive more barriers than do gay, lesbian, or cohabiting heterosexual couples (e.g., Kurdek 1998, Kurdek & Schmitt 1986). A relative lack of barriers may make it less likely that lesbians and gay men will be trapped in miserable and deteriorating relationships. On the other hand, weaker barriers may also allow partners to end relationships that might have improved if given more time and effort. In a longitudinal study, Kurdek (1998) found that barriers to leaving the relationship were a significant predictor of relationship stability over a five-year period. Today, as lesbians and gay men gain greater legal recognition for their relationships, the barriers to ending same-sex relationships may become more similar to those of heterosexuals. The impact of such trends on the stability of same-sex relationships is an important topic for future investigations.

Given the weaker barriers to ending same-sex relationships, we might anticipate that there would be fewer long-term relationships among lesbians and gay men compared with heterosexuals. Unfortunately, we currently know little about the longevity of same-sex relationships. No information comparable to divorce statistics for heterosexual marriages is available. Several studies have documented the existence of very-long-

lasting gay and lesbian relationships (e.g., Johnson 1990, McWhirter & Mattison 1984). Longitudinal studies provide further clues about relationship stability. In a five-year prospective study, Kurdek (1998) reported a breakup rate of 7% for married heterosexual couples, 14% for cohabiting gay male couples, and 16% for cohabiting lesbian couples. Controlling for demographic variables, cohabiting gay and lesbian couples were significantly more likely than were married heterosexuals to break up (see also Kurdek 2004).

In this section, we reviewed empirical research describing basic features of same-sex relationships and comparing them with heterosexual relationships. In the next section, we consider three new directions in research on same-sex couples.

## RECENT RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The twenty-first century has seen renewed interest in research on same-sex couples, spurred by the increasing visibility of lesbians and gay men and by public policy debates about same-sex marriage and gay adoption. A shift has also occurred from viewing same-sex couples through the lens of abnormality and dysfunction toward viewing lesbians and gay men as members of a sexual minority group dealing with social stigma and discrimination.

### Legalizing Same-Sex Relationships: Marriage, Civil Unions, and Domestic Partnerships

For heterosexual couples, marriage represents both a public sign of commitment and a legal status affecting many aspects of life. The General Accounting Office (2004) has estimated that marriage affects 1138 federal rights, including taxes, Social Security, and veterans' benefits. Not surprisingly, lesbians and gay men have actively sought to make legal recognition of their relationships a reality. In a national survey (Kaiser Family Foundation 2001), 74% of lesbians and gay men said that

if they could legally marry someone of the same sex, they would like to do so someday. In recent decades, advances have been made in achieving formal recognition for same-sex relationships. Within gay and lesbian communities, same-sex couples are holding commitment ceremonies to celebrate their relationships, and some religious groups now perform same-sex wedding ceremonies. Additionally, increasing numbers of employers provide domestic partner benefits to same-sex partners. Despite this progress, the substantial social and legal benefits and protections accorded to legally married couples by state and federal laws are still beyond the reach of most same-sex partners in the United States.

Efforts to legalize same-sex relationships have met with considerable opposition. Reflecting public sentiment, President Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, clarifying that for the federal government, marriage is defined as “a legal union of one man and one woman as husband and wife” and that spouse should be defined only as “a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or a wife.” A majority of state governments have also taken steps to restrict marriage to heterosexual couples (Human Rights Campaign 2006). Recent national poll data indicate that a 53% majority of Americans oppose allowing gay men and lesbians to marry legally, with only 36% in favor of same-sex marriage and 11% uncertain (The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2005). For many Americans, opposition to same-sex marriage is strongly correlated with the belief that homosexuality is immoral (Lewis 2006). Despite opposition to same-sex marriage, an increasing percentage of Americans endorses extending legal rights and protections to lesbians and gay men. In national surveys (e.g., Kaiser Family Foundation 2001), more than two-thirds of Americans support providing inheritance rights, health insurance, and social security benefits to same-sex domestic partners. For the first time in 2005, a 53% majority of those polled favored permitting lesbians and gay men to enter into civil unions that would give

them many of the same rights as married couples (The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2005). Public attitudes and governmental policies differ from state to state. Currently, only Massachusetts offers legal marriage to same-sex couples, and six other states recognize some form of same-sex civil union.

In addition to information about heterosexuals' attitudes toward same-sex marriage, researchers have also gathered information about the attitudes of gay men and lesbians. Lannutti (2005) used an open-ended Web-based survey to examine the attitudes of 288 lesbians and gay men toward same-sex marriage. Her findings revealed complex and nuanced views. Virtually all participants emphasized fairness and equal rights: Legal marriage would be a sign that lesbians and gay men had achieved first-class citizenship. Many positive aspects of same-sex marriage were noted. Marriage would help couples feel closer and strengthen their relationships, in part by creating structural barriers to relationship dissolution. Respondents also suggested that marriage would reduce the stress that same-sex couples experience, by increasing legal rights and benefits, reducing societal prejudice, and diminishing internalized homophobia among lesbians and gay men. At the same time, respondents expressed concerns that the availability of legal unions might put pressure on individuals to get married “for the wrong reasons” or might create status hierarchies within the gay/lesbian community that could stigmatize those who choose not to marry. Another concern was that legalizing same-sex marriage might lead to assimilation into mainstream heterosexual norms and values that would change and harm unique features of the gay/lesbian community.

Currently, we have very little information about American couples who seek civil unions or same-sex marriage. Solomon, Rothblum and colleagues (e.g., Solomon et al. 2004, 2005; Todosijevic et al. 2005) studied the first cohort of couples to obtain civil unions in Vermont. For comparison purposes, the researchers asked gay and lesbian respondents

to nominate a married heterosexual sibling and the sibling's spouse as well as a gay or lesbian couple from their friendship circle who were not in a civil union. Results from this research replicated many findings from previous studies concerning sexuality, conflict, and the division of housework and childcare among same-sex couples. Few differences were found among same-sex couples based on their civil union status.

As time goes by, researchers will be able to investigate the impact of civil unions and same-sex marriage on gay and lesbian couples more thoroughly. An important goal will be to identify factors that distinguish same-sex couples who seek legal recognition from those who do not, including their motives and the extent to which couples emphasize the symbolic and psychological meaning of legal recognition or the financial and legal benefits that recognition may confer. A further question concerns the impact of legal recognition itself on the nature and longevity of same-sex relationships. Will legalization increase the stability of same-sex relationships? Data from Norway and Sweden, where registered same-sex partnerships have been available since the 1990s, indicate that the rate of dissolution within five years of entering a legal union is higher among same-sex partnerships than among heterosexual marriages, with lesbian couples having the highest rates of dissolution (Andersson et al. 2006). Unfortunately, the Scandinavian data do not permit comparisons with the longevity of same-sex couples who did not seek legal recognition. Many other questions remain unanswered (Patterson 2004a). For example, do the social and economic benefits of legal recognition affect relationship functioning and satisfaction? Does legal recognition change the way in which couples or their family and friends think about their relationship? Does legalization lead to better physical and mental health for gay and lesbian people (Herdt & Kertzner 2006, Herek 2006, King & Bartlett 2006)? Finally, does the form of legal recognition—

marriage, civil union, domestic partnership—make a difference?

### Same-Sex Couples with Children

Based on data from the 2000 U.S. Census (Gates & Ost 2004), it has been estimated that among adults aged 22–55, 34% of lesbian couples who live together and 22% of gay male couples who live together are raising children. Consequently, approximately 250,000 children under the age of 18 are being raised by same-sex couples. Although the experiences of these children are beyond the scope of our review, it is important to note that research has documented that they are comparable to children of heterosexual parents on measures of psychological well-being, self-esteem, cognitive abilities, and peer relations (see reviews by Fulcher et al. 2006, Patterson 2003, Tasker 2005).

Gay- and lesbian-headed families are created in a variety of ways (Patterson 1995a). Some lesbians and gay men, perhaps the majority at present, had children in a previous heterosexual relationship. Growing numbers of lesbians and gay men are choosing to have children within the context of a same-sex relationship. In a national poll, 49% of gay men and lesbians who were not parents said they would like to have or adopt children of their own (Kaiser Family Foundation 2001). Given the obstacles to parenthood faced by self-identified gay men and lesbians, there is a high likelihood that their children are strongly desired and planned.

Several paths to parenthood are available to same-sex couples, each affecting the biological relatedness of the child to the parents. Some couples adopt, in which case neither parent is biologically related to the child. Some gay male couples turn to surrogacy, so that the partner who provides the sperm is biologically related to the child. Some lesbian couples use donor insemination, so that the lesbian who carries the child is biologically related to the child. Other lesbian couples use

in vitro fertilization so that one woman contributes the egg and the other woman is the birth mother. There are also differences in the legal relations between parents and children. Some states permit two same-sex partners to be the legal parents of a child, whereas many others do not. In states that do not allow second-parent adoption by a same-sex partner, only one partner in the couple is a legal parent. It is likely that the family experiences of lesbians and gay men differ, depending on how they become parents and the nature of their biological and legal relationship to their children.

Although census data provide basic information about same-sex couples with children, small-scale studies provide richer details about the experiences of these couples. Several studies have investigated relationship satisfaction among lesbian couples with children (see review by Patterson 1995a). There is some evidence that relationship satisfaction may decline shortly after the birth of a child, as is generally true for heterosexual couples. A recent longitudinal study followed lesbian couples from one month before the birth of a child to three months after the birth (Goldberg & Sayer 2006). All couples used donor insemination. For both the biological and nonbiological mother, love for the partner typically declined and conflict increased with the transition to parenthood. Patterns of change were affected by the women's neuroticism, expectations about social support from family, and features of the partners' interaction. Other studies have compared lesbian parenting couples with other couples. In an illustrative study, Flaks et al. (1995) compared 15 lesbian couples to 15 heterosexual couples, all with children between the ages of three and nine who were conceived through donor insemination. No significant differences were found between the lesbian and heterosexual couples on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, a standard measure of relationship quality.

Does the egalitarian division of household labor typically found among gay and lesbian couples without children hold for those with

children? Although limited, available research indicates that parenthood does not change the general pattern of shared household responsibilities for same-sex couples (see review on lesbian parenthood by Parks 1998). This is particularly true for the allocation of household chores and decision-making (e.g., Patterson 1995b, Patterson et al. 2004). The division of childcare responsibilities, on the other hand, is less clear-cut.

Research consistently demonstrates that lesbian couples with children endorse an egalitarian division of childcare as their ideal (Chan et al. 1998, Patterson 1995b, Patterson et al. 2004). This is in contrast to heterosexual couples, who tend to endorse a nonegalitarian division, with the wife ideally doing more childcare than the husband does. Research on the actual division of childcare among lesbian mothers is less consistent. Some studies have reported that lesbian partners share equally in childcare (Hand 1991, Patterson et al. 2004), but others have reported that lesbian couples adopt a less-than-egalitarian division of childcare (Ciano-Boyce & Shelley-Sireci 2002, Patterson 1995b). The reasons for these differences are not understood. They may result from the use of relatively small samples. It seems likely, however, that other factors are also at play. In particular, the biological and legal relationship of each parent to the children may make a difference. It may be, for example, that biological mothers tend to be more involved in childcare than are nonbiological mothers. Research systematically examining these issues is needed.

Currently, research on same-sex couples with children is quite limited. Research on gay fathers is rare (Patterson 2004b). Studies of ethnic minority families and low-income families are also needed. Further, it would be useful for researchers to go beyond studying relationship satisfaction and the division of labor to address a broader set of issues in the lives of same-sex couples raising children and to go beyond description toward specifying underlying mechanisms affecting couples'

functioning. Longitudinal approaches to studying same-sex couples as they transition into parenthood may prove especially useful.

### **Societal Stigma: Stress and Social Support**

The stigma of homosexuality affects lesbians, gay men, and their relationships in many ways. Personal experiences of rejection and discrimination are common. In a national survey (Kaiser Family Foundation 2001), 74% of lesbians and gay men reported experiencing discrimination based on sexual orientation, with 23% reporting that discrimination occurred "a lot." Additionally, 34% reported that their family or a family member had refused to accept them because of their sexual orientation. Discrimination often comes in the form of minor daily hassles, such as derogatory remarks or poor service. Swim (2004) utilized daily experience accounts to assess gay and lesbian people's experience with these everyday hassles. Over a one-week period, participants reported experiencing an average of two hassles related to their sexual orientation. Two-thirds of these hassles were verbal, including jokes, comments based on stereotypes, hostile or threatening comments, and comments expressing general dislike of gay men and lesbians. In an experimental study, Jones (1996) demonstrated that same-sex couples requesting a hotel room with a shared bed were denied a room significantly more often than were other-sex couples making an identical request. Lewis et al. (2001) identified several types of gay-related stressors that are specific to lesbians and gay men. One type concerned family reactions and included rejection, lack of support, or ignoring the person's sexual orientation. Other gay-related stressors involved the need to hide one's sexual orientation, fear of being exposed as homosexual, violence and harassment, lack of societal acceptance, and discrimination.

Gay and lesbian couples are also vulnerable to hate crimes based on their sexual orientation. In 2002, a lesbian couple and their

infant son barely escaped with their lives when arsonists set their home on fire, only days after the women had sued the University of Montana for failing to provide domestic partner benefits. In 1999, two brothers claiming to be carrying out God's will brutally murdered long-term gay partners Gary Matson, 50, and Winfield Mowder, 40, while they slept in their home. In a national survey, 32% of lesbian and gay respondents reported having been the target of physical violence against them or their property because of their sexual orientation (Kaiser Family Foundation 2001).

Researchers have consistently shown that lesbians and gay men who experience greater levels of discrimination are at greater risk for poor psychological adjustment and stress-related psychological disorders (e.g., Mays & Cochran 2001; Meyer 1995, 2003). Indeed, researchers are now testing the applicability of models of minority stress, first developed with regard to ethnic minorities, to the experiences of lesbian and gay individuals (Meyer 1995, 2003). Unfortunately, we currently have little information about how social stigma and discrimination affect same-sex couples. Research with heterosexual married couples has clearly demonstrated that high levels of stress from sources outside a relationship (e.g., financial difficulties, lack of social support) are associated with lower marital satisfaction and declines in satisfaction over time (Karney & Bradbury 2005). Further, during times of high stress, married couples report experiencing more marital problems.

It is reasonable to assume that discrimination based on sexual orientation places strains on gay and lesbian couples (Mays et al. 1993, Otis et al. 2006). A study of same-sex couples in civil unions (Todosijevic et al. 2005) found a significant association between reports of more gay-specific stressors and lower relationship satisfaction for lesbian couples but not for gay male couples. The effects of gay-related stress on couple functioning may be direct, for example, through limited access to important resources such as jobs and housing, or rejection of the couple or their

children by family, neighbors, or peers at work or school. Discrimination may also affect couples indirectly, by diminishing the self-esteem or mental health of the partners or their ability to function effectively in a relationship. Research to determine the ways in which discrimination affects same-sex couples is needed.

Equally important will be studies of the resilience of same-sex couples in the face of prejudice and discrimination. Central to understanding how couples cope with discrimination will be analyses of social support. Research consistently shows that, compared with heterosexuals, lesbians and gay men perceive less social support from their family of origin (Elizur & Mintzer 2003; Kurdek 2004, 2006). Of course, these average differences can be misleading. Some gay men and lesbians have strong and supportive family ties that are undoubtedly a valuable source of aid and comfort in times of need. At the other extreme, some lesbians and gay men have negative relations with their families, ranging from grudging acceptance to outright rejection of them and/or their partner. There is evidence that greater social support from relatives is associated not only with greater personal well-being but also with greater relationship satisfaction in same-sex couples (Kurdek 1988, 1995b). In addition, there may be distinctive types of social support that are of special relevance to lesbians and gay men. Preliminary evidence that support for a woman's lesbian identity may be particularly important to psychological well-being comes from a two-week-long daily experience study of lesbians (Beals & Peplau 2005).

A further consistent finding is that lesbians and gay men may compensate for lower levels of family support by establishing closer ties with friends. Some lesbians and gay men create "families of choice," that is, a network of friends who provide love and support, celebrate holidays and rituals, share leisure activities, and offer assistance in time of need (Carrington 1999). Oswald (2002) referred to the creation of these families as "choosing kin"

and noted commonalities between these flexible family networks and the fictive kinship patterns seen in African American and Latino communities. Studies of the impact of supportive friends on the well-being of same-sex couples would be valuable (Elizur & Mintzer 2003).

Social relations can be a mixed blessing (Rook 1998). On the one hand, supportive relationships are a source of aid and comfort in times of stress. On the other hand, social relations can be powerful sources of conflict, hostility, and disappointment that create stress. Further research on sources of stress and support for same-sex couples is needed, along with explicit analyses of how models of minority stress may apply to same-sex couples.

In this section, we have reviewed three relatively new topics of research about same-sex couples: legal recognition of same-sex relationships, same-sex partners as parents, and the impact of gay-related stress on gay and lesbian couples. An important direction for future research will be to use better and more varied research methodologies. The recent availability of information about same-sex couples gathered from large, representative samples including the U.S. Census and other major surveys has been a major advance. Survey research can fruitfully be augmented with daily experience methods, longitudinal assessments, behavioral observations in controlled settings, and experimental designs. In-depth interviews, participant observations, and ethnographies can provide rich descriptions of the daily lives of same-sex couples within a specific cultural, historical, and social context. Studies specifically focusing on couples from diverse ethnic and social class backgrounds would fill an important gap in existing knowledge.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The growing body of research on same-sex couples has contributed to our understanding of close relationships in several important ways. One contribution has been to challenge

the accuracy of negative social stereotypes about gay and lesbian relationships and to provide more reliable information (see review by Peplau 1991). For decades, the media have depicted homosexuals as unhappy individuals who are unsuccessful in developing stable romantic ties and so end up frustrated and lonely. Both the women lovers in Radclyffe Hall's popular 1928 novel, *The Well of Loneliness* (Hall 1928), and the male lovers in the recent award-winning film, *Brokeback Mountain*, reflected this theme. Contrary to these media images, research has documented that many contemporary lesbians and gay men establish enduring intimate relationships. Research has also debunked a second stereotype, that gay and lesbian relationships are dysfunctional or inferior in quality to those of heterosexuals. Instead, studies have shown that on standardized measures of love, satisfaction, and relationship adjustment, same-sex and heterosexual couples are remarkably similar. This is not to say that all same-sex relationships are happy and problem-free, but rather that gay and lesbian couples are not necessarily more prone to relationship difficulties than are heterosexuals. A third stereotype, that same-sex relationships universally mimic heterosexual marriages by creating "husband" and "wife" roles, has also been discredited. Historical and anthropological accounts have documented that masculine-feminine distinctions have sometimes been important in structuring same-sex relations, and this may continue to be true among some Americans today (Murray 2000, Peplau 2001, Peplau et al. 1999). However, most contemporary gay and lesbian couples in the United States share homemaking tasks and financial provider responsibilities, rather than dividing them such that one partner is the "husband" and the other partner is the "wife" (Kurdek 2005).

A second contribution of research on gay and lesbian relationships has been to test the generalizability of relationship concepts and theories that were based, implicitly or explicitly, on heterosexual couples. We reviewed research showing the applicability of social

exchange models of commitment and stability to same-sex couples. Although same-sex couples may differ from heterosexual couples in their mean level of exchange variables, such as barriers to dissolution, the hypothesized associations among key constructs have been strongly supported. This research provides evidence for the general usefulness of exchange models. It also suggests that researchers studying gay and lesbian relationships can build on the existing theoretical literature about close relationships, rather than having to start anew. We agree with Kurdek (2005, p. 253), who observed that "despite external differences in how gay, lesbian and heterosexual couples are constituted, the relationships of gay and lesbian partners appear to work in much the same way as the relationships of heterosexual partners." A promising new direction is provided by studies applying ideas from adult attachment theory to same-sex couples (e.g., Elizur & Mintzer 2003, Kurdek 2002, Ridge & Feeney 1998).

A third contribution of research on same-sex relationships has been to provide a new way to investigate how gender affects close relationships. For example, by comparing how women behave with male versus female partners, we can begin to disentangle the effects on social interaction of an individual's own sex and the sex of their partner. This comparative research strategy is obviously not identical to an experiment, but can nonetheless be informative. Research on social influence in close relationships is illustrative. Studies of heterosexuals have shown that men and women tend to use somewhat different tactics when trying to influence an intimate partner, but could not clarify if these differences were due to the sex of the influence agent, the sex of the target, or some other factor such as relative power in the relationship. Studies including gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples (Falbo & Peplau 1980, Howard et al. 1986) have demonstrated that regardless of gender or sexual orientation, partners with relatively less power in a relationship tend to

use “weak strategies” such as withdrawal or supplication. In contrast, partners with relatively more power tend to use “strong strategies” including bargaining or bullying.

A fourth contribution of empirical research on same-sex relationships has been to provide a scientific basis for policy and legal decisions. Activities of the American Psychological Association (APA) are illustrative. In July 2004, the APA Council of Representatives issued a resolution on sexual orientation and marriage. It stated, “APA believes that it is unfair and discriminatory to deny same-sex couples legal access to civil marriage and to all its attendant benefits, rights and priv-

ileges.” The resolution explicitly referred to research on same-sex couples and concluded that research provides no evidence to justify discrimination against same-sex couples. The APA has also submitted research-based legal briefs *amicus curiae* for court cases challenging state marriage laws in Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, and Washington (Herek 2006).

As this review suggests, research on same-sex couples has been reinvigorated by the continuing public debate about same-sex marriage, by the availability of improved research methods, and by general theoretical advances in the field of close relationships.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We are grateful for advice and assistance provided by David Frederick, Negin Ghavami, Andrew Galperin, Gary Gates, Gregory Herek, Natalya Maisel, Cristina Nguyen, Danny Osborn, Kelly Turner, and Curtis Yee.

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## Errata

An online log of corrections to *Annual Review of Psychology* chapters (if any, 1997 to the present) may be found at <http://psych.annualreviews.org/errata.shtml>