THE QUALITIES OF SAME-SEX AND DIFFERENT-SEX COUPLES
IN YOUNG ADULTHOOD

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July 14, 2015

Direct correspondence to Kara Joyner (kjoyner@bgsu.edu). This research was supported in part by the Center for Family and Demographic Research, Bowling Green State University, which has core funding from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (R24HD050959-07). We appreciate the insightful comments that Jenifer Bratter provided on an earlier draft of this paper presented at the 2012 Meetings of the Population Association of America. We thank Ryan Bogle for his help with the creation of variables for this study. This research uses data from Add Health, a program project directed by Kathleen Mullan Harris and designed by J. Richard Udry, Peter S. Bearman, and Kathleen Mullan Harris at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and funded by grant P01-HD31921 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, with cooperative funding from 23 other federal agencies and foundations. Special acknowledgment is due Ronald R. Rindfuss and Barbara Entwisle for assistance in the original design. Information on how to obtain the Add Health data files is available on the Add Health website (http://www.cpc.unc.edu/addhealth). No direct support was received from grant P01-HD31921 for this analysis.
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ABSTRACT

The relationship pathways of adults are increasingly complex, but studies concerning the qualities of relationships continue to focus primarily on married and cohabiting couples. These studies often exclude dating and same-sex couples. Drawing on the fourth wave of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, we distinguish respondents in nonmarital relationships not only by relationship type (dating and cohabiting), but also by biological sex composition (same-sex versus different-sex relationships). The results suggest that young adults generally fare better with respect to relationship qualities if they are cohabiting rather than dating. They also reveal that young adults in same-sex relationships enjoy similar levels of love and commitment, satisfaction, and trust as their counterparts in different-sex relationships. Same-sex couples do differ from different-sex couples in terms of sexual frequency and exclusivity, though the patterns differ depending on whether these couples are comprised of two women versus two men.

Keywords: same-sex relationships; dating and cohabitation; relationship qualities.
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The romantic and sexual relationships of Americans have been fundamentally transformed in recent decades and there are several indicators of this transformation. The median age at marriage in the United States is at a historic highpoint, 29.3 for men and 27.0 for women (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2014), resulting in an expanded period of singlehood to form and dissolve romantic partnerships. The U.S. has also reached its all-time peak in terms of the percent of individuals who are currently cohabiting or have ever cohabited with a different-sex partner. For instance, the large majority (69%) of recent first marriages have been preceded by cohabitation and 73% of women ages 25-29 have spent some time cohabiting (Manning, Brown, & Payne, 2104; Manning & Stykes, 2015). In addition, the number of premarital sexual relationships that men and women accumulate and the tendency to practice serial cohabitation has grown considerably, again reflecting delays in marriage (Cohen & Manning, 2010; Lichter, Turner, & Sassler, 2010). Limitations in survey and census data make it difficult to track changes in the prevalence of relationships between partners of the same biological sex (or gender identity), but cross-sectional comparisons suggest that same-sex cohabitation has increased substantially (Black, Sanders, & Taylor, 2000; Lofquist, Lugailia, O’Connell, & Feliz, 2012).

Young adults have more options for sexual and romantic involvement than ever before (i.e., type of relationship and sex of partner). They not only face fewer social barriers to residing with a romantic partner, but also have greater freedom to publically acknowledge same-sex relationships (Powell et al., 2010). In spite of the growing variety in relationships that punctuate the transition to adulthood, population-based studies concerning the qualities of adult relationships continue to focus on different-sex co-residential relationships (for an exception see Meier & Allen, 2009). Few representative studies have examined same-sex couples or couples that do not share a residence (hereafter “dating” couples). There are several compelling reasons...
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to broaden the spectrum of relationships when considering contemporary populations. Same-sex
couples, in particular, are said to be early innovators of the modern relationship (e.g., Giddens
1992; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001), and thus harbingers of future trends in relationships.
It is especially critical to understand same-sex unions among younger populations because sexual
minority youth may face unique health and well-being challenges as they navigate adulthood
(IOM, 2011). Finally, comparisons between same-sex and different-sex couples provide an
important counterfactual in studying contemporary relationships: how relationships operate in
the absence of biological sex difference between partners (Carpenter & Gates, 2008).

Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health)
offer an unprecedented opportunity to compare a broad spectrum of young adult relationships
with respect to various outcomes. Add Health’s fourth wave (2007-2008) included men and
women in their late twenties and early thirties and obtained detailed information on their most
recent romantic and/or sexual relationship, collecting the same information for same-sex and
different-sex couples. We limit our sample to 5,175 respondents in nonmarital relationships,
distinguishing respondents by relationship type (dating or cohabiting) and sex composition
(same-sex or different-sex partner). We also highlight differences between male and female
respondents with same-sex partners. We move beyond prior work not only by broadening the
spectrum of relationships, but also by comparing ongoing relationships across a rich roster of
relationship qualities, including love and commitment, satisfaction, trust, sexual frequency, and
sexual exclusivity.

BACKGROUND

In spite of the fact relationships are typically initiated outside of cohabitation and
marriage, population-based studies concerning the qualities of adult relationships continue to
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focus on different-sex co-residential relationships. A small but growing number of studies based on nationally representative surveys have included in their comparisons of union types individuals who are romantically and/or sexually involved outside a co-residential union, a group loosely referred to as “dating” (e.g., Brown & Bulanda, 2008; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2012; Sassler & Joyner, 2011; Waite & Joyner, 2001). Like studies limited to different-sex couples, studies examining same-sex couples routinely exclude dating couples who do not share a residence (e.g., Blumstein and Schwartz 1983). Marriages to same-sex couples are also missing from these comparisons, reflecting the fact that the U.S. just legalized marriages to same-sex couples. Prior to 2007, the year when Add Health began conducting its fourth wave of interviews, young adults in same-sex cohabiting relationships were entitled to civil union or domestic partner benefits in six states, but they could legally marry only in Massachusetts (Badgett & Herman, 2011). Given legal barriers to same-sex marriage, comparisons of same-sex and different-sex couples should be limited to dating and cohabiting relationships (Umberson et al., 2015).

Despite decades of research documenting the “his” and “hers” of relationships (Bernard, 1972; Huang et al., 2011; Sassler, 2010), theories concerning the dynamics of relationships often downplay the possibility that men and women differ in their preferences for relationships (Jamieson, 1999). In studies focused on different-sex couples, it is difficult to ascertain whether men and women differ in their relationship preferences, as behavior within relationships is the result of negotiation between partners (Laumann et al., 1994). Researchers can alternatively examine men’s and women’s stated preferences to address sex differences; however, stated preferences may reflect consensual theories that men and women embrace about what they think they should desire rather than what actually interests them (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008). To
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address the influence of gender, scholars trained across a range of social science fields and
disciplines (e.g., sociology, economics, public policy, and psychology) have brought sexual
minorities, including individuals in same-sex couples, to the forefront of research on various
domains of life (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Carpenter & Gates, 2008; Moore, 2008;
Rothblum, Balsam, & Mickey, 2004; Schilt, 2010; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). These scholars
demonstrate the utility of distinguishing men and women within these populations and
comparing them to their counterparts conventionally examined in studies. We extend this body
of research by considering the importance of gender in shaping the qualities of romantic and
sexual relationships. As Umberson and colleagues (2015) note, “gender almost certainly plays an
important role in shaping relationship dynamics for same-sex couples” (p. 103).

Comparisons within Different-Sex Relationships

A small but growing number of studies based on probability samples are adding
different-sex “dating” individuals to their assessments of young adult relationships (Sassler,
2010). Early data from the National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLS), which was
conducted in 1992, suggest that relationships fall on a continuum with respect to valued
relationship qualities (e.g., emotional satisfaction, physical pleasure, and sexual exclusivity),
with cohabiting individuals falling between their married and single counterparts (e.g., Waite &
Joyner, 2001). Findings based on more recent data are mixed, but there are some consistent
findings. Data from wave three of Add Health suggest that ongoing cohabiting and dating
individuals share similar levels of relationship satisfaction but differ in terms of love (Brown &
Bulanda, 2008). In contrast, results based on the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS)
suggest that young adults who are cohabiting are similar to their counterparts who are dating in
terms of both love and satisfaction (Giordano et al., 2011). Dating and cohabiting couples are
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also found to be similar in their reports of sexual exclusivity (Shaw et al., 2013). Dating couples continue to trail far behind co-residential couples with respect to how frequently they have sex, with cohabiting couples maintaining their lead over married couples in sexual frequency (Rhoades et al., 2012).

Comparisons between Same-Sex and Different-Sex Relationships

Studies have also compared the relationship qualities of same-sex and different-sex couples in the United States, dating back to survey and in-depth interview data collected by the American Couples Study, the path-breaking study begun in 1975 by Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz. Data from this study, which relied on thousands of couples recruited through newspapers, magazines, and television, have enabled some rich comparisons between large groups of same-sex cohabiting partners, different-sex cohabiting partners, and different-sex married partners. One of the most noted findings from this study was that same-sex couples comprised of women had sex less frequently than different-sex couples and same-sex couples involving men. Their lower frequency of sex could be an artifact of measuring sexual activity in terms of intercourse, as opposed to other activities (e.g., oral sex).

Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) also found evidence that same-sex couples with men were less likely to be sexually exclusive than couples of other sex compositions. Studies based on recruitment samples continue to replicate these patterns of exclusivity (Kurdek, 1988; Rothblum, 2009; Solomon Rothblum, & Balsam, 2005). Non-exclusivity on the part of men in same-sex relationships could reflect men’s greater sexual interest, given the strong association between sexual exclusivity and frequency of thoughts about sex (Treas & Giesen, 2000). Gay men are more likely than lesbian women to reside in cities with extensive networks and locales
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comprised of gays, providing them greater opportunity to meet alternative partners (Gates & Ost, 2004).

Findings based on the American Couples data and more recent samples continue to
document that same-sex and different-sex couples are similar in terms of love, affection, and
several dimensions of relationship satisfaction (Kurdek, 2001; Kurdek, 2004; Kurdek, 2006;
Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007; Roisman et al., 2008; Rothblum, 2009). Studies based on nationally-
representative samples of respondents in coresidential (i.e., cohabiting or married) relationships
find that same-sex couples are more likely to dissolve than different-sex couples, with a couple
of exceptions (e.g., Rosenfeld 2014; Weisshaar 2014). Many of these studies find that male
same-sex couples have lower dissolution rates than female same-sex couples. This paradoxical
pattern for same-sex coresidential couples may be an artifact of the higher level of commitment
required for gays than lesbians to cohabit (Lau, 2012). It may be the case that differentials in the
quality of male and female same-sex couples mirror differentials in stability, but to our
knowledge, studies focused on outcomes other than stability have yet to rely on population-based
samples.

CURRENT INVESTIGATION

Recognizing the fact that young adults today experience a wider range of relationships
than prior generations, studies continue to focus mainly on relationships that eventuate in
cohabitation or marriage. When researchers use the terms cohabitation and marriage, all too
often, they are referring to different-sex couples. We move beyond prior studies by relying on
recently collected, nationally representative data on a wide spectrum of relationships experienced
by emerging adults. We examine the qualities of different types of couples (i.e., dating and
cohabiting), paying close attention to how same-sex and different-sex unions compare to each
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other. We also consider whether patterns differ according to the sex composition of the couple, differentiating male same-sex and female same-sex couples.

Focusing on respondents in current nonmarital relationships, we first compare different couple types in terms of both subjective and objective relationship qualities. The subjective indicators include love and commitment, satisfaction, and trust, whereas the behavioral elements consist of sexual frequency and exclusivity. Based on findings from previous studies, we expect to find cohabiting couples scoring higher than dating couples in terms of desired relationship qualities (i.e., love and commitment, satisfaction, trust, sexual frequency, and exclusivity). We also expect same-sex relationships to fare no differently than different-sex couples in terms of subjective qualities. Finally, we anticipate that same-sex couples comprised of men will report a lower likelihood of sexual exclusivity than same-sex couples comprised of women. We might also expect female couples to have sex less frequently than male couples; our broad definition of sexual activity provides a conservative test of gender differences in sexual activity.

Same-sex cohabiting couples are more likely than different-sex cohabiting couples to be older and college-educated, but less likely to be residing with a child (Gates, 2009). They are also less alike than their counterparts with respect to age, race/ethnicity, and educational attainment (Jepsen & Jepsen, 2002; Schwartz & Graf, 2009). Given evidence that homogamy is tied to greater relationship satisfaction and stability along with lower levels of conflict (Bratter & King, 2008; Fu & Wolfinger, 2011; Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008), comparisons of couples require controls for couple homogamy. Our analyses not only include measures of race and age heterogamy, but also key socio-demographic indicators tied to relationship quality in prior studies: race/ethnicity, age, education, prior sexual partnerships, number of children, and duration (Brown and Bulanda 2008; Giordano et al. 2011).
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DATA AND SAMPLE

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) is a longitudinal school-based study (Harris et al. 2009). To select the schools in its sample, Add Health used a database provided by Quality Education Data for its primary sampling frame. Using rosters from each school, Add Health selected a nationally representative (core) sample of 12,105 adolescents in grades seven to twelve to participate in the first in-home interview. Add Health additionally selected oversamples of four racial groups: 1,038 black adolescents from well-educated families, 334 Chinese adolescents, 450 Cuban adolescents, and 437 Puerto Rican adolescents. The first in-home interview was conducted between April and December of 1995. The response rate for the in-home sample was 79%.

In 2007 and 2008, the project conducted a fourth wave of in-home interviews for 15,701 of the original 20,745 respondents (a retention rate of over 75%). By the time of the fourth in-home interview, respondents were between the ages of 24 and 32. Add Health used state-of-the-art survey methods to identify the romantic and sexual relationships of respondents and collect detailed information on them, including computer-assisted self-interviews (ACASI) and partner rosters. Respondents were then asked to provide basic demographic information on these partners, including their gender, age, and race/ethnicity. For respondents with more than one current partner (which was relatively rare), Add Health administered a set of rules for choosing the focal partner. For instance, married partners were chosen over cohabiting partners and cohabiting partners were chosen over romantic/sexual partners. If respondents did not have a current partner the most recent relationship was chosen as the focal one. Add Health asked questions about relationship duration, partner characteristics, and sexual behavior only with reference to the focal partner.
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Of the 14,800 respondents with valid weights, 14,331 respondents reported having had a romantic and/or sexual relationship since 2001. Eight of these respondents failed to provide information enabling us to classify the relationship, specifically, information on the type of relationship and gender of their partner. This information was used to distinguish three different couple types: different-sex couples (N = 13,655), same-sex male couples (N = 166), and same-sex female-couples (N = 168). We then excluded couples that were married at the time of interview (i.e., 6,315 different-sex couples, 11 male couples, and 22 female couples). Analyses of relationship qualities were restricted to respondents in current relationships (N = 5,215 different-sex couples, 98 male couples, and 110 female couples), as questions on love and commitment were not asked of dissolved relationships. Further, retrospective bias may occur for subjective assessments of relationships that have ended. Once we excluded respondents with missing information on key variables of interest (i.e., qualities of the relationship), the number of men and women with a same-sex partner is 97 and 104 (in comparison to 4,974 different-sex couples). The small sample sizes for same-sex couples reduce the precision of our estimates considerably, especially for dichotomous measures. This sample of current relationships includes a total of 5,175 respondents: 2,355 different-sex romantic/sexual couples, 2,619 different-sex cohabiting couples, 73 same-sex romantic/sexual couples, and 128 same-sex cohabiting couples.

MEASURES

Dependent Variables: Subjective Relationship Qualities

Love and Commitment is a scale based on four questions asked only of current partners: stability, commitment, love, and happiness. Stability of the relationship is assessed with an item that asked respondents “how likely is it that your relationship will be permanent.” Commitment is created from an item which asked the respondent “how committed are you to your relationship
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with {initials}?” Love is assessed with an item that asked respondents “how much do you love
{initials}.” Happiness is derived from an item which asked respondents “in general, how happy
are you in your relationship.” In order to create the overall constructed measure, all items were
reverse coded; two items were re-scaled to create equivalence in the number of response
categories. The values for the final item range from 1 to 3, where values of 1 indicate the lowest
possible love and commitment score and values of 3 indicate the highest possible score. The
alpha for this scale is .86 for our analytic sample of nonmarital relationships.

*Satisfaction* is a scale based on five items asked of all focal partners: enjoyment of couple
interaction, conflict resolution, couple disclosure, expression of affection, and satisfaction with
sex life. Respondents were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the following
statements: “We enjoy doing even ordinary, day-to-day things together”; “I am satisfied with the
way we handle our problems and disagreements”; “my partner listens to me when I need
someone to talk to”; “my partner expresses love and affection to me”; and “I am satisfied with
our sex life.” After variables were reverse coded, responses for these items ranged from 1
*(strongly disagree)* to 5 *(strongly agree)*. The variable adding the five items was rescaled, with
values of 1 indicating the lowest possible satisfaction score and values of 5 indicating the highest
possible score. The alpha score for satisfaction is .83 for our sample.

*Trust* is a single item that asked respondents with current partners how much they agreed
or disagreed with the following statement, “I (trust/trusted) my partner to be faithful to me”.
Values were reverse coded so that responses ranged from 1 *(strongly disagree)* to 5 *(strongly
agree)*. Confirmatory factor analysis suggested that this item does not fit well on either of the
two scales just discussed.
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**Dependent Variables: Sexual Behavior**

*Monthly Sexual Frequency* was constructed from questions that asked respondents to report the average frequency of sexual activity (“vaginal intercourse, oral sex, anal sex, or other types of sexual activity”) per week, month, or year with the focal partner. We transformed this information into monthly frequency (if reported in days or years) and took the logarithm to reduce skew in the models. (Due to extraordinarily high values, frequency was top coded 30 prior to this last transformation.) *Exclusivity* was created from two items concerning the respondent’s and partner’s involvement with other sexual partners. Specifically, respondents were asked if their partner “had any other sexual partners” since the relationship began, and if they themselves had any other sexual partners during the course of the relationship. Couples with neither partner indicating this were coded 1 (i.e., exclusive) and those with either partner having another relationship were coded 0. We also used a measure based simply on respondent’s own exclusivity (results not shown) and obtained similar results as those displayed in the tables.

*Relationship Type and Sex Composition*

We distinguish whether respondents were in a cohabiting versus dating relationship at the time of interview. Relationships are defined as cohabiting if respondents reported having “ever lived with” their romantic/sexual partner for one month or longer; the ACASI text informed respondents that “lived with” meant that neither partner kept a separate residence while living together. We also determine the sex composition of the union based on respondent’s own sex (marked by the interviewer) and the sex of their most recent partner (marked by the respondent). We distinguish three groups of relationships: different-sex relationships, female-female relationships, and male-male relationships. Our approach is appropriate as we tested additional models (not shown) that separated different-sex male respondents from different-sex female
Qualities of Same-Sex and Different-Sex Couples respondents. These models revealed a significant gender difference only in love and commitment (with men in different-sex relationships reporting less commitment than women in different-sex relationships).

Control Variables

Our models of current relationships control for a number of relevant variables, including age, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, number of children in the household, and partner heterogamy. Race of respondent was collected from the first wave of the study and recoded to a series of dummy variables (non-Hispanic black, Hispanic, and Asian), with non-Hispanic white acting as the reference group. Education at the time of the wave four was also recoded as a series of dummy variables (less than a high school degree, some college, a bachelor’s degree or higher), with high school degree or equivalent acting as the reference group. Relationship history variables include prior marriage status (1 if respondent was previously married), number of children in the household, and logged number of other sexual partners in the lifetime. We also utilize information on partners to develop measures of whether they were a different race than respondent (using the categories above) and the age difference (absolute value) between partners. Our measure of relationship duration corresponds to the period of the entire relationship.

Analysis Plan

We begin the study with a presentation of descriptive statistics for the five relationship qualities and the independent variables. We limit our consideration of current relationships to cohabiting and dating couples, as married individuals would represent predominantly different-sex couples. These analyses highlight differences between same-sex and different-sex couples, before and after stratifying the analyses by type of relationship. Turning to the multivariate analyses, we present results from regression models focusing on the five relationship qualities,
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beginning with the set of subjective qualities. The type of model we estimate depends on the
categories of the dependent variable. We rely on ordinary least squares regression for models
estimating love and commitment, relationship satisfaction, and sexual frequency; we utilize
ordered logits for models of trust; and we use logistic regression for models of sexual
exclusivity. For each of the five outcomes, we present models that estimate the main effects of
key indicators (e.g., same-sex male union, same-sex female union, and dating) along with the
control variables. The small sample of same-sex dating and cohabiting couples (N = 73 and N =
128, respectively) precludes us from stratifying models by relationship type.

FINDINGS

Table 1 presents means and percentages (in addition to standard errors) for the dependent
and independent variables used in our analyses of respondents in current nonmarital unions.
These statistics are shown separately for respondents in different-sex and same-sex relationships
and then presented for four different groups of relationships: different-sex dating, same-sex
dating, different-sex cohabiting, and same-sex cohabiting. Men and women are combined
together in these analyses to illustrate the union type differentials but the models distinguish men
and women who have same-sex partners. Results in the first two columns corresponding to the
type of relationship reveal that 55% of respondents in different-sex nonmarital relationships are
cohabiting and 45% are “dating” (i.e., in a romantic and/or sexual relationship). In contrast, 61%
of respondents in same-sex relationships are cohabiting and 39% are dating. These differences
between same-sex and different-sex relationships underline the importance of taking current
union status into account when contrasting the qualities of same-sex and different-sex
relationships.

We highlight general tendencies in the qualities of relationships here, as differences
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between same-sex and different-sex relationships are not statistically significant. As in previous studies of ongoing relationships, respondents in all four groups exhibit high levels of love and commitment, satisfaction with intimate aspects of the relationship, and trust in the partner’s fidelity. Average monthly frequency of sex ranges from 9.02 (same-sex dating) to 13.61 (different-sex cohabiting). The majority of respondents in all four groups indicate that both partners were sexually exclusive; these estimates range from 53% among same-sex dating relationships to 72% among the same-sex cohabiting. In discussing the results from models, we elaborate on differences in these qualities by type of relationship and sex composition of union.

As suggested earlier, individuals with same-sex partners differ from their counterparts with different-sex partners in terms of factors potentially associated with relationship qualities. Contrasts of the control variables for same-sex and different-sex respondents indicate many similarities. Key exceptions are that different-sex respondents more often experienced a prior marriage, accumulated fewer sexual partners, have more children within the household, experience less racial asymmetry, and report longer duration relationships. Recall that the duration of relationship variable refers to the number of months since the partners became romantically or sexually involved. These significant differences between same-sex and different-sex couples are also observed within the dating and cohabiting samples (with the exception of number of sexual partners).

Subjective Relationship Qualities

Columns 1 through 3 of Table 2 show coefficients for models predicting relationship qualities. Mirroring the patterns in Table 1, respondents in same-sex and different-sex relationships report similar levels of love and commitment, satisfaction with dynamics, and trust
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in partner, as indicated by the coefficients of the female and male same-sex indicator variables. Additional analyses indicate that men and women with same-sex partners report similar levels for the subjective relationship quality variables. In comparison to respondents who are cohabiting, respondents who are dating report lower levels of love and commitment \( (p < .001) \), trust \( (p < .001) \), and satisfaction with relationship dynamics \( (p < .10) \).

[TABLE TWO ABOUT HERE]

Several control variables are significantly associated with relationship qualities. Black respondents generally have lower values for subjective relationship qualities than do white respondents, whereas Hispanics, Asians, and whites share values for these qualities. Older respondents tend to score lower than younger respondents subjective relationship qualities. Respondents with a college degree score more favorably than their less educated counterparts on these qualities. Respondents with a prior marriage report greater love and commitment, trust, and satisfaction. The number of prior sexual partners is associated with lower values on the subjective qualities. The number of children in the household is associated with less trust and satisfaction but not significantly less commitment. Race and age asymmetries are not significantly associated with relationship qualities. Duration is associated with higher levels of love and commitment but lower levels of satisfaction.

Sexual Behavior

The last two columns of Table 2 present results for sexual frequency and exclusivity. Women in same-sex relationships (but not men in same-sex relationships) report less frequent sexual activity \( (p < .01) \) than respondents in different-sex couples. Additional analyses (not shown here) demonstrate that women in same-sex relationships report significantly lower sexual frequency than men in same-sex relationships \( (p < .10) \). Men (but not women) in same-sex
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relationships report lower sexual exclusivity \((p < .001)\) than their counterparts in different-sex relationships. Further analyses (not shown) show that men in same-sex relationships are less likely to report having an exclusive relationship than women in same relationships \((p < .01)\.

Results from these models also suggest highly significant differences between respondents in cohabiting and dating unions, with daters having less frequent sex and lower sexual exclusivity in comparison to the cohabiters \((p < .001)\). Some of the factors associated with subjective qualities are also associated with exclusivity (e.g., race and duration). Supplementary models (not shown) included interaction terms between dating and the sex composition indicators. These models revealed that the association between dating and each outcome fails to differ significantly for respondents in different-sex and same-sex relationships.

DISCUSSION

Add Health benefits from its large sample and recent fielding, resulting in sizeable numbers of different types of respondents in ongoing dating or cohabiting relationships. Consequently, we were able to not only compare same-sex and different-sex couples, but also distinguish dating from cohabiting relationships. As in previous studies comprised of ongoing different-sex couples, we found significant differences between dating and cohabiting couples, with cohabiting couples appearing more favorable than dating couples with respect to valued relationship qualities (i.e., love and commitment, satisfaction with relationship dynamics, trust, sexual frequency, and exclusivity).

Differences in the qualities of same-sex and different-sex couples in ongoing nonmarital relationships failed to reach statistical significance in both the descriptive and multivariate analyses. While our small sample size may raise questions about statistical power, differences between same-sex and different-sex couples were substantively small in magnitude. Analyses of
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Sexual behavior distinguishing male from female couples revealed some notable differences between same-sex and different-sex couples that other studies have documented with less representative samples (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). Men in same-sex couples were significantly more likely than women in same-sex couples and respondents in different-sex couples to report either partner was having sex with another partner during the course of the relationship. Women in same-sex couples, on the other hand, indicated they had sex less frequently men in same-sex couples and respondents in different-sex couples; differences between these women and the other two groups were slight in magnitude, perhaps reflecting Add Health’s liberal definition of sexual activity. These results pertaining to sexual behavior are consistent with the patterns found by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) focusing on cohabiting couples several decades ago.

Based on prior work, we expected to find gender distinctions in relationship qualities. Qualitative studies continue to show gender distinctions in the meaning of cohabitation among different-sex couples (Huang et al., 2011; Sassler & Miller, 2011), and quantitative studies document heterosexual men placing less importance than heterosexual women on commitment, love, and faithfulness (Meier, Hull, and Ortyl 2009). The results for our sample of different-sex couples provide less definitive support for gender divides than the results for our sample of same-sex couples. For instance, men in different-sex relationships exhibited lower levels of love and commitment than women in these relationships; however, they failed to differ in their reports of satisfaction, trust, sexual frequency, and relationship exclusivity. Keep in mind that men and women in this study are not partnered with each other.

As behavior in relationships reflects the interplay of partners (Laumann et al., 1994), analyses focused on different-sex couples likely belie gender differences in preferences for romantic and sexual involvement. Thus, it is critical to examine differences between men and
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women in same-sex couples (Umberson et al., 2015), with the presumption that they involve partners with more similar outlooks. Among same-sex couples, women reported a slightly lower frequency of sex, whereas men reported a lower likelihood of sexual exclusivity. Still, men and women in same-sex unions were not different in their reports of love and commitment, trust, and satisfaction. These findings signal gender differences in acceptability of different sexual behaviors among same-sex couples.

Of course, our study has some limitations. Due to the relatively small sample size of same-sex couples, we were not able to distinguish male and female couples in descriptive analyses that stratified respondents by whether they were cohabiting or dating. Small sample sizes also precluded us from stratifying our models by relationship type. A related issue is that we do not have couple-level data; our assessments are not based on men and women in relationships together. Couple-level studies present both challenges (recruitment of partners) and opportunities (both partners’ lenses) for understanding gender in relationships (Umberson et al., 2015). Another weakness is that our measures of relationship qualities are collected at the same point in time. Ideally, we would like to examine relationship qualities at the beginning of the relationship and evaluate how relationship qualities are linked to subsequent outcomes for various couples. Furthermore, married individuals were excluded from our analyses. Certainly, the broad range of relationships with varying levels of legal and cultural recognition (civil unions, domestic partnerships, marriage) complicates our understanding of same-sex and different-sex relationships and warrants further attention. In spite of these weaknesses, this study does break new ground in some key respects: using population-based data to examine a wide spectrum of nonmarital relationships and a broad array of relationship outcomes.

Our findings suggest that efforts to understand contemporary relationships need to anchor
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Theories around type of relationship and biological sex. Our results suggest that cohabiting relationships are quite distinct from dating relationships, in spite of dramatic changes that render it a moving target (Smock, 2000). Differences by union type could partly be a reflection of unmeasured factors that select individuals into cohabiting relationships. Decisions on the part of same-sex couples to cohabit, however, may be less reflective of personal choice and more indicative of the challenges to maintaining same-sex relationships in a hetero-normative family environment (van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2011).

Identification of the factors that promote the quality of same-sex and different-sex couples requires that studies examine variation within relationship types rather than just contrasting same-sex and different-sex couples. For instance, Weisshaar (2014) finds evidence that earnings equality has different implications for the stability of same-sex and different-sex couples. This line of research could also profit by utilizing reports in Add Health on sexual orientation identity and romantic attraction, as previous studies demonstrate that sexual behavior does not necessarily correspond with sexual identity or desire (Laumann et al., 1994). Research based on Add Health documents substantial numbers of respondents, particularly women, identifying as “mostly heterosexual” or “bisexual;” the majority of respondents with this identification at wave three report a heterosexual or homosexual identity at wave four (Savin-Williams, Joyner, & Rieger, 2012). These findings beg the question of how sexual identity, and shifts in identity, factor into the qualities of same-sex and different-sex relationships.

Additionally, a multifaceted assessment of relationships is important, as our work treats each quality separately; a more nuanced portrait would consider how the qualities operate together (e.g., sexual frequency and exclusivity). Future studies could also benefit from more detailed emphasis on the status and meaning of relationships (e.g., registered partnerships and
Qualities of Same-Sex and Different-Sex Couples

hookups) and how they shift over time for couples and partners in tandem with life course events. Some of these endeavors require mixed-method data collections that track relationships soon after their formation. More elaborate and dynamic measures will not only enhance understanding of contemporary relationships, but also foreshadow potential changes in the landscape of relationships.
Qualities of Same-Sex and Different-Sex Couples

REFERENCES


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Solomon, S. E., Rothblum, E. D., & Balsam, K. F. (2005). Money, Housework, Sex, and
Qualities of Same-Sex and Different-Sex Couples


## Qualities of Same-Sex and Different-Sex Couples

### Table 1. Descriptive Statistics by Union Type and Sex Composition: Nonmarital Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>All Relationships</th>
<th>Dating</th>
<th>Cohabiting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Different Sex Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Same Sex Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Different Sex Mean (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship Type</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating</td>
<td>0.45 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.39 (0.05)</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
<td>0.55 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.61 (0.05)</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship Qualities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love &amp; commitment</td>
<td>2.50 (0.01)</td>
<td>2.53 (0.06)</td>
<td>2.28 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>4.20 (0.02)</td>
<td>4.23 (0.07)</td>
<td>4.20 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in partner</td>
<td>4.20 (0.02)</td>
<td>4.21 (0.10)</td>
<td>4.04 (0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly sex frequency</td>
<td>12.24 (0.22)</td>
<td>10.28 (0.94)</td>
<td>10.57 (0.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both partners exclusive</td>
<td>0.69 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.59 (0.05)</td>
<td>0.65 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Controls</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female respondent</td>
<td>0.47 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.52 (0.05)</td>
<td>0.45 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.63 (0.03)</td>
<td>0.65 (0.05)</td>
<td>0.58 (0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0.20 (0.02)</td>
<td>0.14 (0.03)</td>
<td>0.22 (0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>0.12 (0.02)</td>
<td>0.14 (0.03)</td>
<td>0.14 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>0.03 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.04 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 1. (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>All Relationships</th>
<th>Dating</th>
<th>Cohabiting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Different Sex</td>
<td>Same Sex</td>
<td>Different Sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at interview</td>
<td>28.08 (0.13)</td>
<td>28.23 (0.20)</td>
<td>28.10 (0.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LT high school</td>
<td>0.10 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.05 (0.02)</td>
<td>0.08 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school degree</td>
<td>0.26 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.20 (0.04)</td>
<td>0.22 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>0.34 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.40 (0.05)</td>
<td>0.33 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>0.29 (0.02)</td>
<td>0.35 (0.05)</td>
<td>0.36 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior marriage</td>
<td>0.14 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.03 (0.02) ***</td>
<td>0.12 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of other sex partners</td>
<td>13.61 (0.34)</td>
<td>17.61 (1.66) *</td>
<td>14.33 (0.52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner race difference</td>
<td>0.21 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.35 (0.05) *</td>
<td>0.22 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner age difference</td>
<td>3.82 (0.09)</td>
<td>4.42 (0.38)</td>
<td>3.96 (0.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of children in household</td>
<td>0.60 (0.03)</td>
<td>0.07 (0.02) ***</td>
<td>0.35 (0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of relationship</td>
<td>38.56 (0.95)</td>
<td>30.35 (2.75) *</td>
<td>22.84 (1.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of cases</td>
<td>4,974 (201)</td>
<td>2,355 (73)</td>
<td>2,619 (128)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note**: Means and standard deviations adjust for design effects. Standard deviation in parentheses.

*p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001 (two-tailed tests between respondents with different-sex and same-sex partners)
## Qualities of Same-Sex and Different-Sex Couples

Table 2. Coefficients from Models of Relationship Qualities: Current Nonmarital Relationships (N = 5,175)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>OLS Model</th>
<th>OLS Model</th>
<th>Ordered Logit Model</th>
<th>OLS Model</th>
<th>Logit Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Love &amp; Commitment</td>
<td>Satisfaction w/ Dynamics</td>
<td>Trust in Partner</td>
<td>Logged Sex Frequency</td>
<td>Sexual Exclusivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex Composition &amp; Relationship Type</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same-sex male union</td>
<td>0.031</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>-0.248</td>
<td>-0.115</td>
<td>-1.016 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same-sex female union</td>
<td>0.049</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>0.206</td>
<td>-1.002 **</td>
<td>0.079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating (v. cohabiting)</td>
<td>-0.354 ***</td>
<td>-0.058 #</td>
<td>-0.715 ***</td>
<td>-0.611 ***</td>
<td>-0.649 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethncity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black (v. white)</td>
<td>-0.157 ***</td>
<td>-0.131 ***</td>
<td>-0.570 ***</td>
<td>-0.143</td>
<td>-0.507 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic (v. white)</td>
<td>-0.041</td>
<td>-0.069</td>
<td>-0.197</td>
<td>0.068</td>
<td>-0.334 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian (v. white)</td>
<td>-0.013</td>
<td>-0.054</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>0.192</td>
<td>0.285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at interview</td>
<td>-0.015 **</td>
<td>-0.024 **</td>
<td>-0.051 **</td>
<td>-0.105 ***</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school (v. high school)</td>
<td>-0.046</td>
<td>-0.030</td>
<td>-0.079</td>
<td>-0.041</td>
<td>-0.271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college (v. high school)</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>-0.041</td>
<td>-0.080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors (v. high school)</td>
<td>0.057 *</td>
<td>0.108 **</td>
<td>0.403 ***</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior marriage</td>
<td>0.077 **</td>
<td>0.106 **</td>
<td>0.299 **</td>
<td>0.228 *</td>
<td>0.143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log # sex partners</td>
<td>-0.043 ***</td>
<td>-0.025 ***</td>
<td>-0.077 ***</td>
<td>0.210 ***</td>
<td>-0.281 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children in household</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>-0.036 *</td>
<td>-0.144 **</td>
<td>0.053</td>
<td>-0.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race difference</td>
<td>-0.011</td>
<td>-0.009</td>
<td>-0.054</td>
<td>-0.015</td>
<td>-0.185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age difference</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>-0.008</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>-0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of union</td>
<td>0.001 **</td>
<td>-0.002 ***</td>
<td>-0.002 #</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>-0.111 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>3.125 ***</td>
<td>5.011 ***</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>4.551 ***</td>
<td>2.003 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F Statistic or R-Square</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>11.99</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>14.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Coefficients and p-values adjust for design effects. Reference category is in parentheses. Ordered logit cut points are not presented.

# p < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001 (two-tailed tests)