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

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### ABSTRACT

Although research on same-sex relationships has proliferated in recent decades, remarkably few population-based studies have focused on the qualities of these relationships. Most prior research on this topic is limited to coresidential relationships, typically cohabiting unions. Drawing on the fourth wave of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, this study focuses on the relationship qualities of young adults in ongoing nonmarital relationships (i.e., “dating” and cohabiting relationships). Specifically, it compares male and female respondents in same-sex and different-sex relationships with respect to indicators of relationship quality (commitment, satisfaction, and emotional intimacy) and sexual behavior (sexual frequency and sexual exclusivity). Consistent with prior studies, the results suggest that respondents in same-sex relationships experience similar levels of commitment, satisfaction, and emotional intimacy as their counterparts in different-sex relationships. They also suggest that same-sex male and female relationships are distinct in their patterns of sexual behavior.

Keywords: dating and cohabitation; gender; LGBT; quantitative.

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The romantic and sexual relationships of Americans have fundamentally changed in recent decades (Sassler, 2010). The median age at marriage in the United States has reached historic high points of 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, almost three-quarters (73%) of women ages 25-29 have spent some time cohabiting (Manning & Stykes, 2015). In addition, the average number of sexual partners that men and women accumulate in early adulthood and their tendency to practice serial cohabitation has grown considerably (Hemez, 2017; Lichter, Turner, & Sassler, 2010), again reflecting delays in marriage. 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, Gates, Sanders, & Taylor, 2000; Lofquist, Lugailia, O'Connell, & Feliz, 2012).

Young adults have more options for sexual and romantic involvement than ever before, including type of relationship (e.g., cohabitation) and sex of partner. They not only face fewer social barriers to residing with a romantic partner, but they also have greater freedom to publicly acknowledge same-sex relationships (Powell, Bolzendahl, Geist, & Steelman, 2010). In spite of the growing variety of relationships that punctuate the transition to adulthood, population-based studies concerning the qualities of sexual and romantic relationships in young adulthood continue to focus on different-sex coresidential relationships. Few representative studies have examined same-sex relationships or relationships that do not involve coresidence, hereafter “dating” relationships. Scholars offer several reasons to broaden the spectrum of relationships

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when considering contemporary populations. Perhaps the most compelling is that same-sex relationships provide an important counterfactual: how relationships operate in the absence of biological sex difference between partners (Carpenter & Gates, 2008). It is also critical to examine same-sex relationships among younger populations, in particular, because sexual minority youth face unique challenges (e.g., “coming out”) as they navigate adolescence and adulthood, challenges that have implications for their health and well-being (Russell, Watson, & Muraco, 2012).

To provide a conceptual framework for examining the qualities of contemporary relationships, we draw from two perspectives tailored to explain the unique experiences of same-sex couples: the minority stress perspective and the gender-as-relational perspective. Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health offer an unparalleled opportunity to compare same-sex and different-sex relationships with respect to commitment, satisfaction, emotional intimacy, sexual frequency, and sexual exclusivity. Add Health’s fourth wave (2007-2008) obtained detailed information on the most recent romantic and/or sexual relationship of its respondents. We limit our sample to 5,052 respondents in relationships that were ongoing and nonmarital at the fourth wave interview, a time when respondents were in their late twenties or early thirties. Thus, our focus is on the dating and cohabiting relationships of young adults. We distinguish their relationships by sex composition (same-sex versus different-sex) and the biological sex of respondent (male versus female). We move beyond prior work not only by considering same-sex and dating relationships, but also by comparing relationships across a rich roster of objective and subjective qualities.

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### BACKGROUND

Studies concerning the qualities of romantic and sexual relationships have long used the term relationship “quality” loosely to include a range of outcomes, typically satisfaction and commitment (e.g. Levinger, 1979; Rusbult, 1980; Scanzoni, Polonko, Teachman, & Thompson, 1989; Sprecher, 1998). These studies often utilize some variant of the social exchange perspective (e.g., interdependence, investment, and commitment perspectives) to explain variation in relationship quality. Measures of satisfaction and commitment are thought to capture the rewards and costs from a relationship. However, commitment to a relationship (i.e., the desire to continue a relationship) is conceptually distinct from satisfaction because it is additionally based on alternatives (e.g., being single or partnered with someone else) and investments (Rusbult, 1980; Waite & Lillard, 1991). Another general indicator of quality is the level of emotional intimacy, defined as feelings and expressions of acceptance, warmth, caring, and love (Prager, 2000). Even though most romantic relationships in adulthood involve sexual activity, research concerning the quality of these relationships often ignores the sexual basis to relationships, though consideration of how sexuality is embedded in relationships has increased in recent decades (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). Physical intimacy may be particularly salient in young adulthood, especially for individuals in nonmarital relationships. Studies have long suggested that the importance of sex is greater in the earlier phases of romantic involvement (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994).

Studies of same-sex relationship quality, in particular, similarly rely on social exchange perspectives (e.g., Kurdek, 1995; Kurdek, 2000), but also draw from perspectives that emphasize minority stress (e.g., Otis, Rostosky, Riggle, & Hamrin, 2006; Rostosky, Riggle, Gray, & Hatton, 2007). Sexual minorities form and maintain relationships in a radically different institutional

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context than their heterosexual counterparts (Rith & Diamond, 2013) and this may influence the nature and course of their relationships. The minority stress perspective, as it relates to sexual minorities, posits that gays, lesbians, and bisexuals experience a higher prevalence of negative mental and physical outcomes than do heterosexuals as a consequence of their stigmatized status in society (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Meyer, 2003). Several recent studies have extended this perspective to address stressors that stem from the marginalization of same-sex relationships and parallel individual-level stressors, specifically, expectations of rejection, discrimination, internalized homophobia, and concealment (e.g., Graham & Barnow, 2013; LeBlanc, Frost, & Wight, 2015). Two recent meta-analytic reviews on stigma and relationship quality found evidence of small but significant associations between minority stress and relationship quality (Cao, Zhou, Fine, Liang, Li, & Mills-Koonce, 2017; Doyle & Molix, 2015). This body of research suggests that same-sex couples may experience, on average, slightly lower levels of relationship quality than different-sex couples.

A new perspective, “gender-as-relational,” suggests that gender and sexuality “play out differently” in same-sex and different-sex relationships (Umberson, Thomeer, & Lodge, 2015, p. 544). A recent qualitative study interviewing both partners in long-term couples, for example, found women partnered with women reported greater attentiveness and responsiveness to each other’s emotional needs than women partnered with men. In contrast, men partnered with men reported more effort respecting boundaries and creating emotional space than men partnered with women. These differences largely reflected the fact that same-sex partners were more concordant than different-sex partners in their views on emotional intimacy and autonomy. To the extent same-sex partners devote greater emotion work to minimizing or maintaining boundaries than their counterparts, they may have higher quality relationships. As Umberson and colleagues

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(2015, p. 553) noted, “The desire to minimize boundaries between partners may be more stressful for women in different-sex relationships than for women in same-sex relationships because of greater partner resistance and discordance in a different-sex context.”

### *Comparisons of Different-Sex and Same-Sex Relationship Qualities*

Several quantitative studies have compared the qualities of same-sex and different sex-relationships (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek, 2004; Kurdek, 2006) and/or the qualities of male and female relationships (e.g., Fingerhut & Maisel, 2010; Kurdek, 1989; Todosijevic, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2005). Appendix A provides important details on published studies that have included one or both of these types of comparisons using data from a U.S. sample and displayed statistics for the groups they compared (e.g., mean levels). These types of comparisons date back to the *American Couples* study, a path-breaking study begun in 1975 by Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) surveyed thousands of individuals recruited through newspapers, magazines, and television. Importantly, their survey data have enabled some rich comparisons between large samples of men and women with same-sex cohabiting partners, different-sex cohabiting partners, and different-sex married partners. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found no systematic differences between same-sex and different-sex relationships with respect to reports of satisfaction, commitment, and other dimensions of relationship quality. Studies based on more recent samples have corroborated their findings (e.g., Fingerhut & Maisel, 2010; Rosenfeld, 2014; Todosijevic et al., 2005). However, some studies found greater relationship quality for women in same-sex relationships than for men in these relationships (e.g., Kurdek, 1989; Mohr & Fassinger, 2006; Peplau, Cochran, & Mays, 1997).

In terms of sexual behavior, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) reported that same-sex couples comprised of women had sex less frequently than different-sex couples and same-sex

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couples involving men. This finding has also been documented in other studies (Blair and Pukall, 2014; Solomon, Rothblum, Balsam, 2005). Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) also found that same-sex couples with men were less likely to be sexually exclusive than same-sex couples with women and different-sex couples. Other studies have corroborated this finding as well (Kurdek, 1988; Solomon et al., 2005). Although young adults overwhelmingly value sexual exclusivity in relationships, regardless of their sexual identity (Meier, Hull & Ortyl, 2009), the norms surrounding sexual exclusivity appear to differ according to the sex composition of relationships (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; Peplau & Spaulding, 2000; Rutter & Schwartz, 1996; van Eeden-Moorefield, Martell, Williams, & Preston, 2011). Yet, same-sex male couples were also more likely than these other groups of couples to have agreements about the acceptability of sexual non-exclusivity (Adam, 2006; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001). Also, gay men are more likely than lesbian women to reside in cities with extensive networks and locales comprised of gays, providing them greater opportunity to meet alternative partners (Gates & Ost, 2004; Schwartz & Graf, 2010).

Few of the studies contrasting same-sex and different-sex relationships utilized population-based studies (with exceptions being Rosenfeld, 2014; Solomon et al., 2005; Todosijevic et al, 2005). Recruitment samples of individuals or partners in committed same-sex relationships are problematic to the extent they overrepresent sexual minorities who are more comfortable with their sexual orientation (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). As many of these studies did not distinguish the biological sex of the respondent or couple, they conflated gender and gendered relational contexts (Umberson et al., 2015). They did not take into account the possibility, for instance, that women partnered with women may have experienced their relationships differently than women partnered with men.



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### CURRENT INVESTIGATION

We move beyond prior studies comparing the relationship qualities of same-sex and different-sex couples by relying on data collected from a nationally representative sample. Data from the fourth wave of Add Health permits such a comparison for a sample of young adults in 2007-2008. As in prior studies, we treat relationship quality as a “set of conceptually distinct but empirically correlated dimensions” (Amato, Booth, Johnson & Rogers, 2007, p. 41). Although Add Health does not contain a comprehensive set of dimensions of relationship quality, it does include items that capture routinely used subjective constructs: commitment, satisfaction, and emotional intimacy (Amato et al., 2007; Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Moore et al., 2007; Prager, 2000; Stanley, 2007). With respect to objective measures, we rely on two common behavioral measures of physical intimacy: sexual frequency and sexual exclusivity (DeMaris, 2013; Sprecher, Cate, Harvey, & Wenzel, 2004; Previti & Amato, 2004; Waite & Joyner, 2001). These subjective and objective indicators are, to varying degrees, associated with relationship stability and psychological well-being (DeMaris, 2013; Kamp Dush, Taylor, & Kroeger, 2008; Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010; Waite & Joyner, 2001; Yabiku & Gager, 2009).

As marriage for same-sex couples was only legal in one state (Massachusetts) at the time of the fourth wave, we focus on nonmarital relationships. We test two sets of hypotheses for these relationships. The minority stress perspective suggests that same-sex relationships will be lower in quality than different-sex relationships due to stressors specific to same-sex couples. In contrast, the gender-as-relational perspective suggests that same-sex relationships will be higher in quality, reflecting greater concordance in partners’ views on emotional intimacy and autonomy. This perspective and prior studies suggest that sexual frequency and exclusivity have different meanings for men and women. We contrast four groups of respondents with respect to

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their self-reported subjective and objective relationship qualities: male respondents with different-sex partners, male respondents with same-sex partners, female respondents with different-sex partners, and female respondents with same-sex partners.

We estimate separate regression models for each of the five relationship qualities, beginning with the set of subjective qualities. The type of model we estimate depends on whether the values of the dependent variable are continuous versus categorical. We rely on ordinary least squares regression for models estimating commitment, satisfaction, emotional intimacy, and sexual frequency and use logistic regression for models of sexual exclusivity. These models include key variables that are related to various relationship qualities. Most importantly, we distinguish relationships based on coresidence following research that finds higher relationship quality, more frequent sexual activity, and greater sexual exclusivity in cohabiting relationships than in dating relationships (Brown & Bulanda, 2008; Giordano, Manning, Longmore, & Flanigan, 2011; Shaw, Rhoades, Allen, Stanley, & Markman, 2013; Waite & Joyner, 2001).

The models also include variables that differentiate same-sex and different-sex relationships. Individuals in same-sex cohabiting relationships are more likely than their counterparts in different-sex cohabiting relationships to be older and college-educated, but less likely to be residing with a child (Gates, 2009). They are also more similar to their partners with respect to age, race/ethnicity, and educational attainment (Jepsen & Jepsen, 2002; Schwartz & Graf, 2009). Our analyses not only include measures of race and age heterogamy, but also key sociodemographic indicators tied to relationship quality in prior studies of young adults: race/ethnicity, age, education, prior sexual partnerships, number of children, and duration (Brown & Bulanda, 2008; Giordano et al., 2011).

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### DATA AND SAMPLE

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (hereafter 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 oversampled several groups, including black adolescents from well-educated families, Chinese, Cuban, and 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 (with a retention rate of over 75%). By the time of the fourth in-home interview, most respondents were between the ages of 25 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: audio computer-assisted self-interviews (ACASI) and partner rosters. Respondents were asked to provide basic demographic information on all their romantic/sexual partners since 2001, including their sex age, and race/ethnicity; however, Add Health asked questions about the qualities of relationships only with reference to a focal partner. For respondents who reported multiple romantic/sexual partners, Add Health designated the current partner as the focal partner. For respondents with more than one current partner, 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.

Of the 14,797 respondents with variables to adjust for design effects (e.g., weights),

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14,783 had a biological sex that was the same as in the first interview. Of these respondents, 14,330 respondents reported having had a romantic and/or sexual relationship since 2001. Twenty-four of these respondents failed to provide information enabling us to classify the relationship, specifically, information on whether the relationship was current and the sex of their partner. We then excluded 6,461 respondents whose most recent relationship eventuated in marriage. As prior studies concerning the qualities of same-sex relationships examined ongoing relationships, we further restricted the sample to respondents who were “currently” cohabiting or in a romantic and/or sexual relationship at the time of the fourth wave. This decreased the sample from 7,854 to 5,413 respondents. Once we excluded respondents with missing information on key variables of interest (i.e., qualities of the relationship), the sample included 5,052 respondents. In this final sample, 95 male respondents and 98 female respondents indicated that they had a same-sex partner.

## MEASURES

### *Dependent Variables: Subjective Relationship Qualities*

As stated earlier, Add Health includes items that capture commitment, satisfaction, and emotional intimacy. *Commitment* is a common indicator of quality and important given its association with relationship-maintenance processes (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Stanley, 2007). We draw on two items available in Add Health that align best with Stanley and Rhoades commitment certainty (Owen et al., 2014): “How committed are you to your relationship with {initials}?” and “How likely is that your relationship will be permanent.” The alpha for the scale is .845 for our analytic sample.

*Satisfaction* is widely used to assess relationship quality and most commonly includes both global and specific features of relationships (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987). Consistent with

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Funk and Rogge (2007)'s scale, we include measures of happiness and satisfaction with the relationship. Specifically, we construct a scale based on four items ( $\alpha = .803$ ): “We enjoy even ordinary day-to-day things together,” “I am satisfied with the way we handle our problems and disagreements,” “I am satisfied with our sex life,” and “How happy are you in your relationship?”

*Emotional intimacy* measures emotional closeness, intimate interactions, and positive affect (Prager, 2000; Moore et al., 2007). To measure emotional intimacy, we include the following four items on the scale ( $\alpha = .779$ ): “How close do you feel to {initials}”, “My partner expresses love and affection to me,” “How much do you love {initials},” and “My partner listens to me when I need someone to talk to.”

The response categories for items that comprise each scale differ. For instance, commitment is measured using a four-point Likert item and a five-point Likert item. We rescaled each item above using a simple proportional rescaling technique so that the values range from 0 to 1. Consider the example of an item that ranges from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). First, we subtracted 1 from the value so that it ranges from 0 to 4. Then, we divided the value by 4 (the maximum value). We also reverse-coded most items so that higher values indicate higher quality. The scales take the numeric average of the items that comprise them so that they also range from 0 to 1. This rescaling technique assumes that scales with different numbers of response categories are equivalent but produce correlations between items that approximate those based on more complicated transformations (Colman, Norris, & Preston, 1997). The alphas that we report above are based on the rescaled items.

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### *Dependent Variables: Objective Relationship Qualities*

*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 some extraordinarily high values, frequency was top coded 30 prior to this last transformation.) *Exclusivity* was created from two items concerning both the respondent’s and partner’s involvement with other sexual partners. Precisely, 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. Relationships with neither partner having a concurrent relationship were coded 1 (i.e., exclusive) and those with either partner having another relationship were coded 0.

### *Independent Variables*

We determined the sex composition of the relationship based on respondent’s own sex (marked by the interviewer) and the sex of their most recent partner (marked by the respondent). As stated earlier, we distinguish in our descriptive analyses and models four groups based on the sex of respondent and sex composition of the relationship: male respondents with different-sex partners, male respondents with same-sex partners, female respondents with different-sex partners, and female respondents with same-sex partners. Male respondents with different-sex partners serve as the reference category in the models.

Again, we distinguish whether respondents were in a cohabiting versus dating relationship at the time of interview. Relationships were defined as cohabiting if respondents reported having “ever lived with” their romantic/sexual partner for one month or longer. Race of

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respondent was collected from the first wave of the study and recoded to a series of dummy variables (non-Hispanic black, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic Asian), with non-Hispanic white acting as the reference group. Education at the time of the wave four was also recoded as 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 were based on the fourth wave and include marital history (whether respondent was previously married), number of children in the household, and logged number of other sexual partners in the lifetime. We also utilized information respondents supplied on partners to develop measures of whether they were a different race than respondent (using the categories above) and the age difference between partners (absolute value). Our measure of relationship duration corresponds to the period of the entire relationship (i.e., from the time of first date or sexual encounter).

Previous studies have suggested that some respondents inadvertently select the wrong sex when answering questions about their partner (Black et al., 2000). Based on this information, we identified a subset of respondents who were consistent in their reports of sexual orientation and lifetime sexual partners in another ACASI section of the questionnaire that preceded the section in which they enumerated romantic and sexual relationships. Respondents in same-sex relationships were defined as consistent if they indicated they had ever had at least one same-sex partner and were not "100% heterosexual (straight)." Respondents in different-sex relationships were defined as consistent if they reported they were 100% straight and had no same-sex sex partners in their lifetime. We also include an additional indicator of whether respondents reported having more than one current partner at the fourth wave. These indicators allow us to investigate the robustness of our findings.

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## FINDINGS

Table 1 presents means and percentages (in addition to standard errors) for the variables used in our analyses of respondents in current nonmarital relationships. It shows statistics for same-sex and different-sex relationships before and after stratifying the analyses by biological sex of respondent. As in previous studies, respondents in different-sex and same-sex relationships (columns 1 and 2, respectively) exhibited high levels of commitment, satisfaction, and emotional intimacy; their values on each scale were closer to the maximum value (1) than the minimum value (0). Average monthly frequency of sex was also high, with respondents in different-sex couples indicating that they had sex about 12 times per month and same-sex couples indicating that they did so about 10 times per month. Whereas the majority of respondents in same-sex and different-sex relationships indicated that both partners were sexually exclusive, different-sex couples were significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more likely to do so (i.e., 69% versus 58%).

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The other two sets of columns (3 through 6) in Table 1 reveal that patterns of exclusivity are obscured when the sex of respondent is not distinguished. Although over two-thirds of respondents in same-sex female and different-sex couples indicated their relationship was exclusive, fewer than half of male respondents with male partners did so. Comparisons across the different sets of columns also suggest that simple contrasts between same-sex and different-sex couples distort other important differences between same-sex male and same-sex female couples. For instance, male respondents in same-sex relationships were much more likely to have a college degree than their counterparts in different-sex relationships (i.e., 49% versus 27%). In contrast, female respondents in same-sex relationships failed to differ significantly from their



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counterparts in different-sex relationships with respect to educational attainment. These results for educational attainment are consistent with prior work based on Add Health (Mollborn & Everett 2015). Differences such as these underscore the need to control for demographic variables in comparisons of same-sex and different-sex relationships.

### *Subjective Relationship Qualities*

Table 2 shows coefficients from the five models predicting subjective relationship qualities. Again, we distinguish respondents by their own sex and the sex composition of their relationships, yielding four different groups. The models shown here use male respondents with male partners as the omitted reference group. The results in Table 2 allow us to differentiate male and female respondents who have same-sex relationships as well as contrast male respondents in same-sex versus different-sex relationships. An alternative set of models, displayed in Appendix B, uses female respondents with female partners as the omitted reference group. Due to space constraints, we do not show or discuss coefficients for the control variables, with the exception of whether the partners were cohabiting (versus dating); these results are available upon request.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Columns 1 through 3 of Table 2 show coefficients for models predicting subjective relationship qualities. The tests of significance in this table indicate that female respondents with same-sex partners had similar levels for the subjective relationship quality variables (commitment, satisfaction, and emotional intimacy) as male respondents with same-sex partners. Similarly, male and female respondents in different-sex relationships had similar levels of subjective relationship quality as the reference group. The alternative set of results that switches the reference category to female respondents in same-sex relationships (Appendix B) shows a

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similar pattern of results (i.e., no significant differences). As expected, respondents who were cohabiting had significantly higher levels of commitment, satisfaction, and emotional intimacy than respondents who were dating.

### *Objective Relationship Qualities*

Columns 4 and 5 of Table 2 present results for sexual frequency and exclusivity. Female respondents in same-sex relationships and respondents in different-sex relationships had similar levels of sexual frequency as male respondents in same-sex relationships. The model that switches the reference category to female respondents in same-sex relationships reveals that male and female respondents in different-sex relationships (but not male respondents in same-sex relationships) had more frequent sexual activity than female respondents in same-sex relationships (Appendix B). Female respondents with a different-sex partner had sex just over two more times per month (e.g.,  $2.23 = \exp[0.800]$ ) than female respondents with a same-sex partner. Female respondents in same-sex relationships and respondents in different-sex relationships were more likely to have an exclusive relationship than male respondents in same-sex relationships. In fact, all three groups had well over twice the odds of exclusivity as male respondents in same-sex relationships (e.g.,  $2.72 = \exp[1]$ ). Results from these models also suggest highly significant differences between respondents in cohabiting and dating relationships, with cohabitators having more frequent sex and greater sexual exclusivity in comparison to the daters.

### *Sensitivity Tests*

We additionally ran the models presented in Table 2 only for respondents with consistent reports of sexual orientation, and alternatively, respondents who reported only one current relationship. The patterns of significance for these models (not shown) were similar to those

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presented in the table. We also interacted the focal indicators (respondent sex and sex composition) with the cohabiting indicator and none of the interaction terms was statistically significant. The associations between sex composition of the couple and relationships qualities were similar for cohabiting and dating young adults. For instance, when we stratified our models by cohabiting status, the point estimates for focal indicators in models for sexual exclusivity were similar for dating and cohabiting relationships (i.e., around 1 or over twice the odds).

## DISCUSSION

Most prior studies comparing the qualities of same-sex and different-sex relationships have utilized convenience samples and limited their scope to coresidential relationships. Importantly, Add Health collected information on respondents' sexual/romantic partners, allowing them to list both same-sex and different-sex partners. For the most recent partner, Add Health also collected information on both subjective and objective qualities, using conventional items (e.g., commitment) and unusual measures (e.g., sexual exclusivity). We were fortunate to have adequate sample sizes of male and female respondents in ongoing same-sex relationships, allowing us to compare the qualities of their relationships to those of their counterparts in ongoing different-sex relationships. We excluded married respondents from our analyses, as very few respondents with same-sex partners were married to their partners.

We drew from two perspectives that suggested competing hypotheses with respect to how same-sex couples would fare in terms of quality relative to different-sex couples. The minority stress perspective predicted that women and men in same-sex relationships would have lower relationship quality than their counterparts in different-sex relationships due to their exposure to minority stressors. In contrast, the gender-as-relational perspective predicted that partners in

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same-sex relationships would have higher relationship quality as a consequence of greater concordance in views on emotional intimacy and autonomy. Even after controlling for a rich set of variables, male and female respondents in same-sex relationships failed to differ from their counterparts in different-sex relationships in their levels of commitment, satisfaction, and emotional intimacy. This largely reflects the fact that differences in the subjective qualities of same-sex and different-sex relationships were small in magnitude, rather than a lack of power to detect statistical significance (i.e., cell sizes).

In contrast, the multivariate analyses of sexual frequency and sexual exclusivity revealed some significant differences in the sexual behavior of male and female respondents in same-sex relationships. Male respondents in same-sex relationships were significantly less likely than female respondents in same-sex relationships and respondents in different-sex relationships to indicate their relationship was sexually exclusive. Female respondents in same-sex relationships indicated they had sex less frequently than male and female respondents in different-sex relationships, but they failed to differ from male respondents in same-sex relationships with respect to sexual activity. In prior studies based on convenience samples, male and female couples were similarly found to exhibit distinct patterns of sexual behavior. One caveat is that scholars have expressed conceptual and methodological concerns with the measure of sexual frequency used in this study and prior studies (Blair & Pukall, 2014; Rothblum, 2000).

As in previous studies comprised of ongoing different-sex relationships, we found highly significant differences between dating and cohabiting relationships, with cohabiting relationships having greater commitment, satisfaction, emotional intimacy, sexual frequency, and sexual exclusivity (Waite and Joyner, 2001). Our results suggest that cohabiting relationships continue to be distinct from dating relationships in their relationship qualities, in spite of dramatic changes

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that render cohabitation a moving target (Smock, 2000). Interestingly, the patterns discussed above for the four different groups of respondents were similar for young adults in cohabiting and dating relationships. For instance, we observed a significantly lower likelihood of sexual exclusivity for men with same-sex partners among both the dating and cohabiting samples.

Consistent with prior studies, our results suggest that same-sex couples and different-sex couples are similar in their levels of relationship quality. This finding is intriguing in light of the fact same-sex couples form and maintain their relationships in a broader context that stigmatizes sexual minorities and their relationships. As suggested by the gender-as-relational perspective, some men and women in different-sex relationships alternatively experience stress from having discordant views on emotional intimacy and autonomy. Scholars have offered additional explanations for why same-sex couples fare just as well as different-sex couples. In their review of the empirical literature on this topic, Rostosky and Riggle (2017) suggest that same-sex couples develop strengths and resiliencies as a consequence of stigmatization. They also found evidence in six different qualitative studies that same-sex couples view individual differences as a source of relationship strength (e.g., Riggle, Rothblum, Rostosky, Clark, & Balsam, 2016).

Alternatively, the patterns found in this study could partly reflect the selection of same-sex couples in ongoing dating and cohabiting relationships. Differences in the qualities of different couple types have long been considered a reflection of unmeasured factors that select individuals into different types of relationships (Paik, 2010). Dating and cohabitation on the part of same-sex couples, however, are not just a reflection of personal choice but also the illegality of same-sex marriage. When the fourth wave of the Add Health was fielded (2007-2008), same-sex couples could legally marry in Massachusetts but not in other states. This has implications for the composition of same-sex couples in this study's sample, as the most committed, satisfied,

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and intimate same-sex couples were not able to select themselves into marriage. It is also worth noting that respondents with same-sex partners were more likely than their counterparts with different-sex partners to dissolve their most relationships prior to the fourth wave (results not shown). These selection issues have also plagued other studies comparing same-sex and different-sex relationships and warrant further attention in future research.

The distinctive findings for same-sex male relationships (i.e., the lower likelihood of sexual exclusivity) and same-sex female couples (i.e., the lower frequency of sex) signal gender differences in acceptability and preferences for different sexual behaviors and practices. For men and women in different-sex relationships, sexual non-exclusivity is negatively associated with levels of emotional satisfaction (Waite & Joyner, 2001) and tends to serve as a precursor to dissolution (e.g., DeMaris, 2013). In spite of having less exclusive relationships, men in same-sex relationships enjoy similar levels of commitment, satisfaction, and emotional intimacy as other couple types. This is evidence of their greater acceptance of nonmonogamy. These findings are also consistent with a recent study that finds no association between the type of agreement (i.e., “open,” “discrepant,” and “monogamous”) and most indicators of relationship quality among same-sex male couples (Parsons, Starks, Gamarel, & Grov, 2012). They underscore the need for future studies to identify factors associated with men’s and women’s reports on the quality of same-sex and different-sex relationships (Rith & Diamond, 2013), an endeavor that requires much larger sample sizes.

Our study offers a perspective on the relationship quality of young adult relationships prior to the legalization of marriage to same-sex couples in all states on June 26, 2015. Our focus on a narrow age group of young adults means that our findings cannot be generalized to other birth cohorts or periods of the life course. Research drawing on experiences of a wider age range

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is warranted along with studies focusing on relationship experiences in the new legal climate. Future studies would also benefit from couple-level data; our analyses are based on one partner from the relationship. A multifaceted assessment of relationships would also be informative, as our work treats each quality separately; a more nuanced portrait would consider how the qualities operate together (e.g. commitment and exclusivity). This study does, however, break new ground in some key respects (i.e., the population-based data, the inclusion of dating relationships, and a broad array of relationship outcomes) and provides an empirical basis on which to further assess the quality of same-sex couple relationships.

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Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for Relationship Qualities by Sex Composition of Relationship and Respondent Sex: Current Nonmarital Relationships (N = 5,052)*

Variable	Men and Women		Men		Women	
	Different-Sex (DS) Mean (SD)	Same-Sex (SS) Mean (SD)	Different-Sex (DS) Mean (SD)	Same-Sex (SS) Mean (SD)	Different-Sex (DS) Mean (SD)	Same-Sex (SS) Mean (SD)
<i>Relationship Qualities</i>						
Commitment (0 to 1)	0.73 (0.01)	0.74 (0.03)	0.69 (0.01)	0.73 (0.04)	0.78 (0.01)	0.75 (0.04)
Satisfaction (0 to 1)	0.81 (0.00)	0.80 (0.02)	0.79 (0.01)	0.81 (0.02)	0.82 (0.01)	0.80 (0.03)
Emotional intimacy (0 to 1)	0.80 (0.00)	0.82 (0.02)	0.78 (0.01)	0.80 (0.03)	0.81 (0.01)	0.83 (0.03)
Monthly sex frequency	12.01 (0.22)	10.12 (0.93)	12.30 (0.28)	11.09 (1.21)	11.67 (0.29)	9.15 (1.53)
Both partners exclusive	0.69 (0.01)	0.58 (0.04)	* 0.67 (0.01)	0.44 (0.06)	** 0.70 (0.01)	0.71 (0.06)
<i>Control Variables</i>						
Cohabiting relationship	0.55 (0.01)	0.62 (0.05)	* 0.53 (0.02)	0.60 (0.07)	0.57 (0.02)	0.65 (0.07)
Duration of relationship	38.45 (0.96)	30.77 (2.72)	35.42 (1.13)	30.63 (4.39)	41.83 (1.29)	30.91 (3.89)
Non-Hispanic white or other	0.63 (0.03)	0.67 (0.05)	0.66 (0.03)	0.62 (0.07)	0.60 (0.04)	0.72 (0.05)
Non-Hispanic black	0.20 (0.02)	0.14 (0.03)	0.18 (0.02)	0.10 (0.04)	0.22 (0.03)	0.18 (0.04)
Hispanic	0.12 (0.02)	0.15 (0.03)	0.12 (0.02)	0.22 (0.06)	0.13 (0.02)	0.07 (0.03)
Non-Hispanic Asian	0.03 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.03 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.03 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Age at interview	28.07 (0.13)	28.27 (0.20)	28.19 (0.14)	28.69 (0.23)	27.93 (0.13)	27.85 (0.26)

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

Table 1. (continued)

Variable	Men and Women		Men		Women				
	Different-Sex (DS)	Same-Sex (SS)	Different-Sex (DS)	Same-Sex (SS)	Different-Sex (DS)	Same-Sex (SS)			
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)			
LT high school	0.10 (0.01)	0.05 (0.02)	0.12 (0.01)	0.03 (0.02)	*	0.09 (0.01)	0.06 (0.03)		
High school degree	0.26 (0.01)	0.20 (0.04)	0.28 (0.02)	0.12 (0.05)	*	0.24 (0.02)	0.29 (0.07)		
Some college	0.34 (0.01)	0.39 (0.05)	0.33 (0.01)	0.36 (0.07)		0.35 (0.02)	0.42 (0.07)		
Bachelors degree	0.30 (0.02)	0.36 (0.05)	0.27 (0.02)	0.49 (0.08)	*	0.32 (0.02)	0.23 (0.06)		
Prior marriage	0.14 (0.01)	0.03 (0.02)	***	0.12 (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)	***	0.16 (0.01)	0.06 (0.03)	*
No. of other sex partners	13.82 (0.35)	18.13 (1.62)	*	16.63 (0.45)	22.33 (2.09)	*	10.69 (0.38)	13.95 (2.55)	
Partner race difference	0.21 (0.01)	0.34 (0.05)	*	0.20 (0.02)	0.39 (0.07)	*	0.22 (0.01)	0.29 (0.07)	
Partner age difference	3.80 (0.09)	4.42 (0.40)		3.57 (0.10)	4.24 (0.55)		4.06 (0.13)	4.60 (0.56)	
No. of children in household	0.60 (0.03)	0.06 (0.02)	***	0.37 (0.02)	0.01 (0.00)	***	0.86 (0.05)	0.11 (0.05)	***
<i>Data Quality Flags</i>									
Consistent sex orientation	0.83 (0.01)	0.93 (0.03)	*	0.93 (0.01)	0.96 (0.03)		0.73 (0.01)	0.90 (0.05)	*
Multiple current partners	0.08 (0.01)	0.08 (0.03)		0.10 (0.01)	0.11 (0.04)		0.05 (0.01)	0.04 (0.03)	
N of cases	4,859	193		2,361	95		2,498	98	

Note: Means and standard deviations adjust for design effects. Standard deviations 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 Relationships

Table 2. *Coefficients from Models of Relationship Qualities: Current Nonmarital Relationships (N = 5,052)*

Variable	OLS Model		OLS Model		OLS Model		OLS Model		Logit Model	
	Commitment		Satisfaction		Emotional Intimacy		Logged Sex Frequency		Sexual Exclusivity	
<i>Respondent Sex and Sex Composition</i>										
<i>(v. Male Respondents in SS Relationships)</i>										
Female respondents in SS relationships	-0.001		-0.021		0.015		-0.638		1.008	*
Male respondents in DS relationships	-0.032		-0.017		-0.020		0.222		0.983	***
Female respondents in DS relationships	0.029		0.013		0.002		0.162		1.065	***
<i>Type of Relationship</i>										
Cohabiting (v. dating)	0.195	***	0.041	***	0.096	***	0.596	***	0.680	***
F Statistic or R-Square	18.5%		5.2%		9.3%		9.5%		13.20	

*Note* : Coefficients and p-values adjust for design effects. Reference category is in parentheses. The models also include control variables for duration, race, age, education, marital history, number of sex partners, and number of children in the household.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed tests)

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

Appendix A. *Quantitative Studies of Same-Sex Relationship Qualities: U.S. Studies with a Comparative Lens*

Studies Comparing Same-Sex Couples (SSC) and Different-Sex Couples (DSC)				
Author(s) & Year	Data Yrs.	Same-Sex Sample	N of SSC	Relationship Quality
Blumstein & Schwartz 1983 <sup>1</sup>	1978-81	Cohabiting couples	969 male ss couples 788 female ss couples	Relationship satisfaction; Sexual frequency; Sexual exclusivity
Duffy & Rusbult 1986 <sup>2</sup>	Early 1980s	Any relationship, from any time, any duration, and any level of seriousness	25 males in ss couples 25 females in ss couples	Relationship satisfaction; Sexual exclusivity
Henderson, Lehavot, & Simoni 2009 <sup>3</sup>	Not Available	Lesbians in cohabiting, monogamous, committed relationships $\geq 1$ year	114 females in ss couples	Relationship satisfaction; Cohesion Sexual satisfaction; Sexual frequency
Hurlbert & Apt 1993 <sup>4</sup>	Not Available	Cohabiting relationships	34 females in ss couples	Intimacy; Sexual satisfaction; Sexual frequency
Kurdek 1994 <sup>5</sup>	Not Available	Cohabiting couples with no children	75 male ss couples 51 female ss couples	Relationship satisfaction
Kurdek 1998 <sup>5</sup>	1990-95	Cohabiting couples	66 male ss couples 51 female ss couples	Intimacy
Kurdek 2004 <sup>5</sup>	1990-02	Cohabiting couples with no children	33-80 male ss couples	Commitment; Relationship satisfaction
Kurdek 2006 <sup>1</sup>	1978-79	Cohabiting couples	706 male ss couples 655 female ss couples	Relationship satisfaction; Sexual frequency
Kurdek & Schmitt 1986	Not Available	Cohabiting couples with no children	50 male ss couples 56 female ss couples	Relationship satisfaction; Love; Like
Mackey, Diemer, & O'Brien 2004 <sup>6</sup>	1997-10	Married or committed couples $\geq 15$ years	36 ss couples	Relationship satisfaction
Matthews, Tartaro, & Hughes 2003 <sup>7</sup>	1996-97	Committed relationships	36 females in ss couples	Relationship satisfaction; Sexual satisfaction; Sexual frequency
Rosenfeld 2014 <sup>8</sup>	2009-12	Romantic or sexual relationships (any type)	242 males in ss couples 229 females in ss couples	Relationship quality
Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam 2005 <sup>9</sup>	2000-01	Couples with civil unions or romantic relationships	195 male ss couples 378 female ss couples	Sexual frequency; Sexual exclusivity

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

## Appendix A. (continued)

Studies Comparing Only Male Couples (MC) and Female Couples (FC)				
Author(s) & Year	Data Yrs.	Same-Sex Sample	N of MC & FC	Relationship Quality
Berger 1990 <sup>10</sup>	1988	Current relationships	114 males in ss couples 29 females in ss couples	Relationship satisfaction; Love
Bryant & Demian 1994 <sup>11</sup>	1988-89	Same-sex cohabiting and romantic couples	560 male couples 706 female couples	Commitment; Relationship quality
Clausell & Roisman 2009 <sup>12</sup>	Not Available	Same-sex romantic couples	30 male couples 30 female couples	Relationship satisfaction; Relationship quality
Cooper, Totenhagen, Curran Randall, & Smith 2017 <sup>13</sup>	Not Available	Couples $\geq$ 2 months	23 male couples 58 female couples	Relationship quality
Fingerhut & Maisel 2010 <sup>14</sup>	2007	Current relationships	131 males in ss couples 108 females in ss couples	Relationship satisfaction
Gottman et al. 2003 <sup>15</sup>	1987-99	Cohabiting couples $\geq$ 2 years	32 male couples 18 female couples	Relationship satisfaction
Kurdek 1988 <sup>16</sup> Kurdek 1989 <sup>16</sup> Kurdek 1991 <sup>16</sup>	1988-89  Not Available	Cohabiting couples with no children  Cohabiting couples	65/74 male couples 47/53 female couples 75 male couples 51 female couples	Relationship satisfaction Like; Sexual exclusivity Relationship satisfaction
Mohr & Fassinger 2006 <sup>17</sup>	Not Available	Couples $\geq$ 2 months	187 male couples 274 female couples	Commitment; Relationship satisfaction
Peplau, Cochran, & Mays 1997 <sup>18</sup>	Not Available	Serious, committed relationship of African Americans	325 males in ss couples 398 females in ss couples	Satisfaction; Love; Closeness; Sexual frequency; Sexual exclusivity
Quam, Whitford, Dziengel & Knoche 2010 <sup>19</sup>	Not Available	Current relationships $\geq$ 10 yrs; 50+ yrs old	77 males in couples 68 females in couples	Relationship satisfaction; Communication
Thies, Starks, Denmark & Rosenthal 2016 <sup>20</sup>	Not Available	Couples $\geq$ 3 months	99 males in ss couples 86 females in ss couples	Relationship Satisfaction; Commitment; Passion; Love; Trust; Intimacy
Todosijevic, Rothblum, & Solomon 2005 <sup>21</sup>	2000-01	Civil unions in Vermont in first yr of legislation	114 male couples 199 female couples	Relationship satisfaction
Whitton, Kuryluk, & Khaddouma 2015 <sup>22</sup>	2012	Cohabiting couples $\geq$ 6 months	230 male couples 374 female couples	Commitment; Relationship satisfaction



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

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### Appendix A. (continued)

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Note: Unless otherwise specified, "couples" indicate that both partners were included in the sample.

- <sup>1</sup>American Couples: National sample of 6,071 couples (total of 12,142 respondents)
- <sup>2</sup>Convenience sample: all respondents resided in the Lexington, Kentucky area; homosexual sample recruited through questionnaire distributed at meetings of Lexington area gay organizations and a notice published in the Lexington Gay Services Organization Newsletter
- <sup>3</sup>Convenience sample recruited primarily through the Internet, newspapers, online advertisements, fliers, and email listservs
- <sup>4</sup>Student population of women (23-35) in intimate relationships matched for demographic characteristics in two samples, homosexual and heterosexual
- <sup>5</sup>Convenience sample of different-sex couples primarily based in Ohio, with same-sex couples recruited through requests in periodicals
- <sup>6</sup>Convenience sample recruited through businesses, organizations, churches, etc.
- <sup>7</sup>Chicago Health and Life Experiences of Women: Convenience sample recruited through a broad range of sources in Chicago and surrounding suburbs; recruitment through flyers, advertisements, churches, and organizations; lesbians asked to provide contact of comparable heterosexual woman
- <sup>8</sup>How Couples Meet and Stay Together: Nationally representative sample of 3,009 relationship; Oversample of same-sex relationships; longitudinal
- <sup>9</sup>Population and convenience sample: Respondents drawn from all same-sex couples who obtained civil unions in Vermont; other couples were recruited from the friendships and siblings of primary respondents
- <sup>10</sup>Couples National Network Survey: Membership survey; respondents predominantly in southern California
- <sup>11</sup>Convenience sample recruited through gay and lesbian press, gay churches and community organizations, and gay publications
- <sup>12</sup>Convenience sample from small Mid-western community; recruited through advertisements on campus
- <sup>13</sup>Convenience sample from Alabama and Arizona; recruited through flyers to universities and listservs/social media posting and flyers around the community
- <sup>14</sup>Convenience sample obtained through online sample of California residents
- <sup>15</sup>Convenience sample recruited through advertisements in the classified sections of Berkeley and San Francisco gay newspapers, flyers, gay and lesbian groups, and PSAs on area radio stations
- <sup>16</sup>Convenience sample recruited through gay and lesbian periodicals as well as through personal contacts
- <sup>17</sup>Convenience sample recruited through LGB Mail lists and advertisements in LGB newspaper
- <sup>18</sup>Convenience sample recruited through national Black gay and lesbian political, social, and healthcare organizations, flyers in gay and lesbian bars, and gay and lesbian publications
- <sup>19</sup>Purposive and snowball sample recruited through GLBT listservs, radio shows, and flyers as well as emails to friends and others known to researchers
- <sup>20</sup>Convenience sample recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk and through postings on websites and online media focused on interracial and same-sex
- <sup>21</sup>Population sample based on letter sent to all same-sex couples in Vermont who had a civil union during the first year of legislation
- <sup>22</sup>Convenience sample recruited through LGBT organizations, website postings, flyers

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

Appendix B. Coefficients from Models of Relationship Qualities: Current Nonmarital Relationships ( $N = 5,052$ )

Variable	OLS Model		OLS Model		OLS Model		OLS Model		Logit Model	
	Commitment		Satisfaction		Emotional Intimacy		Logged Sex Frequency		Sexual Exclusivity	
<i>Respondent Sex and Sex Composition</i>										
<i>(v. Female Respondents in SS Relationships)</i>										
Male respondents in SS relationships	0.001		0.021		-0.015		0.638		-1.008	*
Male respondents in DS relationships	-0.031		0.005		-0.035		0.860	*	-0.025	
Female respondents in DS relationships	0.031		0.035		-0.013		0.800	*	0.056	
<i>Type of Relationship</i>										
Cohabiting (v. dating)	0.195	***	0.041	***	0.096	***	0.596	***	0.680	***
F Statistic or R-Square	18.5%		5.2%		9.3%		9.5%		13.20	

Note : Coefficients and p-values adjust for design effects. Reference category is in parentheses. The models also include control variables for duration, race, age, education, marital history, number of sex partners, and number of children in the household.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed tests)