

Components of Love and Relationship Satisfaction: Lesbians and Heterosexual Women

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ABSTRACT. In prior research, relationship satisfaction has been predominantly researched in a hetero-normative context. This study examines relationship satisfaction in 90 lesbians and 213 heterosexual women. We did not find significant differences of relationship satisfaction, commitment, passion, or intimacy based on sexual orientation. In order to determine whether age, length of relationship, and living with children predicted relationship satisfaction, we ran linear regressions. This model was insignificant for heterosexual women, but length of relationship accounted for 36% of the variance of relationship satisfaction, $p = .27$. Regression analyses were also conducted to determine whether commitment, passion, and intimacy were predictors of relationship satisfaction. We found that passion and intimacy were predictors of relationship satisfaction for both lesbians and heterosexual women, whereas commitment was not significant. Passion and intimacy accounted for 61% of the variance for heterosexual women, $p < .001$, and 77% of the variance for lesbians, $p < .001$. This research is interesting because passion and intimacy predict women's relationship satisfaction, in both heterosexual and lesbian relationships. Clinical implications can be drawn to examine these factors of a relationship in therapy to increase overall relationship satisfaction, regardless of sexual orientation.

Research on intimate relationships has focused primarily on heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 1994). Little research is available to help researchers and practitioners alike understand if these theories and findings are applicable, in part or in whole, to lesbian and gay males in relationships. Large discrepancies exist between lesbians and heterosexual women in romantic relationships, ranging from the visibility of their relationships to how their relationships are perceived by society (Felicio & Sutherland, 2001). For instance, in research on heterosexual couples, a central concept is gender differences (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990), and the heteronormative construct of gender does not pertain to lesbian and

gay male relationships (Kurdek, 1994). Additionally, same-sex couples often develop outside of the context of social sanctions and support of family members (Kurdek, 1994). The current study seeks to fill a knowledge gap by focusing on lesbians in relationships. This study explores relationship satisfaction, commitment, passion, and intimacy in lesbians and heterosexual women. These three variables were chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of relationships as experienced by women of varying sexual orientations.

Relationship Satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction is defined as the degree to which an individual is satisfied with his or her

WINTER 2012

PSI CHI
JOURNAL OF
PSYCHOLOGICAL
RESEARCH

current romantic relationship. Research has demonstrated several important predictors of relationship satisfaction in both heterosexual and lesbian romantic relationships.

In his triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1977), Sternberg proposed that relationship satisfaction is comprised of 3 components: intimacy, passion, and commitment (Sternberg, 1986). Kurdek and Schmitt (1986) found relationship satisfaction in lesbian couples to be correlated with high dyadic attachment and shared decision-making. Additionally, lesbians who had higher levels of dyadic attachment and lower levels of personal autonomy, high levels of self-esteem, and high life satisfaction reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction than lesbians who had lower levels of dyadic attachment and higher levels of personal autonomy, low levels of self-esteem, and low life satisfaction (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990). High dyadic attachment in lesbians was also related to high levels of relationship satisfaction.

Additionally, lesbian couples report significantly less gender-role differentiated behavior than heterosexual couples (Cardell, Finn, & Marecek, 1981). Sex-role differentiated behavior encompasses the division of household labor with women usually performing more chores than men in heterosexual relationships, whereas lesbians tend to be more equitable in their relationships in sharing responsibilities around the house (Cardell et al., 1981; Matthews, Tartaro, & Hughes, 2003). This can lead to greater relationship satisfaction in both lesbian and heterosexual relationships (Cardell et al., 1981). Schreurs and Buunk (1996) also found a positive relationship between relationship satisfaction and equity. This equity that is typical of lesbian relationships is not common for heterosexual relationships (Littlefield, Lim, Canada, & Jennings, 2000). Besides equity, Peplau, Padesky, and Hamilton (1982) also found that power balance and attitude similarity correlated positively with relationship satisfaction in lesbian relationships.

Living with children may also influence relationship satisfaction. One study found that women who lived with children and a partner reported poorer subjective health (Erlandsson, Björkelunc, Lissner, & Håkansson, 2010). This could be explained because children and a spouse are additional stressors in women's lives, which might have an impact on relationship satisfaction. However, other research shows that number of children has no effect on relationship satisfaction

(Witting et al., 2008). A meta-analysis comparing relationship satisfaction among couples with children and couples without children found that relationship satisfaction decreased in couples who had children, but this may be more indicative of relationship changes over a time span than parenthood (Mitnick, Heyman, & Smith Slep, 2009).

Communication is another factor that influences relationship quality and satisfaction. Constructive communication plays a vital role in maintaining relationships. Couples who are not satisfied with their romantic relationships seem to lack tools to communicate effectively, which predicts partner dissatisfaction (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). Sexual satisfaction and positive communication styles were significantly related to partner satisfaction (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). Julien, Chartrand, Simard, Bouthillier, and Bégin (2003) found that communication styles in conflict and support situations were correlated with relationship quality, with negative styles of communication having lower levels of satisfaction and positive styles of communication reporting higher levels of satisfaction. They concluded that aside from the negative and positive behaviors in conflict and support tasks, variance in relationship satisfaction is responsive to the influence of both partners' involvement in a task (Julien et al., 2003). Although they did not find differences among lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual communication patterns, this could be a result of using measures designed for heterosexual couples.

In regards to comparing relationship satisfaction between lesbians and heterosexual women, pairwise comparisons in Kurdek's (2008) longitudinal study showed that the highest levels of relationship quality were reported by lesbian couples as compared to gay male and heterosexual couples. Because relationship quality was measured using the Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale (1976), which has been used to measure relationship satisfaction of intimate relationships, relationship quality is synonymous with relationship satisfaction (Carey, Spector, Lantinga, & Krauss, 1993). Kurdek (2008) theorizes that lesbians might experience higher relationship quality because they may have characteristics that facilitate sustaining high levels of appeal. For instance, because lesbians and gay men have higher levels of expressiveness which is linked to relationship satisfaction, lesbians and gay men may use the expressiveness in their relationship to handle issues in a positive manner. However, other research suggests there are no

differences in relationship satisfaction based on sexual orientation or gender (Mackey, Diemer, & O'Brien, 2004). There is some evidence that relationship satisfaction is predicted more by the length of the relationship as opposed to the type of couple (Patterson, 1994). Conflicting research indicates that this is a valuable topic for further research.

Relationship Commitment

Relationship commitment refers to the choice to continue a relationship (Sternberg, 1977). Properties that impact relationship commitment are conscious controllability and the importance of long-term relationships (Sternberg, 1986). Relationship commitment has implications for relationship satisfaction and longevity in relationships. Although research is limited on relationship commitment, positive relationship satisfaction may lead to a higher level of relationship commitment.

Kurdek (1995) found that changes in the balance between currently perceived levels of attachment and currently perceived levels of autonomy reliably predicted changes in relationship commitment. Because fewer socially constructed barriers keep lesbian and gay male couples from ending relationships, they may be more likely to be committed to their relationships for reasons related to their satisfaction in the relationship and less likely to staying together in response to societal barriers (Kurdek, 1995). Littlefield et al. (2000) argue that because society does not endorse lesbian relationships, they are more conducive for enduring relationships. Littlefield and colleagues' (2000) reasoning is based on members of same-sex relationships staying together because they want to be in the relationship, not because they feel like they have to be in a relationship. This leads to long-term, satisfying relationships. Factors that are strongly related to high levels of commitment include high levels of relationship satisfaction, low quality of alternatives to the relationship, high investment size, and low avoidance motivation (Kurdek, 2007). Kurdek (2007) found that cohabiting gay and lesbian couples reported higher levels of commitment than did heterosexual partners.

Passion

Passion is the romance, physical attraction, and sexual attraction in a relationship (Sternberg, 1988). Although passion is generally unstable across relationships, it is important in fulfilling psychological and physiological needs (Sternberg,

1986). Furthermore, passionate components of love are often reciprocal with intimate components of love (Sternberg, 1986). However, passionate aspects of relationships are relatively unexplored in the mainstream literature (Brehm, 1988). Sexual attraction and activity is thought to be a part of passion, but it is not the only factor involved in passion and romantic attachment. Berscheid (1988) adds a sexual component as part of passion. There is a documented positive connection between relationship satisfaction and greater sexual satisfaction and pleasure (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005).

Numerous factors influence sexual satisfaction. Some research reveals that aging causes a decrease in sexual functioning (Tracy & Junginger, 2007) and is correlated with a decrease in sexual satisfaction (Biss & Horne, 2004). Sexual satisfaction is influenced by children. Some research found that having children was related to increased sexual satisfaction (Witting et al., 2008). Conversely, Henderson, Lehavot, & Simoni's (2009) research found that living with children had no significant effect on sexual satisfaction. Psychological factors often have an effect on sexual satisfaction, specifically for women (Tracy & Junginger, 2007). Depression and anxiety are negatively related to sexual pleasure and satisfaction. Also, intimacy and commitment are related to sexual satisfaction (Biss & Horne, 2004; Tracy & Junginger, 2007). One of the most common complaints expressed by women with lower levels of sexual satisfaction is lack of intimacy (Kirkpatrick, 2002).

When looking at sexual satisfaction in lesbian couples, internalized homophobia has not been found to be a significant predictor of sexual satisfaction (Biss & Horne, 2004; Henderson et al., 2009). Lesbians are sexually expressive regardless of internal attitudes about homosexuality. Because lesbians are more sexually assertive, arousable, and comfortable using erotic language with a partner, Iasenza (2002) suggests that they may report higher levels of sexual satisfaction than heterosexual women. Additionally, greater sexual satisfaction may be reported by lesbians than heterosexual women because there are more flexible gender roles in the queer community (Henderson et al., 2009).

Intimacy

Intimacy refers to the feelings in a relationship that foster one feeling connected or close to his or her partner (Sternberg, 1986). When one experiences

WINTER 2012

PSI CHI
JOURNAL OF
PSYCHOLOGICAL
RESEARCH

feelings of intimacy, he or she also experiences feelings of wanting his or her partner to be in good welfare, experiences happiness with the partner, and values the partner in high regards (Sternberg, 1986). Intimacy affects relationship satisfaction for both lesbians and heterosexual women (Felicio & Sutherland, 2001). Same-sex couples have reported greater intimacy and compatibility compared to their heterosexual married counterparts (Balsam, Beauchaine, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2008). Previous research viewed lesbian's high level of intimacy, or fusion, as unhealthy. Fusion was understood as pathological in lesbian relationships (Mencher, 1997), and it was viewed as maladaptive because the intense intimacy experienced in lesbian relationships may cause partners to lose their individual identities (Ackbar & Senn, 2010). However, Felicio and Sutherland (2001) argue that intimacy in lesbian relationships was misinterpreted, and high levels of intimacy can be attributed to lesbians' greater reports of relationship satisfaction.

Additionally, intimacy is related to education level. Education has been found to have a negative correlation with intimacy, but it has a positive correlation with autonomy (Balsam et al., 2008). In a study by Kurdek (1998), results showed that lesbian partners had higher levels of education than heterosexual partners. Lesbians may thus report lower levels of intimacy than heterosexual women because they may have higher levels of education. Factors that may predict higher levels of intimacy for same-sex couples include reports of more effective arguing, more positive problem solving, and less partner withdrawal (Balsam et al., 2008). In a study of lesbian couples, there were positive correlations between relationship satisfaction and four domains of intimacy: emotional, social, intellectual, and sexual intimacy (Schreurs & Buunk, 1996). Lesbian couples may report higher levels of intimacy because they can be more expressive than heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 2006).

Based on the previous research, this study investigated the relationship satisfaction of women in heterosexual or lesbian relationships. We explored the levels of commitment, passion, and intimacy within each type of relationship and the impact of these factors on relationship satisfaction to find if lesbians would have greater relationship satisfaction, commitment, passion, and intimacy than women in heterosexual relationships and to discover if commitment, passion, and intimacy would predict relationship satisfaction for both lesbians and heterosexual women.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 101 lesbians and 233 heterosexual women in relationships. Thirty percent of participants were between the ages of 18–24, 58.8% were between the ages of 25–54, and 10.6% were over 55. Sixty-four percent of participants had a bachelor's degree or higher. Participants reported their racial background as White (78.1%), Black (3.6%), Hispanic (7.9%), Asian (4.6%), and other (5.7%). Most participants, heterosexual and lesbian, lived with their partners. For further demographic data for participants regarding age, race, education, length of relationship, and status of living with partner and/or living with children, see Table 1.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling and the snowball sampling technique. Fourteen research assistants used e-mail flyers, paper flyers, and social media to recruit participants. The participants were asked to complete an online survey using SurveyMonkey. Advantages of using an Internet survey include its cost effectiveness, and ability to obtain data from participants who may otherwise be difficult to reach (Alessi & Martin, 2010). However, multiple submissions can be a problem for Internet surveys (Alessi & Martin, 2010). In order to check for duplication submissions, we paired members of the couple by the last two numbers of their anniversary year and the first two letters or numbers of their address. If they did not live together they were asked to select one address and use it for both of the surveys. In order to be eligible to participate, participants had to be over 18 years of age, living in the United States, and currently in a relationship. The study was approved by Agnes Scott College's Institutional Review Board.

Participants gave consent electronically prior to completing the online survey. Once consent was secured, participants responded to a survey that included measures about relationship satisfaction and components of love (i.e., intimacy, passion, and commitment). Demographic information was also obtained. Participants were automatically entered into a random drawing to receive a \$100 Amazon gift card.

Measures

Intimacy, passion, and commitment. Sternberg's Triangular Love Scale (Sternberg, 1988) was used

WINTER 2012

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PSYCHOLOGICAL
RESEARCH

TABLE 1

Sample Demographic Characteristics

	Heterosexual Women (N = 231)		Lesbian Women (N = 98)	
	n	%	n	%
Age				
18–24	72	31.0	29	29.6
25–34	63	27.2	39	39.8
35–44	42	18.1	15	15.3
45–54	26	11.2	8	8.2
55–64	23	9.9	7	7.1
65 +	5	2.2	0	0.0
Race				
White	171	73.7	85	85.9
Black	10	4.3	2	2.0
Asian	12	5.2	3	3.0
Hispanic	23	9.9	3	3.0
Indian	2	0.9	0	0.0
Native American	1	0.4	0	0.0
Multi-racial	7	3.0	5	5.1
Other	3	1.3	1	1.0
Education				
High School Degree	13	5.7	1	1.0
Some College	71	30.9	31	31.3
BA/BS	81	35.2	31	31.3
MS or Equivalent	47	20.4	23	23.2
PhD or Equivalent	18	7.8	12	12.1
Length of Relationship				
0–2 years	56	24.2	45	45.5
2–10 years	90	38.8	39	39.4
10 years +	86	37.0	15	15.1
Living With Partner				
Yes	187	80.6	76	76.8
No	45	19.4	23	23.2
Living With Children				
Yes, all of the time	73	57.5	19	50.0
Yes, some of the time	16	12.6	4	10.5
No	38	29.9	15	39.5

to measure intimacy, passion, and commitment. Sternberg (1997) defines intimacy as feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bonding; passion as the drives that lead to romance, physical attraction, and sexual activity; and commitment as the decision

to maintain the relationship. The scale is composed of 45 questions, and an example item for intimacy is “I have a warm relationship with my partner;” an example item for passion is “I find myself thinking about my partner frequently during the day;” and, an example item for commitment is “I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner.” Participants rated their responses using a 9-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*extremely*). Higher scores indicate greater commitment, passion, and intimacy. Hendrick and Hendrick (1989) found that all three subscales demonstrated strong, positive correlations with the Passionate Love Scale by Hatfield and Sprecher (1986) and with Davis’ viability, intimacy, passion, care, and satisfaction subscales and negative correlations with the conflict subscale from the Davis Relationship Rating Form (Davis & Todd, 1982). This is evidence of convergent validity, which consists of providing evidence that two tests that are believed to measure closely related skills or types of knowledge correlate strongly. Hendrick and Hendrick (1989) found subscale alphas ranging from .93 to .96, with an alpha of .97 for the total 45-item scale. For this study, alpha reliability coefficients were found to be .96 for commitment, .94 for passion, and .94 for intimacy.

Relationship satisfaction. The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) is a 7-item measure developed by Hendrick (1988). An example item is “In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?” Participants answered each item using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores denote greater relationship satisfaction. This scale is positively correlated (.80) with the longer and more commonly used Spanier (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale, which provided convergent validity. Hendrick (1988) reported an alpha coefficient of .86. For this study the alpha coefficient was .87.

Results

We predicted that lesbians would have greater relationship satisfaction, greater commitment, greater levels of passion, and greater levels of intimacy than women in heterosexual relationships. We used independent samples *t* tests to evaluate the first hypothesis to examine the effects of sexual orientation on relationship satisfaction, commitment, passion, and intimacy. Sexual orientation did not significantly differentiate relationship satisfaction for lesbians and heterosexual women, $t(312) = .56$, $p = .58$, $d = -0.07$. We also did not find differences

WINTER 2012

PSI CHI
JOURNAL OF
PSYCHOLOGICAL
RESEARCH

between lesbians and heterosexual women for commitment, $t(301) = .16, p = .87, d = 0.02$, passion, $t(301) = 0.03, p = .97, d = 0.01$, or intimacy, $t(302) = .33, p = .74, d = -0.04$. Therefore, our first hypothesis was not supported.

We also hypothesized that commitment, passion, and intimacy would predict relationship satisfaction for both lesbians and heterosexual women. In order to evaluate this hypothesis, we used linear regression analyses. First, we wanted to determine if age of participants, living with children, length of relationship, and orientation affected relationship satisfaction for lesbians and heterosexual women. Next, we evaluated commitment, passion, and intimacy as predictors of relationship satisfaction for lesbians and heterosexual women. Linear regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between relationship satisfaction and various potential predictors. Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations for the variables in the present study for lesbian and heterosexual women, and Tables 3 and 4 show the regression models.

First, we regressed living with children, age of participant, length of relationship, and orientation to partial out the effects of these variables on relationship satisfaction. In the first model, age of participant and length of relationship were entered first. Living with children was not entered into the regression model because it is categorical. As observed in Table 3, the overall model significantly predicted relationship satisfaction for heterosexual women, $R^2 = .05, F(2, 216) = 5.52, p = .005$, but only age was a significant predictor, whereas length of relationship was not. The overall model was significant for lesbians, $R^2 = .08, F(2, 90) = 3.98, p = .022$. While the overall model was significant, length of relationship was the only

predictor of relationship satisfaction for lesbians with greater length of relationship predicting decreased relationship satisfaction. In the second model, we regressed commitment, passion, and intimacy to examine if the variables are predictive of relationship satisfaction. The overall model was significant for heterosexual women, $R^2 = .61, F(3, 209) = 109.24, p < .001$, and lesbians, $R^2 = .77, F(3, 86) = 97.98, p < .001$. However, only intimacy and passion significantly contributed to relationship satisfaction for lesbian and heterosexual women (see Table 4) with greater levels of intimacy and passion predicting greater relationship satisfaction.

Discussion

In this article we hypothesized that lesbians would report higher levels of relationship satisfaction than heterosexual women. We also wanted to determine whether commitment, passion, and intimacy were predictors of relationship satisfaction when controlling for the effects of age of participant, living with children, and length of relationship.

The first hypothesis was not supported; sexual orientation had no effect on relationship satisfaction. This was unexpected for several reasons. Prior research indicates lesbians are more likely to report greater levels of passion and sexual satisfaction (Biss & Horne, 2004; Henderson et al., 2009; Iasenza, 2002). A possible explanation for this finding could result from the demographic information of our sample. Sixty-nine percent of our sample reported a length of relationship of two years or greater. Tracy and Junginger's study (2007) showed that passionate aspects and sexual satisfaction decrease over time in a relationship. This is in line with previous research (Sternberg, 1988) that states passionate love ends around a two-year period. Because the majority of our sample was in a relationship of two years or greater, this could explain the lack of significance of the effects of sexual orientation on relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, prior research asserts that lesbians report higher levels of intimacy than heterosexual women (Balsam et al., 2008; Kurdek, 2006; Schreurs & Buunk, 1996). Because of the relationship between intimacy and relationship satisfaction, we predicted that lesbians would report higher levels of relationship satisfaction, because they are more likely to experience higher levels of intimacy in their relationships. The current study did not find significant differences in intimacy levels reported by lesbians and heterosexual women; this could

TABLE 2

Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Study Variables

Measure	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. RAS	30.24	4.26	—					
2. Age	2.41	1.34	-.18**	—				
3. Length	5.58	2.88	-.19**	.71**	—			
4. Intimacy	121.72	14.83	.78**	-.16**	-.12*	—		
5. Passion	108.50	22.15	.71**	-.26**	-.23**	.75**	—	
6. Commitment	124.59	15.87	.65**	.07	.15**	.73**	.68**	—

Note. Higher score indicates greater magnitude. All analyses were two-tailed. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. RAS = Relationship Assessment Scale; Length = length of relationship. Living with Children was included in the first model, but was not included in the correlation table because it is a yes/no question. Intimacy, Passion, and Commitment are subscales of Sternberg's Triangular Love Scale.

be because most participants reported high levels of relationship satisfaction regardless of sexual orientation.

The age of participant and length of relationship significantly predicted relationship satisfaction for heterosexual women and lesbians. However, only age was a significant predictor in this model for relationship satisfaction for heterosexual women, and only length of relationship was a significant predictor in this model for relationship satisfaction for lesbians. Age of participant and length of relationship typically have been related to relationship satisfaction (Biss & Horne, 2004; Kurdek, 2008; Tracy & Junginger, 2007), but we explored length of relationship in order to predict relationship satisfaction for heterosexual women. As our sample had a respectable amount of participants across various age groups and those who were in committed relationships for two years or greater, the fact that our study did not find the first model to be significant for heterosexual women could be attributed to extraneous variables, such as communication or equity. Perhaps, length of relationship was a predictor of relationship satisfaction for lesbians because they are more likely to stay together for reasons that make them happy as opposed to societal barriers making it difficult to leave a relationship. The existing research on relationship satisfaction and living with children has been conflicting. Some studies found relationship satisfaction was negatively related to living with children (Erlandsson et al., 2010), while others found no significant relationship (Mitnick, 2009; Witting et al., 2008). Our research was consistent with the research that found no significant effects of living with children on relationship satisfaction. While lesbians and heterosexual women did not differ from each other in regards to living with children, it is imperative to note that only 38 lesbians and 127 heterosexual women responded to this question. The large drop of participants from both groups of women may skew the results.

We also wanted to assess whether commitment, passion, and intimacy were positive predictors of relationship satisfaction. Passion and intimacy were found to be predictors of relationship satisfaction for lesbians and heterosexual women, whereas commitment was not. The lack of significance found between commitment and relationship satisfaction contradicts previous research (Kurdek, 2007) that indicated higher levels of commitment are strongly related to higher levels of relationship satisfaction. Passion and relationship satisfaction have also been

related in existing literature (Berscheid, 1988). Intimacy and relationship satisfaction have been connected in prior research (Felicio & Sutherland, 2001). For heterosexual women, we found that 61% of the variance in relationship satisfaction can be predicted from this model, and for lesbians, we found that this model accounted for 77% of the variance in relationship satisfaction. These results support our second hypothesis. These results suggest that these components of love are important in predicting relationship satisfaction for women regardless of their partner's sex.

Because the second regression model accounted for 61% and 77% of the variance of relationship satisfaction for lesbians and heterosexual women, respectively, we know that other factors are still affecting women's relationship satisfaction. Some of those other factors may include communication or equity. Other studies have shown that communication influences relationship satisfaction (Julien et al., 2003; Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). Positive communication styles, especially in situations involving conflict, are related to higher levels of relationship satisfaction. Equity has been positively related to relationship satisfaction (Cardell et al., 1981; Matthews, Tartaro, & Hughes, 2003).

These results are important because therapists working with women who identify as lesbian or heterosexual can focus on their levels of passion and intimacy to increase their satisfaction with their relationships. Because passion and intimacy were predictors of relationship satisfaction, it might be worthwhile to focus on ways to foster more intimacy and think of how to increase passion. Although commitment to the relationship did not significantly contribute to the variance, because commitment has been correlated with many other relationship variables, it would not harm couples to look at issues that cause commitment to waver

TABLE 3

Predictors of Relationship Satisfaction Regression 1

Variable	B	95% CI	β	t	p
Age					
Heterosexual	-0.72	[-1.38, -0.06]	-.23	-2.14	.03
Lesbian	0.37	[-0.40, 1.13]	.11	0.96	.34
Length of Relationship					
Heterosexual	0.03	[-0.30, 0.35]	.02	0.15	.89
Lesbian	-0.51	[-0.87, -0.15]	-.32	-2.79	.006

Note. $R^2 = .05$ ($N_{\text{heterosexual}} = 219, p = .01$). $R^2 = .08$ ($N_{\text{lesbian}} = 93, p = .02$). CI = Confidence interval for B. This table shows 95% confidence intervals for B.

WINTER 2012

PSI CHI
JOURNAL OF
PSYCHOLOGICAL
RESEARCH

when considering overall relationship satisfaction. For heterosexual women, the clinician may not want to devote attention to client's age, whether she lives with children, or the length of the relationship, because these variables were not predictors of relationship satisfaction. However, because length of relationship was significant for lesbians, the clinician may wish to acknowledge and investigate the effects of the length of the relationship. These results are encouraging to couples because, while it is not always feasible to send children away, intimacy, commitment, and passion are variables that can be clinically worked on to improve one's relationship. Other issues, such as commitment, passion, and intimacy may be more of a pertinent focus in a therapeutic context for improving overall relationship satisfaction than focusing on age, children, or length of relationship.

One of the positive aspects of this study is that it focuses on the under-studied population of lesbians. Research using heterosexual relationships dominates the literature. Another strength of this study is that our hypotheses which were supported are consistent with prior research and theory. Additionally, our survey was based on previously used scales with established reliability and validity. However, our sample was not very diverse in regards to age and race, as 78% of women were between the ages of 18 and 45 years old and 78.1% of women identified as White. Another limitation to this study is the use of self-report data. The results should be viewed cautiously, as self-report data can be unreliable at times, especially when the issues are sensitive in nature, such as passion and sexual satisfaction. Furthermore, there may have been selection bias. The participants reported high

levels of relationship satisfaction. Participants who experience higher levels of relationship satisfaction may have been more likely to take the survey than those who had lower levels of relationship satisfaction. However, there could have been an issue of data dependence, where one partner influenced the other partner to respond a certain way.

For future studies, researchers may want to examine other variables that affect relationship satisfaction, such as sexual satisfaction and communication styles. Another study could be conducted to determine if other psychological factors affect lesbians and heterosexual women in relationships similarly or differently. Because sexual minorities are more likely to receive discrimination and stigma toward their relationships, dealing with adversity may strengthen their relationships or cause additional stress (Frost, 2011). Frost argues that sexual minorities experience overt discrimination through lack of political and legal recognition of their relationships. Both implicit and explicit negative stereotypes of same-sex relationships persist in our society, and thus stigma exists. Some members of same-sex couples may internalize this stress, which may decrease relationship satisfaction (Frost, 2011). It would be interesting to investigate the levels of stress lesbians perceive from outsiders on their relationships and how they cope with it. Whether or not they cope effectively could affect their relationship satisfaction.

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TABLE 4

Predictors of Relationship Satisfaction Regression 2

Variable	B	95% CI	β	t	p
Intimacy					
Heterosexual	0.16	[0.12, 0.20]	.55	7.59	.001
Lesbian	0.14	[0.09, 0.20]	.49	5.17	.001
Passion					
Heterosexual	0.04	[0.01, 0.07]	.20	2.61	.01
Lesbian	0.08	[0.05, 0.11]	.38	5.60	.001
Commitment					
Heterosexual	0.03	[-0.01, 0.06]	.09	1.39	.07
Lesbian	0.03	[-0.02, 0.07]	.12	1.26	.21

Note. $R^2 = .61$ ($N_{\text{heterosexual}} = 213, p > .001$). $R^2 = .77$ ($N_{\text{lesbian}} = 90, p > .001$). CI = Confidence interval for B. This table shows 95% confidence intervals for B.

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