Examining Relationships: Communication and Satisfaction in Lesbian and Heterosexual Women

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ABSTRACT. In light of the current literature concerning communication and satisfaction in relationships, we examined whether there are differences in communication and its impact on the relationship and sexual satisfaction of lesbian and heterosexual women. A sample of 209 heterosexual and 94 lesbian women completed an online survey about relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and communication variables. Greater physical touch indicated greater relationship satisfaction for lesbian compared to heterosexual women. There was not a significant interaction between sexual orientation and physical touch in relation to sexual satisfaction. Greater words of affirmation indicated greater sexual satisfaction for heterosexual women compared to lesbian women. There was no significant interaction between sexual orientation and words of affirmation in relation to relationship satisfaction. There was no significant difference between lesbian and heterosexual women on relationship satisfaction, nor was there a significant difference between lesbian and heterosexual women on sexual satisfaction. A central implication from these findings is that working to improve verbal communication in heterosexual couples and physical touch in lesbian couples might lead to improved sexual satisfaction. These findings are important to consider from the perspective of both couples and sex therapy work.

While variables including sexual satisfaction, communication, and relationship satisfaction have been examined extensively in heterosexual women, the habits and experiences of lesbian women in these areas are notably under-researched (Kurdek, 1993). Researchers have explored lesbian couples’ issues in the context of lesbian and gay couples research (Kurdek, 2005); few studies, however, have compared lesbian and heterosexual women on various relationship and sexual issues (Kurdek, 1993). Communication about sex and relationship, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction are important factors in the maintenance and health of relationships (Kurdek, 1993, 2008) regardless of orientation, and we examine them here.

Communication
A central issue when examining relationships is communication. A core component of satisfaction in both heterosexual marriage (Gottman & Levenson, 1992) and same-sex partnerships (Kurdek, 1998) is that effective communication is key for sustaining a healthy relationship over time (Regan, 2011; Spanier & Lewis, 1980). Here, we use Gottman’s (1994) definition: clear and honest communication (pertaining to relationship and/or sexual issues) between partners.

There exists a demonstrated and significant connection between communication and satisfaction in relationships (Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Regan, 2011; Rogge & Bradbury, 1999). Partners who lack the necessary skills to communicate effectively often suffer from heightened...
dissatisfaction in their relationships, and poor communication has been shown to predict distress in marriages (Markman, 1979). Mackey, Diemer, and O’Brien (2004) found that communication emerged as a central element in explaining greater satisfaction in both same-sex and heterosexual relationships. Openness to self-disclosure in relationships has been demonstrated to result in greater relationship satisfaction (MacNeil & Byers, 2004). Conversely, couples that experience distress in their relationships are more likely to avoid communication (Christensen & Heavey, 1990).

But what about couples who, instead of experiencing conflict that leads to lessened communication, avoid communication and conflict altogether? Evidence strongly suggests that these couples—those who avoid discussing possible areas of conflict—eventually experience emotional separation, which often results in major conflict (Metz, Rosser, & Strapko, 1994). Few studies have compared the communication—verbal or physical—of heterosexual and lesbian women in the same study, and, despite heightened attention towards the gay and lesbian communities in political and social arenas, few researchers have examined same-sex communication. It is thus difficult to make predictions about communication in lesbian couples that are rooted firmly in findings from the current literature. We base our hypothesis regarding communication on the existing, albeit slim, literature.

According to Bell and Weinberg (1978), lesbians fare better when it comes to verbal communication than heterosexual women, heterosexual men, and gay men. This is not surprising given that women are simply more likely than men to use language to interact (Leaper, 1994). Perhaps in a partnership in which both members are women, communication about the relationship would be more successful because both partners are “speaking the same language.” There is also considerable evidence that lesbian couples are stronger in domestic communication—talking about chores and division of household labor and childcare—than heterosexual couples (Peplau & Cochran, 1990). Perhaps this type of communication would carry into more romantic topics, like relationship and sexual satisfaction of lesbian women if they experience it less than heterosexual women.

**Relationship Satisfaction**

Satisfaction with one’s relationship is, understandably, influenced by a wide variety of variables. These include, but certainly are not limited to, communication (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005) and sexual satisfaction (Sprecher, 2002).

Lesbian women experience better communication in their relationships than heterosexual women and also are better at talking with each other about sexual issues (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Gotta et al., 2011). Given the importance of sex within a committed partnership (Kurdek, 1998)—research suggests that sexual satisfaction and frequency of sex are positively related to relationship quality—it is sensible to posit that lesbian couples would experience greater relationship satisfaction due in part to a better ability to discuss sex (Bell & Weinberg, 1978). Also, according to recent findings by Kurdek (2008), lesbian women experience greater relationship satisfaction than heterosexual women.

**Sexual Satisfaction**

Strong evidence exists in the literature suggesting a positive association between a couple’s relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction (Purnine & Carey, 1997). According to Lawrance and Byers (1995), relationship quality affects sexual satisfaction. Additionally, relationship satisfaction, as a by-product of poor communication, leads to lessened sexual satisfaction (Schenk, Pfrang, & Rausche, 1983). There is, however, debate as to whether a causal relationship exists (Henderson-King & Veroff, 1994; Sprecher, 2002). Does relationship satisfaction affect sexual satisfaction? Is it the reverse? Or, as research suggests, is there perhaps a mediating variable, like communication, that affects both simultaneously (Byers & Demmons, 1999)?

Here, we follow both the Interpersonal
Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction (Lawrance & Byers, 1995) and more recent findings from Byers (2005) that indicate that relationship satisfaction is positively related to sexual satisfaction. As discussed above, the literature suggests that lesbian couples experience greater relationship satisfaction, possibly because of stronger communication, than heterosexual couples; lesbian couples also experience greater intimacy in their relationships (Kurdek, 1998). Thus, it is reasonable to hypothesize that lesbian couples would also experience greater sexual satisfaction. We hope to explore this connection in the present study.

Hypotheses
Given the existing literature, we present six hypotheses. Words of affirmation will serve as a more important form of communication for relationship satisfaction for heterosexual women than for lesbian women. Words of affirmation will also serve as a more important form of communication for sexual satisfaction for heterosexual women as compared to lesbian women. Physical touch will serve as a more important form of communication for relationship satisfaction for lesbian women than for heterosexual women. Physical touch will serve as a more important form of communication for sexual satisfaction for lesbian women as compared to heterosexual women. Lesbian women will experience greater relationship satisfaction than heterosexual women. Lesbian women will also experience greater sexual satisfaction than heterosexual women.

Method
Participants
Our participants consisted of 209 heterosexual women and 94 lesbian women. Participants listed their racial background as being 78.1% White, 3.6% Black, 4.6% Asian, 7.9% Hispanic, and 4.1% other. The average age for participants was 29.21 (SD = 3.64). The majority of the participants had a Bachelor’s degree (34%) or a graduate degree (30.4%). The rest had not earned college degrees (35.6%). Seventy-nine percent of the participants lived with their partner and 67.4% had children who lived with them. The couples reported being with their partners for the following lengths of time: 1–6 months (9.6%), 6–12 months (5.7%), 1–2 years (15.1%), 2–3 years (9.9%), 3–5 years (8.7%), 5–7 years (10.8%), 7–10 years (9.6%), and greater than 10 years (30.3%).

Procedure
Fourteen research assistants recruited individuals in relationships using e-mail flyers, paper flyers, and social media. Participants were asked to complete a brief survey online. Requirements to participate were that individuals had to live in the United States, be in a relationship, and have access to take the survey online.

Participants were asked to answer items concerning basic demographic information, relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and communication. While participation was voluntary, those who agreed to participate were entered into a computer-generated drawing to win a $100 Amazon gift card.

Measures
Love languages. The 30-item Five Love Languages Profiles for men and women by Chapman (2004) was developed to assess the ways in which couples communicate, including physical touch and words of affirmation. Participants were asked to rate how well their partners were doing in those love languages. Each item gave participants the option to select which of two sentences sounded more like their preference in a romantic relationship, with a sample item being “I love having my partner’s undivided attention” versus “keeping the house clean is an important act of service.” Participants selected a letter (A, B, C, D, or E) to indicate their choice, with each letter corresponding to a different love language. In our survey, we changed all instances of the word “wife” or “husband” to “partner” in order to be more inclusive. The measure was scored by adding how many times the participant chose each letter. The letter with the highest score indicated the participant’s main love language.

Relationship satisfaction. A 7-item measure developed by Hendrick (1988), the Relationship Assessment Scale, assessed relationship satisfaction. Participants answered each item using a 5-point Likert scale, with an example item being “In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?” Greater relationship satisfaction is indicated by a higher score. When measured against the more widely used Spanier (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale, this scale had a .80 correlation. The author reported an alpha reliability coefficient of .86 (Hendrick, 1988). For this study a .87 alpha reliability coefficient was found.

Sexual satisfaction. Developed by Abraham et al. (2009), the Sexual Relationship Scale (SRS) is an 8-item measure used to assess sexual satisfaction.
An example item includes “When we have sex I feel close to my partner.” A 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1, strongly disagree, to 6, strongly agree, was used. Higher scores indicate greater sexual satisfaction. To support the discriminant validity of the scale, Abraham et al. (2009) found the sexual satisfaction scores were significantly lower in men and women with sexual dysfunction. They reported coefficient alphas ranging from .88 to .89 for the scale. For this study a .88 alpha coefficient was found.

Results
Four univariate analyses of variance and two independent sample t tests revealed significance on two of our six hypotheses (see Table 1). Our hypothesis that physical touch would be more important for relationship satisfaction for lesbian women compared to heterosexual women was supported. Greater physical touch indicated greater relationship satisfaction for lesbian women (M = 30.45, SD = 4.10) compared to heterosexual women (M = 30.14, SD = 4.34), F(8, 313) = 1561.05, p = .031. There was not a significant interaction between sexual orientation and physical touch in relation to sexual satisfaction, F(9, 303) = 15.64, p = .161. Our hypothesis that words of affirmation would be more important for sexual satisfaction for heterosexual women was supported. Greater words of affirmation indicated greater sexual satisfaction for heterosexual women (M = 39.10, SD = 8.57) compared to lesbian women (M = 37.68, SD = 8.84), F(8, 303) = 389.59, p = .024. There was not a significant interaction between sexual orientation and words of affirmation in relation to relationship satisfaction, F(8, 313) = 11.92, p = .241, ns. There was not a significant difference between lesbian and heterosexual women on relationship satisfaction, t(314) = .479, p = .489, nor was there a significant difference between lesbian and heterosexual women on sexual satisfaction, t(304) = .522, p = .471.

Discussion
Our findings support two of our six hypotheses: Words of affirmation were more important for heterosexual women than for lesbian women when examining sexual satisfaction, and physical touch was more important for lesbian women than for heterosexual women when examining relationship satisfaction. Our other hypotheses were not statistically significant. Our significant results were theoretically consistent in that words of affirmation would be more important for heterosexual women when considering satisfaction, and that physical touch would be more important for lesbian women.

Somewhat surprisingly, our hypotheses that physical touch would be important for sexual satisfaction, specifically for lesbian women, and that words of affirmation would be important for relationship satisfaction, specifically for heterosexual women, were not supported. This appears to be theoretically inconsistent in that it would make sense for physical touch as a form of communication to be more important for lesbian couples in sexual satisfaction if it is more important in relationship satisfaction. Also, because words of affirmation as a form of communication were more important for heterosexual women in terms of greater sexual satisfaction, a relationship between this variable and relationship satisfaction in heterosexual women was expected. These inconsistencies suggest that the link between sexual and relationship satisfaction is perhaps not as strong as the literature suggests.

Additionally, our hypotheses that lesbian women would experience greater relationship and sexual satisfaction than heterosexual women were not supported. This is surprising given evidence that lesbian women experience greater satisfaction in relationships than heterosexual women (Kurdek, 1998; 2008).

Our results are consistent with previous literature that suggests that communication is an important variable for satisfaction in relationships (Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Rogge & Bradbury, 1999). Couples who communicate poorly often suffer lower relationship satisfaction; conversely good communication skills in a relationship have been related to heightened relationship satisfaction (Mackey et al., 2004; MacNeil & Byers, 2005). While the existing literature did not provide evidence for differences in the type of communication between

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<td>Means and Standard Deviations for Lesbian and Heterosexual Women</td>
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lesbian and heterosexual women, or the potential importance of different types of communication on sexual or relationship satisfaction, the link between communication and satisfaction in relationships is well established.

Lesbian women are often better at verbal communication than heterosexual couples (Bell & Weinberg, 1978), perhaps because they are more likely to use language to interact (Leaper, 1994). It would be plausible, then, that desiring words of affirmation—a form of verbal communication—in a relationship would be less important for lesbian women because good verbal communication already exists. Thus, our finding that words of affirmation are more important for heterosexual women than for lesbian women when considering sexual satisfaction is consistent with the literature in that we would expect heterosexual women, who have less present verbal communication in their relationships, to have a greater desire for words of affirmation. This could mean that if heterosexual women desire greater verbal communication, then the presence of good verbal communication could have greater effects on sexual satisfaction for these women than for lesbian women, who seem to naturally use verbal communication more effectively.

Our finding that physical touch as a form of communication is more important for lesbian women than for heterosexual women when considering effects on relationship satisfaction is consistent with the literature in that sexual and physical contact seems to appear more often in heterosexual relationships (Matthews et al., 2005). While lesbian couples are better at verbal communication than heterosexual couples, physical touch—whether sexual or otherwise—may not be as present.

An implication from these findings is that working to improve verbal communication in heterosexual couples might lead to improved sexual satisfaction. Likewise, working to improve physical touch in lesbian couples might lead to improved relationship satisfaction. These findings are important to consider from the perspective of both couples and sex therapy work.

Our study is strong in several areas. First, it is one of few studies examining lesbian and heterosexual women on variables regarding communication, relationship satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction in the same sample. Second, it is one of the first studies in the literature to specifically examine words of affirmation and physical touch in the context of lesbian and heterosexual women’s relationship and sexual satisfaction. Third, our study was based on previously used scales with established reliability and validity.

A potential limitation in our study is that we used an online survey. It is possible that we lost potential participants because our survey required Internet access. Using an online survey, however, is more environmentally friendly than a paper survey and increases feasibility of the research by reducing costs and time demands.

A second potential limitation was that our data was self-reported, and there exists the possibility that participants’ perceptions of their own experiences are different than their actual experiences. This, however, is theoretically consistent in that we were interested in lesbian and heterosexual women’s perceptions of communication, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction.

Our study points in several directions for possible future research. It would be interesting to examine lesbian couples who report having good physical and sexual communication to investigate whether physical touch would still be as important when that type of communication is perceived to be present. It would likewise be interesting to examine heterosexual couples who report having excellent verbal communication skills; would words of affirmation still be as important for women in these couples?

Another possible variable to include in future studies would be relationship confidence. Is communication still as important for women who are more confident in their relationships? Or are women who have high relationship confidence in relationships in which communication is already high, perhaps leading to better confidence? It would also be helpful to reexamine our non-significant results to better understand why physical touch was not significant for sexual satisfaction among lesbians and also why verbal communication was not significant for relationship satisfaction among heterosexual women. It would also be interesting to reexamine relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction in these two groups of women giving existing evidence supporting differences that we did not find in this study.

References


