

# A Comparison of Women in Lesbian and Heterosexual Dual-Income Couples: Communication and Conflict

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**ABSTRACT.** In light of the current dual-income literature, we examined whether lesbians in dual-income relationships would experience (a) greater domestic communication, (b) greater social support from their partners, (c) less work-family conflict, and (d) less family-work conflict than heterosexual women in dual-income relationships. A sample of 132 heterosexual and 112 lesbian women completed a paper survey about domestic communication, social support, work-family conflict, and family-work conflict. Lesbian women in dual-income couples experienced greater domestic communication,  $t(234) = 4.119, p < .021, d = 0.62$  and greater social support,  $t(239) = 6.082, p = .001, d = 0.79$  than heterosexual women in dual-income couples. Our hypotheses involving work-family and family-work conflict were not supported. These findings could be relevant for therapists working with lesbian couples because they could emphasize possible strengths in their relationships.

Relatively little attention has been devoted to the study of lesbian and heterosexual dual-career women. The relationship satisfaction, well-being, and social support of heterosexual couples have been examined in detail (Geist & Gilbert, 1996; Quek & Knudson-Martin, 2006), and 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 dual-career women on various relationship issues (Kurdek, 1993). Communication about domestic chores, social support within the partnership, and work-family and family-work conflict are prominent factors in the maintenance and health of relationships (Kurdek, 1993, 2008), regardless of orientation, and we examine them here.

Also important to consider is the current legal and cultural movement toward the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States and around the world. A discussion of lesbian and heterosexual relationship issues is especially timely with the recent action by the United State Supreme Court,

in which the court declared California Marriage Protection Act (Proposition 8) unconstitutional. Proposition 8, which made same-sex marriage in California illegal, was proposed to and passed in the California state legislature in 2008. Another decision by the Supreme Court, a ruling on the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in which Section 3 of DOMA was ruled unconstitutional, signaled changing tides in the legal discussion of same-sex marriage and related federal benefits. Additionally, several states have recently legalized same-sex marriages, and various countries are reexamining their laws surrounding civil unions and marriage. These recent social changes, along with the sizable presence of same-sex couples throughout the country, are further reasons that an examination of lesbian and heterosexual couples is necessary and timely.

## Domestic Communication

A central issue that affects dual-career couples is the division of household labor, whether chores or childcare, between the partners (Kurdek, 1993; Patterson, Sutfin, & Fulcher, 2004). In heterosexual

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couples, division of household labor tends to fall predictably along lines of gender, with women completing the majority of household tasks (Patterson et al., 2004). This use of gender to determine division of labor is called segregation (Blair & Lichter, 1991).

Women are more likely to spend their time in the home, and men are more likely to spend their time in paid employment outside the home. What is especially interesting about this gender divide is that, according to Blair and Lichter (1991), the division of household labor tends to be determined by gender in highly educated couples, as well as those without children.

What does this division mean for relationship satisfaction among heterosexual couples? In a study by Ross, Mirowsky, and Huber (1983), the repetitiveness of household chores (i.e., washing dishes or ironing) was linked to heightened levels of depression in women. According to Bergen (1991), the persistence of women completing the greater part of chores within the home limits their ability to work productively outside the home, thus limiting their access to financial resources. This creates a dependence of the wife on the husband that decreases her sense of (real or imagined) power in the marriage; when one partner has less money, that partner in turn has less power. When power is equally dispersed in the relationship, the couple feels greater relationship satisfaction (Peplau, Padesky, & Hamilton, 1982).

Conversely, for lesbian women, household chores tend to be divided on the basis of equality rather than segregation (Peplau & Cochran, 1990). This means that both partners of lesbian couples feel they contribute equally to different types of work (i.e., washing dishes, paying bills, folding laundry). According to a study on segregation-, balance-, and equality-based division of household labor, lesbian women displayed higher levels of equality than heterosexual couples, and heterosexual couples displayed higher levels of segregation (Kurdek, 1993). This means that one of the two partners does the bulk of the household chores. In this study, the wife did the majority of the household work.

A construct associated with level of communication in the home is the partners' means of conflict resolution. More satisfied couples practice more positive conflict resolution, whereas less satisfied couples practice more negative means of conflict resolution (Metz, Rosser, & Strapko, 1994). Interestingly, lesbian couples reported engaging

in more positive conflict resolution strategies, maintaining a greater level of optimism about conflict resolution, and, in turn, reported greater relationship satisfaction than heterosexual women. Also, a greater level of emotional companionship exists in lesbian couples. In a study investigating differences between heterosexual and lesbian women on conflict and satisfaction in their relationships, lesbian women reported experiencing significantly less conflict and being significantly more satisfied in their relationships than heterosexual women (Meuwly, Davila, Nuñez, Garcia, & Bodenmann, 2013).

Additionally, Julien, Chartrand, Simard, Bouthiller, and Bégin (2003) studied positive communication in relation to conflict resolution and found positive communication during moments of conflict to be integral to the maintenance of the couples' relationship. According to Metz et al. (1994), lesbian women reported receiving more constructive assertive communication from their partners during moments of conflict, and they perceived less verbal aggression from their partners than heterosexual women did, possibly leading them to value a partnership in which they can communicate with their partners when conflict arises.

In recent qualitative work into lesbian couples' communication strategies, Connolly and Sicola (2005) found that lesbian women focus on communication that conveys meaning, put particular emphasis on negotiating skills in the relationship, and avoid derisive and condescending language. The authors also noted an increased focus on empathy between the partners, as well as an emphasis on reading body language and nonverbal cues.

### **Social Support**

Current ideas about relationships acknowledge that relationships seem to develop in social contexts, and several studies have investigated the source of support for lesbian and gay relationships (Kurdek, 2004), as well as for heterosexual relationships (Goldberg & Smith, 2008). Does support for relationships seem to come primarily from family, friends, the partners themselves, or a combination?

In a study of gay and lesbian couples' social support, partner and friends were the most important people in each partner's social support network (Kurdek, 1988). In fact, friends made up 43% of support networks, whereas family members accounted for a mere 13.5% of total social support. Many of these couples had not disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents or family

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members for fear of a negative reaction. In a study investigating family support in same-sex couples, however, Rostosky et al., (2004) found that, when family support is available, it has a significant positive effect on the partners' perceived strength of their relationship.

In other related work, Connolly (2005) employed an ethnographic perspective to qualitatively examine coping strategies that lesbians employ in their relationships. The author identified two resilience themes that emerged in her interviews: relationship resiliency and couple resilience. The former focuses on interdependence and balance in the relationship, although the latter focuses on couple unification and buffering from external stressors. Both of these themes of resilience emphasize heightened support in lesbian partnerships.

These findings accentuating social support in same-sex relationships are notably distinct from heterosexual couples' support networks, in which family members make up a much larger share of the support (Julien et al., 2003). For both heterosexual women and lesbians, strong social support from the partner is important for overall perception of relationship quality.

#### **Work-Family and Family-Work Conflict**

Work-family and family-work conflict refer to the amount of conflict in family life because of work and the amount of conflict in work life because of family, respectively. When examining work-family and family-work conflict for heterosexual and lesbian dual-career couples, one *given* must be acknowledged. An accepted consistency in the work-family and family-work conflict literature is that each partner's career is influenced by the other partner's career (Rapoport & Rapoport, 1969). At some point during a long-term partnership, both couples will have to make decisions that will affect one or both of their careers. For heterosexual couples, this tends to mean that the wife's career will gradually become secondary to her husband's as time and childcare pressures mount (Kurdek, 1993). But for lesbian dual-career couples, very few norms exist as guides for how to handle career changes and work-family conflict (Hetherington & Orzek, 1989).

With little research into this area for lesbian dual-career couples, and with few real-life role models, these couples often are forced to forge a path for career decisions in the partnership that is not as clearly predictable as it might be for

heterosexual dual-career couples. There is the possibility, however, that this unforged path could result in a lessening of work-family and family-work conflict for these women because their paths can be more personal to their relationships and individual preferences.

#### **Hypotheses**

Given the existing research into lesbian and heterosexual dual-career women, we examine the following hypotheses in this study. First, we hypothesized that lesbians in dual-income couples would experience greater domestic communication than heterosexual women in dual-income couples. Second, lesbians in dual-income couples would feel more social support from their partners than heterosexual women in dual-income couples. Lastly, lesbians in dual-income couples would feel less work-family conflict and family-work conflict than heterosexual women in dual-income couples.

### **Method**

#### **Participants and Procedure**

Three hundred fifty-three dual-income heterosexual women were approached to complete our survey; of those, 132 women returned a completed survey. This was a 37% response rate. Of the 128 dual-income lesbian couples who were approached to complete the survey, 56 couples, or 112 women, returned completed surveys. This was a 44% response rate. We surveyed women across 11 states: Georgia, Ohio, New Jersey, Louisiana, Florida, Indiana, Illinois, Texas, California, Alabama, and Washington. The majority of the surveys were returned from Georgia (86%).

Average age for heterosexual participants was 45.15 ( $SD = 9.38$ ); average age for lesbian women was 37.14 ( $SD = 9.75$ ). Heterosexual participants listed their racial background as being: 81.8% White, 14.4% Black, 1.5% American Indian, 1.5% Hispanic, and 0.8% "other." Lesbian participants listed their racial background as being: 79.5% White, 10.7% Black, 0.9% American Indian, 3.6% Hispanic, 3.6% Asian, and 1.8% "other."

To qualify to participate, heterosexual women had to be in a dual-income marriage in which both spouses worked more than part time. Lesbian women had to have been in a committed partnership for at least one year in which both partners worked more than part time. Couples were selected based on both convenience for the researchers and a snowball sampling technique. Participants were informed that their participation was completely

voluntary, and Institutional Review Board approval was obtained prior to any data collection.

### Measures

**Social support.** To assess emotional social support, we asked the following questions: “My partner asks me regularly about my day”, “My partner is sympathetic when I am upset”, “When I am frustrated my partner listens to me”, “My partner accepts me completely”, “When I have a tough day, my partner tries to cheer me up”, and “My partner cares about me.” Items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 to 5, *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Higher scores reflect greater social support from partner. The alpha coefficient for this scale was .85.

**Work-family conflict.** Work-family conflict and family-work conflict can be defined as the extent to which a person experiences pressures within one role that are incompatible with pressures from another role. To assess these constructs, we used Netemeyer, Boles, and McMurrian’s (1996) five-item Work-family Conflict Scale and five item Family-work Conflict Scale. An example item from the Work-family Conflict Scale reads, “The demands of my work interfere with my home and family life.” An example item from the Family-work Conflict Scale is “The demands of my family or spouse/partner interfere with work-related activities.” A Likert scale was used, with answers ranging from 1 to 5, *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Higher scores indicate greater work-family conflict or family-work conflict. Netemeyer et al. (1996) found alpha coefficients of .88 to .89 for the Work-family Conflict Scale and .83 to .89 for the Family-work Conflict Scale. To provide evidence for the construct validity of their scales, Netemeyer et al. found negative correlations between work-family conflict and family-work conflict and organizational commitment and job satisfaction. They also found positive correlations with role conflict, job tension, role ambiguity, intention-to-leave an organization, and search-for-another-job. In this study, the alpha coefficient for Work-family was .93; alpha for family-work was .89.

**Domestic communication.** To assess wives’ sense of fairness, Hawkins, Marshall, and Allen (1998) developed the Orientation Toward Domestic Labor Questionnaire (ODL-Q). The subscale effective communication about domestic labor was used to assess fairness. The effective communication about domestic labor subscale has seven items; six were used in this study. An example item is “I feel appreciated by my partner for the

housework I do.” Items were rated on a scale from 1 to 4, from *not at all* to *very much like me*. Higher scores indicated greater communication about domestic labor. Hawkins et al. reported an alpha coefficient of .88 for the subscale. They provided evidence for construct validity by finding that those who felt appreciated and listened to also felt the division of housework to be fair. The alpha coefficient in this study was .89.

### Results

Independent samples *t* tests revealed significance for two of our four hypotheses. Lesbian dual-income women ( $M = 55.72$ ,  $SD = 8.47$ ) experienced better domestic communication than heterosexual dual-income women ( $M = 50.62$ ,  $SD = 8.10$ ),  $t(234) = 4.119$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $d = 0.62$ . Also, lesbian dual-career women ( $M = 27.67$ ,  $SD = 3.00$ ) experienced greater social support from their partners than heterosexual dual-career women ( $M = 24.78$ ,  $SD = 4.22$ ),  $t(239) = 6.082$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = 0.79$ . There was not a significant difference between lesbian and heterosexual dual-career women on work-family conflict,  $t(235) = .309$ ,  $p = .168$ , *ns*. Results for family-work conflict were insignificant as well,  $t(235) = .006$ ,  $p = .264$ , *ns*.

### Discussion

Our findings support two of the four hypotheses. Lesbian dual-income women experience better communication about domestic chores than their heterosexual counterparts do. Also, lesbian dual-income women experience greater social support from their partners compared to heterosexual dual-income women. These findings are theoretically consistent in that if lesbian couples receive less familial support than heterosexual couples, then they would be more likely to seek and receive support from their partners. Also, lesbian couples are more likely to focus on equality over segregation, which would require more communication to function effectively (Peplau & Cochran, 1990).

Surprisingly, our hypotheses that lesbian dual-income women would experience less family-work and work-family conflict were not supported. This seems theoretically inconsistent in that if lesbian women experience greater communication about domestic chores—one of the greatest sources of family-work and work-family conflict in the dual-income literature (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Kurdek, 1993; Patterson et al., 2004)—then they would experience less conflict involving work and family.

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With homosexuality still widely unaccepted in families, it is not surprising that lesbian women are less likely than heterosexual women to turn to their families for social support (Kurdek, 2005). Conversely, research suggests that because lesbian women are likely to be alienated by families and friends for their sexual orientation, it is probable that lesbian women turn to their partners for the support that heterosexual women often receive from family and friends (Kurdek, 2005). Therefore, our finding that lesbian women receive greater social support from their partners is logically supported by previous findings.

Research by Peplau and Cochran (1990) suggests that heterosexual couples—regardless of education or childlessness—are more likely than lesbian couples to divide household labor on the basis of sex segregation. Women are likely to perform the bulk of traditionally female tasks, such as ironing, washing dishes, or cooking, whereas men are likely to perform the bulk of traditionally male tasks, such as mowing the lawn. Lesbian couples, on the other hand, do not have different sexes on which to base the division of household work, and are more likely to divide work on the basis of equality. Essentially, the focus is on how much and which type of labor each partner performs, so that both partners feel they are performing the same amount of the same tasks (i.e., one partner washes dishes tonight, and the other partner washes dishes tomorrow). Thus, it is consistent that lesbian couples would communicate more effectively about household work because they are not simply relying on sex to divvy up tasks.

As one of the first studies to examine both lesbian and heterosexual dual-career women on domestic communication, social support, work-family, and family-work conflict, we raise interesting implications. First, our insignificant results actually prove quite significant in the literature. We did not find significant differences between lesbian and heterosexual women on the work-family and family-work constructs, and this is surprising. Two major sources of conflict between work and family are household work and childcare (Kurdek, 1993; Patterson et al., 2004), and if lesbian women experience greater domestic communication, then it is logical to hypothesize that they experience less conflict involving these variables. It is possible, however, that there are sources of conflict between work and family that arise for lesbian dual-income couples that are currently neglected in the literature. Perhaps it is harder for lesbian couples to

secure daycare services that will work with same-sex parents, or perhaps lesbian couples' focus on equality over segregation in dividing chores backfires in that they spend an excessive amount of time discussing division of labor. This could easily increase conflict between work and family in that time is wasted divvying up work at home.

Another implication stems from our finding that lesbian dual-income women experience greater social support from their partners than their heterosexual counterparts do. Although the strength of support that lesbian women receive from their partners likely comes out of rejection by friends and family, their reliance on their partners for support could prove significant when examining happiness in relationships over time.

Our study is strong in several areas. First, it is one of few studies examining lesbian and heterosexual dual-income women in the same sample. Second, it serves to expand the relatively thin body of literature on lesbian dual-income couples. Third, our study was based on previously used scales with established reliability and validity.

A potential limitation to this study is that we used a paper survey. This forced participants to take the time to not only complete the survey, but also to mail it back to us. This could, however, be a positive method in that using a paper survey allowed us to match responses by couple.

Another potential limitation was that our data were 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, support, and conflict.

A third limitation is that, because we surveyed couples, it was a challenge to ensure that we received responses from both members of each partnership. This is, however, an issue when surveying couples in general, and was not specific to our study. A limitation within this arena that is specific to our study, however, is that we collected two surveys per lesbian couple and only one survey from heterosexual couples. Although our focus was on women, thus requiring us to collect from both female partners in each lesbian couple, this could pose a problem when making comparisons between couples.

Our study points in several directions for possible future research. It would be interesting to assess differences in domestic communication for lesbian

couples with and without children. Perhaps once a lesbian couple has had children, the partners are more likely to abandon dedication to equality when it comes to household chores in favor of a method that is faster and more functional, such as a balance approach. Although these were not data we collected in this study, examining the possible mediating effect of children on communication is an important and relevant issue.

Another area for future research may be to assess the ways in which lesbian dual-income couples communicate about domestic issues. Do these couples spend a significant portion of time discussing what each partner accomplishes in terms of domestic chores, and could future research examine ways in which heterosexual couples might be able to incorporate this type of communication? It is likely that a substantial amount of direct communication about household work could prove beneficial for heterosexual dual-income couples, rather than just relying on a gender-defined division of labor.

It would also be interesting to further examine work-family and family-work conflict in lesbian and heterosexual dual-income couples. It was surprising to find insignificant differences on these constructs in our study, and although this could be attributed to our relatively small sample size, there could be other variables at work. Perhaps, as mentioned previously, lesbian dual-income couples experience stressors that increase their conflict between work and family, and these potential variables are important to address in future work.

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