

# Heterosexual, Lesbian, and Gay Male Relationships: A Comparison of Couples in 1975 and 2000

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*This study examined the differences among lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals at two points in time (1975 and 2000) using responses of 6,864 participants from two archival data sets. Groups were compared on variables representing equality of behaviors between partners in seven realms: traditionally “feminine” housework, traditionally “masculine” housework, finances, support, communication, requesting/refusing sex, and decision-making. In addition, the current study compared monogamy agreements and monogamy behaviors reported by the two cohorts of couple types. Overall, the results indicate that on the equality variables, there have been many statistically significant behavioral shifts among the different sexual orientations across 25 years. In addition, all couple types reported substantially greater rates of monogamy in the year 2000 than in 1975. The present study has important clinical implications for therapists working with couples because it provides new baseline evidence regarding how couples now interact with one another (especially about monogamy) and how this has shifted over time. In addition, it elucidates the differences that still exist between different couple types, which could serve to inform couple therapists as they strive to become more culturally competent working with same-sex couples.*

*Keywords: Same-Sex Couples; Gay Couples; Lesbian Couples; Gender Roles; Monogamy; Division of Household Labor*

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The groundbreaking book *American Couples: Money, Work, Sex* (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983) chronicled a nationwide study that compared four types of couples: heterosexual married couples, heterosexual cohabiting couples, lesbian couples, and gay male couples. Two decades later, Solomon, Rothblum, and Balsam (2005) presented results of a similar survey of contemporary couples, using many of the same questionnaire items and subscales from the Blumstein and Schwartz study. In their analyses, Solomon and colleagues included a national sample of lesbians and gay couples from across the U.S. who obtained civil unions in Vermont, lesbians and gay couples who had not obtained such civil unions, and heterosexual married couples.

The similarity between these two studies conducted at different periods of time in U.S. history provided an opportunity to investigate whether there had been changes in the relationships of lesbian couples as a group, gay male couples as a group, and heterosexual married couples as a group over more than two decades. Note that these comparisons were between separate cohorts of participants recruited at two points in time, not comparisons within samples of participants recruited at one point in time and followed longitudinally.

The current study compared nine variables of interest that were examined in both the Blumstein and Schwartz study (1983) and the study by Solomon et al. (2005). These variables were: equality in division of finances, equality of traditionally feminine housework, equality of traditionally masculine housework, equality of communication, equality of support, equality of decision-making, sexual relations between partners in past year, monogamy agreements, monogamy behaviors, and couple conflict.

## RESEARCH ON EQUALITY BETWEEN PARTNERS

Same-sex couples are unable to rely on socially prescribed gender-linked division of household tasks and therefore must negotiate their own system of dividing labor within their household, which usually results in a more equal division (Green & Mitchell, 2008). For example, Matthews, Tartaro, and Hughes (2003) found that lesbians were more likely than heterosexual women to indicate that their partners always share in household tasks. In contrast, heterosexual couples tend to divide housework based on traditional gender roles (i.e., men doing work that is outside of the house and women doing work that is inside of the house; Peplau & Spalding, 2000). The present study examined whether there has been a change in the division of housework for lesbians, gay men, and heterosexual couples over a 25-year period. In particular, it was hypothesized that there would be a more equal division of housework in 2000 than in 1975 for heterosexual but not for same-sex couples.

Research also has suggested that same-sex and heterosexual couples divide money differently. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that lesbian and gay male couples tend to be more independent and to have an equal division of finances wherein each person pays an equal amount of each purchase. Married heterosexual couples tend to separate their finances (Burgoyne, Clarke, Reibstein, & Edmunds, 2006). The present study sought to investigate whether division of finances changed over time and across couple types. In particular, it was hypothesized that there would be a more equal division of finances in 2000 than in 1975 for heterosexual couples so that they approached the equality of finances demonstrated by same-sex couples.

In addition, the present study examined differences across time between couple types on three additional variables of interest in the realm of relationship mainte-

nance (who is more likely to do what in the relationship): equality of support, equality of decision-making, and equality of communication.

### RESEARCH ON SEX, MONOGAMY, AND COUPLE TYPES

Regarding sex and monogamy, prior research shows that same-sex couples differ from heterosexual couples. These studies have revealed that gay men have sex more frequently and lesbians less frequently than heterosexual married couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Peplau, Fingerhut, & Beals, 2004; Solomon et al., 2005). This difference has been attributed by some authors to the fact that women are not socialized to initiate sex and that men tend to become physiologically aroused more quickly and urgently in sex compared with women. Furthermore, whereas monogamy is highly valued by lesbian and heterosexual couples, nonmonogamy agreements and behavior have been more accepted in gay male culture traditionally. Two men tend to be more likely to view sex in purely recreational terms rather than in the relational framework of love and commitment that heterosexual or lesbian women tend to prefer (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Green, Bettinger, & Zacks, 1996; Green & Mitchell, 2008; Peplau et al., 2004). Solomon et al. (2005) found that while few lesbians, heterosexual men, and heterosexual women had sex outside their relationships, nonmonogamy was reported by half of the gay male sample in their couple relationships.

However, recent research has demonstrated a possible shift in this pattern. D'Augelli and colleagues found that a large majority of gay male youths (82%) now aspire to have monogamous long-term couple relationships (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Rendina, 2006; D'Augelli, Rendina, Grossman, & Sinclair, 2007). Relatively recent legal changes, specifically the addition of legally recognized relationships and legal adoption rights, might have changed the way that younger generations of same-sex couples conceptualize their relationships. For the present study, we expected this generational trend would emerge in our data such that contemporary gay male partners would be more monogamous in 2000 than in 1975, but still significantly less monogamous than lesbian and heterosexual partners.

Overall, we hypothesized that the percentage of couples who have had sex with someone else outside their relationship would have decreased over time for all couple types. We based this prediction on the fact that the advent and rise of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases since 1975 have made extra-relational sexual encounters seem more risky for both members of the primary couple regardless of sexual orientation. Hoff and Beougher (2010) found that the threat of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases was one of the main reasons that gay male couples chose to either be monogamous or adhere to safe-sex practices with outside partners.

Furthermore, in terms of agreements about monogamy/nonmonogamy, we hypothesized that the percentage of couples who have an agreement that sex outside the relationship is acceptable (i.e., a nonmonogamy agreement) would have decreased over time. Even so, based on the prior research, we expected that gay male couples would have the highest percentage of nonmonogamy agreements. Conversely, we anticipated that the percentage of participants who would have decided that sex outside the relationship was unacceptable (a monogamy agreement) would have increased over time for all couple types. Based on the prior research, gay male couples were predicted to have the lowest percentage of participants with a monogamy agreement.

We anticipated that couples would be more likely to be discussing monogamy in 2000 than 1975. Therefore, partners' expectations of monogamy without an explicit discussion of the topic were expected to decrease over time for all couple types. We predicted that the percentage of couples who had meaningful love affairs outside their relationship would have decreased over time because of the associated health risks and greater moral approbation assigned to nonmonogamy by U.S. society. An additional research question explored whether there has been a change in the percentages of couples that had discussed sex outside the relationship but did not agree on a monogamy or nonmonogamy arrangement.

We also investigated couples' fighting about sex outside their relationship. Based on previous research (Solomon et al., 2005), we hypothesized that lesbian and heterosexual couples would not differ in this conflict area over time but that gay men and heterosexual men would differ. Because gay men are more likely to be nonmonogamous, they are more likely to have to deal with conflicts over sex outside the relationship.

The last variable of interest was regarding couples' tendency to request or refuse sex. Solomon et al. (2005) found that heterosexual women were more likely to refuse sex and less likely to request sex than lesbians. The researchers also found that gay men were more likely to refuse sex and less likely to request sex than heterosexual men. The 21st century has seen an increase in women's financial and social independence. This independence may have generalized to women's approach to sexuality, wherein a woman's decreased need to rely on a man has increased her power in the bedroom (Schwartz, 2000). Women's increased sexual liberation over the past several decades led us to anticipate that both heterosexual women and lesbians would request and refuse sex more often in 2000 than in 1975, but still less than heterosexual and gay men in their couple relationships.

## METHOD

### Participants

This research project used archival data from 972 gay men, 2,177 heterosexual men, 783 lesbians, and 2,150 heterosexual women from the Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) study, as well as for 195 gay men, 80 heterosexual men, 378 lesbians, and 129 heterosexual women from the Solomon et al. (2005) study. The samples from both studies constituted a national sample. Additional demographic variables are shown in Table 1.

Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) recruited participants through the mass media (e.g., talk shows on local and national television and radio, newspapers, and magazines) as well as through bulletin board postings and canvassing by the researchers. To be included in the study, questionnaires had to be filled out and returned by both partners of a couple who lived together and had a sexual relationship at least some time in their life together. In addition, they also had to consider themselves a couple, not just roommates.

As their starting point for recruitment, Solomon et al. (2005) had access to all of the certificates for same-sex couples that had obtained civil unions in Vermont during the first year that civil unions became available in that state. The researchers contacted all of these couples, and 41% agreed to participate. The researchers then asked the first 400 participating civil union couples for the name of a friend who was in a lesbian or gay couple relationship but who did not have a civil union, and for the name of a heterosexual married sibling and his or her spouse. These additional people were then

TABLE 1  
*Demographics of the Participants Separated by Time*

	1975	2000
<i>N</i>	6,082	782
Gender	Male = 3,149 Female = 2,933	Male = 275 Female = 507
Sexual orientation	Gay Men = 972 Heterosexual Men = 2,177 Lesbian = 783 Heterosexual Women = 2,150	Gay Men = 195 Heterosexual Men = 80 Lesbian = 378 Heterosexual Women = 129
Race/ethnicity	African American = 64 (1%) Asian American = 37 (<1%) Latino/a = 58 (1%) Native American = 19 (<1%) White = 5,807 (96%) Other = 44 (1%)	African American = 6 (<1%) Asian American = 10 (1%) Latino/a = 12 (2%) Native American = 6 (<1%) White = 720 (92%) Other = 19 (3%)
Mean age	32.0 (s.d.: 11.1)	42.8 (s.d.: 9.7)
Mean years of education	15.23	15.69
Mean number of years that the couple has been dating	Gay Men = 6.78 Heterosexual Men = 13.98 Lesbian = 4.40 Heterosexual Women = 13.66	Gay Men = 13.53 Heterosexual Men = 20.94 Lesbian = 10.87 Heterosexual Women = 19.04

recruited for participation in the research. It is noteworthy that the first cohort of same-sex couples to obtain civil unions in Vermont also constituted a national rather than Vermont-only sample. In fact, only one-fifth of the participants were from Vermont. Despite somewhat different recruitment methods that are reflective of the different statuses of such couples during these two historical eras, we believe the large size and geographical dispersion of the samples increases the likelihood that each sample of couples was reasonably representative of the population of middle class, predominantly white, and self-defined same-sex couples in existence at the time data were gathered.

The present study made several adaptations to the original researchers' categorization of couples. Whereas Solomon et al. (2005) were able to separate same-sex couples based on legal status (civil union vs. noncivil union); Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) were not able to make such a distinction due to the fact that civil unions (or any form of legalized relationships) were not available to same-sex couples in the United States before the year 2000. It is unclear which participants would have obtained civil unions in 1975 had civil unions been available then. Therefore, in the current study, we combined the same-sex civil union and non-civil union couples from the Solomon et al. same-sex samples when making comparisons to the Blumstein and Schwartz same-sex couple samples.

In addition, Solomon and colleagues in collecting their year 2000 data only included heterosexual couples who were married and, unlike Blumstein and Schwartz in 1975, did not recruit an unmarried/cohabiting sample of heterosexual couples. Therefore, data from Blumstein and Schwartz's 1975 sample of cohabiting/unmarried couples were not included in the present comparisons with Solomon and colleagues' year 2000 data. Thus, for both the 1975 and year 2000 heterosexual cohorts, we only utilized data on couples who were married rather than cohabitating.

Lastly, to ensure independence of data, only one member of each couple was included in the analysis. Including both members of a couple would violate statistical assumptions requiring that each data source be unrelated to each other data source. For the Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) data set, one member of each couple type was randomly selected. For the Solomon et al. (2005) data set, one member from each heterosexual couple was randomly selected to be included in the analysis. The original data set for Solomon et al. (2005) included only one member from each gay male couple and one member from each lesbian couple; thus data from all of Solomon and colleagues' gay and lesbian participants were utilized in our analyses.

## Measures

The measures below were used by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) and then replicated in Solomon et al.'s (2005) study. For each variable, a respondent's score was the mean of his/her coded responses on the items comprising that variable.

### *Equality of behaviors*

The seven equality subscales below used nine-point Likert scales (the wording of each Likert scale is described below). To assess "equality" in the present research, ratings below 5 were reflected (e.g., a score of 9 was recoded to 1 = one of us does this all the time). On the resulting 5-point scale, high scores indicated more equal division on the subscale and low scores indicated less equal division.

### *Equality of "feminine" housework*

Solomon et al. (2005) developed an 8-item scale from the original Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) questionnaire to assess housework typically done by women (e.g., cleaning the bathroom, ironing, vacuuming). A 9-point rating scale was used (1 = I do this all the time; 5 = We do this equally; 9 = He/she does this all the time). The internal consistency reliability (Chronbach alpha) for this variable was 0.90.

### *Equality of "masculine" housework*

Solomon et al. (2005) developed a 4-item scale from the Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) questionnaire to assess housework typically done by men (e.g., repairing things around the house, taking care of the lawn). In order to increase the reliability of the scale, one item was eliminated to increase the internal consistency reliability alpha from 0.42 to 0.67. The same 9-point rating scale as for "feminine" housework was used.

### *Equal division of finances*

This scale asked whose income pays for each of eight expenses (e.g., rent or house payment, utilities, clothes). A 9-point rating scale was used (1 = my income pays for all; 5 = both our incomes contribute equally; and 9 = my partner's income pays for all). The alpha for this variable was 0.92.

### *Equality of communication*

The two items on this scale asked who is more likely to engage in particular communication behaviors: talk about what is troubling our relationship and keep one's feelings to oneself (reverse scored). A 9-point rating scale was used (1 = I do this much more; 5 = we do this equally; and 9 = My partner does this more). The alpha for this variable was 0.76.

### *Equality of support*

The two items on this scale asked who is more likely to engage in emotionally supportive behavior: pay the other compliments, give a spontaneous hug. A 9-point rating scale was used (1 = I do this much more; 5 = we do this equally; and 9 = My partner does this more). The internal consistency reliability (Chronbach alpha) for this scale was 0.63.

### *Equality in decision-making*

The three items on this scale asked who is more likely to engage in decision-making behaviors (i.e., “who has more to say about important decisions”; “who has altered habits and ways of doing things to please a partner” (reverse scored); and “who sees oneself as running the show in the relationship”). A 9-point rating scale was used (1 = I do this much more; 5 = we do this equally; and 9 = My partner does this more). The alpha for this scale was 0.61.

### *Equality of requesting/refusing sex*

The two items on this scale asked who is more likely to initiate sex with their partner [i.e., “let the other know I would like to have sex” and “refuse sex” (reverse scored)]. A 9-point rating scale was used (1 = I do this much more; 5 = we do this equally; and 9 = My partner does this more). The alpha for this scale was 0.77.

### *Monogamy*

Three different variables were used to assess changes in the level of couples' sexual frequency or level of monogamy between the different couple types over time. Participants were asked to respond *yes or no* to three questions: “Have you had sex in the past year”; “Have you had sex outside your relationship since you have been a couple”; and “Have you had a meaningful love affair outside your relationship since you have been a couple?”

### *Monogamy agreements*

Participants were asked to choose one of six different types of agreements a couple could have regarding sex outside their relationship: “discussed sex outside the relationship and decided that under some circumstances is it all right”; “discussed sex outside the relationship and decided that under no circumstances is it all right”; “discussed sex outside the relationship and don't agree”; “have not discussed sex outside the relationship but feel we would agree that under some circumstances is it all right”; “have not discussed sex outside the relationship but feel we would agree that under no circumstances is it all right”; and “have not discussed sex outside the relationship but feel we would not agree.” For the purposes of analysis (given that this question was intended to yield categorical rather than continuous data), this one-question item was analyzed as if it were six *yes or no items* (e.g., if a participant selected monogamy agreement type #1, then the response was coded as *yes* for agreement #1 and *no* for the other five options).

### *Total conflict*

The 14 items on this scale asked how often the participant and partner fight about different topics (e.g., “how the house is kept”; or “our social life”). A 9-point rating

scale was used (1 = Daily or almost every day, 5 = Once a month, 9 = Never). The alpha for this scale was 0.89.

### *Fighting about sex outside the relationship*

The scale is composed of one item that asked participants how often they fight with their partners about sex outside their relationship. The same 9-point scale that was used for total conflict was used again here.

## RESULTS

### Statistical Analyses

Multivariate and univariate analyses of variance were conducted to determine how each of the dependent variables differed by time, sexual orientation, and gender. For the dichotomous monogamy variables and the monogamy agreements, separate chi-square analyses were run for each couple type in order to measure the change in prevalence over time.

### Preliminary Analyses

A series of preliminary analyses (ANOVAs) were conducted to determine if the two samples (1975 vs. 2000) differed based on income, education, duration of relationship, ethnicity, or age. Many differences were found between the samples. However, it was decided before these analyses that only differences accounting for more than five percent of the variance would be controlled for in the main analyses. The only demographic variable that accounted for more than 5% of the variance between 1975 and 2000 was age of participants ( $n^2 = 0.067$ ), accounting for 6.7% of the variance; therefore age was controlled for in the main analysis. Demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Two three-way MANCOVAs (Time  $\times$  Sexual Orientation  $\times$  Gender controlling for age) were conducted. Equality of "Masculine" Housework and Equality of "Feminine" Housework were determined by both theoretical and statistical means (correlations) to be related enough so that inclusion together in one MANCOVA was justified. Equality in Decision-Making, Support, and Communication were also found to be sufficiently theoretically and statistically similar enough to be included together in a separate MANCOVA. The categorical dependent variables that were not theoretically related to, nor statistically associated significantly with, any other dependent variables (total conflict, fight about sex outside the relationship, equality of total finance, and equality of requesting/refusing sex) were run separately as four three-way ANCOVAs controlling for age.

### Results Pertaining to Equality Between Partners (MANCOVAs and ANCOVAs)

#### *Multivariate results for equality of "feminine" housework and equality of "masculine" housework*

In the MANCOVA, the main effects of time, sexual orientation, and gender were significant (see Table 2; means and standard deviations are available upon request). Additionally the two-way interactions of time and sexual orientation and of orientation and gender were significant. All of these significant effects, as well as the corresponding significant effects in follow-up ANCOVAs, were of small magnitude.

TABLE 2  
MANCOVA and ANCOVA Strength of Association Statistics

Source	Multivariate		Univariate			
	F	n <sup>2</sup>	Equality of feminine housework		Equality of masculine housework	
			F	n <sup>2</sup>	F	n <sup>2</sup>
Time	36.41 ***	0.011	72.21 *** (T1 < T2)	0.011	3.36	
Sexual orientation (S.O.)	67.49 ***	0.020	98.80 *** (GL > H)	0.015	76.59 *** (GL > H)	0.012
Gender	3.00 *	0.001	5.65 * (M > F)	0.001	0.02	
Time × S.O.	22.67 ***	0.007	45.26 *** (GL: T1 > T2), (H: T1 < T2) or (T1 & T2: GL > H)	0.007	5.36 ** (GL: T1 > T2), (H: T1 < T2) or (T1 & T2: GL > H)	0.001
Time × Gender	0.69		0.49		1.24	
S.O. × Gender	11.70 ***	0.004	23.13 *** (hw < l), (hm < g) or (hm > hw), (g < l)	0.004	3.85 * (hw < l) (hm < g) or (hm > hw), (g < l)	0.001
Time × Orientation × Gender	0.04		0.001		0.08	

\*\*\*p = .001, \*\*p < .01, \*p < .05.

g = gay men, l = lesbian, hm = heterosexual men, hw = heterosexual women.

GL = gay/lesbian, H = heterosexual, M = male, F = female, T1 = 1975, T2 = 2000.

The two-way interaction of time and gender and the three-way interaction were not significant.

*Equality of “feminine” housework*

Gay men and lesbians reported more equal division of “feminine” housework in their relationships than heterosexuals. Participants in general demonstrated more equality of “feminine” housework in 2000 than in 1975. Males reported more equality of “feminine” housework than did females. All results remained significant when controlling for age. On Equality of “Feminine” Housework, there were significant interaction effects of time and orientation and of orientation and gender. Results of simple main effects analyses suggested that, as predicted, equality of “feminine” housework increased over time for heterosexuals, but that, contrary to prediction, it decreased over time for gay men and lesbians. Participants in same-sex couples reported more equality of “feminine” housework than heterosexuals in both 1975 and 2000. Mean differences between sexual orientation groups in 1975 and in 2000 were both significant, although the difference between orientations was larger in 1975 than

in 2000. Results of the simple main effect analyses suggested that lesbian women reported more equality of “feminine” housework than did heterosexual women, and that gay men reported more equality of “feminine” housework than did heterosexual men. There was a larger difference between lesbians and heterosexual woman than between gay men and heterosexual men. Heterosexual men reported more equality than did heterosexual women and lesbians reported more equality than did gay men. There was a larger difference between heterosexual men and women than between gay men and lesbians on equality of “feminine” housework.

#### *Equality of “masculine” housework*

Gay men and lesbians reported more equality of “masculine” housework in their relationships than heterosexuals, but the main effects for time and gender were not significant (Table 2). On this variable, the time by orientation interaction and gender by orientation interaction were significant. Results of the simple main effects analyses suggested that, as predicted, equality of “masculine” housework increased over time for heterosexuals, but that, contrary to prediction, it decreased over time for gay men and lesbians. Mean differences between sexual orientation groups in 1975 and 2000 were both significant, although the difference between orientations was larger in 1975 than in 2000. In other words, even though same-sex partners had become slightly (but significantly) less equal over time whereas the heterosexual partners had become slightly (but significantly) more equal over time in Equality of “Masculine” Housework, gay men and lesbians still reported more equality of “masculine” housework at both times than did heterosexual men and women.

Results of the simple main effect analyses suggested that lesbians reported more equality of “masculine” housework than did heterosexual women, and that gay men reported more equality of “masculine” housework than did heterosexual men. There was a larger difference between lesbians and heterosexual woman than between gay men and heterosexual men. Heterosexual men reported more equality than did heterosexual women and lesbians reported more equality than did gay men. There was a larger difference between gay men and lesbians than between heterosexual women and men on equality of “masculine” housework. The rank order from most equal division of “masculine” housework to least equal was: lesbians, gay men, heterosexual men, and heterosexual women.

#### *Multivariate results for equality of communication, support, and decision-making*

In the MANCOVA (controlling for age) the main effects of time, sexual orientation, and gender were significant (see Table 3). Additionally, the two-way interactions of sexual orientation and gender were significant. All of these significant effects, as well as the corresponding significant effects in follow-up ANCOVAs, were of small magnitude. The two-way interactions of time and gender and of time and orientation and the three-way interaction were not significant.

On Equality of Communication, gay men and lesbians reported more equal communication in their relationships than heterosexuals; however, the main effect of gender and time were not significant. On this variable the orientation by gender interaction was significant. On equality of Support, gay men and lesbians reported more equal support in their relationships than did heterosexuals; participants in 2000 reported more equal support than participants in 1975; and women reported more equal

TABLE 3  
MANCOVA and ANCOVA Strength of Association Statistics

Source	Multivariate			Univariate					
	Equality of communication			Equality of support			Equality of decision-making		
	F	n <sup>2</sup>	n <sup>2</sup>	F	n <sup>2</sup>	n <sup>2</sup>	F	n <sup>2</sup>	n <sup>2</sup>
Time	4.63**	0.002	0.05	8.35** (T1 < T2)	0.001	0.001	6.57* (T1 < T2)		0.001
Orientation	2.70*	0.001	5.42* (GL > H)	5.92* (GL > H)	0.001	0.001	1.60		
Gender	3.23*	0.001	0.10	8.62** (F > M)	0.001	0.001	2.09		
Time × Orientation	0.72		0.61	.24			0.55		
Time × Gender	2.30		3.49	2.08			0.20		
Orientation × Gender	9.20***	0.004	5.23* (g < hm), (l > hw) or (g < l), (hm > hw)	11.15** (g < hm), (l > hw) or (g < l), (hm > hw)	0.001	0.002	26.67*** (g < hm), (l > hw) or (g < l), (hm > hw)		0.004
Time × Orientation × Gender	2.08		3.26	2.69			.02		

\*\*\*p < .001, \*\*p < .01, \*p < .05.

g = gay men, l = lesbian, hm = heterosexual men, hw = heterosexual women.

GL = same-sex couples, H = heterosexual couples, F = female, M = male, T1 = 1975, T2 = 2000.

support than did men. The sexual orientation by gender interaction was significant. On Equality in Decision-Making, participants in 2000 reported more equal decision-making than did participants in 1975. However, the main effects of sexual orientation and gender were not significant. On this variable, the sexual orientation by gender interaction was significant.

For all three variables, simple main effects analyses suggested that lesbians reported more equal decision-making than did heterosexual women, but that heterosexual men reported more equality in decision making than did gay men. The mean difference between lesbians and gay men was larger than that between heterosexual men and women, although there was a significant difference between heterosexual men and women. The mean difference between lesbians and heterosexual women was larger than that between gay and heterosexual men, although there was a significant difference between gay and heterosexual men. For Equality of Support, there was also a significant difference between the means of heterosexual men and women.

#### *Equality of requesting/refusing sex*

There were no significant main effects or interaction effects for this variable.

#### *Equal division of finances*

Gay men and lesbians reported more equal division of finances in their relationships than heterosexuals, but the main effects for gender and time were not significant (Table 4). On this variable, the three-way interaction of time, gender, and sexual orientation was also significant. Simple main effects analyses revealed that in 1975 and 2000, gay men reported dividing finances more equally than heterosexual men, and lesbians reported dividing finances more equally than heterosexual women. The mean difference was larger between lesbians and heterosexual women in 1975 and between gay men and heterosexual men in 2000. Simple main effects showed that lesbians, heterosexual men, and gay men divided finances more equally in 1975 than in 2000. The opposite was true for heterosexual women, who divided finances more equally in 2000 than they did in 1975.

### **Results Pertaining to Sex and Monogamy (Chi-Square Analyses)**

#### *Couple having sex in the past year*

Participants were asked whether or not they had sex in the past year. The percentage of couples that had sex in the past year decreased between 1975 and 2000 for all couple types, but were significantly lower only for lesbians and heterosexual men.

#### *Monogamy*

As predicted, the percentage of participants that had sex with someone else since they have been a couple decreased between 1975 and 2000 for all couple types; however, the results were not significantly different for heterosexual women. Also as predicted, gay men had the highest percentage of sex outside the relationship, compared with the other two couple types. As expected, the percentage of participants that had a meaningful love affair with someone else since they have been a couple decreased significantly for all couple types between 1975 and 2000. The percentages are reported in Table 5.

TABLE 4  
ANCOVA and Strength of Association Statistics

	Equality of requesting sex		Equal division of finances		Total conflict		Fight about sex outside the relationship	
	F	n <sup>2</sup>	F	n <sup>2</sup>	F	n <sup>2</sup>	F	n <sup>2</sup>
Time	1.88		1.45		16.47*** (T1 > T2)	0.003	16.02*** (T1 > T2)	0.003
Orientation	1.06		94.72*** (GL > H)	0.017	0.73		49.34*** (GL > H)	0.008
Gender	2.28		0.53		15.38*** (M > F)	0.002	47.40*** (M > F)	0.008
Time × Orientation	2.25		1.32		0.02		5.47* (GL & H: T1 > T2) or (T1 & T2: GL > H)	0.001
Time × Gender	3.20		0.22				0.62	
Orientation × Gender	0.01		0.30		0.03		15.48*** (g > l) (hm > hw) or (g > hm) (l > hw)	0.003
Time × Orientation × Gender	0.83		5.00* (T1 & T2: g > hm, l > hw) or (l, hm, g: T1 > T2, hw: T1 < T2)	0.001	0.11		0.42	

\*\*\*p < .001, \*p < .05.  
g = gay men, l = lesbian, hm = heterosexual men, hw = heterosexual women.  
GL = gay/lesbian, H = heterosexual, M = male, F = female, T1 = 1975, T2 = 2000.

TABLE 5  
Prevalence Rates Related to Monogamy

Couple Type	1975	2000	$\chi^2$
<i>Prevalence (%) of Couples That Have Had Sex in the Past Year</i>			
N = 1975, 2000			
Gay Men (n = 959, 192)	95.3	93.2	1.44
Lesbians (n = 773, 375)	98.2	89.3	44.18***
Heterosexual male (n = 2,170, 77)	98.7	90.9	28.36***
Heterosexual female (n = 2,142, 127)	98.2	96.9	1.249
<i>Prevalence (%) of Participants That Have Had Sex With Someone Else Since They Have Been a Couple</i>			
Gay Men (n = 959, 192)	82.6	59.4	51.44***
Lesbians (n = 776, 376)	28.4	8.2	60.08***
Heterosexual male (n = 2,130, 79)	27.6	10.1	11.81***
Heterosexual female (n = 2,122, 127)	22.9	14.2	5.33
<i>Prevalence (%) of Participants That Have Had a Meaningful Love Affair With Someone Else Since They Have Been a Couple</i>			
Gay Men (n = 953, 193)	14.8	7.3	54.26***
Lesbians (n = 246, 377)	29.7	4.0	81.03***
Heterosexual male (n = 616, 79)	26.9	1.3	25.30***
Heterosexual female (n = 532, 127)	31.0	5.5	34.57***

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### Monogamy agreements

Participants were asked to choose one of six monogamy agreements that best reflected the arrangement they had with their partner. The first type of agreement was listed as "we have discussed sex outside the relationship and decided that under some circumstances it is all right." As predicted, the percentage of participants who chose this agreement type decreased significantly for all couple types. Also as predicted, gay men had the highest percentage of this agreement type. The second agreement type was "we have discussed sex outside the relationship and decided that under no circumstances is it all right." As predicted, the percentage of participants who chose this agreement type increased significantly between 1975 and 2000 for all couple types. Also as predicted, gay partners had the lowest percentage of this agreement type. The third agreement type was "we have discussed sex outside the relationship and don't agree." The percentage of participants that had this agreement type decreased significantly over time for all couple types. The fourth agreement type was "we have not discussed sex outside the relationship but feel we would agree that under some circumstances it is all right." As predicted, there was a significant decrease over time in

the percentage of participants who chose this agreement for lesbians. Contrary to prediction, there was not a significant change over time for gay men, heterosexual men, or heterosexual women on this type of agreement. The fifth agreement type was “we have not discussed sex outside the relationship but feel that we would agree that under no circumstances is it all right.” There was a significant decrease over time in the percentage of heterosexual men and women who chose this agreement but not among gay men or lesbians. The sixth agreement type was “we have not discussed sex outside the relationship but feel we would not agree.” There was a significant increase over time for lesbians and heterosexual women on this variable, but not for gay men or heterosexual men. The percentages are reported in Table 6.

## **Additional Findings**

### *Total conflict*

Men reported arguing more frequently than did women; participants in 1975 reported arguing more frequently than participants in 2000; but the main effect for sexual orientation was not significant. There were no interaction effects for this variable.

### *Fights about sex outside the relationship*

Participants in 1975 fought about sex outside their relationships more often than participants in 2000. Gay men and lesbians fought about sex outside their relationship more than heterosexuals. Men reported arguing more about sex outside their relationship than did women. On this variable, there were interaction effects for both time and sexual orientation and for gender and sexual orientation.

Both sexual orientations reported fighting about sex outside the relationship more often in 1975 than in 2000. There was a bigger change over time for participants in same-sex couples. During both 1975 and 2000, gay men and lesbians reported fighting about sex outside the relationship more often than heterosexuals. The mean difference was larger between same-sex couples and heterosexuals in 1975 than in 2000. Gay men reported fighting about sex outside the relationship more often than lesbians; the difference between heterosexual men and women was not significant.

Gay men reported fighting about sex outside the relationship more often than heterosexual men, and lesbians reported fighting about sex outside the relationship more often than heterosexual women. There was a larger mean difference between gay men and heterosexual men than between lesbians and heterosexual women, although there was a significant difference between lesbians and heterosexual women. When listed in rank order, gay men reported fighting the most about sex outside the relationship, then lesbians, then heterosexual men, and finally heterosexual women.

## **Summary of Results**

Over time, heterosexual men and women have moved toward slightly greater equality in their relationships (division of “feminine” and “masculine” housework). Gay men and lesbians seem to have become slightly less equal than they were 25 years previously (division of “feminine” housework, division of “masculine” housework, and division of finances). Even so, same-sex couples remain much more egalitarian than heterosexual couples at both points in time. Gay men and lesbians seem to be fighting less about sex outside the relationship.

TABLE 6  
Types of Agreements Regarding Sex Outside the Relationship

Couple Type (n = 1975, 2000)	1975	2000	$\chi^2$
<i>Prevalence (%) of Participants Who Have Discussed Sex Outside the Relationship and Decided That Under Some Circumstances it is All Right (Agreement #1)</i>			
Gay Men (n = 949, 190)	66.8	43.7	36.29***
Lesbians (n = 758, 370)	33.6	5.1	109.86***
Heterosexual Male (n = 2,093, 67)	23.0	6.0	10.84***
Heterosexual Female (n = 2,054, 121)	20.6	3.3	21.65***
<i>Prevalence (%) of Participants Who Have Discussed Sex Outside the Relationship and Decided That Under No Circumstances is it All Right (Agreement #2)</i>			
Gay Men (n = 949, 190)	13.5	44.2	98.64***
Lesbians (n = 758, 370)	44.3	85.7	174.38***
Heterosexual Male (n = 2,093, 67)	41.9	80.6	39.53***
Heterosexual Female (n = 2,054, 121)	43.5	81.8	67.72***
<i>Prevalence (%) of Participants Who Have Discussed Sex Outside the Relationship and Don't Agree (Agreement #3)</i>			
Gay Men (n = 949, 190)	12.4	4.2	10.88***
Lesbians (n = 758, 370)	15.3	2.7	39.79***
Heterosexual Male (n = 2,093, 67)	10.8	1.5	5.98*
Heterosexual Female (n = 2,054, 121)	11.4	2.5	9.42**
<i>Prevalence (%) of Participants Who Have Not Discussed Sex Outside the Relationship but Feel We Would Agree That Under Some Circumstances it is All Right (Agreement #4)</i>			
Gay Men (n = 949, 190)	5.1	5.8	0.172
Lesbians (n = 758, 370)	1.7	0.0	6.42*
Heterosexual Male (n = 2,093, 67)	5.2	0.0	3.68
Heterosexual Female (n = 2,054, 121)	4.3	1.7	2.00
<i>Prevalence (%) of Participants Who Have Not Discussed Sex Outside the Relationship but Feel We Would Agree That Under No Circumstances is it All Right (Agreement #5)</i>			
Gay Men (n = 949, 190)	1.6	1.1	0.30
Lesbians (n = 758, 370)	3.7	2.4	1.25
Heterosexual Male (n = 2,093, 67)	15.6	4.5	6.23*
Heterosexual Female (n = 2,054, 121)	17.3	4.1	14.38**

TABLE 6. (Contd.)

<b>Couple Type (n = 1975, 2000)</b>	<b>1975</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b><math>\chi^2</math></b>
<i>Prevalence (%) of Participants Who Have Not Discussed Sex Outside the Relationship but Feel We Would Not Agree (Agreement #6)</i>			
Gay Men (n = 949, 190)	.6	1.1	0.408
Lesbians (n = 758, 370)	1.3	4.1	8.58**
Heterosexual Male (n = 2,093, 67)	3.4	7.5	3.17
Heterosexual Female (n = 2,054, 121)	2.9	6.6	5.35*

\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ .

Note that all of the significant results about changes in equality within couple types are of very small magnitude (under 2.0% of variance accounted for by any of them) and should be interpreted with great caution. These findings suggest that levels of equality in the three types of couples have indeed changed perceptibly over time, but only minimally, incrementally, and very slowly. However, when considered in societal context, such incremental changes add up into a cultural change that is measurable in terms of occurring with a frequency greater than chance.

In contrast, our findings reveal a marked movement toward monogamy over time in all types of couples. Participants were substantially less likely in 2000 than in 1975 to have had sex outside their relationship or a meaningful love affair. In addition, all types of couples were more likely in 2000 than in 1975 to discuss having sex outside the relationship and agree not to do so.

## DISCUSSION

This study was unique in that it provided an opportunity to look at differences among couple types over time. We found that equality of “feminine” housework, equality of “masculine” housework, and equal division of finances have increased over time for heterosexuals. This result is consistent with the finding of Barnett and Rivers (1996) that although women continue to do the majority of housework, there has been a trend toward more equitable division of labor in heterosexual couples. This could be because less housework is being completed in households overall. Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, and Robinson (2000) found that the overall hours of domestic labor done in an American household have declined steadily since 1965. Women have cut their household hours in half since 1960. In contrast, men have doubled the amount of housework conducted, thereby creating a new middle ground regarding the division of housework between the genders. However, it should be noted that in the present study, heterosexual men were more likely to report equality in housework than were heterosexual women. It is possible that husbands overestimate how much housework they do, and/or that wives still take on much of the responsibility for supervising, correcting, and reminding husbands about home chores (c.f., Keller, 2008). The present research

found this division to vary based on sexual orientation, with lesbian couples tending to have more equality of “feminine” housework than heterosexual couples.

Additional results of this study were consistent with a number of previous studies. As found by Peplau and Spalding (2000), lesbians and gay men reported more equal division of “masculine” and “feminine” housework than did heterosexuals. Gay men and lesbians also reported more equal division of finances, more equal communication, and more equal support than did heterosexuals. This is consistent with the findings of Kurdek (2004), who found that same-sex couples perceive higher levels of equality in their relationships than heterosexual couples. Women reported more equality of “masculine” housework and more equal support than did men. This is consistent with Cutrona’s (1996) finding that wives tend to provide more support to their partners than do husbands. Overall, this set of results is consistent with gender socialization theory in that heterosexual couples seem more likely than same-sex couples to divide up housework along traditional gender role lines whereas same sex couples who lack this gender prescribed “default option” must decide from scratch who will do what work in their households (Green et al., 1996). Lesbians reported more equality of communication, support, and decision-making than did heterosexual women. Heterosexual men reported more equality of communication, more equality of support, and more equality of decision-making than did gay men. These results are contrary to previous findings suggesting no difference in communication or support across couple types (Julien, Chartrand, Simard, Bouthillier, & Begin, 2003). These other researchers did not examine equality in the specific domains examined in our research but rather asked about overall levels. Therefore, the current findings point to a new set of variables that should be used to compare equality in the various couple types.

A number of researchers have found that gay male couples and lesbian couples are better at resolving their conflicts than are heterosexual couples (Gottman, et al., 2003a, 2003b; Kurdek, 2004). Owing to the archival nature of the data analyzed here, the present study was not able to examine conflict resolution *per se* but rather could only explore the existing data pertaining to frequency of conflict. No differences were found between same-sex couples and heterosexual couples in terms of the frequency of conflict they experience in their relationships. Differences were found based on gender (i.e., men reported arguing more frequently than did women) and time (i.e., participants arguing more in 1975 than in 2000). It may be that men are more physiologically reactive to arguments and therefore are more likely to remember them than women (Gottman et al., 2003b), but it is unclear why couple arguing would have decreased from 1975 to 2000.

Contrary to prediction, equality of “feminine” housework, equality of “masculine” housework, and equal division of finances were found to decrease over time for gay male couples and lesbian couples. However, even though there was a decrease in equality on these variables for same-sex couples, their scores still indicate more equality than those reported by heterosexual couples. In other words, even though same-sex couples appear to divide housework and finances less equally in 2000 than 1975, they are still significantly more equal in these behaviors than heterosexual couples.

Although the present results reveal significant across-time changes for gay male and lesbian couples, the current study did not examine variables that might explain these changes. For example, it is possible that the increase in same-sex couples making longer-term commitments and/or raising children together might affect their desired

or perceived level of equal division of household labor in their relationship. Analogously, Kurdek (2004) found that heterosexual couples without children perceived more equality in their relationship than heterosexual couples who had children, and perhaps our findings are the result of more of the same-sex couples raising children in 2000. Future studies could look into these and other factors such as changing norms within the gay community that might have led to this change in perceived equality.

Lesbians and heterosexual men both reported having significantly less sex in 2000 compared with 1975. For each type of couple, there was a significant decrease in the percentage of participants that reported having sex outside their relationship since they became a couple. This decrease in nonmonogamy was most dramatic for gay men. The results show that the percentage of gay men who had ever had sex outside their relationship decreased from 83% in 1975 to 59% in 2000. There also was a significant decrease for all couple types regarding the percentage of participants who reported having a meaningful extra-relational love affair since they became a couple.

Regarding monogamy agreements, the results indicate that there has been a statistically significant and very substantial increase over time in the percentage of couples that are agreeing to be monogamous. Also of note is a trend for heterosexual couples talking explicitly with their partners to make sure monogamy expectations are clear and fully agreed to by both partners. Additionally, female (but not male) respondents are beginning to acknowledge that they differ from their partners regarding expectations of monogamy.

The principal theme that emerges from this research is that there has been a very large increase in both monogamy agreements and monogamy behavior between 1975 and 2000. We speculate that awareness of HIV/AIDS and other STDs has led couples to be more cautious and more conservative about sex outside their relationships over the last 25 years (Hoff & Beougher, 2010; Prestage et al., 2008). Especially for younger cohorts of gay men and lesbians, the desire for longer-term monogamous, committed, legalized relationships is becoming the norm (D'Augelli et al., 2006, 2007; Green, 2009), and this trend is likely reflected in the greater rates of monogamy agreements and behavior between our 1975 and 2000 samples.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Several limitations of this study should be kept in mind. First, the samples included were not representative of the general U.S. population in terms of race/ethnicity, in that both were disproportionately White. Second, the effect sizes for the equality variables were all very small (the highest being .020). This indicates that although the changes over time are occurring at a rate significantly greater than chance, these changes in equality among partners have been *very* small in magnitude. Third, the analyses were based on self-reports. The analysis for the present study used reports from only one member of a couple. The participants were asked about their own as well as their partner's behavior, and it is not known if the partners would have agreed in their description of each other's behavior. In future studies, couples could be observed as well as questioned about their relationship behaviors.

An additional limitation is the differences in legal status that existed for the two samples. The 2000 sample was able to differentiate between same-sex couples who had obtained civil unions and those who had not. Because legal status was not available for same-sex couples in 1975, the current researchers were not able to make this distinction

when comparing couples across time. It is possible that the differences in legal status created a distinction that was lost when civil union and noncivil union same-sex couples were combined in the analyses. In addition, the heterosexual couples in the 2000 sample were referred to the study by a sibling who was either a lesbian or a gay man, and therefore it is possible that these heterosexual couples' beliefs and relationship behaviors might not be generalizable to the general population of married couples. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the heterosexual siblings in Solomon et al.'s 2005 sample were quite "mainstream" in terms of their rates of religious participation, homemaker status (for women), presence of children, and political affiliations.

Differences in the mean length of relationships also might have influenced the results of the study. The participants from the 2000 sample were in their relationship for a greater length of time than participants in the 1975 sample, possibly due to their higher age. In addition, heterosexual couples were in their relationships for somewhat longer than the participants in same-sex couples. However, since these differences in the samples did not constitute more than 5% of the variance, we decided *a priori* not to control for them in the statistical analyses.

The archival nature of the data available to us made it impossible to assess more details about frequency of extra-relational sex among partners who are not monogamous. Thus, we could only compare couples on whether either partner at any time in the history of their relationship had even once had an extra-relational sexual experience, not the frequency of extra-relational sexual encounters nor the number of partners. It is important to note that there may be a higher prevalence of extra-relational sexual encounters near the beginning of couple relationships, so it is possible that many such reports of nonmonogamy may refer to extra-relational encounters that have not been repeated since early in the primary couple's life together. The archival nature of the data also precluded exploration of changes that may have occurred among these three couple types in the 10 years since the year 2000 data were collected.

Also, relevant to our gay male couples' greater likelihood of nonmonogamy agreements and behavior, another study of gay couples found that, in practice, gay partners with nonmonogamy agreements actually had sex outside the relationship never (9%) or only rarely (80%) (Kurdek, 1988). Only 11% of Kurdek's sample of gay male couples with nonmonogamy agreements reported having extra-relational sex more often than "rarely." Thus, the greater rate of nonmonogamy among gay male partners does not necessarily mean that their extra-relational sex was frequent, with many partners, or continuous over time. Lastly, many sex researchers conjecture that gay men may be more willing to disclose to researchers their sexual behaviors (including nonmonogamy) than are heterosexual men or women, although we have no way to ascertain whether this was the case in the present samples. More comprehensive data about our gay male couples' nonmonogamy would be needed to address these latter questions.

In sum, the present study indicates that both same-sex and heterosexual couples in the United States are changing over time in small and large ways. If same-sex marriage were to become legal throughout the United States, would the greater equality of lesbian and gay couples serve as a model for heterosexual couples in terms of division of housework, finances, and relationship support? Conversely, are same-sex couples becoming more "heterosexualized" and "mainstream" in terms of having children and advocating for legalized relationships, which might lead to markedly less egalitarian relationships over time? These intriguing questions make the 21st century an

auspicious time for comparative longitudinal and cross-sectional research on heterosexual, lesbian, and gay male couples.

### **Implications for Couple and Family Therapists**

To the extent that couple relationships and couple therapy are both influenced by sociocultural norms, we hope the present study's results can inform couple therapists' assumptions and expectations about shifting gender roles, equality in decision making, equality of household labor, equality in rates of initiating/refusing sex, and rates of monogamy/nonmonogamy among contemporary couples. Below, we suggest some ways our findings can be used by couple therapists working with same-sex and heterosexual couples.

As U.S. society shows increasing acceptance of same-sex couples and provides greater opportunity for legal recognition of their relationships, it seems likely that aspirations for long-term commitments and monogamy will increase among lesbian and gay male couples. For example, Jones, Campbell, and Green (2009) found that greater social support from family and friends for a same-sex couple's relationship predicted that the couple would obtain a domestic partnership in California over an 8-year period. Balsam, Beauchaine, Rothblum, and Solomon (2008), in the 3-year follow-up of the Solomon et al. (2005) data, discovered that civil union same-sex couples were less likely to separate over time than same-sex couple without civil unions. Thus, the shift of same-sex couples from "outlaw" to "in-law" status is giving same-sex couples more social and legal support for solidifying and maintaining their commitments (Green, 2009).

However, our findings also suggest that this "mainstreaming" may eventually draw same-sex relationships into the normative vortex of traditional expectations for couples in the realms of monogamy and greater specialization (less equal division) of household labor based on which partner earns more money and/or which partner spends more time engaged in direct childcare.

This shift has important implications for clinicians who work with same-sex couples.

For example, gay fathers often experience psychological distress because their traditional gender role socialization as men comes into conflict with their new roles as childcare providers (Benson, Silverstein, & Auerbach, 2005; Schacher, Auerbach, & Silverstein, 2005). Family therapists can help one or both gay male partners become more comfortable with decisions to scale back at work in order to provide childcare and manage the housework during the transition to parenthood and beyond (Bergman, Rubio, Green, & Padron, 2010).

In the realm of monogamy, some earlier writings about gay male couples asserted that virtually all such couples naturally evolved toward nonmonogamy over time and that failure to do so represented a kind of stagnation or inhibition in their functioning (McWhirter & Mattison, 1984). However, based on our data, couple therapists nowadays should temper any a priori assumptions they have about gay male partners almost always being nonmonogamous or being incapable of monogamy. Our data imply that couple therapists should be prepared to help each gay male couple find their own path in this regard, given that large percentages of contemporary male couples are showing both monogamous and nonmonogamous patterns.

Our results suggest that clinicians, who rarely receive education on this topic, would benefit greatly from training and supervision in how to help all types of couples negotiate monogamy or nonmonogamy agreements. Although comprehensive guide-

lines for facilitating monogamy/nonmonogamy agreements can be found in an article by Shernoff (2006), previously published in *Family Process*, it seems to us that couple therapists remain largely unaware of how to explicitly address these issues in therapy, especially with gay male couples.

The results of the current study are consistent with previous findings that lesbian couples have less sex than other couple types (Peplau et al., 2004), and our data add the information that the amount of sex lesbian couples are having seems to be decreasing somewhat over time. In colloquial parlance, this phenomenon has sometimes been referred to as “lesbian bed death,” and it is viewed as contributing to dissolution of relationships. Although the causes of this trend remain unclear, couple therapists can help lesbian partners explore the dynamics of initiating and refusing sex in their relationships and the extent to which any inhibitions in initiating sex may be due to traditional gender role socialization or waiting to feel the kind of sexual urgency that males frequently require in order to initiate sexual encounters. That is, female sexuality in long-term relationships needs to be understood and normalized on its own terms—frequently more relational and frequently with somewhat slower arousal in the start-up phase, and this kind of framing is helpful to many female partners in rekindling desire and sexual behavior between them (Hall, 2004).

Our findings for heterosexual couples also can inform clinical practice. In particular, it seems important for clinicians to recognize that although there is more equality between married heterosexual partners in 2000 than in 1975, our data suggest that the changes seem to be much smaller in magnitude than many couple therapists anticipated and hoped would occur as a result of the women’s movement and feminist thought. It thus remains a fact of life for many couple therapists that many of their clients may not expect the level of couple equality that therapists believe is beneficial. Also, these clients may be unable because of a variety of structural constraints in the society (e.g., unequal pay for equal work, social approbation from their families of origin and peers) to achieve those levels of relationship equality.

Thus, to the extent that couple therapists believe equality is important for heterosexual couples, our findings underscore that most couples in therapy must still step way outside the norms of the predominant culture to achieve true equality of decision making and division of household labor. Simply recognizing and explicitly reflecting on this normative context is helpful with many couples in treatment. In addition, a central task for our field remains how to empower heterosexual women and men to create the kind of equal relationships that may put them out of step with their families, current peers, workplaces, children’s schools, and religious communities but might benefit their emotional well-being in so many other ways (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2009). In light of our findings and the observations of other culturally oriented couple therapists (e.g., Almeida, Parker, & Dolan-Del Vecchio, 2008; McGoldrick & Hardy, 2008), it may be that for most heterosexual couples in treatment to make substantial shifts toward equality, they may need to join or create new social networks whose norms support more egalitarian couple relationships over time.

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