

# Same-sex couples in civil unions compared with same-sex couples not in civil unions and heterosexual siblings: An overview

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**T**HE SAME-SEX MARRIAGE DEBATE IS taking place in most of the world (see Wintemute & Andenaes, 2001, for an international overview). Although a few countries have same-sex marriage (Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, and Spain), several more have other forms of national, legalised registration, including Australia, Brazil, Croatia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greenland, Hungary, Iceland, Israel, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Sweden, and Switzerland. In other cases, specific localities or provinces have enacted same-sex registered partnerships (e.g. Buenos Aires, Argentina) in countries that do not have national policies.

The US falls into this last category. At the present time, only the state of Massachusetts has legalised same-sex marriage, Vermont and Connecticut have same-sex civil unions, and California, New Jersey, Maine, Hawaii, and the District of Columbia have registered domestic partnerships for same-sex couples. Although same-sex couples across the US are lobbying for marriage, it is important to point out that state-level marriage, civil unions and domestic partnerships are *legally* similar. Couples receive only statewide benefits for income tax, inheritance, family medical leave, etc., which is not nearly the same as receiving these benefits on the federal level.

## The Civil Union Study

Our research began when Vermont became the first US state to legalise same-sex relationships in the summer of 2000 (before same-sex marriage was legal in Massachusetts or in any province of Canada). Excited by the new legislation, hundreds of same-sex couples travelled to Vermont for civil unions, despite the fact that these civil unions were not recognised by their own state. We too were excited by the opportunity to survey these 'pioneers' coming to our state (at the time we were all either students or faculty members at the University of Vermont). Additionally, Vermont state legislators were bombarded with questions by gay activists and policymakers from around the US, and yet they had no data to give out. So we decided to conduct a study that would provide a demographic and relationship profile of civil union couples.

As researchers, we were also intrigued by another aspect of this project. Civil union certificates were treated as public information (similar to heterosexual marriage certificates) so we were able to have access to everyone's name, address, and other information on the certificates. For decades, researchers studying lesbian and gay male issues (including same-sex couples) had to rely on convenience samples (either by contacting friends of friends or by distributing questionnaires at gay events or via mailing lists). As a result it was never certain how representative these samples were of

lesbians and gay men in the general population. In the case of couples who had civil unions, we could compare those who chose to participate in our study to the whole population on a few variables (gender, race/ethnicity, geographic location). This meant that we could ascertain the representativeness of our sample compared to the whole population of civil union couples – quite an innovation.

We obtained photocopies of all 2475 civil union certificates from the first year (1 July, 2000 to 30 June, 2001) from the Vermont Office of Vital Records of the Vermont Department of Health. Based on information on the certificates, only 21 per cent of the couples were from Vermont (so we had a national sample), two-thirds of couples were female, and 10 per cent of individuals were members of ethnic minority groups. After entering the data into a spreadsheet, we contacted every couple, congratulating them on their civil union and asking if they would be willing to participate in a questionnaire study that focused on ‘... demographic information, your relationship, your connection to your family of origin, and social supports available to you in your community.’ Of the 2475 civil union couples who were sent letters, 165 addresses (seven per cent) were incorrect, five individuals notified us that their partner had died, 28 indicated that their relationship had ended, and eight couples were close friends or students of the research team and thus were not included in the study. This resulted in an actual pool of 2269 possible civil union couples. We received back reply forms from 947 couples (42 per cent) indicating willingness to participate in the study. We should add that this is quite a high response rate for couples who had not volunteered for research, indicating the degree of enthusiasm among this pioneer cohort.

#### **Heterosexual siblings as a comparison group**

The barrage of media focus on civil unions (by both liberal and conservative media) was

on how same-sex couples compared with heterosexual married couples. So we decided to compare civil union couples with heterosexual married couples. We could have compared civil union couples to US census data on married couples, though that would have been limited by the few items asked during the census. Or we could have surveyed heterosexuals who got married in Vermont that same year (who would likely have been much younger than the civil union couples because the latter group had not been able to legalise their relationship until that year). Instead, we chose to ask civil union couples if we could survey a sibling who was heterosexual and married. Many lesbians and gay men have heterosexual siblings, and these siblings are usually similar in age, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic background (see Balsam *et al.*, 2005; Balsam, Rothblum & Beauchaine, 2005; Rothblum, Balsam & Mickey, 2004; Rothblum *et al.*, 2005; Rothblum & Factor, 2001;). Thus, we asked each civil union couple to give us the name and contact information of a heterosexual sibling who was married, and his/her spouse. Very little research has used adult siblings as a comparison group, and this presents a unique method of comparing couples who differ in sexual orientation yet who are similar on several demographic variables (e.g. race, ethnicity, religion growing up, parental socioeconomic background, etc.).

#### **Lesbian and gay male couples not in civil unions as another comparison group**

In addition, our other interest was to compare couples who had civil unions with same-sex couples who did not. Until the year 2000, there was no way that same-sex couples could have their relationship legalised in the US. This meant that all prior same-sex couples research in the US had focused on couples who have not had civil unions. Thus, our second comparison group represented the status quo of current same-sex couples research. We decided to ask civil union couples to give us the names and address of

a couple in their friendship circle who had not had a civil union. We assumed that, overall, friendship couples would be similar on some variables (e.g. age, length of relationship, geographic location).

### Study 1: Funding and method

Researchers rarely spend much time describing their attempts to procure funding. In our case we (Esther Rothblum & Sondra Solomon) were extremely fortunate to receive a grant from the Gill Foundation, an agency in Colorado that typically funds lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender activism rather than research. In this case, however, they felt that our research would have policy implications. In addition, Sondra Solomon applied for a small grant from the University of Vermont. Given our need to send questionnaires to civil union couples, same-sex couples not in civil unions, and heterosexual married couples, we decided to limit ourselves to the first 400 civil union couples who responded and who were willing to have their friends and siblings participate. This would allow us to cover the cost of printing and mailing 2400 questionnaires (two questionnaires sent to 400 couples for three types of couples), along with printing and mailing of reminder letters (to those couples that did not have e-mail) and data entry. Questionnaires did not include names or addresses, but had an identifying number that was identical for the two members of the civil union couple (e.g. 166 A and B), their same-sex friends (e.g. 166 C and D), and their heterosexual married sibling and spouse (e.g. 166 E and F).

Of the 400 sets of questionnaires sent out, we received back at least one questionnaire from 388 (97 per cent) 'families' of couples (this ranged from receiving questionnaires from both members of all three types of couples to only one questionnaire from all six possible respondents). Of the 800 questionnaires sent to both members of 400 civil union couples, we received back 659 (82 per cent). We received back 466 (58 per cent) from same-sex couples not in civil

unions, and 413 (52 per cent) from married heterosexuals (these numbers represent total respondents; we did not always receive back two questionnaires from each couple).

As mentioned above, we received back statements of interest from over twice that number of civil union couples. Interestingly, many couples were disappointed or annoyed to have been left out of the study and consequently we invited them to participate in a different study, described later on. In all, we were able to complete the two studies (resulting in six publications to date) for under \$20,000. This is a relatively small amount of funding in the US where researchers often need to cover the costs of their own salary and those of their research team (we did not need to do this).

### Our measures

Our questionnaire was adapted from the survey used by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) in their *American Couples* project, and included sections about demographics (year of birth, race/ethnicity, years of education, individual income, religion while growing up, current religion, importance of religion, frequency of attending religious services, size of city or town, years lived in current location, and distance of last move), relationship (the year that participants met their current partner, began going out with their partner, and began living with him/her, and whether they had ever seriously considered ending their relationship and seriously discussed ending their relationship), and children (the number and ages of children, whether their children were from their current or a prior relationship, how much time per year their children lived with them, and what percentage of the childcare they did).

A number of items asked about contact with family of origin (contact with mother and father, initiating contact with partner's mother and father, the degree to which their mother and father make them feel like part of the family and how often they bring their partner along when visiting their mother and father. Same-sex couples were also asked

if they consider themselves 'married'). We assessed social support with Procidano and Heller's (1983) measures of Perceived Social Support From Friends and Perceived Social Support From Family. These scales measure the extent to which respondents believe that friends and family, respectively, fulfill their needs for support, feedback, and information (e.g. 'My friends give me the moral support I need').

Respondents were asked the degree to which they do leisure activities alone versus with their partner, and also whether they attend social events alone versus together. They were asked how many of their friends were also friends of their partner's and how many current friends used to be lovers. Level of outness about sexual orientation was assessed only for lesbian and gay male respondents, using the Outness Inventory developed by Mohr and Fassinger (2000). We asked about sexual behaviour (frequency of sex, non-monogamy, and whether they and their partner had an agreement about non-monogamy).

We used several subscales from the American Couples project (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983), including Division of Finances (whose income pays for each of 10 items, such as rent/house payment, utilities, groceries), Division of Household Tasks (a 19-item subscale that assessed which partner does various household tasks such as repairing things around the house, doing the dishes, taking out the trash), Relationship Maintenance Behaviours (a 19-item subscale that asks who is more likely to do certain Behaviours in their relationship, such as pay the other compliments, see the other's point of view during an argument, take on a problem in a rational rather than emotional way), and Conflict (17 areas of conflicts such as how the house is kept, our social life, sex outside our relationship).

### Results of Study I

Because we had recruited heterosexual couples via siblings of civil union couples, the two types of couples were similar in age,

race/ethnicity, and religion while growing up. This is one of the strengths of using the sibling comparison methodology. Yet we found many differences between same-sex couples and heterosexual married couples (for more detailed results, see Solomon *et al.*, 2004, 2005).

#### *Results for women: How do civil union couples differ from married heterosexual couples?*

*Demographics and relationship factors.* Among women, lesbians in civil unions as well as those not in civil unions had higher levels of education than did heterosexual married women. Yet lesbians and heterosexual women did not differ significantly on income, indicating that lesbians are underpaid for their higher educational level (see Rothblum *et al.* (in press) for a more detailed discussion of income). In adulthood, heterosexual women were more likely to attend religious services, and to practice the religion of their childhood, than were lesbians. Heterosexual women had been in their current relationship for more years than lesbians, and were also more likely to have children.

#### *Social support and contact with family of origin.*

Heterosexual married women perceived more support from their families than did lesbians. Heterosexual married women also had more frequent contact with their mother, and initiated more contact with their partner's parents, than did lesbians. But there were no differences in how often lesbians and heterosexual women brought their partners along when visiting their parents.

#### *Division of housework and finances.*

Married heterosexual women reported doing more of the household tasks than their partners did. Lesbians in civil unions and those not in civil unions tended to report sharing household tasks more equally. Conversely, married heterosexual women were more likely to report that their partner paid for items in general, whereas lesbians in civil unions and those not in civil unions tended to report sharing finances more equally.

*How do lesbians in civil unions differ from lesbians not in civil unions?*

Generally, there were few differences between the two groups of lesbians. Lesbians in civil unions were more 'out' or open about their sexual orientation, than lesbians not in civil unions. Lesbians in civil unions reported more contact with their mother than did lesbians not in civil unions. The former group was also more likely to consider themselves 'married.'

*Results for men: How do civil union couples differ from married heterosexual couples?*

*Demographic and relationship factors.* Unlike the results for women, gay and heterosexual men did not differ significantly on educational level or income. Gay men, however, were over three times more likely to be living in a large city than were heterosexual men. Heterosexual married men were more likely to practice the religion of their childhood and to rate religion as more important than did gay men. Heterosexual men had been in their current relationship for more years than gay men, and were also more likely to have children.

*Social support and contact with family of origin.*

Gay men in both types of couples perceived significantly more social support from friends than did heterosexual married men. Unlike women, the groups did not differ significantly in perceived social support from family or in frequency of contact with their mother and father. Heterosexual married men were significantly more likely to initiate contact with their partner's father than gay men. The groups did not differ in the extent to which they brought their partners along when visiting their parents.

*Division of housework and finances.* Heterosexual men tended to do less of the housework than their partner and pay for more items, whereas gay men shared these activities more equally.

*How do gay men in civil unions differ from those not in civil unions?*

The percentage of gay men who had children was 17 per cent for those in civil unions compared with 9.7 per cent of those not in civil unions. Gay men not in civil unions were significantly more likely to report that they had seriously considered ending their relationship, and also that they had seriously discussed ending their relationship, than were gay men in civil unions.

Gay men in civil unions were significantly more likely to initiate contact with their partner's mother than were gay men not in civil unions. They were also more likely to state that their father made them feel like part of the family. Gay men in civil unions were significantly more likely to consider themselves 'married' than were gay men not in civil unions.

*How representative was our sample?*

The ratio of two-thirds women to men in our sample of civil union couples corresponded to the gender ratio of the civil union population. Similarly, race and ethnicity of the sample (with about 10 per cent people of colour) was comparable to the whole population. Regarding geographic distribution, the majority of respondents were from Vermont, but the sample and the population constituted a national sample. As such, this was the first study of lesbian and gay couples that allowed comparison to a population on even a few variables. It also indicates that the present sample of civil union couples was a very strong representation of the entire civil union population on these variables.

We should note that our sample, as well as the whole civil union population, is not representative of same-sex couples of colour. Vermont is one of the whitest US states (95.5 per cent) and thus may not have felt welcoming to lesbians and gay men of colour. Furthermore, race and class are inter-correlated in the US, and consequently travel to a rural state may have been expensive to people of colour.

## Study 2: Method and results

The first study compared civil union couples with same-sex couples not in civil unions and with heterosexual married couples. Our second study focused on factors *within* civil union couples (see Todosijevic, Rothblum & Solomon, 2005, for more detail). Specifically, we were interested in whether it mattered if the two members of a couple were similar or different from each other on several factors, described below. The remaining 447 civil union couples not included in our earlier study constituted the sample for the present study. This included 295 lesbian (66 per cent) and 152 gay male (34 per cent) couples. Once again, the majority of the couples contacted for the current study were out-of-Vermont residents (79 per cent) and two per cent were from outside of the US.

This study sent out questionnaires that consisted of demographic information, relationship satisfaction (the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, Spanier, 1976), Outness (the Outness Inventory, Mohr & Fassinger, 2000), Lesbian and Gay-Specific Stressors (Measure of Gay-Related Stressors, Lewis *et al.*, 2001), and Positive and Negative Affectivity (Positive and Negative Affect Scales, Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988). This last measure is a 20-item self-report scale specifically designed to assess the distinct dimensions of positive and negative affect (e.g. 'hostile', 'enthusiastic').

*Are couples happier when they are demographically similar to one another?* Despite the common belief that 'opposites attract,' research on heterosexual couples has shown that demographic similarity is related to relationship satisfaction. A couple of prior studies on same-sex couples have yielded mixed results (Kurdek, 2003; Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton, 1982). Our study found that similarity in educational level or income between the two partners of a couple was not related to relationship satisfaction. However, age was, but in opposite directions for lesbian than for gay male couples. Lesbian couples were happier when more different in age; gay

men when more similar in age to one another.

*Are same-sex couples happier when they are similar in levels of outness?* For same-sex couples, it is possible that similarity in level of outness may be more important for relationship satisfaction than similarity on demographic variables. For example, it may be more important that both members of the couple have been out for a similar number of years, or both agree to be closeted to their neighbours. Here, too, prior research has been mixed. Jordan and Delury (2000) found that partner similarity in outness was related to greater relationship satisfaction whereas Beals and Peplau (2001) did not find this to be the case. Our results did not find partner similarity in level of outness to be related to relationship satisfaction.

*Is positive affect related to relationship satisfaction?* Research has found that heterosexuals who report more negative emotions (affectivity) tend to report less satisfaction with their relationships. For lesbian and gay male couples in our study, relationship satisfaction was positively correlated with positive affectivity and negatively correlated with negative affectivity.

*How does stress affect same-sex couples?* Lewis *et al.* (2001) developed a 70-item stressor questionnaire that found 10 stress factors. In their study, gay men reported more stress associated with two factors, HIV/AIDS and violence/harassment, than did lesbians. Lesbians reported more stressors than did gay men regarding family reactions to one's partner.

When we used the Lewis *et al.* (2001) measure in our study, gay male couples reported experiencing more stress surrounding HIV/AIDS-related issues and violence and harassment than lesbian couples. Lesbian couples reported experiencing more stress connected to family reaction to their sexuality than did male couples. None of the factors were significantly corre-

lated with relationship satisfaction for gay male couples. In contrast, among lesbian couples, eight out of 10 factors (all factors except HIV/AIDS and violence/harassment) were significantly negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction.

### **Civil union couples in their first year are just the beginning: Ongoing research**

At the time of this writing, we only have data on civil union couples from the first year of that new legislation. This means that we could compare couples who chose to make use of this legislation compared with those who did not, and with heterosexual couples. Thus far, this is not a study of the *effects* of being in a civil union, because the couples had just entered into these legal unions.

This past year marked the three-year period from when we first surveyed all three types of couples in Study 1. Consequently we tracked them down for a follow-up study. This was surprisingly easy to do because we had contact information on their friends and siblings; someone usually knew how to get in touch with a couple who had moved away. This will allow us to see how civil union couples, same-sex couples not in civil unions, and married heterosexual couples have changed in a three-year period. We will be able to see which factors at Time 1 predict relationship satisfaction at Time 2. And,

since some couples in all three groups have broken up, we will also be able to see if there are any factors at Time 1 that predict who terminated their relationship later on.

But even during the first year of the new civil union legislation, there were some differences between couples who chose to have such unions and their friends who did not. We expect more differences between these groups over time. In addition, there were many differences between same-sex couples and married heterosexual couples. We should point out that all heterosexual couples in our study had a sibling or in-law who was lesbian or gay, so perhaps they were not 'typical' heterosexuals. Nevertheless, these heterosexual couples, even with a lesbian or gay family member, were quite traditional in terms of having children, being more religious, and dividing housework and finances along traditional gender role lines. Why did they not model after the same-sex couples in their extended family?

Since this study was conducted, more US states have enacted legislation acknowledging same-sex couples and such legislation is up for debate (either pro or con) in every state. Ours is the first longitudinal research project of couples with legalised relationships in the US, and the results over time will have implications for same-sex couples in other states as well.

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