

Maintenance Behaviors in Same-Sex and Marital Relationships: A Matched Sample Comparison

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This study is follow-up to Haas and Stafford's (1998) initial exploration of communicative relationship maintenance behaviors in gay and lesbian relationships. This investigation is an attempt to explore relationship maintenance behaviors of ongoing, same-sex relationships through direct comparison with those used in heterosexual marriages. Using a community-based sample, 30 married heterosexuals from a larger study on maintenance were matched with 30 gay and lesbian individuals in ongoing romantic relationships on 4 criteria: age, sex, education level, and length of relationship. All participants completed an open-ended questionnaire assessing communication behaviors used in maintaining their intimate relationships. Responses were coded for maintenance behaviors that have emerged in previous research (i.e., Canary & Stafford, 1992; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Stafford & Canary, 1991). Both same-sex and married relationships use similar maintenance behaviors overall, and sharing tasks was the most commonly reported maintenance behavior across relational type. However, differences emerged between these relationships when analyzing the prevalence with which behaviors were reported. Findings indicated that participants in same-sex relationships most frequently reported the use of "bonding" types of maintenance behaviors (e.g., meta-relational communication), whereas married participants most often reported positivity maintenance efforts (e.g., humor and favors and gifts) within their relationships. These findings may indicate important maintenance variations across couples based on legal validation.

In the last 15 years, research in the area of relationship maintenance in romantic couples has gained increased attention. Existing research sheds light on the strategies and behaviors relational partners use in the process of sustaining these intimate relationships. *Relationship maintenance* refers to using communicative strategies and behaviors to prevent relationship dissolution through “parties’ efforts to sustain a dynamic equilibrium in their relationship definition and satisfaction levels as they cope with the ebb and flow of everyday relating” (Baxter & Dindia, 1990, p. 188). Romantic relationships provide particular relational benefits such as love, affection, sexual activity, emotional intimacy, and social support (Coyne & DeLongis, 1986; Cutrona & Suhr, 1994; Prager, 1995; Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000). In fact, Coyne and DeLongis found that other confiding relationships, such as with a parent, sibling, or friend, could not compensate for the confiding intimacy of a romantic partner. One limitation of the existing research is that it has focused almost exclusively on the relationships of dating or married, White, middle class, heterosexual couples. Therefore, our knowledge of the maintenance behaviors enacted in other types of couples characterized by race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation is lacking.

This study is a follow-up to Haas and Stafford’s (1998) initial investigation of communication maintenance behaviors in gay and lesbian ongoing, romantic relationships. Through an inductive analysis of gay and lesbian individuals’ open-ended responses, Haas and Stafford found overall similarities with the maintenance behaviors reported in previous maintenance research on married couples (these are discussed in detail in a following section). This study seeks to extend our understanding of relationship maintenance behaviors by explicitly comparing the strategies and behaviors reported in ongoing, same-sex relationships to those reported in ongoing heterosexual married relationships. Directly compared similarities or differences between these two groups have the potential (a) to increase our understanding of maintenance strategies and behaviors used in the understudied population of gay and lesbian relationships and (b) to move beyond using marital couples as a standard, in favor of studies that directly compare relational maintenance behaviors across couple types. The importance of this sort of direct comparison is that it allows us to move beyond inferential claims and conclusions based on the preponderant marital maintenance research.

First, to provide a foundation for this direct comparison, several characteristics of gay and lesbian relationships, including a few studies that have explicitly compared psychological dimensions of same-sex and heterosexual relationships (e.g., satisfaction), are reviewed. Next, communication research on heterosexual relationship maintenance behaviors is discussed, and findings from Haas and Stafford (1998) and Haas’s (1999) work on communicative maintenance behaviors in same-sex couples are highlighted. Finally, we present a matched-sample study designed to directly compare the relationship maintenance behaviors reported in heterosexual married and ongoing, same-sex relationships.

RESEARCH ON GAY AND LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

Gay and lesbian couples are understudied when compared to the amount of extant research on heterosexual married and dating romantic relationships (Wood & Duck, 1995). However, select studies illuminate several general characteristics of same-sex relationships. For instance, several studies indicate that many gay and lesbian individuals do seek to establish long-term (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Fitzpatrick, Jandt, Myrick, & Edgar, 1994, McWhirter & Mattison, 1982, 1984; Mendola, 1980; Tuller, 1978), committed (Berger, 1990; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986b; Mendola, 1980; Peplau, 1991), and satisfying (Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Kurdek, 1987, 1988, 1989; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986a; Lewis, Kozac, Milardo, & Grosnick, 1981) relationships for much the same reasons as heterosexuals do: love, affection, and companionship (Peplau & Cochran, 1981).

Research suggests, however, that gay and lesbian couples do not follow traditional male–female sex roles in the process of assigning relational duties. Instead, gay and lesbian couples rely on egalitarian notions based on personal skill, interest, and available time (Kurdek, 1993). For example, Kurdek found that an equitable distribution of shared household tasks (Kurdek, 1993) and shared decision making (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986b) were important dimensions of gay and lesbian relationships. In general, evidence indicates that same-sex relationships are based in egalitarian relational roles involving flexibility and turn-taking (Kurdek, 1993; Lynch & Reilly, 1986; Marecek, Finn, & Cardell, 1982; Peplau, 1982; Peplau, Padesky, & Hamilton, 1982; Reilly & Lynch, 1990).

In terms of relational outcomes, Kurdek (1987) and Dailey (1979) compared heterosexual and same-sex couples on the dimension of psychological adjustment and found no differences. In addition, Kurdek and Schmitt (1986b) found no difference between same-sex and heterosexual couples on ratings of relationship quality and dyadic attachment. Duffy and Rusbult (1986) and Kurdek and Schmitt (1986a) also found no significant differences between levels of gay, lesbian, and heterosexual relationship satisfaction. Specifically, Kurdek and Schmitt (1986b) found that several dimensions of relationship quality, such as few relational alternatives, high shared decision making, and few beliefs that disagreement is destructive, were significant predictors of relational satisfaction for all the couples. Finally, Metz, Rosser, and Strapko (1994) found no difference between same-sex and heterosexual styles of conflict resolution and found that lesbian couples have the most effective styles of conflict resolution and the highest levels of satisfaction across the heterosexual and same-sex relationships in the sample.

This research illuminates relational dimensions of same-sex couples; however, researchers devote little attention to exploring the actual communicative behaviors used and exchanged in maintaining gay and lesbian relationships. Many communication strategies and behaviors used in maintaining married couples emerge in

prior research; however, only two studies attempted to investigate communicative relationship maintenance within same-sex couples. This area of communication research is reviewed next.

COMMUNICATION RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE RESEARCH

Most of the current research on relationship maintenance focuses on the means by which heterosexual married or dating couples maintain their relationships over time. A social exchange perspective dominates this research focusing on the reciprocation of communication behaviors (i.e., what partners actually do and say) in maintaining relationships (see Ayres, 1983; Canary & Stafford, 1992, 1994; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Shea & Pearson, 1986; Stafford & Canary, 1991). For instance, Stafford and Canary (1991; Canary & Stafford, 1992) developed a typology of strategic behaviors based in social exchange that both married and dating couples use in maintaining their relationships. Five primary relationship maintenance strategies (defined as purposive or intentional maintenance behaviors) emerged: (a) *positivity* (e.g., cheerfulness and positive comments), (b) *openness* (e.g., self-disclosure and meta-relational communication), (c) *assurances* (e.g., verbal and nonverbal expressions of love and comfort), (d) *shared tasks* (e.g., performing household duties and relational responsibilities), and (e) *social networks* (e.g., communicating with mutual friendships and kinship ties). Additional studies replicate the use of these communication strategies in heterosexual couples (Dainton & Aylor, 2002; Ragsdale, 1996; Stafford et al., 2000).

In addition, Canary and Stafford (1992) found that relationship equity serves as an important predictor of one's own use and perception of a partner's use of relationship maintenance behaviors in married couples. Equity theory (Thibaut & Kelly, 1959) proposes that as long as the ratio of rewards to costs for partners is relatively equal, partners will seek to maintain the relationship. In addition, Canary and Stafford found that self-reported and perceived partners' maintenance strategies served to predict several relational dimensions. For example, positivity was found to predict both control mutuality (i.e., amount of agreement on relationship control of partners) and liking of partner. Perceptions of partners' maintenance behaviors, in general, were especially predictive of liking, whereas sharing tasks and social networks were correlated with commitment to the relationship.

Dainton and Stafford (1993) extended this work by examining routine behaviors that couples report enacting in addition to strategic behaviors. Routine maintenance behaviors are regular or habitual behaviors (intentional and unintentional) that serve to maintain the relationship. Five primary routine behaviors emerged: (a) *joint activities* (e.g., spending time together and rituals), (b) *affection* (e.g., touching, kissing, and sexual intimacy), (c) *avoidance* (e.g., avoiding topics and

conflict), (d) *antisocial* (e.g., acting jealous), and (e) *focus on self* (e.g., watching one's weight or furthering a career). In addition, less predominant routine behaviors included *mediated communication* (e.g., phone calls, cards, letters), use of humor, and everyday small talk. Recently, Dainton and Aylor (2002) showed that there is a link between routine and strategic maintenance behaviors and that strategic behaviors frequently become routinized the longer partners are together.

Only two published studies specifically examine communicative relationship maintenance behaviors in same-sex couples. Using an inductive, open-ended questionnaire with convenience samples of gay and lesbian individuals in ongoing relationships and in-depth interviews with gay male partners living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) or acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), Haas and Stafford (1998) and Haas (1999), respectively, found that same-sex couples reported the use of similar general maintenance behaviors as those reported in prior research by heterosexual couples. For example, Haas and Stafford found that individuals in same-sex relationships reported similar maintenance behaviors as found by Stafford and Canary (1991; Canary & Stafford, 1992). Specifically, positivity, openness, assurances, shared tasks, and social networks were described as basic maintenance behaviors within the gay and lesbian relationships. In addition, Haas found evidence for use of the Canary and Stafford and Dainton and Stafford (1993) maintenance behaviors in his sample of gay male couples living with HIV or AIDS. The specific maintenance behaviors these gay male couples reported were equity in shared tasks, openness, positivity and favors, assurances, affection, sharing time together, social networks, talk of day, and use of calls and letters and electronic mail. Particular importance of maintaining equity in shared tasks was mentioned by these male couples. Equity was reflected through a tendency to capitalize on the interests of each partner. Similar to past research, performing duties and tasks by one partner or the other is attributed to personal interest and ability to perform the task not by role assignments. In addition, equity is an important relational feature helping to avoid establishing a caregiver and receiver relationship that was rejected by all couples in this HIV-related study (see Haas, 2001, for a more detailed discussion of rejecting notions of caregiving by gay male couples).

As a result of findings reflecting similarities between same-sex and heterosexual couples regarding several relational dimensions and initial evidence of similarities in communicative maintenance behaviors, we hypothesize the following:

H1. When directly compared, individuals in ongoing same-sex and heterosexual marital relationships will report to use generally similar relational maintenance strategies and behaviors.

On the other hand, Dailey (1979) found that same-sex couples averaged higher on measures of dyadic cohesion than heterosexual couples. Dailey hypothesized that this may be due to the increased effort gays and lesbians must invest in their-

relationships to overcome the lack of legal recognition and social acceptance. In addition to finding initial similarities in maintenance behaviors in gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples, Haas and Stafford (1998) also found two unique maintenance behaviors reported as means for same-sex relationships to deal with social stigma and the lack of wide spread acceptance in society. These behaviors included (a) being "out" as a couple and (b) seeking gay and lesbian supportive environments. Being out as a couple used social network support for validation and support of the couple relationship. Seeking gay and lesbian supportive environments means seeking social environments that are accepting and supportive of gays and lesbians and their relationships (e.g., gay and lesbian bars, gay and lesbian vacation guest houses, gay pride events, and the like). Because same-sex couples currently cannot obtain legal validation of their relationships (except for civil unions in the state of Vermont), being open or out to the couple's networks and seeking supportive social environments serve important relationship maintenance functions in these relationships.

Because gay and lesbian couples currently are not fully accepted in American society and experience differing degrees of social and legal discrimination, there may be important differences in how gays and lesbians overcome this lack of social acceptance to maintain their romantic relationships. It is possible, therefore, that gay and lesbian couples may use maintenance behaviors in ways that heterosexual couples do not in coping with these social pressures. To explore potential differences in the reported use of maintenance behaviors, we pose the following research question:

RQ1. When directly compared, are there differences in the prevalence of reported maintenance behaviors by individuals in same-sex versus heterosexual relationships?

METHOD

The purpose of this study was to directly compare the maintenance behaviors used in ongoing same-sex relationships to those of heterosexual relationships. To explore this type of comparison, this study used a matched-sample approach using the open-ended questionnaire developed by Dainton and Stafford (1993).

Matched Sample

First, open-ended questionnaire responses were solicited from a convenience sample of 30 individuals involved in ongoing, committed, gay or lesbian relationships (15 men and 15 women). Participants were recruited through a community-based network sampling technique. All of the gay and lesbian individuals reported them-

selves as being in a committed, ongoing relationship when presented with the options of “dating, seriously dating, or committed” in describing their relationship. Then, to directly compare same-sex and heterosexual maintenance behaviors, 30 married individuals (15 men and 15 women) who had completed the same open-ended questionnaire as part of a larger maintenance study were matched to the gay and lesbian participants on four characteristics: biological sex, age, education level, and length of relationship (within 2 months).

The average age of the gay and lesbian group was 34 years 3 months and the average age of the heterosexual group was 34 years 5 months. The average length of relationship for both the same-sex and heterosexual samples was 5 years 4 months (range: 1 year to 10 years 3 months). To assess level of education, the following scale was used: 1 = did not complete high school, 2 = high school graduate, 3 = some college, 4 = college degree, 5 = some post graduate work, and 6 = a graduate degree. The gay and lesbian sample was relatively highly educated, with approximately 50% having obtained a graduate degree. The heterosexual sample matched the gay and lesbian sample’s levels of education.

Instrumentation

The first portion of the questionnaire asked for demographic information. This was followed by the same open-ended questions asked by Dainton and Stafford (1993) concerning maintenance behavior use. First, participants were asked: “Please offer examples of behaviors (positive and/or negative) that you have used to maintain your relationship.” This was followed by a question to probe “routine” behaviors:

Much of maintaining a relationship can involve mundane or routine aspects of day-to-day life. These are things you might not have thought of above because they might seem too trivial. Please try to describe the routine things you do to maintain your relationship.

Participants were next asked to answer these same two questions regarding their partner’s maintenance behaviors.

Coding Procedures

First, to explore if individuals in gay and lesbian committed relationships engage in similar maintenance behaviors as individuals in marital heterosexual relationships, a subsample of gay and lesbian responses were examined for goodness of fit of the relationship maintenance typology developed by Dainton and Stafford (1993). Instances of these behaviors were evidenced in the gay and lesbian responses. Thus, the category scheme was used to code responses to all open-ended responses of the gay, lesbian, and heterosexual participants. Similar to Dainton and

TABLE 1
 Descriptions of Maintenance Categories and Example Behaviors

-
1. Positivity: Attempts to make interactions cheerful and pleasant
 - a. Nice and cheerful—"I'm cheerful most of the time"
 - b. Favors/gifts—"I give her flowers"
 - c. Proactive prosocial—"I use humor"
 - d. Reactive prosocial—"I'm willing to change things that bother her"
 2. Openness: Direct discussions, offering and listening to thoughts and feelings
 - a. Self-disclosure—"She is always completely honest with me"
 - b. Meta-relational communication—"discuss problems"
 - c. Advice—"ask for advice on house decisions"
 - d. Empathetic behavior—"We respect each other's differences"
 3. Assurances: Implicitly or explicitly assuring each other of the future of the relationship, stressing commitment, and demonstrating faithfulness
 - a. Comfort and support—"encourage him in his work"
 - b. Overt expressions—"I tell her I love her"
 - c. Nonverbal assurances—"I am monogamous"
 - d. Future plans—"discuss plans for the future"
 4. Social Networks: Relying on the support and love of common friends and family or use of people outside the relationship
 5. Shared Tasks: Performing tasks that jointly face the partners—"makes dinner," "pays the bills"
 6. Joint Activities: Spending time with each other
 - a. Sharing time together—"go out to movies"
 - b. Rituals—"We attend church together"
 - c. Nonrituals—"We try to surprise each other in little ways"
 7. Talk: Verbal communication, not as "deep" as openness
 - a. Talk time—"We schedule household meetings"
 - b. Small talk—"We talk about our day"
 8. Mediated Communication
 - a. Cards and letters—"I leave notes in his briefcase"
 - b. Phone calls and e-mail—"I look forward to his calls at work"
 9. Avoidance: Evasion of partner or issues
 - a. Topic avoidance—"I try to avoid talking about some things"
 - b. Conflict avoidance—"She doesn't get mad if I tell her she's spending too much money"
 - c. Person avoidance—"We allow each other to have their space"
 10. Anti-social: Socially unfriendly or unacceptable behaviors
 - a. Indirect—"I would not tell her if someone said something negative about her"
 - b. Direct—"She teases me occasionally to point out my behavior"
 11. Affection: Displays of fondness or sexual intimacy
 - a. Affection—"We kiss good-bye in the morning"
 - b. Sex
 12. Focus on self: Behaviors that are self-directed rather than toward the partner or relationship—"individual spiritual growth"
 13. Other : Miscellaneous
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Note. Descriptions of all categories and examples reprinted from "Relationship Maintenance Behaviours in Gay and Lesbian Couples," by S. Haas and L. Stafford, 1998, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 14(4), pp. 846-855. Copyright Ó 1998 Sage Publications Ltd. Reprinted with permission.

Stafford, the unit of analysis was any relational behavior. Feeling states (e.g., trust) and role relationships (e.g., good partner), however, were not counted or coded as maintenance behaviors.

Dainton and Stafford's (1993) typology was derived from Stafford and Canary's (1991) typology, Canary, Stafford, Hause, and Wallace's (1993) typology, and inductively from the Dainton and Stafford data. It consists of 12 major categories, 29 subcategories, and 1 miscellaneous category. Category descriptions and examples are presented in Table 1.

After the data were coded into one of the behavior categories, a content analysis was performed to assess the commonality and prevalence of each reported behavior. More than one reference to the same behavior by an individual was not counted to determine prevalence of reported behaviors across respondents. Twenty percent of the surveys were coded by two raters. Intercoder reliability of .91 indicated strong agreement in applying the coding scheme to the data. Any coding disagreements were resolved between raters, and the remaining surveys were divided and coded independently by the two raters. Frequencies and relative probabilities for the gay, lesbian, and heterosexual individuals' reported use of each category within their relationships is reported in Table 2. Frequency of reported use was then rank-ordered for the gay and lesbian sample (Table 3) and the heterosexual sample (Table 4). Relative rankings were then compared across the two groups.

RESULTS

Based on prior research indicating few differences between same-sex and heterosexual couples on relational characteristics such as relationship quality, satisfaction, and equity, H1 proposed that individuals in same-sex and heterosexual relationships would report similar behaviors in maintaining their ongoing romantic relationships. Overall, H1 was found to be supported. Dainton and Stafford's (1993) typological behaviors developed from heterosexual married and dating couples' were reported by the gay and lesbian participants in this sample. The open-ended data provide support for H1 in that the same maintenance strategies and behaviors were reported as being used by both heterosexual married and gay or lesbian individuals to sustain their relationships. Relative reported frequencies for the heterosexual men and women, gay men, and lesbian women are reported in Table 2.

Although similarities in overall maintenance behaviors were found between the two groups, potential differences addressed in RQ1 also emerged regarding the frequency with which particular behaviors were reported. To examine these differences, the five most frequently mentioned maintenance behaviors based on percentage of reported use were rank-ordered and compared. The five most prevalent maintenance behaviors reported by the heterosexual married respondents are pre-

TABLE 2
Frequency of Reported Maintenance Behaviors

	<i>Gay and Lesbian Sample</i>			<i>Heterosexual Sample</i>		
	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Total^a</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Total^a</i>
1. Positivity						
a. Nice and cheerful	0	4	4 (13.3%)	2	4	6 (20.0%)
b. favors/gifts	5	7	12 (40.0%)	5	13	18 (60.%)
c. Proactive prosocial	3	6	9 (30.0%)	7	13	20 (66.7%)
d. Reactive prosocial	8	6	14 (46.7%)	2	4	6 (20.0%)
2. Openness						
a. Self-disclosure	2	10	12 (40.0%)	6	10	16 (53.5%)
b. Meta-relational communication	7	9	16 (53.3%)	6	6	12 (40.0%)
c. Advice	2	2	4 (13.3%)	0	0	0 (0.0%)
d. Empathetic behavior	3	10	13 (43.3%)	4	6	10 (33.3%)
3. Assurances						
a. Comfort and support	4	8	12 (40.0%)	8	10	18 (60.0%)
b. Overt expressions	5	8	13 (43.3%)	1	8	9 (30.0%)
c. Nonverbal assurances	3	5	8 (26.6%)	2	2	4 (13.3%)
d. Future plans	3	2	5 (16.6%)	1	0	1 (3.3%)
4. Social networks	2	3	5 (16.6%)	2	4	6 (20.0%)
5. Shared tasks	9	13	22 (73.3%)	12	13	25 (83.3%)

(Continued)

6. Joint activities						
a. Sharing time together	7	8	15 (50.0%)	4	6	10 (33.3%)
b. Rituals	2	4	6 (20.0%)	0	3	3 (10.0%)
c. Nonrituals	1	3	4 (13.3%)	2	6	8 (26.6%)
7. Talk						
a. Talk time	0	4	4 (13.3%)	1	3	4 (13.3%)
b. Small talk	3	4	7 (23.3%)	1	11	12 (40.0%)
8. Mediated communication						
a. Cards and letters	4	4	8 (26.6%)	2	4	6 (20.0%)
b. Phone calls and e-mail	3	4	7 (23.3%)	2	6	8 (26.6%)
9. Avoidance						
a. Topic avoidance	1	1	2 (6.6%)	0	2	2 (6.6%)
b. Conflict avoidance	2	5	7 (23.3%)	1	2	3 (10.0%)
c. Person avoidance	5	5	10 (30.0%)	4	3	7 (23.3%)
10. Antisocial						
a. Indirect	0	3	3 (10.0%)	0	3	3 (10.0%)
b. Direct	1	2	3 (10.0%)	0	2	2 (%)
11. Affection						
a. Affection	5	7	12 (40.0%)	4	11	15 (50.0%)
b. Sex	1	1	2 (6.6%)	0	2	2 (6.6%)
12. Focus on self	2	3	5 (16.6%)	2	3	5 (16.6%)
13. Other: miscellaneous	0	2	2 (6.6%)	0	2	2 (6.6%)

^aN = 30.

sented in Table 3. Two behaviors tied for the third-ranked position for these couples. Next, the five most frequently mentioned maintenance behaviors reported by the gay and lesbian participants are presented in Table 4. Here, two behaviors tied for the fifth-ranked position as the most commonly reported maintenance behaviors used in their same-sex relationships.

In comparing Tables 3 and 4, both heterosexual and same-sex couples reported shared tasks as the most frequently mentioned relationship maintenance behavior. In addition, sharing tasks was reported to be used fairly equally by both men and women across both types of relationships. After shared tasks, however, differences can be observed in the relative rankings of reported prevalence in comparing heterosexual and same-sex relationships. For heterosexual participants, proactive prosocial behaviors was the second most reported behavior. On the other hand, meta-relational communication was the second most reported maintenance behavior for the gay and lesbian participants. Differences also exist for the third most prevalent behaviors across the two types of relationships. Heterosexuals reported providing favors or gifts and comforting and supportive messages as the third most frequent behavior, whereas gays and lesbians reported sharing joint activities together. Self-disclosure and affection were ranked fourth and fifth, respectively, for heterosexuals, whereas those in same-sex relationships reported reactive prosocial behaviors fourth and overt expressions and empathic behavior tied as the fifth most

TABLE 3
Top 5 Most Frequently Reported Heterosexual Maintenance Behaviors

-
1. Shared tasks (83.3%)
 2. Proactive prosocial behaviors (66.7%)
 3. Favors/gifts^a (60%)
 - Comfort/support behaviors^a (60%)
 4. Self-disclosure (53.5%)
 5. Affection (50%)
-

^aBehaviors were of equal reported frequency.

TABLE 4
Top 5 Most Frequently Reported Same-Sex Maintenance Behaviors

-
1. Shared tasks (73.3%)
 2. Meta-relational communication (53.3%)
 3. Joint activities (50.0%)
 4. Reactive prosocial behaviors (46.6%)
 5. Overt expressions^a (43.3%)
 - Empathic behaviors^a (43.3%)
-

^aBehaviors were of equal reported frequency.

frequently reported. The relational implications of these findings are discussed in the following section.

DISCUSSION

Over the past decade, research on maintenance in heterosexual couples continues to increase our understanding of how these relationships are sustained over time. The purpose of this study was to extend previous relationship maintenance research by comparing the relationship maintenance behaviors of ongoing same-sex couples to married heterosexual couples. Other than the Haas and Stafford (1998) and Haas (2001) studies, no previous research examines the communicative relationship maintenance behaviors of gay and lesbian couples. This study is a follow-up to Haas and Stafford through a direct comparison of ongoing, same-sex and heterosexual married relationships.

H1 proposed that individuals in heterosexual married and same-sex couples would likely use similar relationship maintenance behaviors. This hypothesis was supported. Overall, the typology developed by Dainton and Stafford (1993) was found to apply to the self-reported maintenance behaviors of both couple types. For both heterosexual and same-sex relationships, the range of behaviors reported were quite similar. This finding provides evidence that there are basic relationship maintenance behaviors that are used in both same-sex and heterosexual relationships and lends additional support to the validity and generalizability of the Dainton and Stafford maintenance typology.

A further similarity emerged in that the most prevalent maintenance behavior reported across both the heterosexual and same-sex relationships was shared tasks. Shared tasks involves accomplishing relational duties that are the responsibility of both partners often revolving around running a joint household (e.g., paying bills, cooking meals, cleaning, doing laundry, and performing household maintenance). Dainton and Stafford (1993) observed that on the surface sharing tasks may not immediately appear to be a relational maintenance behavior. However, individuals in both same-sex and heterosexual relationships consistently report these types of task-oriented behaviors as the most common way they maintain their intimate relationships. It would appear then that in the process of completing tasks that are a mutual responsibility of the couple, partners clearly feel these behaviors carry relational implications and serve maintenance functions within their relationships. In addition, consistent with previous research (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Kurdek, 1993; Lynch & Reilly, 1986), equity in sharing tasks was found to be an important feature of both heterosexual and same-sex relationships. Although not all tasks were reported to be shared equally, a general balance of task distribution was consistently reported by individuals in the maintenance of both heterosexual and same-sex relationships.

RQ1 explored potential differences, and, although same-sex and heterosexual relationships were found to use similar overall maintenance behaviors, important differences were evident regarding the salience in reporting particular behaviors over others. One important difference can be observed in comparing the second most commonly reported behaviors across the groups. Meta-relational communication ranked second in looking at the frequency of reported behaviors by gays and lesbians in this sample as a maintenance behavior, whereas heterosexuals reported proactive prosocial behaviors. This finding may be an important indication of relational focus for same-sex versus heterosexual couples in maintaining their relationships. For gay and lesbian couples, the focus on meta-relational communication (which involves open discussions regarding the current state of the relationship) may be a reflection of lacking a legal bond to hold the relationship together. Unlike heterosexual marriages, emotional commitment is the sole bonding force in same-sex relationships. It appears that to some degree heterosexual married couples may take for granted that they are bound together through legal marriage, whereas gays and lesbians must frequently “take the pulse” of the relationship to assess its status.

In addition, similar to Kurdek (1993), we found evidence of flexible, negotiated roles within these gay and lesbian relationships. In her work on couple types, Fitzpatrick (1988) found that heterosexual “independent couple types” negotiate role allocations and tend to engage in frequent meta-relational communication. Due to a focus on role change and individual goals, independent couple types need to communicate about the state of the relationship to periodically assess if the personal growth needs of relational partners are being met. Given the lack of formalized role structure found in gay and lesbian relationships, our findings lend further support for the centrality of meta-relational communication within relationships that hold role negotiation as a relational value, perhaps regardless of sexual orientation. Future research is necessary to explore this speculation further.

The fact that heterosexual couples appear to be able to focus on aspects of positivity in their relationships through proactive prosocial behaviors (e.g., humor) as the second most frequent maintenance behavior reported and using favors and gifts (the third most frequent behavior reported) may lend insight into an important qualitative difference between these two couple types. After shared tasks, it would appear that heterosexual married couples may be able to focus their relational energy toward making the relationship positive and pleasant, whereas gay and lesbian couples focus their efforts on assessing the state of the relationship. For gays and lesbians, relational positivity was described in a different way through the use of reactive prosocial behaviors (e.g., efforts to change oneself to please one’s partner). The differing focus on how positivity is manifest in these two couples may indicate yet another important difference.

Furthermore, for the gay and lesbian participants, sharing time together (i.e., spending leisure time engaging in joint activities) was the third most frequently re-

ported behavior. For the heterosexual married couples, sharing time together was a less frequently mentioned maintenance behavior (reported by only one third of these individuals). However, Dainton and Stafford (1993) found sharing time to be a fairly common reported behavior in their combined sample of married and dating heterosexual couples. It is possible that sharing time together may be more characteristic of nonmarried couples (both dating heterosexual and same-sex couples). One possibility is that being married may encourage partners to be less concerned with sharing leisure time engaging in the same activities because of the security of being legally committed. The legal commitment may allow partners to pursue their individual interests. Another explanation is that the presence of children in many marriages limits the amount of potential leisure time available for joint couple activities. The relational implications of lower reported frequency of sharing time together reported in this sample by married individuals related to their relationship maintenance efforts calls for further investigation.

LIMITATIONS

Two limitations of this study are worthy of note. First, the size of the convenience sample used in this study is relatively small ($N = 60$). This was due largely to difficulty in recruiting community-based participants from the stigmatized gay and lesbian population. It is often difficult to recruit participants from minority or stigmatized groups and even more difficult to recruit a subgroup (i.e., coupled group members) within that population. Second, the education level of those in this study was above average. The sample size and education level of this sample may affect the generalizability of the findings. However, we believe the open-ended nature of the data offer important insight into the maintenance behaviors of this understudied population.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to examine the maintenance behaviors of ongoing same-sex relationships through a method of direct comparison to those of heterosexual relationships. In this matched sample, both groups reported similar overall maintenance behaviors. This lends support to the hypothesis that there are likely basic relationship maintenance behaviors common to all romantic relationships. Specifically, the typological behaviors of Dainton and Stafford (1993) were reported within these gay and lesbian relationships and, thus, add additional support for the validity of this typology.

In addition to a general similarity in types of behaviors reported, important differences regarding the prevalence in reporting certain behaviors were found for

both groups. Specifically in regards to gay and lesbian relationships, the primary emphasis placed on bonding maintenance behaviors (e.g., meta-relational communication, sharing joint activities, overt expressions of love and empathy for one's partner) seems to indicate important qualitative relational differences that married couples may take for granted. Continued research is called for to increase our understanding of relational maintenance in same-sex relationships.

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