

Pioneers in Partnership: Lesbian and Gay Male Couples in Civil Unions Compared With Those Not in Civil Unions and Married Heterosexual Siblings

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This study compared 212 lesbians and 123 gay men who had civil unions in Vermont during the first year legislation made this available with 166 lesbians and 72 gay men in their friendship network who had not had civil unions, and also with 219 heterosexual married women and 193 heterosexual married men consisting of civil union couples' siblings and their spouses. Married heterosexual couples had been together longer and had more traditional division of labor and child care than did lesbians and gay men in both types of couples. Lesbians in civil unions were more open about their sexual orientation than those not in civil unions, and gay men in civil unions were closer to their family of origin than gay men not in civil unions. This is the first study on same-sex couples with civil unions, and the first to compare lesbians and gay men with their married siblings. At a time of legal changes for same-sex couples, these results indicate that legalized same-sex relationships are related to visibility of same-sex couples to their family and the general public.

keywords: civil unions, same-sex couples, lesbian couples, gay male couples, sexual orientation, division of labor

Only a few countries have legalized same-sex relationships such as same-sex marriage (Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands), same-sex partnerships (Denmark), and registered same-sex cohabitants (France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Israel, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, and Sweden; Eskridge, 2001). In the United States, there is no federal recognition of same-sex marriage, despite prior legal referenda in Hawaii, Alaska, and Vermont, and more recently in other cities and states (Strasser, 2002). The state legislature of Vermont became a pioneer in enacting legal rights for lesbian and gay male couples when it passed Act 91 of the Acts and Resolves of the Vermont 2000 Legislative Session. Act 91, *An Act Relating to Civil Unions* (Moats, 2004), was

signed by former Governor Howard Dean in June 2000, allowing gay men and lesbians to be united in civil unions beginning on July 1, 2000 (Hollingdale, 2002). Same-sex civil unions in Vermont are the first legal unions for gay and lesbian couples in the United States at the state level. Although it is a groundbreaking effort, this legislation is still limited—It is not marriage and it is not legal outside Vermont. Couples receive only statewide benefits for income tax, inheritance, family medical leave, and so forth, which is not nearly the same as receiving these benefits on the federal level.

Given that civil union legislation is so recent, little information exists on couples who have chosen to make use of such legalized relationships. The first goal of the present study was to compile a demographic and relationship profile of couples who had civil unions in Vermont during the first year that such legislation was available. The second goal involved representativeness of sampling. The majority of prior research on lesbians and gay men (including lesbian and gay male couples) has relied on convenience samples, so that it was impossible to know the respondents' degree of representativeness of the general lesbian and gay male communities. In the present study, we were able to compare basic information about survey respondents with the civil union population as a whole, because civil unions, like marriage certificates, are a matter of public record. Thus, this study had access to a population, not just a sample, and represents a methodological improvement over previous research in this area. Consequently, our second goal was to compare our sample with the whole civil union

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population on available variables, in order to assess its representativeness.

Our third goal concerned appropriate comparison groups. The media often compares and contrasts civil unions with heterosexual marriage, so we wanted to include a comparison group of heterosexual married couples. Recent research (e.g., Dibble, Roberts, & Nussey, in press; Roberts, Dibble, Nussey, & Casey, 2003; Rothblum & Factor, 2001) has included heterosexual siblings of lesbians and gay men for comparison purposes. Many lesbians and gay men have heterosexual siblings, and these siblings are usually similar in age, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. Thus, we asked each civil union couple to give us the name and contact information of a heterosexual sibling who was married and that of his or her spouse. Very little research has involved adult siblings as a comparison group, and this presents a unique method of comparing couples who are different in sexual orientation yet similar on several demographic variables.

In addition, we asked each civil union couple to give us the name and contact information of a couple in their friendship circle who was lesbian or gay but who had not had a civil union. By comparing civil unions to same-sex couples in the couples' friendship network, we expected that, on average, couples that socialize together would be comparable on demographics (such as age, income) and also in length of relationship. By focusing on couples who had civil unions, the present study sets a precedent in using a legal definition in U.S. same-sex couples research. Given that all other same-sex couple research has focused on couples who have not had civil unions, this second comparison group represents the status quo of current same-sex couples research.

Lesbian and Gay Male Couples Versus Heterosexual Married Couples

Prior research on lesbians and gay men in convenience samples comparing them with U.S. census data on lesbians and gay men (e.g., Bradford & Ryan, 1988), and their heterosexual siblings (e.g., Rothblum & Factor, 2001) and with U.S. census data on lesbians and gay men in representative national samples (e.g., Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994), has found some consistencies on demographics. On average, lesbians and gay men have higher levels of education than heterosexuals, are less likely to have children, and tend to be less religious. Gay men frequently live in large cities. These studies did not differentiate between lesbians and gay men who were coupled versus those who were not. We too predicted these demographic differences to occur between same-sex couples in civil unions and corresponding male or female married heterosexuals. A considerable body of research has found that heterosexual married women perform a greater proportion of housework and child care than their husbands, whereas same-sex couples share these tasks more equitably (Chan, Brooks, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983). Similarly, we expected same-sex couples in civil unions as well as those not in civil unions to

share housework and child care to a greater extent than heterosexual married couples.

Lesbian and Gay Male Couples in Civil Unions Versus Those Not in Civil Unions

We also had some predictions of ways in which civil union couples would differ from lesbians and gay male couples who were not in civil unions. Anyone can access civil union records, so names and addresses of couples are public information. Given the public accessibility of civil union records, we expected civil union couples to be more "out" or open about their sexual orientation than couples not in civil unions. We also predicted that couples who choose to legalize their relationship are closer to family of origin than those who have not had civil unions. This includes having more frequent contact with parents and partner's parents and, for example, bringing the partner to family events.

In a society where their relationship is not formally recognized, it is not surprising that many lesbian and gay male couples turn to their "family of friends" or friendship circle for social support. Kurdek and Schmitt (1987) surveyed 44 married, 35 heterosexual cohabiting, 50 gay male, and 56 lesbian couples about emotional support from family and friends. Lesbian and gay male couples perceived less support from their families and more support from friends than did married couples. Kurdek (1988) interpreted this difference in light of family members having difficulty accepting the lesbian or gay family member and the partner, as well as the couple's need to keep distance from the family to avoid discovery of their sexual orientation. This lack of disclosure would limit the sources of social support that lesbian and gay couples have and place greater importance on friends. Consequently, we predicted that lesbians and gay men not in civil unions would perceive more social support from their friends, whereas lesbians and gay men in civil unions, like married couples, would perceive more social support from their family. Finally, we predicted that lesbians and gay men in civil unions would be more coupled in terms of spending leisure and social time together versus alone, and having more friends in common, than same-sex couples not in civil unions.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We obtained photocopies of all 2,475 civil union certificates from the period July 1, 2000, to June 30, 2001, the first year that this legislation began, from the Vermont Office of Vital Records of the Vermont Department of Health. On the basis of the information on the certificates, only 21% of the couples were from Vermont, two thirds of couples were female, and 10% of individuals were members of ethnic minority groups. We sent a letter to each couple, congratulating them on their civil union and asking if they were willing to participate in a research project that focused on "demographic information, your relationship, your connection to your family of origin, and social supports available to you in your community." We also asked civil union couples if they would

complete a reply form with contact information of a heterosexual married sibling and his or her spouse as well as a gay or lesbian couple in their friendship circle who had not had a civil union. Siblings and friends did not have to be the same gender as the civil union couple. This study had Institutional Review Board approval, and return of the reply form indicated consent.

Of the 2,475 civil union couples who were sent letters, 165 addresses (7%) were incorrect, 5 individuals notified us that their partner had died, 28 indicated that their relationship had ended, and 8 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 2,269 possible civil union couples. We received back reply forms from 947 couples (42%) indicating willingness to participate in the study.

We had funding to send out questionnaires to 400 civil union couples as well as 400 lesbian and gay couples not in civil unions and 400 married heterosexual couples. Questionnaires were sent to the first 400 civil union couples who sent back reply forms and who were willing to give us contact information about siblings and friends. Each couple was sent two questionnaires and two postage-paid reply envelopes, along with a cover sheet. Twelve same-sex couples who had not had civil unions and 10 heterosexual married couples could not be included (e.g., their relationship had terminated, their address was incorrect). 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%) "families" of couples (this ranged from receiving questionnaires from both members of all three types of couples to receiving 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%). We received back 466 (58%) from same-sex couples not in civil unions and 413 (52%) from married heterosexuals (these numbers represent total respondents; we did not always receive back two questionnaires from each couple).

Measures

Respondents completed a self-report questionnaire including the following measures.¹

Demographics. Participants were asked to provide 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. Respondents were asked to indicate the year they met their current partner, the year they began going out with their partner, and the year they began living with him or her.

Children. Respondents were asked if they have children, the number and ages of the 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 child care they did.

Housework. Respondents were asked how many hours they spend each week on housework.

Ending the relationship. Respondents were asked whether they had ever seriously considered ending the relationship with their partner and whether they seriously discussed ending their relationship. These were scored on 4-point Likert scales (1 = *never*; 4 = *more than 3 times*).

Contact and closeness to parents. There were a number of items about relationship with parents and partner's parents, includ-

ing contact with mother and father and the initiation of contact with partner's mother and father (scored on 9-point Likert scales ranging from 1 = *daily* to 9 = *never*). Respondents were asked the degree to which their mother and father make them feel like part of the family (ranging from 1 = *very much* to 9 = *not at all*) 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."

At the beginning of this section, respondents were asked if either or both parents were deceased. If both parents were deceased, they were asked to omit this section. Each item also had the choice "does not apply in my situation" for respondents with one deceased parent.

Leisure activities and friends. 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 (ranging from 1 = *always together* to 9 = *always alone*). They were asked how many of their friends were also friends of their partner's (ranging from 1 = *all* to 5 = *half* to 9 = *none*) and how many current friends used to be lovers.

Social support from friends and family. 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 are asked to circle *yes*, *no*, or *don't know* to 20 statements about friends and family, respectively. Items are scored as +1 if they are circled in the direction of perceived social support (*don't know* answers are not scored), and a high score indicates high perceived social support. The perceived social support measures are internally consistent and measure constructs that are separate from each other and from measures of social networks (e.g., number of friends; Procidano & Heller, 1983).

Outness. Level of outness about sexual orientation was assessed only for lesbian and gay male respondents, with the Outness Inventory developed by Mohr and Fassinger (2000). The Outness Inventory is an 11-item self-report measure designed to measure the degree to which individuals are open about their sexual orientation in different spheres of their lives (e.g., "mother or stepmother," "my work peers"). Items are scored on 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*person definitely does not know about your sexual orientation status*) to 7 (*person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, and it is openly talked about*). Total scores ranged from 11 to 77.

Results

Data Analyses

For the present analyses, we used only questionnaires with the letter A (from one member of the civil union couple), C (from one member of a same-sex couple that had not had a civil union), and E and F (both members of the heterosexual married couple, given that they were always of different genders). If only one member of a couple returned a questionnaire, we included it if it had the letter A, C, E, or F; if it had the letter B or D, we did not include it. This ensured that we did not overly represent questionnaires

¹ A more complete report including all measures from the questionnaire is available from the authors.

Table 1
Comparison of Lesbians in Civil Unions, Lesbians Not in Civil Unions, and Heterosexual Married Women

Variable	Lesbians in civil unions (n = 212)	Lesbians not in civil unions (n = 166)	Heterosexual married women (n = 219)	Statistic
Age in years	42.74 (8.57)	42.15 (9.25)	43.10 (1.52)	$F(2, 588) = 1.06$
Race/ethnicity				$\chi^2(12, N = 591) = 15.18$
African American/Black	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%	
Asian American/Pacific Islander	1.0%	0.0%	1.4%	
Latina	2.9%	1.2%	0.9%	
Native American/American Indian	1.0%	2.5%	0.5%	
European American/White	91.9%	93.9%	94.5%	
Other	0.5%	0.0%	1.4%	
Biracial	1.9%	2.5%	1.4%	
Years of education	15.93 _a (1.59)	15.86 _a (1.51)	15.20 _b (1.84)	$F(2, 593) = 12.26****$
Individual income	\$55,518 (\$79,201)	\$54,733 (\$39,176)	\$40,583 (\$44,931)	$F(2, 549) = 3.77$
Religion while growing up				$\chi^2(12, N = 592) = 12.58$
Buddhist	0.5%	0.6%	0.0%	
Catholic	37.3%	31.5%	39.0%	
Jewish	7.7%	7.3%	8.7%	
Protestant	46.9%	47.3%	41.7%	
None	5.3%	9.7%	4.6%	
Spiritual beliefs do not fit formal religion	1.0%	1.8%	1.8%	
Other	1.4%	1.8%	4.1%	
Religion now				$\chi^2(12, N = 568) = 61.89****$
Buddhist	1.5%	1.2%	0.5%	
Catholic	5.9%	7.3%	21.6%	
Jewish	7.8%	6.7%	8.0%	
Protestant	27.8%	27.4%	38.2%	
None	15.6%	16.5%	11.1%	
Spiritual beliefs do not fit formal religion	39.0%	40.2%	16.1%	
Other	2.4%	0.6%	4.0%	
Religion				
Importance ^a	3.14 (1.48)	3.08 (1.38)	3.54 (1.38)	$F(2, 587) = 6.28$
Frequency of attending services ^b	4.32 _a (1.73)	4.35 _a (1.67)	3.67 _b (1.89)	$F(2, 591) = 9.68****$
Location				
Size of city or town				$\chi^2(10, N = 590) = 16.50$
Live in large city	15.2%	20.1%	14.4%	
Years in current location	11.17 _a (10.99)	13.27 _a (11.23)	15.92 _b (13.82)	$F(2, 585) = 8.02****$
Distance of last move ^c	2.96 (1.65)	2.78 (1.60)	2.92 (1.67)	$F(2, 579) = 0.56$
Relationship				
No. years known partner	10.93 _a (7.58)	12.33 _a (8.25)	19.71 _b (11.67)	$F(2, 590) = 52.30****$
No. years since dating	9.46 _a (7.06)	10.41 _a (7.63)	18.70 _b (11.79)	$F(2, 593) = 63.80****$
No. years living together	8.87 _a (6.90)	10.22 _a (7.19)	14.95 _b (9.84)	$F(2, 514) = 28.11****$
Children				
Have children	34.0%	31.3%	80.3%	$\chi^2(2, N = 596) = 126.47****$
Mean age of children	12.88 (10.26)	15.62 (12.97)	14.65 (12.06)	$F(2, 291) = 0.90$
From current relationship	15.1%	12.7%	62.8%	$\chi^2(2, N = 596) = 152.02****$
From prior relationship	19.3%	18.1%	15.1%	$\chi^2(2, N = 596) = 1.38$
Mean time children live with participants during the year ^d	3.05 (2.11)	3.80 (7.28)	2.23 (2.07)	$F(2, 276) = 4.04$
% of children living with participants for specified portions of the year				
Full-time	39.1%	50.0%	69.5%	
7-11 months	15.9%	8.7%	4.3%	
2-4 months	8.6%	10.9%	5.6%	
Less than 2 months	8.6%	4.4%	1.2%	
On weekends only	7.2%	0.0%	1.8%	
Visit occasionally	14.4%	21.7%	11.8%	
Never visit	5.8%	2.2%	5.0%	
Child care				$\chi^2(10, N = 296) = 38.00****$
Do all or most	7.0%	3.9%	13.2%	
Do more than partner	21.1%	17.6%	33.3%	
Share equally	21.1%	15.7%	24.7%	
Partner does more than me	16.9%	19.6%	2.3%	
Partner does all or most	4.2%	3.9%	0.6%	
Not applicable	29.6%	39.2%	25.9%	

Table 1 (continued)

Variable	Lesbians in civil unions (n = 212)	Lesbians not in civil unions (n = 166)	Heterosexual married women (n = 219)	Statistic
Own home	89.1%	90.9%	87.6%	$\chi^2(2, N = 593) = 1.00$
Home in both names	72.0%	65.1%	87.9%	$\chi^2(2, N = 522) = 27.94****$
Joint bank account	84.0%	73.8%	88.5%	$\chi^2(2, N = 594) = 16.69$
Hours per week spent on housework ^c	3.39 _a (1.11)	3.32 _a (1.05)	4.15 _b (1.46)	$F(2, 589) = 27.99****$
None	0.5%	0.6%	0.0%	
5 or less	16.5%	17.1%	9.9%	
6–10	44.8%	45.7%	22.1%	
11–20	26.4%	28.7%	38.5%	
21–30	8.5%	4.9%	15.0%	
Over 30	3.2%	3.0%	14.5%	
Ending relationship ^f				
Seriously considered	1.59 (0.93)	1.67 (0.89)	1.75 (0.98)	$F(2, 588) = 1.56$
Seriously discussed	1.47 (0.76)	1.65 (0.83)	1.58 (0.91)	$F(2, 593) = 2.17$
Social support ^g				
From friends	15.55 (4.45)	15.80 (4.22)	14.86 (4.32)	$F(2, 595) = 2.50$
From family	12.14 _a (6.60)	11.29 _a (6.58)	15.33 _b (5.15)	$F(2, 591) = 24.30****$
Contact with ^h				
Mother	3.51 _a (1.58)	3.09 _b (1.32)	2.46 _c (1.20)	$F(2, 455) = 24.31****$
Father	4.10 _a (1.69)	4.09 _a (1.61)	3.56 _b (1.92)	$F(2, 377) = 4.12$
Initiate contact with ^h				
Partner's mother	6.62 _a (1.90)	6.87 _a (1.87)	5.06 _b (1.93)	$F(2, 473) = 42.88****$
Partner's father	7.15 _a (1.81)	7.39 _a (1.85)	5.88 _b (2.03)	$F(2, 353) = 21.59****$
Mother makes you feel like part of the family ⁱ	2.86	3.43	2.46	$F(2, 476) = 5.60$
Father makes you feel like part of the family ⁱ	3.16	3.52	2.55	$F(2, 352) = 3.94$
Always bring partner when visiting mother	31.1%	24.4%	16.9%	$\chi^2(2, N = 440) = 30.29$
Always bring partner when visiting father	32.3%	28.9%	19.4%	$\chi^2(2, N = 354) = 27.64$
Consider themselves married	94.8%	72.3%		$\chi^2(1, N = 370) = 36.14****$
Leisure activities alone versus together ^j	3.36 _a (1.38)	3.60 _a (1.58)	3.95 _b (1.80)	$F(2, 594) = 7.37***$
Attend social events with partner ^j	2.44 _a (1.45)	2.43 _a (1.28)	3.62 _b (1.89)	$F(2, 591) = 38.24****$
Mutual friends ^k	2.95 _a (1.84)	2.93 _a (1.95)	3.89 _b (1.97)	$F(2, 591) = 16.19****$
No. of friends who used to be lovers	0.41 _a (0.81)	0.49 _a (0.82)	0.09 _b (0.37)	$F(2, 576) = 18.96****$
Level of outness ^l	5.70 (1.09)	5.25 (1.40)		$F(1, 375) = 12.40****$

Note. Percentages are given for categorical variables. Means, followed by standard deviations (in parentheses), are given for continuous variables.

^a 1 = not at all important; 3 = moderately important; 5 = very important. ^b 1 = weekly; 2 = more than once a month; 3 = about once a month; 4 = several times a year; 5 = rarely; 6 = never. ^c 1 = 0–20 miles; 2 = 21–50 miles; 3 = 51–100 miles; 4 = 101–500 miles; 5 = over 500 miles. ^d 1 = full-time; 2 = 7–11 months; 3 = 2–4 months; 4 = less than 2 months; 5 = on weekends only; 6 = visits occasionally. ^e 1 = none; 2 = 5 hr or less; 3 = 6–10 hr; 4 = 11–20 hr; 5 = 21–30 hr; 6 = 31–40 hr; 7 = 41–50 hr; 8 = 51–60 hr; 9 = 61 hr or more. ^f 1 = never; 2 = once; 3 = 2–3 times; 4 = more than 3 times. ^g 20 items, each given 1 point if in the direction of social support. ^h 1 = daily or almost every day; 2 = 3–4 times a week; 3 = 1–2 times a week; 4 = 2–3 times a month; 5 = once a month; 6 = once every few months; 6 = a few times a year; 7 = about once a year; 8 = less than once a year; 9 = never. ⁱ 1 = very much; 9 = not at all. ^j 1 = always together; 5 = half together/half alone; 9 = always alone. ^k 1 = all; 5 = half; 9 = none. ^l 11-item Outness Inventory, where 1 = person definitely does not know about your sexual orientation status and 7 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status and it is openly talked about.

*** $p < .001$. **** $p < .0005$; within rows, means with different subscripts are significantly different in pairwise comparisons between groups.

from the member of the couple more likely to respond or to respond within the specified time frame. This resulted in 335 members of civil unions (212 lesbians and 123 gay men), 238 members of same-sex couples not in civil unions (166 lesbians and 72 gay men) and 412 married heterosexual participants (219 women and 193 men).

We then performed separate one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) for women and men for continuous variables and chi-square analyses for categorical variables, which ensured that no two members of any couple were represented in the same analysis. This yielded a comparison of 212 lesbians in civil unions, 166 lesbians not in civil unions, and 219 heterosexual married women. Among men,

there were 123 gay men in civil unions, 72 gay men not in civil unions, and 193 heterosexual married men. The heterosexual women and men were from the same couples but were never compared to each other. We used a Bonferroni adjustment to control for the number of comparisons for each gender; the resulting adjustment set the corrected p value at $<.001$.

Women

Demographic information. Table 1 indicates means and percentages of comparisons among lesbians in civil unions, lesbians not in civil unions, and heterosexual married

Table 2
Comparison of Gay Men in Civil Unions, Gay Men Not in Civil Unions, and Heterosexual Married Men

Variable	Gay men in civil unions (n = 123)	Gay men not in civil unions (n = 72)	Heterosexual married men (n = 193)	Statistic
Age	44.03 (9.71)	44.41 (10.95)	45.84 (10.48)	$F(2, 382) = 1.27$
Race/ethnicity				$\chi^2(12, N = 384) = 14.80$
African American/Black	0.8%	4.2%	0.0%	
Asian American/Pacific Islander	2.5%	2.8%	1.1%	
Latino	1.6%	0.0%	0.0%	
Native American/American Indian	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%	
European American/White	93.4%	90.3%	95.8%	
Other	0.8%	0.0%	0.5%	
Biracial	0.8%	2.8%	1.6%	
Years of education	15.90 (1.46)	15.64 (1.76)	15.18 (1.90)	$F(2, 385) = 6.59$
Individual Income	\$65,847 (\$51,380)	\$79,172 (\$125,661)	\$73,706 (\$80,692)	$F(2, 351) = 0.60$
Religion while growing up				$\chi^2(12, N = 388) = 13.93$
Buddhist	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	
Catholic	39.8%	31.9%	33.7%	
Jewish	6.5%	12.5%	9.8%	
Protestant	43.9%	48.6%	46.6%	
None	2.4%	1.4%	7.3%	
Spiritual beliefs do not fit formal religion	3.3%	1.4%	0.5%	
Other	4.1%	4.2%	2.1%	
Religion now				$\chi^2(12, N = 361) = 37.10****$
Buddhist	0.8%	0.0%	0.6%	
Catholic	7.5%	8.5%	22.9%	
Jewish	5.0%	12.7%	7.6%	
Protestant	29.2%	25.4%	37.1%	
None	30.8%	18.3%	14.1%	
Spiritual beliefs do not fit formal religion	23.3%	32.4%	15.9%	
Other	3.3%	2.8%	1.8%	
Religion				
Importance ^a	2.56 _a (1.48)	2.85 _a (1.38)	3.22 _b (1.42)	$F(2, 385) = 7.99****$
Frequency of attending services ^b	4.45 (1.66)	4.76 (1.41)	4.04 (1.85)	$F(2, 386) = 5.35$
Location				
Size of city or town				$\chi^2(8, N = 383) = 60.29****$
Live in large city	43.4%	37.5%	10.1%	
Years in current location	11.74 (10.24)	14.56 (12.69)	15.95 (14.46)	$F(2, 381) = 3.88$
Distance of last move ^c	3.28 (1.57)	3.50 (1.60)	2.77 (1.67)	$F(2, 375) = 6.55$
Relationship				
No. years known partner	13.16 _a (9.35)	12.89 _a (8.72)	19.81 _b (11.98)	$F(2, 380) = 19.21****$
No. years since dating	12.75 _a (9.07)	12.16 _a (8.70)	18.75 _b (12.00)	$F(2, 378) = 16.45****$
No. years living together	12.12 (8.91)	12.71 (8.64)	15.22 (10.13)	$F(2, 331) = 4.21$
Children				
Have children	17.9%	9.7%	81.8%	$\chi^2(2, N = 387) = 176.40****$
Mean age of children	16.14 (10.59)	23.32 (9.75)	15.23 (12.48)	$F(2, 179) = 1.49$
From current relationship	8.1%	1.4%	63.5%	$\chi^2(2, N = 387) = 144.70****$
From prior relationship	10.6%	8.3%	14.6%	$\chi^2(2, N = 387) = 2.34$
Mean time children live with participants during the year ^d	3.79 (2.44)	4.12 (2.69)	2.52 (2.24)	$F(2, 171) = 3.69$
% of children living with participants for specified portions of the year				
Full-time	33.3%	33.3%	63.9%	
7-11 months	5.6%	0.0%	2.8%	
2-4 months	11.1%	16.7%	4.8%	
Less than 2 months	0.0%	0.0%	2.1%	
On weekends only	0.0%	0.0%	3.5%	
Visit occasionally	11.1%	33.4%	20.4%	
Never visit	16.7%	16.7%	6.8%	
Child care				$\chi^2(10, N = 180) = 17.83$
Do all or most	4.8%	14.3%	2.0%	
Do more than partner	4.8%	0.0%	4.6%	
Share equally	38.1%	0.0%	22.4%	
Partner does more than me	19.0%	14.3%	40.1%	
Partner does all or most	0.0%	0.0%	5.3%	
Not applicable	33.3%	71.4%	25.7%	

Table 2 (continued)

Variable	Gay men in civil unions (n = 123)	Gay men not in civil unions (n = 72)	Heterosexual married men (n = 193)	Statistic
Own home	85.4%	80.3%	88.0%	$\chi^2(2, N = 385) = 2.51$
Home in both names	72.8%	66.1%	86.1%	$\chi^2(2, N = 324) = 16.52$
Joint bank account	81.3%	57.7%	90.1%	$\chi^2(2, N = 386) = 35.77****$
Hours per week spent on housework ^c	3.41 (1.06)	3.06 (.95)	3.22 (1.12)	$F(2, 384) = 2.67$
None	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%	
5 or less	21.1%	29.2%	25.4%	
6–10	35.0%	47.2%	35.4%	
11–20	28.5%	13.9%	29.1%	
21–30	13.0%	8.3%	5.8%	
Over 30	2.4%	1.4%	2.6%	
Ending relationship ^f				
Seriously considered	1.62 _a (0.87)	2.24 _b (1.36)	1.59 _a (0.99)	$F(2, 380) = 11.03****$
Seriously discussed	1.50 _a (0.75)	1.97 _b (1.22)	1.52 _a (0.89)	$F(2, 383) = 7.34***$
Social support ^g				
From friends	15.29 _a (4.79)	15.22 _a (4.75)	11.42 _b (5.35)	$F(2, 383) = 27.69****$
From family	11.90 (6.48)	11.07 (6.46)	12.80 (5.89)	$F(2, 376) = 2.18$
Contact with ^h				
Mother	3.17 (1.43)	3.53 (1.62)	3.24 (1.31)	$F(2, 291) = 1.15$
Father	4.27 (1.73)	4.26 (1.65)	3.94 (1.71)	$F(2, 225) = .35$
Initiate contact with ^h				
Partner's mother	6.12 _a (2.18)	6.97 _b (1.90)	5.72 _a (2.27)	$F(2, 308) = 6.99***$
Partner's father	6.60 _a (2.13)	7.46 _a (1.53)	5.88 _b (2.19)	$F(2, 244) = 10.37****$
Mother makes you feel like part of the family ⁱ	2.57 (2.50)	3.17 (2.74)	2.00 (1.88)	$F(2, 311) = 5.95$
Father makes you feel like part of the family ⁱ	2.95 _a (2.99)	4.09 _b (3.17)	1.94 _c (1.81)	$F(2, 240) = 12.70****$
Always bring partner when visiting mother	37.5%	17.4%	26.8%	$\chi^2(2, N = 284) = 6.47$
Always bring partner when visiting father	41.7%	18.4%	20.2%	$\chi^2(2, N = 214) = 11.69$
Consider themselves married	85.4%	65.3%		$\chi^2(1, N = 195) = 10.66****$
Leisure activities alone versus together ^j	3.78 (1.66)	4.35 (1.75)	4.17 (1.68)	$F(2, 384) = 3.11$
Attend social events with partner ^j	2.32 (1.33)	2.80 (1.68)	2.88 (1.70)	$F(2, 380) = 4.83$
Mutual friends ^k	2.52 _a (1.65)	3.10 _b (0.99)	3.69 _c (1.93)	$F(2, 382) = 14.94****$
Friends used to be lovers	0.28 _a (0.64)	0.31 _a (0.69)	0.00 _b (0.32)	$F(2, 374) = 9.60****$
Level of outness ^l	5.62 (1.31)	5.43 (1.16)		$F(1, 192) = 1.11$

Note. Percentages are given for categorical variables. Means, followed by standard deviations (in parentheses), are given for continuous variables.

^a 1 = not at all important; 3 = moderately important; 5 = very important. ^b 1 = weekly; 2 = more than once a month; 3 = about once a month; 4 = several times a year; 5 = rarely; 6 = never. ^c 1 = 0–20 miles; 2 = 21–50 miles; 3 = 51–100 miles; 4 = 101–500 miles; 5 = over 500 miles. ^d 1 = full-time; 2 = 7–11 months; 3 = 2–4 months; 4 = less than 2 months; 5 = on weekends only; 6 = visits occasionally. ^e 1 = none; 2 = 5 hr or less; 3 = 6–10 hr; 4 = 11–20 hr; 5 = 21–30 hr; 6 = 31–40 hr; 7 = 41–50 hr; 8 = 51–60 hr; 9 = 61 hr or more. ^f 1 = never; 2 = once; 3 = 2–3 times; 4 = more than 3 times. ^g 20 items, each given 1 point if in the direction of social support. ^h 1 = daily or almost every day; 2 = 3–4 times a week; 3 = 1–2 times a week; 4 = 2–3 times a month; 5 = once a month; 6 = once every few months; 7 = a few times a year; 8 = less than once a year; 9 = never. ⁱ 1 = very much; 9 = not at all. ^j 1 = always together; 5 = half together/half alone; 9 = always alone. ^k 1 = all; 5 = half; 9 = none. ^l 11-item Outness Inventory, where 1 = person definitely does not know about your sexual orientation status and 7 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status and it is openly talked about.

*** $p < .001$. **** $p < .0005$; within rows, means with different subscripts are significantly different in pairwise comparisons between groups.

women. Women in the three types of couples did not differ significantly on age, with a mean age in the early 40s. Similarly, the three types of couples did not differ significantly on race or ethnicity; more than 90% were White/European American. Lesbians in both types of couples had significantly higher levels of education compared with heterosexual married women, but there was no significant group difference on individual income (the mean income of \$40,583 for heterosexual married women includes those who are homemakers and earn no income; when homemakers are excluded, the mean income for heterosexual married women increased to \$49,773). The groups did not differ in the size of the city or town in which they were currently

living. Heterosexual married women had lived in their current location significantly longer than lesbians in both types of groups, but there was no difference in how far women moved during their most recent move.

The sample did not differ significantly in religion while growing up, but this had changed markedly in adulthood, and the difference in current religion was significant among groups. Whereas most heterosexual women still identified as Catholic or Protestant, about 40% of lesbians in both types of couples reported that their spiritual beliefs do not fit a formal religion, compared with 16% of heterosexual married women. The percentage of women who were Jewish had not changed much in adulthood. Heterosexual married

women also attended religious services more frequently than did lesbians in both types of couples.

Relationship and children. Heterosexual married women had been in their current relationship significantly longer than lesbians in both types of couples. The groups did not differ with respect to having seriously considered ending their relationship or having seriously discussed ending their relationship. Among heterosexual married women, 80% had children, whereas this was the case for just over 30% of lesbians in both groups. Furthermore, most heterosexual married women had children from their current relationship, compared with less than one fifth of lesbians. The three groups did not differ significantly in the percentage that had children from a prior relationship or in the mean age of children. The groups did not differ in the percentage of time children lived with them during the year. There was a significant effect for percentage of child care that women did relative to their partner. Heterosexual married women were more likely to report that they did all or most of the child care, and also more than their partner, whereas these percentages were more evenly divided for lesbians.

Joint ownership and housework. The majority of women in all three types of couples owned their home and also had a joint bank account with their partner. However, heterosexual married women were more likely to have home ownership in both partners' names (88%) than lesbians in civil unions (72%) or lesbians not in civil unions (65%). There was a significant difference between groups on self-reported hours that they personally spent on housework each week. Heterosexual married women reported spending an average of 11–20 hr on housework per week, compared with an average of between 6 and 10 hr and 11 and 20 hr for lesbians in both groups.

Social support and contact with family of origin. The three types of couples did not differ on perceived social support from friends. However, heterosexual married women perceived significantly more social support from family than did lesbians in either group. Heterosexual married women had the most frequent contact with their mother, followed by lesbians not in civil unions, with lesbians in civil unions having the least frequent contact. The groups did not differ significantly in contact with father. Heterosexual married women had initiated contact with their partner's mother and father more frequently than had lesbians in both types of groups. The groups did not differ in feeling that their mother and father made them feel "like part of the family," and there were no group differences in the frequency with which women brought their partners along when visiting their parents. Lesbians in civil unions were also significantly more likely to consider themselves "married" than were lesbians not in civil unions.

Lesbians in both types of couples did more leisure activities with their partner and attended social events more with their partner than by themselves, compared with heterosexual married women. Lesbians in both groups were also significantly more likely to have mutual friends, compared with heterosexual married women. Very few women had friends who used to be lovers, but this was significantly

more common among lesbians in both groups than among heterosexual married women. On the Outness Inventory, lesbians in civil unions scored higher, indicating greater outness, than did lesbians not in civil unions.

Men

Demographic information. Table 2 presents means and results of comparisons for gay men in civil unions, those not in civil unions, and heterosexual married men. The three groups did not differ significantly on race/ethnicity, age, educational level, or individual income; on average, men were in their 40s, and over 90% were European American. Gay men in both types of couples were over three times more likely to be living in a large city than were heterosexual married men.

Men in the three types of couples did not differ significantly in religion while growing up. Current religion, however, showed significant group differences. Approximately the same percentages of men in each group were still Jewish, but fewer gay men were currently Catholic or Protestant compared with heterosexual married men. Instead, gay men were more likely to indicate that their spiritual beliefs did not fit a formal religion or to indicate no current religion. Gay men also rated the importance of religion significantly lower than did heterosexual married men.

Relationship, children, and housework. Heterosexual married men had been in their current relationship significantly longer than gay men in both groups. 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 and heterosexual married men. Over 80% of heterosexual married men had children, compared with 17% of gay men in civil unions and 10% of gay men not in civil unions. Among men who had children, there was no significant difference in the mean ages of children. Whereas 65% of heterosexual married men had children from their current relationship, this was the case for only 8% of gay men in civil unions and 1% of gay men not in civil unions. The three groups did not differ significantly in the percentage who had children from a prior relationship, the length of time that children spent with them each year, and the amount of child care. Heterosexual married men were twice as likely to have children living with them full-time than were gay men in both types of groups. The majority of men in the three types of couples owned their home and co-owned it with their partner or spouse. Gay men not in civil unions were less likely to have joint bank accounts, compared with gay men in civil unions and heterosexual married men. The three groups did not differ in reported hours spent per week doing housework.

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. The three groups did not differ significantly in perceived social support from family or in frequency of contact with their mother and father. Gay men in civil unions and heterosexual married men were significantly more likely to

initiate contact with their partner's mother than were gay men not in civil unions. Heterosexual married men were significantly more likely to initiate contact with their partner's father than were gay men in both types of couples. The groups did not differ in the extent to which they felt their mother made them feel like "part of the family." Heterosexual married men were most likely to feel that their father made them feel part of the family, followed by gay men in civil unions, and this was least likely the case among gay men not in civil unions. The groups did not differ in the extent to which they brought their partners along when visiting their parents. Gay men in civil unions were significantly more likely to consider themselves "married" than were gay men not in civil unions.

The groups did not differ in the extent to which they spent leisure activities or social events with their partner. Gay men in civil unions were the most likely, and heterosexual married men the least likely, to indicate that they had mutual friends with their partner. Although few men had friends who used to be lovers, this was significantly more likely among both groups of gay men. Gay men in civil unions did not differ significantly from gay men not in civil unions in level of outness.

Discussion

This is one of the few studies of same-sex couples to have access to a population instead of just a convenience sample, and we begin with a discussion of the representativeness of the sample. Next, we raise some methodological issues, including the use of comparison groups of married heterosexual siblings and same-sex friends not in civil unions. This is the first study of legal same-sex relationships in the United States and, thus, the first to provide a preliminary demographic and relationship profile of couples who had civil unions during the first year of this legislation. We discuss some salient factors that differentiate civil union couples from heterosexual married couples and also from same-sex couples not in civil unions.

Among the civil union couples, the gender ratio of two thirds women to men in the present sample corresponds to the gender ratio of the civil union population. Similarly, race and ethnicity of the sample (with about 10% people of color) is 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 is the first study of lesbian and gay couples that permits 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.

By recruiting heterosexual married couples via siblings of civil union couples, we were able to obtain a sample of heterosexuals that was comparable to the civil union couples on age, race/ethnicity, and religion while growing up. This renders the many differences between lesbians, gay men, and corresponding heterosexuals in couples especially convincing. It could also be argued that married siblings of

lesbians and gay men in civil unions are not traditional heterosexuals because all heterosexuals in this study were aware of their sibling's or sister/brother-in-law's same-sex relationship. Nevertheless, this study and others (Rothblum, Balsam, & Mickey, in press; Rothblum & Factor, 2001) have found heterosexual siblings of lesbians and gay men to be quite traditional and comparable to U.S. Census data in terms of religion, children, and length of relationship. Furthermore, this study found that heterosexual couples were more traditional in division of housework and child care than their lesbian and gay male siblings or in-laws.

Interestingly, recent research has questioned the shared environment of siblings, suggesting that each sibling may experience the family environment quite differently. Behavioral genetics researchers have focused on nonshared environment among siblings (e.g., Bussell & Reiss, 1993; Towers, Spotts, & Reiss, 2003) and examined gene-environment associations. Developmental psychologists such as Feinberg and Hetherington (2001) argued that parenting should be viewed as a within-family variable, given the evidence that parents treat children differently on warmth and negativity. In addition, research in clinical settings points to ways in which siblings de-identify from one another so as to highlight their own uniqueness (e.g., Schachter, 1985). There has been little research on how parents treat siblings differently on the basis of sexual orientation. Perhaps the lesbian or gay sibling is more gender atypical and thus evokes more negative reactions from parents. Perhaps the lesbian or gay sibling is more different from their same-sex parent and thus less close, making it easier to move away for education or employment. Conversely, the child who is less close with parents or is treated more negatively has less need for parental approval and is thus able to come out as lesbian or gay. This would explain how siblings who grew up in similar demographic environments could grow up to be so demographically different; further research is needed to explore the pathways of this process.

By recruiting same-sex couples from the friendship circles of civil union couples, this study was quite rigorous in its methodology. Couples in long-term relationships are likely to socialize with similar couples, and the results support this. Just like same-sex couples in civil unions, those not in civil unions had been partnered for at least 10 years. Had we compared civil union couples to a convenience sample of same-sex couples within the lesbian and gay communities, these couples would likely have been more different. Furthermore, selection effects are a challenge in couples research; one cannot randomly assign heterosexual couples to marriage or same-sex couples to civil unions. It would have been interesting to include a comparison group of cohabiting, but unmarried, heterosexuals, similar to same-sex couples not in civil unions. However, among heterosexuals, only 8 couples cohabit for every 100 who marry (Waite & Gallagher, 2000), so finding a large enough sample among siblings would have been difficult in this study.

This study was limited to civil union couples who were willing to let us contact same-sex friends and siblings. It is

not known how many civil union couples failed to send back reply forms because they did not want us to contact these individuals. Thus, this study was limited to civil union couples who were at least somewhat connected to family of origin and who had some degree of social support. This means that the sample was biased against couples who were more socially isolated, had no same-sex friends, or who were not out to their siblings. Nevertheless, our sample was very similar on gender ratio, race/ethnicity, and geographic distribution to the whole population of civil union couples based on information on civil union certificates. Thus, our participants were representative of the population from which they were drawn.

It should be noted that the study sample in particular, and also the population of all couples who had civil unions, may not be particularly representative of lesbians and gay men of color. Merely 10% of the study sample (and also the civil union population) was African American, Latina or Latino, Asian American, Pacific East Islander, Native American, or of non-American origin. There are no data to suggest that gays and lesbians of color in committed relationships would be less likely to take advantage of the civil union legislation *per se*. Perhaps fewer lesbians and gay male couples from these groups who desired to be joined in civil unions were willing to travel to Vermont, a state that is known to be predominantly (i.e., 96%) White. Also, gays and lesbians of color may not have the same financial resources as their European American cohorts. This would inhibit their ability to pay for the travel and lodging costs of a trip to Vermont.

As predicted, same-sex couples were similar to each other and different from married heterosexuals of their gender on demographic variables and on division of child care and housework. This is one of the few studies to examine demographics of same-sex couples and also to compare such couples with heterosexual couples. Faderman (1991) and Rothblum (2000) have argued that, for women, not being married or having children at an early age permits the opportunity to seek a higher education; conversely, attending college may expose women to lesbianism. Either way, being lesbian and having a higher education are correlated. Given the educational differences, one would also expect lesbians to earn higher incomes than heterosexual women. Yet Badgett (e.g., 2001) has discussed multiple ways in which lesbians and gay men are discriminated against in the work setting, resulting in lower incomes. Although research has shown gay men to earn less than heterosexual men, these incomes are statistically significant in some studies (e.g., Black, Makar, Sanders, & Taylor, 2003) but not in others (e.g., Rothblum, Balsam, & Mickey, *in press*). Lesbians tend to earn higher incomes than heterosexual women, although the difference is usually not statistically significant (e.g., Rothblum, et al., *in press*; Black et al., 2003; Rothblum & Factor, 2001). In the present study, the group difference in income was not significant for lesbians or gay men when the *p* value was adjusted to .001 by the Bonferroni correction.

Laumann et al. (1994) have stated that the best way to recruit gay men is to focus on the 12 largest cities in the United States. It is probable that gay men have moved to

large urban areas from smaller cities and towns, whereas heterosexual men have remained more evenly distributed in these locations. Lesbians and gay men who were raised Catholic were especially likely to have moved away from this denomination in adulthood, and this was also true to a great extent among those raised Protestant. Given the homophobia of many traditional religions, and their lack of recognition of same-sex relationships, it is not surprising that lesbian and gay male couples move away from these denominations to nontraditional or no spiritual practices. In particular, given the vocal opposition by right-wing religious groups to gay marriage and civil unions, same-sex couples are unlikely to remain part of traditional religions.

Contrary to prediction, there were few differences between same-sex couples in civil unions and those not in civil unions. We predicted that lesbians and gay men in civil unions would be more open about their sexual orientation than same-sex couples not in civil unions, and this hypothesis was confirmed for women but not for men. Although lesbians may vary tremendously in level of outness, it is logical that lesbian couples who have chosen to have civil unions, on average, will be more open about their same-sex orientation to others. Why was this not the case for gay male couples? Perhaps two men living together, whether or not they have had a civil union, are suspected to be gay. In contrast, two women living together may be thought to be doing so for financial or safety reasons and not instantly regarded as lesbian. Thus, men who live with their partner need to be quite out, whether or not they have had civil unions.

We had hypothesized that lesbians and gay men in civil unions would be comparable to married heterosexuals in terms of contact with and closeness to family and in greater contact with and closer to family than same-sex couples not in civil unions. The results showed some support for this prediction for gay men but not for lesbians. The hypothesis that same-sex couples not in civil unions would perceive the most social support from friends, and heterosexual couples from family, was not supported, and the results differed by gender. Among women, social support from friends was high in all three groups. Heterosexual women receive the greatest combined level of social support, as they also perceive social support from family. Among men, perceived social support from family was relatively low. It is gay men who have the greater level of combined social support, given their high level of perceived support from friends. This finding implies that being part of a supportive network of friends is important for gay men (Kurdek, 2003) and may be another reason why gay men gravitate to large cities. It also confirms the research of Crosbie-Burnett and Helmbrecht (1993), who found that gay male couples parenting children reported more social support from gay friends than from family members.

Same-sex couples are not bound by gender roles and division of labor (housework and child care) to the same extent as heterosexual married couples. In this way such couples may serve as an egalitarian model for heterosexual couples, especially in recent decades when married women have entered the workforce and have less time for child care

and housework. Conversely, same-sex couples, even those with civil unions, have a long way to go to be as accepted by their parents and partner's parents as heterosexual married couples.

This study provides the first data for lesbian and gay couples who are in, or planning to enter, civil unions, as well as for legislators, policymakers, social activists, and the media. It is also the first to point out some ways in which same-sex couples in civil unions are different from those not in civil unions. This study also underscores the importance of studying same-sex relationships that are legally defined. Family and public policies are not set up to include same-sex couples, so that most lesbian and gay male couples are not automatically entitled to family health benefits, family leave, inheritance laws, dual-parent adoption, and so forth (Hartman, 1996; Laird, 2003). For the first time in the United States, Vermont civil unions confer such benefits at the state level. Clinicians such as Green and Mitchell (2002) described the difficulties for same-sex couples in defining what makes their relationship "real," a concept they referred to as "boundary and commitment ambiguity" (p. 552). They stated,

With lesbian and gay couples in therapy, we frequently observe a lack of clarity in how they define their couplehood to themselves and to others. We believe this is partly because lesbian and gay couples (in contrast to legally married heterosexual couples) lack a socially endorsed, legally framed, normative template for how couplehood should be. (Green & Mitchell, 2002, p. 552)

In their book arguing the case for marriage among heterosexuals, Waite and Gallagher (2000) stated,

Americans think about marriage as an intimate, deeply personal relationship. And of course it is. But marriage, unlike other sorts of personal relationships, has an inherently public side. Marriage is what lovers do when they want to bring their love out of the merely private, internal realm of emotion and make it a social fact, something visible to and acknowledged by everybody from parents to bank clerks. Marriage is thus not just a personal vow, it is a legally binding contract between two individuals. To be legal, a marriage must be performed by someone authorized by the state to do so, such as a judge, or a member of the clergy. . . . Marriage is also an agreement between the partners and society. This agreement, while less formal, is quite real. As sociologists know well, the force of social expectations can be as powerful as law. Married couples are expected to behave in certain ways, and most do. (p. 18)

Given that civil unions are legal only in Vermont; it is interesting that the vast majority of couples, both in our sample and in the civil union population, are from out of state. In their written comments, couples described positive benefits they had received—sometimes unintentionally—from having had a civil union; for example:

I feel the commitment we made in Vermont has given some sort of basis for outsiders to take it more seriously and see us as a couple.

So far, with the exception of taxes, my state has accepted my civil union on my driver's license and we get the marriage benefit with our car insurance company.

Prior to our civil union, we had always felt that we were married. . . . During my maternity leave, we decided to drop

the kids off and drive to Vermont so we could be legally wed while it was still legal there. We were both very surprised at how emotional it was for us. . . . our ceremony felt legitimate and real.

Thought you would be interested to know that since we had our civil union, I changed my name at work. . . by showing my civil union certificate. Then we recently bought a new home here in ____, applied for a VA loan, and have loan papers saying "married," based on our civil union certificate.

Civil unions are the product of new legislation, and this study was conducted at the end of the first year of this legislation. Consequently, this study is more about who chooses to have a civil union versus who does not. It is less about how being in a civil union changes a relationship; for that, follow-up research is needed, and we plan to continue contact with these couples over time. This sample of female and male couples in civil unions, those not in civil unions, and those in heterosexual marriages will also permit observation, over time, of both couples who stay in their relationships, civil unions, or marriages and those who terminate them. This will allow researchers to see which factors at Time 1 predict subsequent dissolutions of relationships and whether these predictors differ by gender or sexual orientation. Furthermore, lesbian and gay male couples who chose to enter into civil unions during the first year such legislation was available represent a cohort of pioneers. As this study indicates, these couples are, on average, in their 40s and have been together for some time. It will be interesting, if civil union legislation continues, to compare these couples with a newer cohort of couples who enter into civil unions in future years. This would allow comparison of the initial cohort with couples who may have entered into same-sex relationships, or even grown up, at a time when civil union legislation was taken for granted. This latter cohort may be comparable to newlywed heterosexual married couples.

When Vermont State Legislator Bill Lippert addressed the Vermont House of Representatives to urge legalization of same-sex relationships, he concluded his speech with the following words:

Our relationships deserve every protection that our bill would grant. Our relationships deserve those rights, those protections. . . . We have a historic opportunity. . . to take another piece of hatred and discrimination and prejudice and remove it. At the same time, we will give an affirmation to our community about what it means to have full inclusivity, to embrace our neighbors, to affirm committed, loving relationships, and to affirm our common humanity. (Hollingsdale, 2002, p. 167)

By taking advantage of this new legislation, civil union couples are indeed pioneers in partnership.

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