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## “The Secret of Our Success”: Long-term Same-Sex Couples’ Perceptions of Their Relationship Longevity

Ellen D. B. Riggle<sup>a</sup>, Esther D. Rothblum<sup>b,c</sup>, Sharon S. Rostosky<sup>d</sup>, Jennifer B. Clark<sup>e</sup>, and Kimberly F. Balsam<sup>f</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Gender and Women’s Studies and Department of Political Science, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, USA; <sup>b</sup>Department of Women’s Studies, San Diego State University, San Diego, California, USA; <sup>c</sup>The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, Los Angeles, California, USA; <sup>d</sup>Department of Educational, School, and Counseling Psychology, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, USA; <sup>e</sup>CUPPLES Project, Palo Alto University, Palo Alto, California, USA; <sup>f</sup>Pacific Graduate School of Psychology, Palo Alto University, Palo Alto, California, USA

### ABSTRACT

Long-term same-sex couples have maintained relationships within a sociopolitical environment that has historically stigmatized and provided little or no legal recognition for their relationship. In a qualitative interview study about relationships, 31 same-sex couples, in relationships lasting from 13 to 41 years (mean length = 22.6 years), were asked to discuss their perceptions of the factors or strengths they have as a couple that contribute to the “success” or longevity of their committed relationship. All couples were in legally recognized relationships (21 married, 10 in civil unions). Thematic analyses of the responses revealed six themes summarizing the lived experiences that couples perceived as contributing to their relationship longevity: Communication; Similarities in Values; Complementary Similarities and Differences; Sharing Experiences; Commitment to the Relationship; and Support From Others. These themes are illustrated with quotes from couple discussions and discussed in the context of long-term committed relationships. The implications of the findings for future study of longevity of same-sex couple relationships and within a conceptual framework of commitment are discussed.

### KEYWORDS

Commitment; gay and lesbian; intimate relationships; long-term relationships; qualitative couple research; relationship stability

## Introduction

The factors associated with couples maintaining a long-term relationship has been the subject of a plethora of research. Research on different-sex couples has suggested that factors ranging from education level to marital status to conflict resolution styles are associated with relationship longevity (see Gottman & Silver, 2000, and Lerner, 2012, for general reviews of the literature). However, few studies have been conducted on perceptions of reasons for relationship longevity in same-sex couples.

**CONTACT** Ellen D. B. Riggle  [e.riggle@uky.edu](mailto:e.riggle@uky.edu)  Department of Gender and Women’s Studies and Department of Political Science, 1615 Patterson Office Tower, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40506-0027

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Current long-term same-sex couples have established and maintained their relationships in a sociopolitical environment that has historically stigmatized and provided little or no legal recognition for their relationship (e.g., Green & Mitchell, 2002; Herek, 2006). While the sociopolitical environment has evolved, there are still social and legal challenges to maintaining a long-term relationship that are unique to same-sex couples (e.g., Lannutti, 2014; Rostosky & Riggle, 2015). Within this context of minority stress (i.e., social, cultural, and legal stigmatization of same-sex relationships), it is important to explore same-sex couples' perceptions of the factors contributing to their "success" or longevity as a couple in a committed relationship.

As part of a larger study on relationships, a sample of same-sex couples was asked to discuss their perceptions of their "strengths" and attributions for their "success" as a long-term couple. The current study sought to qualitatively explore couples' perceptions of the factors that contributed to their relationship longevity. Their responses were thematically analyzed to explore these perceptions and convey the lived experiences of same-sex couples in long-term relationships.

### ***Relationship longevity***

Research on relationship longevity in different-sex couples has typically focused on marital longevity and its correlates. Civil marriage itself has been found to be associated with longer relationship duration; the longer a couple is married, the lower the odds of the relationship ending in divorce (e.g., White & Booth, 1991). Other studies have focused on demographic factors associated with relationship longevity, such as having children in the household (for a review, see Papalia, Sterns, Feldman, & Camp, 2002), age at marriage and prior cohabitation (e.g., Kuperberg, 2014), and higher household income and demographic similarity within couples (e.g., Adams, 1979; Francis & Mialon, 2014; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). Different-sex couple longevity has also been found to be associated with having positive communication patterns, higher levels of relationship commitment, and similar interests (e.g., Bachand & Caron, 2001; Lavner & Bradbury, 2012; Robinson & Blanton, 1993).

While research on long-term different-sex couples has often focused on marital status as the marker of success, civil marriage was not an option for same-sex couples in the United States until after 2003. At the time of the interviews conducted for this study in mid- to late 2014, civil marriages of same-sex couples were not recognized in all U.S. states or in most other countries. Other forms of legal relationship recognition have been limited in scope, impact, and availability (e.g., domestic partnerships and civil unions). Within this political and legal context, many same-sex couples have used nonlegal (private), religious, or spiritual ceremonies as a marker of commitment in their relationship (e.g., Hull, 2006; Lewin, 1998; Oswald, 2002).

The lack of availability of civil marriage is one example of the minority stress that has impacted same-sex couples (see Rostosky & Riggle, 2015). Same-sex couples must find strategies for creating and expressing their commitment within their relationship in a context that contains stigma and the risk of experiencing prejudice and discrimination. Despite these challenges, past studies have suggested that same-sex couples are similar to different-sex couples in reported levels of relationship satisfaction and commitment, although they were also slightly more likely to dissolve their relationship over time (e.g., Balsam, Rothblum, Beauchaine, & Solomon, 2008; Kurdek, 2008).

Similar to studies of different-sex couples, several factors have been identified in prior literature as important to same-sex couples' relationship satisfaction and success. Studies of long-term same-sex couples have found that communication is an important factor in couple relationships. For example, a study of 36 same-sex couples and 72 married different-sex couples who had been together an average of 30 years found that in both groups of couples, psychologically intimate communication and minimal relational conflict facilitated by open communication between partners predicted satisfaction with the relationship (Mackey, Deimer, & O'Brien, 2004). A study of 10 long-term lesbian couples who had been together 10 to 24 years found that communication that avoids contemptuous language and includes empathic attunement was perceived as an important strength by the partners in those relationships (Connolly & Sicola, 2005).

Relationship commitment in same-sex couples has been found to be related to intracouple factors as well as external supports. In an interview study with 14 same-sex couples, Rostosky and colleagues found that perceived investments in the relationship, acceptance of intracouple differences, the emotional rewards of being in the relationship, and support of family and friends were associated with feelings of commitment within the couples (Rostosky, Riggle, Dudley, & Comer-Wright, 2006). In a survey of 304 cohabiting same-sex couples who had been together an average of eight and a half years (79% had a civil union from Vermont), Kurdek (2008) found that personality similarities, effective arguing skills, and support from friends and family were positively related to relationship commitment.

Relationship maintenance has been conceptualized as a type of resilience within same-sex couple relationships. Dziengel (2012) created a relationship resilience model based on data from an online survey with 156 participants over the age of 44 who had been in a same-sex relationship for more than 10 years. Dziengel's secondary analysis of answers to open-ended questions asking about the "people" or "things" that contributed to their relationship resilience found five factors impacting longevity: "maturity, integration as a couple, compatibility, complementarity, and ambiguity of external supports" (p. 79). These factors, which supported couple communication, commitment, shared goals, and appreciation, acted as buffers against threats or stresses on the couple relationship.

Long-term same-sex couples who formed their relationships in a sociolegal context of little or no relationship recognition are an understudied population. Although this context is changing, long-term couples have already established relationships that have endured under conditions of stigmatization (e.g., Lannutti, 2014; Recnez, Elliot, & Umberson, 2009). Given the unique and shifting context in which long-term same-sex couples live, it is important that they voice their own thoughts and perspectives. Thus, using qualitative interviews, the current study seeks to explore long-term same-sex couples' experiences and perceptions of their relationship "success." We analyzed the responses of same-sex couples, considering them to be experts on their own relationships, in order to understand how these couples see their relationship longevity and the factors that have contributed to that longevity.

## Method, data, and analysis plan

### Participants

Participants were 18 female and 13 male same-sex couples (participants were asked to indicate their gender identity, and that identity was used to classify couples as "same-sex;" participants were not asked about their cisgender identity). The length of couple relationships (as reported by the couple) ranged from 13 to 41 years ( $M = 22.6$ ;  $SD = 7.2$ ). All couples were in relationships with a legal status: 21 couples were in a civil marriage, and 10 were in a civil union. All couples cohabited and resided in 15 different states (including four couples each from California, Massachusetts, and Vermont, three couples each from Florida, Pennsylvania, and Texas, two couples from Wisconsin, and one couple each from Connecticut, Georgia, Minnesota, North Carolina, New Jersey, New York, Nevada, and Ohio). Four couples reported having at least one child currently living in their home, and an additional 10 couples reported having at least one adult child in their family. Seven couples were interracial with one partner reporting their race as "White" and the other couple member reporting a non-White racial identity, one couple was multi-racial, and 23 couples had both partners reporting their race as "White."

The sample of individual participants ranged in age from 37 to 84 ( $M = 55.3$ ;  $SD = 9.0$ ). Individuals self-reported their race/ethnicity as: 83.9% White, 9.7% multiracial, 4.8% Black/African American, and 1.6% American Indian/Alaska Native. Participants reported their highest education level as 16.1% high school degree or some college, 24.2% college degree, and 59.6% advanced degree.

### Procedure

Individuals in same-sex couples were originally recruited in 2002 from the population who received a civil union in Vermont between June 2000 and June 2001. The purpose of the original study was to explore similarities and differences between couples with and without a civil union. Individuals in same-sex couples with a civil

union who participated in the study provided names of individuals in a same-sex couple in their friendship network who did not have a civil union at the time. Those individuals were also contacted and recruited for the original study (see Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2004, for more information about the original recruitment of couples).

Individuals from the original study were recontacted in 2014 for participation in a follow-up survey. Of the 786 individuals who responded to the follow-up survey, 693 (88.2%) reported still being with the same relationship partner from 2001/2002. Of the respondents who reported still being with their original partner, 449 (64.8%) volunteered to take part in interviews about their relationship. The volunteers included 141 couples where both partners volunteered to take part in an interview.

A sample of 31 couples was chosen for interviews. The criteria for selection included the couples' legal relationship status at the time of their original recruitment into the study in 2002 and current legal relationship status (civil union or civil marriage). An effort was made to include as many couples as possible with at least one partner who reported a non-White racial identity and to approximate the larger sample by couple gender. Couple response and availability for interviews also determined final inclusion in the sample.

The couples were interviewed, with both couple members present, via telephone or online audio/video by one of the authors of the study. This was the first time these couples had been interviewed during their participation in the longitudinal study. The interviews were conducted between June and December 2014, and each interview lasted approximately 50 to 60 minutes.

Included in the interview protocol was a semi-structured question asking couples about their strengths and attributions for the "success" of their long-term relationship: "What do you think are your strengths as a couple? What has contributed to your success in being in a long-term relationship?" "Success" and "strength" were not defined for couples; the decision was made to use positive terms to describe the longevity of the relationship. Other questions in the protocol focused on the couples' decisions to obtain or not obtain a civil union, a civil marriage, and their experiences associated with these decisions and events.

All couples were presumed to be experts on their own relationship. All couples answered the question as part of their joint conversation. Dyadic interviews were conducted to reflect the shared experiences of the relationship and the process of creating shared meanings. The audio files of the interviews were transcribed for analysis.

### ***Data and analysis***

A set of responses was constructed containing only the section of the conversation transcript that was in direct response to the question about the couples' success or strengths contributing to their long-term relationship. Although couples may have

discussed similar ideas elsewhere during the interview, the decision was made to retain only the direct responses in order to not infer meanings from other portions of the interview. Couples were assumed to be authorities on their relationship, and using the transcripts allowed couples to speak for themselves, reflecting on their own perceptions.

Each set of responses was read in its entirety by four of the authors using an inductive thematic analysis (no a priori categories were used). Each of the four initial readers created a list of meaning units reflecting discrete ideas mentioned by the couples and grouped these meaning units together to create broader thematic categories. These four authors discussed their findings and came to consensus about the final thematic structure representing the data. The fifth author audited the process and the themes for their fit with the responses as a check on the validity of the process. The fifth author agreed with the themes as representing responses across couples (see Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## Results

Analyses of the data revealed six themes: Communication; Similarities in Values; Complementary Similarities and Differences; Sharing Experiences; Commitment to the Relationship; and Support From Others. Individual couple responses included from one to four themes. Coding of themes was examined for possible differences by the gender identification of the couple, however no significant differences were noted. Male couples and female couples were found in each thematic category and at approximately the same level of response. Also, no differences in the emergence of themes were noted for couples who were married versus those in a civil union. Each theme is illustrated below with quotes from the interviews (using pseudonyms chosen by the authors).

### Communication

Most couples discussed communication as a central component of their relationship success. Couples suggested that being open and honest with each other and treating each other with respect and kindness in their communication helped to maintain the relationship and couple closeness. Communication included daily communication, more in-depth “check-ins” with each other, and talking to resolve conflicts. Communication was sometimes referred to as a goal or part of a relationship ideal, and at other times was referred to as a set of specific behaviors that specifically supported the relationship.

For some couples, it was important to have daily communication in order to maintain their relationship. As Kurt and Tim (partnered for 25 years) explained, “One thing that we do is we communicate a lot. Sometimes it’s effective, sometimes it’s bland, sometimes it’s very heated, but we don’t let things fester for any length of time” (Tim). Other couples cited their rule of “Never go to bed angry” as an impetus for talking through issues. Helen and Barb (36 years) reported, “We never go

to bed mad; if there has been anything that we did not agree on at the end of the day, it's discussed and cleared out before we go to bed" (Barb).

Other couples reported establishing a habit of intentional communication about their relationship. Stuart and Ray (22 years) shared their process:

Ray: I think communication is important, really important. We were having a rough patch for a while as lots of couples probably do. It was the first time we ever went to counseling together. We also started doing, a couple of times a week, a check-in with each other and giving each other time to talk about how we're feeling without any interrupting from the other person. And that's really helped us.

Stuart: It's recommended for anybody in a relationship. I have to say I'm a big fan of that.

Couples valued "open and honest" communication and "discussing everything, all the way down to the deep feelings" (Eric and Bruce, 27 years). Sally, partnered with Jai for 19 years, reported:

Sally: One of our biggest things from the beginning was to be very honest and open with each other even in those times when it is tough to spit out those words... to say, you know here's what's going on, or here's what I'm feeling, or here's what I need instead of holding it in and not saying it and letting it build up to something that explodes when it could have been tackled a lot earlier.

### ***Similarities in values***

Many couples discussed the importance of similarities in their individual values that contributed to their joint couple values. These values were related to goals (such as creating their own families), experiences (such as raising children), and ideals (such as being close to their family of origin). Couples also discussed the importance of similarities in their religious upbringing, political ideas, or backgrounds and experiences growing up (e.g., socioeconomic class, race). Several couples noted that they shared similar values about money, spending habits, and financial security.

Irene and Liz (33 years) shared their similarities:

Liz: I think that we had the benefit of going into the relationship where we had a lot in common in the beginning. Our upbringing was very similar. We're both Jewish. We came from similar types of families. We were raised in a similar way. So we started this relationship kinda on the same page. We wanted the same things and we had those conversations right in the very beginning. We knew we wanted children, we knew we wanted a particular type of lifestyle.

Irene: I also think we're lucky in that we both have the exact same spending habits and the same child-rearing philosophies.

After explaining how different their personalities and backgrounds were, Marc and Dan (26 years) shared their similar values and goals. Dan explained, "We have a lot in common, our ethics, our politics, our devotion, our commitment... the way we feel about family. We're the same; we look different, but we think about certain things the same way."

Jon and James (16 years) explained how their similar values and long-term goals have supported their relationship:

Jon: I think we have very similar value systems. I think that's what attracted us to each other in the first place, our similar upbringing. His father was a minister; my mother was an assistant minister in the same religion. I think there was a certain sense of morality and commitment that we shared from the beginning. We also both wanted a child... we both kind of had that as an end goal. We have our priorities pretty straight; our priority is our son right now.

James: I think we've been pretty honest with each other about our goals and where we see ourselves in the future. We've always been able to see ourselves in the future together. Our goals are more of the long-term perspective [and that] has gotten us through some of the rough times where maybe we didn't feel like we were communicating in the moment, but we felt that we still were on track for our long-term goals.

Jon: There are ups and downs communication-wise, but the overall goals and perspective were always in sync with each other.

### ***Complementary similarities and differences***

Some couples discussed the similarities in their personalities. Others discussed the differences in their personalities. Whether they spoke of similarities or differences, couples perceived both as “complementary.” Their appreciation of their similarities or differences, and sometimes both, created an acceptance and respect for each other within the relationship.

Some couples felt that the similarities in their personalities helped them to appreciate each other and coexist more easily. Shirley and Judy (26 years) shared:

Shirley: We're both introverts. Since we're both introverts, we're happy sitting at home and reading a book or going out to a movie.

Judy: Seeing friends occasionally, seeing family occasionally. We have a very boring life and we love it. We're not bored, we're content.

Couples also discussed the relationship work they engaged in to overcome similarities in their “weaknesses” and find strategies to use their collective strengths to compensate. Connie and Laura (21 years) illustrated this point:

Connie: I'd say we're a good team, that we work very well together. I think one of our downfalls, but one of the good things too, is that we see a lot of things similarly. We have the same personality type. I think we have the same weaknesses then too, but we work well together [to make up for those weaknesses].

Couples who felt that they had different personality types appreciated how complementary their differences were. For these couples, learning to appreciate and value their differences was important. Marc and Dan explained:

Marc: We're very different. I'm more educated than Dan; he is much more streetwise. He grew up in a city; I grew up in a small town. I'm very musical; Dan is a chatterbox. So our differences really complement each other, and I think our friends find that fascinating.

Dan: We don't look alike. The best way to say it is he's white bread and I'm olive. It's really two different foods. We've both gotten off on it, the difference.

Many couples saw different strengths as complementary and worked to overcome differences that might be seen as potentially problematic. For example, Amy and Michelle (15 years) discussed their different skills:

Michelle: Amy pays the bills and keeps the books because I couldn't add two plus two. Amy is very good at that stuff. She's good at fixing tech stuff.

Amy: And if it weren't for Michelle our house would be a mess. Let's put it this way, I'm unfortunately intrinsically a bit of a slob. And Michelle makes our house nice. Michelle is intrinsically more social than I am. She makes sure that we actually have a social calendar. We have parties and have people come over.

### ***Sharing experiences***

Many couples discussed the importance of shared experiences in enhancing their relationship. These experiences included just spending time together doing things, having fun, sharing hobbies, or traveling together. Others called each other their "best friend." Frank and Dave (29 years) shared:

Frank: We're just best friends because we like being together all the time.

Dave: We do both travel a lot and so we do spend time apart from each other, and I still get excited to be with him every day.

Many couples appreciated how they made each other laugh and experiences of having fun together. These positive experiences reflected and facilitated affection in the relationship. "We laugh a lot" (Linda and Denise, 17 years) and "We have so much fun, we laugh together" (Jerome and Roger, 17 years) were common sentiments expressed by couples.

Enjoying time together created a shared history that supported couples through challenges in their relationship. Jackie, partnered with Harriet for 18 years, referenced the importance of this shared history:

Jackie: The fact that we have so much fun together. I mean that's just the icing on the cake. And you know even when things get difficult or complicated for some reason, we have so much history together and so many wonderful shared experiences that that's what sort of buoys us through the difficult times.

Sharing activities created a bond for couples. Ray and Stuart told the following story:

Ray: Having kids has really brought us closer and bonded us a lot. [We] continue to be more and more visible in the gay community, but also in the larger community. It's really been reaffirming and it's an opportunity for us to grow closer. We have a lot of common interests in theater, music and food and hiking and outdoor stuff and traveling.

Stuart: Spending time together whether we're traveling or being at home or going out to see a play or whatever. For me it's hugely binding.

Even if a couple had different interests, they recognized the value in spending time together for the benefit of the relationship. Paula and Dolores (13 years) reported:

Paula: We just like to do a lot of things together.

Dolores: There's various things, hobbies and different things that we like to do. And we both may not like it 100%, but we both enjoy doing things and we particularly like to do them together.

Paula: I can give you an example. I like boating. We live on the water and I have a boat. I can't say Dolores loves boating but she doesn't mind boating. So she will boat with me. She loves gardening, so I made sure that she had her garden. I don't particularly like digging in dirt, but I don't mind raking and mowing the lawn and things like that, so I will go out and help so I can be with her.

### ***Commitment to the relationship***

A shared commitment to the relationship was explained as a motivating factor for working continually on their relationship, creating ways for the relationship to grow and change, and helping each other grow and change within the relationship. Tim and Kurt defined their commitment:

Kurt: I think that for relationships commitment is more important than love. Because in any relationship that you're in, you get mad at the person, you love the person, you're ecstatic with the person. There's a whole range. You fall out of love with the person; you fall in love with the person again. And if you hang in there long enough you really see that that's just part of life. And it's more about being committed and what that commitment brings. I think the fact that we are totally committed with each other means that we're gonna fix things.

Tim: There is no relationship in the world where you are happy all the time. But there are lots of rewards with staying in the relationship and being committed that you would never know about unless you actually get past those difficult times.

Margaret and Theresa (23 years) shared their support for each other and their commitment to their relationship:

Margaret: The fact is Theresa brought to the relationship an unwavering commitment. There's a quality of trueness about Theresa, that she is there for me.

Theresa: When we first got together I think both of us were ready to be in a relationship where we could change and grow. We knew change that is important and change together would be scary, but if we did it together and were open about what was happening, then we'd both grow as people.

Commitment included supporting each other through stresses and showing appreciation and respect for each other and the relationship. Guy and Paul (15 years) told us, "Both of us kind of rely on each other and lean on each other" (Guy). For Kay and Glenda (30 years), "It's knowing that Glenda always has my back. There's a trust there, a love there that is unshakeable. We may go through rough times, but the bottom line is that you're there for one another" (Kay). Emily and Joyce (33 years) shared, "I think we try to be sensitive and I think we genuinely want one another to be happy. We will work hard to help the other person achieve

whatever they want to achieve” (Emily). For Edith and Billie (15 years), the commitment included their emotional commitment to each other:

Edith: Respect and the way we tend to one another and talk to each other.

Billie: Edith and I, we work really hard. She challenges me and she just makes me want to be the best person, not only with her but with everybody I encounter.

Edith: I just want to add that I am still very much attracted to my wife and in love with my wife and I think it shows. I look at her and she still just makes me smile. I still feel truly, madly, deeply.

Couples made their relationship a priority over others and made decisions together for the good of the relationship and to achieve relationship or joint goals. Barb and Helen shared this story:

Barb: It’s just that Helen shows nothing but complete love and compassion for me and considers me the top of the plate. Helen as a partner comes first in everything in my life.

Helen: We have been through a lot of serious physical problems. I will tell you that this has made the relationship stronger. The concern and the care that comes out when the relationship is threatened makes the relationship stronger.

### ***Support from others***

In addition to qualities within the relationship, several couples cited support from others as an important factor in their relationship longevity. This included examples of support from members of families of origin and friends. Shirley cited being “supportive of each other and family,” and Judy followed up by explaining, “I think our families have been very important to our relationship just because families are really important to us.” Dan and Marc felt a special bond with each other’s mother:

Marc: The relationship we had with each other’s mothers was neat. Dan’s mother adored me because there were so many ways that I was different than Dan. And by the same token, my mother adored Dan for exactly the same reason.

Harriet and Jackie appreciated the impact that support from their family and friends had on their relationship:

Harriet: We have such a great mixture of friends. They’re very, very supportive.

Jackie: And I think having the collective support of our two families has been an enormous plus.

Harriet: We’re the cool aunts; we have so many nephews and nieces and cousins that are younger than us and that look up to us. And they reach out to us.

Jackie: I think having that support is crucial.

Friends are an important part of couple support networks. Dan explained how his and Marc’s network of friends grows:

Dan: Another thing is that we’re always adding people to our circle. We travel a lot and we have added people through cruises [where we make friends]. In fact, our good friend

just walked in the door now. She's a straight woman with a gay son. You mix up the soup and you get goulash.

## Discussion

In this study, we found that same-sex couples in long-term relationships created and maintained successful relationships by using their strengths and resources in support of their relationship. The current study added to existing literature by using qualitative methodology to explore these couples' unique perceptions of these strengths. Analysis of the perceptions of this sample of long-term same-sex couples about the reasons for their relationship longevity resulted in six themes. These themes suggest consistencies with prior research findings on couple longevity that focus on perceptions rather than demographics. The themes also suggest possible different perspectives on same-sex couples that may be useful for future research. For example, "complementary similarities and differences" suggests a possible new way of conceptualizing factors contributing to relationship success. While research on couple stability tends to focus on similarities between couple members, for many couples in the present study, recognizing and appreciating not only similarities but also the contributions of differences between the partners to the relationship was important (see also Dziengel, 2012).

The themes found in the present study may suggest additional factors for quantitative researchers to consider measuring when exploring relationship longevity in same-sex couples. For example, the use of humor as a means of conflict resolution has been previously noted by Gottman et al. (2003). In the current study, humor and laughter within a relationship were perceived more generally as part of communication and an important shared experience. This finding suggests that humor may go beyond a means of conflict resolution by serving as a positive bonding experience for couples.

The current study suggests that same-sex couples' relationship commitment is a source of strength in a relationship. Without the traditional legal and social barriers to leaving a relationship (Kurdek, 2000; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007), same-sex couples have historically created their own couple-level commitments to sustain the relationship. Commitment was expressed in emotional as well as physical or material ways (see also Pope & Cashwell's discussion of "moral commitment" in same-sex couples, 2013). Actions that signaled commitment to the relationship were part of the maintenance of the relationship as well as a source of strength during times of stress on the relationship. The importance of relationship commitment was expressed even though the couples in this sample had a legal relationship status, suggesting that for these couples and perhaps other same-sex couples, legal relationship recognition does not negate the importance of commitment.

Sharing goals, values, and experiences may contribute to interdependence for same-sex couples. Traditionally there have been fewer structural barriers

to same-sex couples dissolving their relationship, in part because of the lack of legal recognition of relationships and also due to fewer social supports. Stigmatization of same-sex relationships and minority stress, including internalized negative beliefs (based on negative stereotypes), historically may have impacted moral commitments in same-sex couples. In this context, personal commitments may have played a more important role in long-term same-sex relationships (see Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston's tripartite model of commitment, 1999; see also, Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Stanley and Markman's (1992) "dedication" to the relationship may be reflected in the current findings as same-sex couples worked to maintain their relationship within a stigmatizing social environment.

### **Limitations**

The current data are from a purposive sample that is predominantly White/Caucasian and has higher levels of education than the national average. Same-sex couples that include individuals with non-White or non-privileged ethnic or racial identities may have different perceptions of their relationship success (cf. Moore, 2011). Also, higher incomes may provide resources that support relationships and that are less available to those without these socioeconomic privileges (cf. McGarrity, 2014). There may also be differences between female and male same-sex couples, and for mixed-orientation couples that were not highlighted in the current study (cf. Connolly, 2006).

The couples in the current sample have been involved in a larger longitudinal study of relationships. Although this was the first time they were interviewed verbally, their ongoing participation in the written survey may have prompted them to think about their relationship in certain ways not typical of other couples. The couples in the current study were also in long-term relationships and all had a legal relationship status (i.e., civil marriage or a civil union). The changing legal environment of relationship recognition and their own legal relationship status may have prompted them to think in different ways about their relationship (cf. Lannutti, 2014; Humble, 2013). This study did not specifically ask about the impact of legal relationship recognition on couple longevity, and that status did not emerge as a theme from this sample. These limitations suggest the need for future research with different samples, including couples with and without civil marriages or other legal relationship status, and those in newer relationships, in order to further explore differences in factors impacting same-sex couple relationship longevity.

### **Conclusions**

Long-term same-sex couples represent a unique opportunity to study relationships that have been maintained in a sociopolitical environment that stigmatizes their relationships. These relationships have been created and maintained by modifying or writing new relationship scripts to support commitment and stability

(e.g., Lannutti, 2014; Riggle & Rostosky, 2012). This context makes the study of couple perceptions of their relationship success especially significant. These perceptions may indicate priorities for couples when devoting energy to their relationship. They may also be an indication of how couples “visualize” or create their own relationship script in the absence of, or with few other, same-sex couples as role models.

Most of the couples in this sample discussed the “hard work” involved in creating and maintaining their relationships. This work was an investment and contributed to an enduring relationship. Future research may more specifically explore the themes revealed in this study. Research on long-term same-sex couples may also explore the impact of legal relationship recognition on the factors perceived as important to the longevity of relationships created after civil marriage became a legal option. The changing social and legal environment shapes the relationship experiences of same-sex couples and their perceptions of those experiences. Therefore, same-sex couples’ perceptions of commitment and strengths within their relationships will likely continue to reflect these changes.

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