

Differences in Conflict-Resolution Styles Among Heterosexual, Gay, and Lesbian Couples

Michael E. Metz, Ph.D.

University of Minnesota Medical School

B. R. Simon Rosser, Ph.D.

University of Minnesota Medical School

Nancy Strapko, Ph.D.

Department of Health, Physical Education & Recreation, Plymouth State College, New Hampshire

We investigated whether different patterns of resolving relationship conflict distinguished heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples. One hundred eight couples (36 gay male, 36 lesbian, and 36 heterosexual) were drawn from the community, matched for age and length of relationship, and compared on the scales of the Styles of Conflict Inventory (SCI). To distinguish those conflict patterns that were orientation or gender specific, styles of conflict resolution between the men in same- and other-sex relationships and between the women in same- and other-sex couples were also compared. Results indicated that most couples across type of relationship reported a high degree of relationship satisfaction and moderately low amounts of conflict. Overall, heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples were fundamentally similar, and common stereotypes of each couple were not verified. Women in lesbian relationships reported significantly greater relationship satisfaction, greater hope for conflict resolution, and several more constructive conflict-resolution styles than either gay male couples or heterosexual couples. Differences appeared to be correlated with social gender role factors and common differences in relationship lifestyle features, such as the presence of children in the home.

General theories of relationship, family, and sexual satisfaction and distress have emphasized the role of relationship conflict in the etiology, maintenance, and therapeutic treatment of relationship problems (Coser, 1956; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Raush, Barry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974; Stuart, 1980). Braiker and Kelley (1979) proposed that relationship conflict is the central dynamic in conceptualizing couples' interactions and that it serves as a metaphorical "window" through which one can observe how close relationships function. Authors of relationship problem-solving models (e.g., Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988) have proposed that relationship satisfaction is mediated by the partners' conflict-management strategies. Relationship satisfaction research indicates that it is both common and normal for couples to have conflicts or disagreements; the important factor is how cooperatively couples approach and resolve them (e.g., Bowman, 1990; Epstein & Baucom, 1989; Gottman & Krokoff,

1989; Peterson, 1983). Among heterosexual couples, research consistently indicates that couples who recognize relationship differences, and resolve their conflicts mutually, tend to be more satisfied with their relationship than couples who do not (e.g., Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Epstein, DeGiovanni, & Jayne-Lazarus, 1978; Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Markman et al., 1988; O'Leary & Smith, 1991).

Relationship Satisfaction

Several researchers have investigated overall relationship satisfaction among heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983), in a large scale study of U. S. heterosexual married, heterosexual cohabitating, gay male, and lesbian couples, found greater similarities than differences across types of couples. Although some researchers have reported no differences between the groups (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Schreurs, 1991), where differences were found, greater relationship satisfaction in lesbian couples has been reported (Kurdek, 1988; Zacks,

Green, & Morrow, 1988). Studies of marital status have also shown that heterosexual married couples report greater overall relationship satisfaction than heterosexual nonmarried couples (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986).

Other researchers have explored various correlates of relationship quality, such as decreased social

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Correspondence may be addressed to Michael E. Metz, Ph.D., Program in Human Sexuality, Department of Family Practice and Community Health, University of Minnesota Medical School, Suite 180-3, 1300 South 2nd Street, Minneapolis, MN 55454. Voice: (612) 625-1500. Fax: (612) 626-8311. E-mail: Michael.E.Metz-1@umn.edu.