



Brief Report

Sociosexuality and relationship commitment among lesbian couples

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ABSTRACT

This study extended previous research on the importance of sociosexual orientation in romantic relationships through the examination of lesbian dyads. One-hundred and forty-four women (72 couples) completed an assessment of sociosexuality and relationship commitment. Using actor–partner interdependence models, it was found that high levels of relationship commitment were reported by participants with low levels of sociosexuality. Further, women with low levels of sociosexuality tended to experience particularly high levels of relationship commitment when their partner was similar to them in terms of SO but were much more likely to report low levels of commitment when they had a partner who possessed high levels of sociosexuality.

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1. Introduction

Across individuals, there is variation in the tendency to engage in or consider engaging in in casual (uncommitted) sex. Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948) introduced the term “sociosexual attitude” to describe individual differences in people’s willingness to engage in uncommitted sexual relationships. Numerous studies have confirmed these early observations and suggest that people differ in their willingness to engage in sexual affairs, desire for number of sexual partners, frequency of sexual fantasizes about people other than their current partners, attitudes toward “casual sex,” and the number of past sexual partners (see Buss & Schmitt (1993), for a review).

More recently, Gangestad and Simpson (1990) argued that, because many of these sexual desires are interrelated, they are likely the manifestation of a personality dimension called sociosexual orientation (SO). At the low end of this dimension are individuals who prefer to build long-term and exclusive relationships. These individuals with a restricted SO often express the need of feeling commitment and love toward romantic partners before having sex, are not likely to have sex outside their current relationship, and are unlikely to have a one-night stand (Gangestad & Simpson, 1990). On the other end of the SO dimension, are individuals who prefer to mate with a large number of short-term partners. These unrestricted individuals are comfortable having sex without love or commitment, are more likely to have sex outside their current relationship, are likely to have had multiple partners, and are likely to have engaged in one-night stands (Gangestad & Simpson, 1990).

Variability in SO has been linked to gender differences, with men tending to be more unrestricted than women (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Sexual orientation has also been found to differentiate levels of SO for men. An analyses of the norms published in the Sociosexual Inventory – Revised ($n = 7927$) manual indicates that gay men have moderately higher levels of unrestricted SO than heterosexual men (Cohen’s $d = .62$), although lesbian and heterosexual women have virtually identical levels of SO (Cohen’s $d = .02$; Penke, 2010). It is important to note that, prior to the present study, Penke (2010) reports the only research that explicitly examined SO among lesbian women. In these past findings, regardless of sexual orientation, women tended to have lower levels of SO than men. It has been argued that this consistent gender difference in SO reflects different selection pressures encountered by men and women during their evolutionary history (see Buss & Schmitt, 1993).

Given the intrinsically interpersonal nature of SO, it is not too surprising that this construct has been linked to various romantic relationship outcomes among heterosexual couples. Research examining heterosexual relationships has found that restricted women tend to report having more positive interactions with their partners and find their partners more physically attractive than unrestricted women (Hebl & Kashy, 1995). In contrast, unrestricted women not only tend to have more opposite sex friends (i.e., potential sexual partners; Hebl & Kashy, 1995), but are more likely to betray their current romantic partners by pursuing other romantic involvements (Seal, Agostinelli, & Hannett, 1994; Feldman & Cauffman, 1999). Further, it has been found that heterosexual individuals in a relationship with a partner who is unrestricted tend to report being less likely to stay in the relationship and report lower levels of love than individuals who have a restricted partner (Simpson & Gangestad, 1992).

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Taken together, these results suggest that a person with a restricted SO or a person with a restricted partner will likely experience greater relationship commitment than other individuals. However, no study to date has examined both members of a couple to determine whether or not the SO of both partners interact with each other when predicting relationship commitment. It is unclear if mismatches in terms of SO (i.e., when one partner is restrictive and the other is unrestrictive) is more or less problematic for the success of a relationship than SO matches (i.e., when both partners are restrictive or when both partners are unrestrictive). Numerous studies have linked partner similarity in terms of various personality and demographic variables to positive relationship outcomes among both heterosexual and lesbian couples (Byrne, 1971; Gaunt, 2006; Luteijn, 1994; Markey & Markey, *in press*; Morry & Gaines, 2005; Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2000). Although mismatches in SO might follow a similar pattern as past research, such mismatches might be especially problematic for restricted women. Given that restricted women tend to value loyalty and faithfulness in a partner (i.e., the qualities of a restricted partner; Simpson & Gangestad, 1992) it seems probable that such women will find it particularly troubling if their partners are unrestricted. In other words, although mismatches in terms of SO are likely not ideal for any individual in a romantic relationship, it is expected that such mismatches will be particularly troubling for restricted women.

Relative to heterosexual couples, there is a dearth of research examining important predictors of relationship outcomes among lesbian romantic couples. Given the growing acceptance of gay and lesbian relationships among the general population and the understanding of the prevalence of these relationships, the relatively sparse research examining the factors that contribute to adaptive, committed relationships among these couples is unfortunate. Perhaps even more troubling is that such a lack of empirical research often means that lay people, politicians, and policy makers will rely on stereotypes instead of research when discussing lesbian relationships. In short, it is equally important to understand the predictors of relationship outcomes among lesbian couples as it is among heterosexual couples.

In order to better understand such predictors, the current study will investigate the potential associations among lesbian women's SO, their romantic partners' SO, and their relationship commitment. Because the current study utilizes data from both partners of a romantic dyad who are indistinguishable from each other in terms of gender (i.e., both partners are women) traditional statistical techniques are not appropriate. Therefore, Actor–Partner Interdependence Models (APIMs; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2008) will be employed in order to account for the dependency in these data. APIMs are statistical methods that make it possible to examine how Person A's criterion variable simultaneously and independently relates to her own predictor variable and to her partner's (Person B's) predictor variable. In the current context, an APIM can be used to examine how relationship commitment is shaped by unique and interpersonal variables that exist among romantic partners. This methodology allows one to isolate several potential variables of influence. First, the association between Person A's SO and Person A's own perceived relationship commitment can be estimated. The APIM denotes this as an “actor effect.” Second, the association between Person A's SO and Person B's relationship commitment can be estimated. This link between the Person A's SO and Person B's relationship commitment is termed the “partner effect.” Finally, to examine the extent to which similarity among Person A's and Person B's SOs predicts relationship commitment, the interaction between Person A's SO and Person B's SO can be examined. The hypotheses that can be tested for each effect yielded by the APIM (i.e., actor effect, partner effect, and interaction effect) are presented below:

- (1) *Actor effect*: Participants' (A) SO will be negatively related to participants' (A) relationship commitment.
- (2) *Partner effect*: Participants' romantic partners' (B) SO will be negatively related to participant's (A) relationship commitment.
- (3) *Interaction effect*: It is expected that participant's (A) own SO and their romantic partners SO (B) will significantly interact with each other when predicting women's relationship commitment.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

One-hundred and forty-four women (72 couples; M age = 33.40, SD = 10.20) participated in the present study as part of a larger study examining associations between romantic relationships and health among lesbian women. Sixty-nine percent of the sample was European–American, 17% was African American, 7% was Hispanic, 4% was Asian, and 3% was of an ‘other’ ethnic background. All couples were required to have maintained an exclusive monogamous relationship for at least 6 months. The majority of the couples in our sample were cohabitating (83%) and couples had been romantically involved for 4.68 years on average (SD = 3.48 years).

Participants were recruited from a northeastern university campus and the surrounding area by advertising in diverse periodicals and through local health and advocacy groups located in nearby urban areas. Participants were placed in separate rooms in the researchers' laboratory while they completed the measures used in this study.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Sociosexual orientation

Participants' SO was assessed using the nine item Sociosexual Orientation Inventory – Revised (SOI-R; Penke, 2010). The SOI-R includes items that assess past sociosexual behavior (e.g., “With how many different partners have you had sexual intercourse on *one and only one* occasion?”), attitudes toward uncommitted sex (e.g., “Sex without love is OK.”), and sexual desires (e.g., “In everyday life, how often do you have spontaneous fantasies about having sex with someone you have just met?”). Participants rated each item using a 5-point Likert-type scale. As done previously, these items were then aggregated to create a total sociosexuality score with lower scores representing a restricted SO, whereas higher scores represent an unrestricted SO. In the current data set, the SOI-R achieved adequate internal reliability (α = .78) and SOI-R scores were unrelated between romantic partners (pairwise intraclass $r(70)$ = .01, p = .93; Griffin & Gonzalez, 1995). It is also worth noting that the mean SO score for the current sample (M = 2.70, SD = .82) was not significantly different than the mean SO score of women between 31 and 35 years of age (n = 348) from the general population (M = 2.71, SD = .80, $t(490)$ = .13, p = .90, d = .01; Penke, 2010).

2.2.2. Relationship commitment

In order to assess overall relationship commitment, participants completed the Multiple Determinants of Relationship Commitment Inventory (MDRCI; Kurdek, 1995). Partners completed this and all other measures in separate rooms to ensure their confidentiality. Due to time constraints, participants completed four of the six subscales of the MDRCI that past research has found to be the most reliable (Kurdek, 1995). Specifically, participants completed the subscales Relationship Rewards (e.g., “One advantage to my

relationship is that it provides me with companionship.”; $\alpha = .71$), Relationship Costs (reversed coded; e.g., “I give up a lot to be in my relationship.”; $\alpha = .83$), Ideal Relationship (e.g., “My current relationship comes close to matching what I would consider to be my ideal relationship.”; $\alpha = .75$), and Alternatives to Relationship (reversed coded; “As an alternative to my current relationship, I would like to date someone else.”; $\alpha = .78$). These scales assess various components of relationship commitment. A principal-components analysis of the four commitment scales revealed a single factor as indicated by a first to second eigenvalue ratio of 2.45–.74. As suggested by methodologists (e.g., Cohen & Cohen, 1983), because it appears these scale define a common factor, they were standardized and combined to create a measurement of overall relationship commitment. In the current study, there was a moderate level of agreement between romantic partners as to their overall relationship commitment (pairwise intraclass $r(70) = .49$, $p < .01$; Griffin & Gonzalez, 1995).

3. Results

In the following analyses, the results obtained were similar regardless of the length of participants' relationships and participants' ages; thus, all participants are included together in the reported results. Multilevel modeling was first used to test APIM models including only the main effects (the actor and partner effects) to predict relationship commitment. This model simultaneously tests the unique contributions of the centered actor SO and the centered partner SO to relationship commitment (see

Table 1
Summary of the actor–partner interdependence model predicting relationship commitment.

	Estimate	SE	<i>t</i>	Effect size (<i>r</i>)
<i>Level 1 variables</i>				
Actor effect	-.16	.07	-2.12*	-.25
Partner effect	-.11	.07	-1.40	-.17
<i>Level 2 variable</i>				
Actor × partner	.26	.12	2.18*	.25

Note: *n* Dyads = 72; *n* individuals = 144.

* $p < .05$.

Table 1). Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the actor effect was negatively related to relationship commitment, but contrary to Hypothesis 2, the partner effect failed to reach significance. These findings suggest that women with a restricted SO tend to report greater levels of relationship commitment than women with an unrestricted SO. However, a women's level of relationship commitment was not related to her partner's SO.

A second APIM analysis examined whether or not the interaction between individuals' and partners' SO predicted their relationship commitment. To do this, a new variable was created, which was the product of the centered women's SO and their centered partner's SO. This interaction term was then included as an independent variable, along with the actor and partner main effects, in the new model. As seen in Table 1 and consistent with Hypothesis 3, the actor–partner interaction predicted relationship commitment. In order to better understand this interaction, Fig. 1 presents a graphical representation derived by calculating simple regression equations corresponding to individuals scoring at the mean, 1 standard deviation above the mean, and 1 standard deviation below the mean for each predictor variable (Aiken & West, 1991). Significance tests of the simple slopes revealed that when women had moderate ($b = -.12$; $t(70) = -.95$, $p = .34$; $r = -.11$) or high levels ($b = .09$; $t(70) = 1.16$, $p = .24$; $r = .13$) of SO, their partners' SO was unrelated to their own relationship commitment. However, when women had low levels of SO, their partners' SO was negatively related to their relationship commitment ($b = -.33$; $t(70) = 3.40$, $p < .01$; $r = -.38$). Specifically, women who had low levels of SO experienced high levels of relationship commitment when their partner was similar to them in terms of SO but were much more likely to report low levels of commitment when they had a partner who was dissimilar to them and possessed high levels of SO.

4. Discussion

In their seminal review of research examining SO within romantic relationships, Simpson, Wilson, and Winterheld (2004) concluded that one of the “most glaring gaps in research on SO is the impact that SOs have on long-term relationships” (p. 108). Specifically, these authors noted that little is known about how mismatches in terms of SO might be related to various relationship

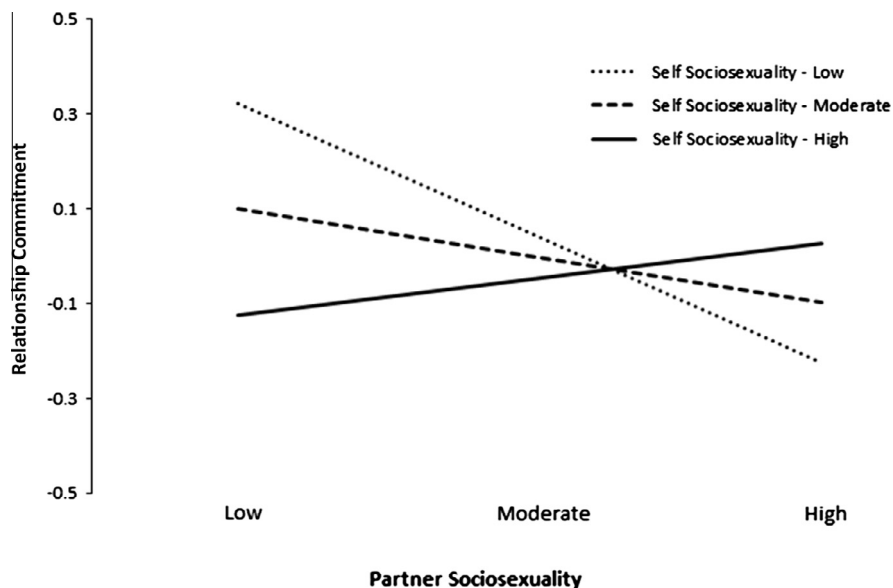


Fig. 1. Interaction between women's sociosexuality and their romantic partners' sociosexuality when predicting relationship commitment.

outcomes. Since the time of this review, several studies have started to examine SO within the context of romantic relationships (c.f., Asendorpf, Penke, & Mitja, 2011), but no study to date has examined the importance of similarity among romantic partners in terms of SO. Also, perhaps most glaring, no studies to date have examined the importance of SO within the context of same-sex relationships. In order to extend past research, this study examined the SO of both members of lesbian dyads.

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, results indicated that restricted lesbian women tended to report greater levels of relationship commitment than unrestricted women. Such a finding is consistent with previous research examining heterosexual couples (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999; Hebl & Kashy, 1995; Seal, Agostinelli, & Hannett, 1994) and with the general understanding of the construct of SO (Gangestad & Simpson, 1990). Restricted individuals likely display high levels of commitment because they tend to have a greater desire to build long-term and exclusive relationships than unrestricted individuals, who are more inclined to have sex outside their current relationship (or at least to be interested in considering the possibility; c.f., Simpson et al., 2004).

Contrary to Hypothesis 2, the SO of the romantic partner was not a significant predictor of relationship commitment. Even though the main effect of partner's SO was not significant, consistent with Hypothesis 3, there was a significant partner \times actor interaction effect when predicting relationship commitment. Simple slope analyses revealed that, although unrestricted women's level of relationship commitment was unrelated to their partners' SO, restricted women's relationship commitment was inversely related to their romantic partners SO. In other words, restricted women tended to report low levels of relationship commitment when they had unrestricted partners. Given that unrestricted women are more likely to flirt with and even have affairs with individuals who are not their romantic partners (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999; Seal, Agostinelli, & Hannett, 1994; Simpson, Gangestad, & Nations, 1996), it is not surprising that restricted women (who value faithfulness and commitment; Simpson et al., 2004) tend to report low levels of relationship commitment when romantically paired with unrestricted women.

Although this is the first study to examine the trait of SO among lesbian romantic partners, there are a few limitations worth noting. First, even though the participants in this study were relatively diverse, they are not necessarily representative of all women in relationships with women. These couples were participants in a study of romantic relationships and health among lesbian women and thus had to self-identify as lesbian and were relatively comfortable with their sexual orientation. They were also relatively well-educated and tended to be in their 30s and 40s. The extent to which these demographic factors make these women similar or different from the population of women in same-sex relationships is not known. This study was also cross-sectional and correlational in nature. Although the APIMs tested a predictor (SO) and an outcome (relationship commitment), there is no way to definitively know the direction of effects in this study. It is possible (although seemingly unlikely), that levels of commitment may affect the SO of women.

In spite of these limitations, this research extends past studies that have focused on the trait of SO and the limited research available to identify factors that contribute to lesbian women's

relationship experiences. It is hoped that in the future researchers will consider the importance of SO among other types of romantic partners (e.g., heterosexual couples, gay couples) in order to predict diverse relationship outcomes (e.g., relationship satisfaction, health, etc.). Not only will such research help clarify the importance of SO within romantic relationships, but will also could provide a better understanding of why some relationships ultimately fail while others succeed.

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