Comparative Couple Stability: Same-sex and Male-female Unions in the United States

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Abstract
Findings on comparative couple stability between same-sex and male-female unions vary, with some studies finding similar dissolution rates among same-sex and male-female unions and others finding higher rates of dissolution among same-sex unions. The authors extend previous research by examining the association between gender composition of couples and dissolution patterns, distinguishing between cohabitational and formal unions. Using data from the How Couples Meet and Stay Together survey, a nationally representative longitudinal survey of coupled individuals including an oversample of gay-, lesbian-, and bisexual-identified individuals, the authors conduct event-history analyses to estimate the hazard of dissolution of cohabiting and formalized unions. The findings suggest that dissolution rates are indistinguishable among cohabiting unions of all gender compositions and that formalized female-female unions may have a higher risk of union dissolution than the formalized unions of their male-male and male-female peers. The authors explore possible mechanisms underlying this observed risk differential.

Keywords
dissolution, gender, gay, lesbian, bisexual, LGBT, marriage

With the advent of Obergefell v. Hodges in 2015, same-sex marriages are legal across the United States, and in some states, same-sex marriages and other governmentally recognized unions were legal several years prior. Levels and patterns of the stability of this relatively new type of union are not well understood. While some studies have shown that same-sex unions are at higher risk of dissolution compared to male-female unions, others have found similar dissolution rates for same-sex and male-female unions. A common finding across the literature, however, is that female-female unions in particular are less stable than their male-male or male-female counterparts. It is unclear, however, whether this gendered difference in union stability is found for both cohabiting and formalized unions (i.e., marriage, domestic partnership, or civil union). Additionally, the mechanisms underlying the relative instability of female-female unions remain unexplained.

This article seeks to compare the stability of male-male, female-female, and male-female couples in both cohabitational and formalized unions, exploring the interaction effects between the gender composition and the formal union status of couples. While the literature on this topic has divergent findings, each study has approached this issue in a slightly different way, some investigating only cohabitational unions or only formal unions and some considering same-sex couples as a single group rather than separating male-male and female-female unions, for example. Using recent longitudinal data from coupled individuals, we separate male-male, female-female, and male-female couples as well as cohabitational and formalized unions to provide an understanding of similarities and differences in stability between couple types. We find that all cohabitational unions experience the same risk of union dissolution and that all formalized unions have a lower risk of dissolution compared to their cohabitational peers. However, we find that formalized female-female unions have higher risk of union dissolution compared to formalized male-male and male-female unions. This article also seeks to shed light on mechanisms that drive this difference in stability.

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Background

Inconsistencies in Findings for Same-sex and Male-female Couple Stability

Findings on the stability of same-sex unions have been inconsistent across the literature. Several studies suggest that same-sex couples have dissolution rates higher than those of male-female couples (Andersson et al. 2006; Kurdek 1998; Lau 2012; Weisshaar 2014; Wiik, Seierstad, and Noack 2014). However, some studies indicate that same-sex couples have dissolution rates that are similar to those associated with male-female couples (Manning, Brown, and Stykes 2016; Rosenfeld 2014).

A variety of approaches to sampling and measurement are employed across studies on same-sex couples. In the absence of available representative data, some studies have used non-representative samples of same-sex couples, relying on convenience or snowball samples (Balsam et al. 2008; Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Kurdek 1998, 2004; Lau 2012). There is also a lack of comparability among measures. Due to differences in legal status of formal unions among same-sex couples across time and space, some studies have focused on civil unions (Balsam et al. 2008; Ross, Gask, and Berrington 2011), others a mix of formalized unions including marriage (Andersson et al. 2006; Rosenfeld 2014; Weisshaar 2014; Wiik et al. 2014), and still others cohabitational couples (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Joyner, Manning, and Bogle 2017; Kurdek 1998, 2004; Lau 2012; Manning et al. 2016; Rosenfeld 2014; Weisshaar 2014). While these measures are inconsistent across the literature, they are also often inconsistent within studies comparing one type of union for same-sex couples to another type of union for male-female couples (Balsam et al. 2008; Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Kurdek 1998, 2004; Lau 2012; Manning et al. 2016). These limitations of previous studies lead to difficulty attempting to generalize results. See Table 1 for a summary of recent and relevant studies.

In addition to inconsistencies in the relationship status of couples studied, there are differences between findings in the Scandinavian and American contexts, even among recent studies using representative samples to compare same-sex and male-female union stability. Studies using administrative-level data in Norway and Sweden find that same-sex couples had higher dissolution rates than male-female couples, with female-female unions experiencing higher dissolution rates than male-male couples (Andersson et al. 2006; Wiik et al. 2014). Findings from couples in the United States are less consistent. Using data from the How Couples Meet and Stay Together survey (HCMST; Rosenfeld, Thomas, and Falcon 2015), Rosenfeld (2014) found that same-sex and male-female couples had the same dissolution rates after accounting for entrance into formal unions, including domestic partnerships, civil unions, and formal marriage. Focusing on cohabitational unions, Manning et al. (2016) indicated that same-sex and male-female cohabiting couples experienced similar dissolution rates and that both same-sex and male-female cohabiting couples were subject to higher dissolution rates than male-female married couples. In contrast, Joyner et al. (2017) found that male-male relationships that are neither formalized nor cohabitational, that is, dating, are less stable than male-female relationships of the same variety; female-female dissolution rates in these relationships are indistinguishable from their male-female counterparts. However, when considering cohabitational unions that are not formalized, female-female unions were found to be less stable than male-female relationships and male-male unions to be indistinguishable from their male-female peers (Joyner et al. 2017). Additionally, Rosenfeld (2014), considering separately male-male and female-female couples, found that female-female couples had higher risks of union dissolution compared to their male-female couple peers.

While the particular findings vary by context, one commonality is that female-female couples are often found to be less stable than their male-male and male-female counterparts, though some studies find this to be the case for cohabitational unions and others for marital unions. Whether this difference in gendered dissolution risk is true across couple types is not known. The mechanisms that might explain this association between gender composition of a couple and union stability are explored in the literature but remain unclear.

Mechanisms for Differences in Union Stability

Alternative hypotheses have previously been put forth to explain the gendered differences in same-sex dissolution rates. The first lies in the suggestion that male-male and female-female couples self-select differently into cohabitation and marriage, as posited by Lau (2012). While Lau (2012) suggested that male-male cohabitational couples are less stable than female-female cohabitational couples, he recognized that consensus has not been achieved on this gendered difference and that male-male couples may be more highly self-selected than female-female couples, a prediction he acknowledges is at odds with his own tentative findings. He notes that Carpenter and Gates (2008) found such a selection effect: Male-male couples who sought legal recognition of their union in California had been together longer than female-female couples who did the same, which may result in greater stability observed among male-male legal unions.

The difference in stability has also been attributed to fewer perceived barriers to union dissolution in same-sex unions (Kurdek 1998), though these findings are based on a comparison of same-sex cohabitational unions and male-female marital unions, which raises the question of whether the difference in perceived barriers to union dissolution arise...
| Authors and Year                  | Representative Same-sex Sample | Representative Male-female Sample | Data Set                                                                 | Considered Male-male vs. Female-female | Male-female Couple Type | Country(ies) | Findings                                                                 |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Blumstein and Schwartz (1983)    | No                              | No                              | Convenience sample of approximately 6,000 couples, of whom approximately 1,750 were same-sex, obtained through advertisements for the study | Yes                                    | Cohabiting and married | United States | Female-female couples were most likely to break up                        |
| Kurdek (1998)                    | No                              | No                              | Same-sex: convenience/snowball sample gathered from gay periodicals and referrals Male-female: all marriages published in the *Dayton Daily News* May 1986 through January 1988 | Yes                                    | Cohabiting            | United States (Ohio) | Gay and lesbian couples were more likely to dissolve their unions than male-female couples. |
| Kurdek (2004)                    | No                              | No                              | Same-sex: convenience/snowball sample gathered from gay periodicals and referrals Male-female: marriages published in the *Dayton Daily News* | Yes                                    | Cohabiting            | United States (based on civil unions formed in Vermont, though many were nonresident) | No differences in stability found between male-male and female-female couples. No direct comparison was made to male-female couples. |
| Andersson et al. (2006)          | Yes                             | Yes                             | Population registers of Norway and Sweden                                 | Yes                                    | Registered partnerships (legal equivalent to marriage) | Norway and Sweden | Female-female couples were more likely than male-male couples to dissolve their unions. Male-male couples were more likely than male-female couples to dissolve their unions. |
| Balsam et al. (2008)             | Yes (for civil unions) and no (for nonformalized) | No                              | All registered same-sex civil unions in Vermont during first year post-legislation; nonformalized same-sex and married male-female couples were siblings of civil union sample | No                                    | Civil union and nonformalized | United States | Same-sex couples not in civil unions were more likely to dissolve their unions than same-sex couples in a civil union or male-female married couples. |
| Ross, Gask, and Berrington (2011) | Yes                             | n/a                             | Civil unions during first five years post-legalization in United Kingdom    | Yes                                    | Civil union            | United Kingdom | Female-female couples dissolved unions at a greater rate than male-male couples. |

(continued)
Table 1. (continued)

| Authors and Year | Representative Male-female Sample | Data Set | Considered Male-male vs. Female-female Same-sex Couple Type | Male-female Couple Type | Country(ies) | Findings |
|------------------|-----------------------------------|----------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|----------|
| Lau (2012)       | No                                 | Yes      | National Child Development Study, British Cohort Study       | Yes                     | Cohabiting and married | Great Britain | Same-sex cohabiting couples’ unions experienced lower stability than those of male-female married couples. |
| Rosenfeld (2014) | Yes                                | Yes      | How Couples Meet and Stay Together survey                    | Yes                     | Cohabiting and formalized unions | United States | Same-sex couples, pooled across sex, experienced the same dissolution rates as male-female couples. Female-female couples were more likely to dissolve their unions than male-female couples were when considered separately from male-male couples. |
| Weisshaar (2014) | Yes                                | Yes      | How Couples Meet and Stay Together survey                    | No                      | Cohabiting and formalized unions | United States | Same-sex couples were more likely to dissolve their unions than male-female couples. |
| Wiik, Seierstad, and Noack (2014) | Yes                                  | Yes | Population register of Norway | Yes | Formalized unions | Norway | Female-female couples were more likely to dissolve their unions than male-male couples, who in turn were more likely to dissolve their unions than male-female couples. |
| Manning, Brown, and Stykes (2016) | Yes                                  | Yes | Survey of Income and Program Participation | No | Cohabiting | United States | Same-sex and male-female cohabiting couples all experienced the same dissolution rates and were less stable than male-female married couples. |
| Joyner, Manning, and Bogle (2017) | Yes                                  | Yes | National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent and Adult Health | Yes | Non-coresident and cohabiting | United States | Male-male couples were more likely to dissolve than male-female couples, when considering non-coresidence. Coresident female-female couples were more likely than male-female couples to dissolve. |
from the sex composition of the couples or the difference in type of union. Another hypothesis reflects gendered differences in relationship satisfaction and the initiation of divorce. Women have been found to be more sensitive than men to relationship difficulties and may perceive marital problems more readily (Amato and Rogers 1997). Women have also been found to be less satisfied in their relationships (Wiik, Keizer, and Lappegård 2012) and to be more likely to initiate divorce (Kalmijn and Poortman 2006; Sweeney 2002).

Differences in the stability of same-sex and male-female couples may arise from differentials in the effects of predictors of relationship stability between couple types, such as household income. For example, Weisshaar (2014), in her study of the effects of equal earnings on union stability and relationship satisfaction among same-sex and male-female couples, found that equal earnings between partners is associated with increased relationship stability among same-sex couples but decreased stability among male-female couples. Other common covariates of relationship stability in the literature are education, race/ethnicity, and presence of minor children, which may function differently for same-sex and male-female couples.

Joyner et al. (2017) predicted differences in union stability by gender composition of the couple using the minority stress model discussed below. We also hypothesize that stressors affect same-sex couples differently than male-female couples such that same-sex unions, on average, experience lower levels of stability. Additionally, minority stress functions differently among male-male and female-female couples since female-female couples would experience an interaction of sexism- and heterosexism-based stressors, whereas male-male couples would not experience sexism-based stressors.

**Social Exchange Theory and the Minority Stress Model**

Social exchange theory may explain differences in stability between same-sex and male-female relationships as well as differences between male-male and female-female relationships. Levinger (1976) posited that marital unions dissolve when dissolution represents a potentially net positive change in that the perceived benefits of alternatives to the relationships (including being single) outweigh the perceived benefits within the relationship, factoring in any costs of union dissolution, be they financial, psychic, or otherwise. One source of differences between same-sex and male-female relationships in the perceived benefits within a relationship may be stressors that affect same-sex couples differently than male-female couples, which in turn may manifest themselves in relationship quality. While Kurdek (2004) and Balsam et al. (2008) found that same-sex couples had better relationship quality than male-female couples, many other studies have found that same-sex couples face additional stresses and navigate additional challenges that male-female couples do not encounter.

The minority stress model posits that minorities, in this case sexual minorities, experience additional stressors not experienced by the majority group (Meyer 2003). These stressors come from external events, anticipation of these events, and the “internalization of negative societal attitudes” (Meyer 2003:676). For example, individual-level stressors may include ongoing experiences such as the concealment of sexual identity or acute experiences such as denial of service.

In addition to individual-level stressors that same-sex-attracted individuals may experience, there are couple-level stressors (Frost et al. 2017). Couple-level stressors include processes such as negotiating gender roles within the couple or feeling like being on display in public when interacting together in ways that would be accepted for male-female couples (e.g., holding hands; Frost et al. 2017).

The disclosure of sexual orientation, or outness, is an additional obstacle same-sex couples must surmount, which male-female couples need not worry about. Management of the disclosure of sexual orientation influences the stability of relationships (Murphy 1989). Differences in degrees of outness between members of a couple can lead to stress within the relationship.

Stability is also a function of familial and friendship networks (Felmlée 2001), and the structures and effects of these networks are different between same-sex and male-female couples (Oswald 2002). In particular, being out to family members and friends as well as acceptance of the relationship by these significant people in an individual’s life may affect the quality of a relationship (Caron and Ulin 1997; Recczek 2016). However, even though increased outness is reported to reduce stress within a relationship, outness may lead to increased stress from family- or work-related stress (Knoble and Linville 2012). Entering into a formal union may lead to additional family stresses through coming out to family or experiencing negative reactions of family members to the formalization of a same-sex union (Ocobock 2013).

On a variety of measures, LGBT-identified individuals indicate lower levels of well-being (Gates 2014). These include self-reported well-being with respect to finances, physical health, and social life, among other realms. As Beals, Imprett, and Peplau (2002) have noted, lesbians and gay men may face minor but constant stress in the form of microagressions due to their sexual minority status. This may place stress on a relationship to which a male-female relationship would not be subjected. Perceived stress is a predictor of relationship quality expressed among same-sex couples, with higher levels of stress predicting poorer self-reported relationship quality (Otis et al. 2006). Similarly, relationship quality may suffer from the internalized homophobia of one or both members of a couple (Lavner 2017; Otis et al. 2006), internalized homophobia being self-hatred or stigma felt against oneself that a same-sex-attracted individual may experience as a reflection of the negative views in society more generally.
While the minority stress model has been used as a lens to better understand same-sex relationships that have not been formalized as well as coresidential unions (Joyner et al. 2017), to our knowledge, no research has tested whether dissolution rates for marital unions are consistent with predictions made with the minority stress model. Same-sex marital unions may be less prone to minority stress due to their legal acceptance and equivalence to male-female marital unions, removing an institutional source of stress. While the legal availability and acceptance of same-sex marital unions does not necessarily include acceptance of same-sex relationships by family, Bennett (2017) notes that a couple’s marital status seems to matter more than the gender composition of the couple for parental approval, according to data from Rosenfeld (2014). However, parental approval of same-sex unions, whether marital or not, is lower than that for male-female unions (Rosenfeld 2014) and may still constitute a source of stress for same-sex couples.

Joyner et al. (2017) suggest that minority stress is approximately equal for both male-male and female-female couples, albeit due to stresses from different sources. Of course, both male-male and female-female couples as well as non-partnered LGBT-identified individuals have experienced a variety of forms of discrimination (for a discussion of the history of discrimination against LGBT-identified men and women, see Chauney 2004). It has been found that females in same-sex relationships report more stress from family reactions, as opposed to men in same-sex relationships, who report greater fear of violence or harassment (Todosijevic, Rothblum, and Solomon 2005). It is possible, however, that female-female couples face higher levels of stress than male-male couples due to an interaction of stresses from sexism and heterosexism. That is, same-sex couples, whether male-male or female-female, would experience similar stresses due to perceived discrimination of their sexual minority status and homophobia, whether experienced from others or internalized. LGBT-identified females would experience separate stresses due to perceived discrimination of their gender and internalized sexism, or the stigma against oneself that a female may feel as a result of absorbing and believing stigmas against or negative perceptions of women that exist in society more generally. These separate stresses would compound such that female-female couples would experience, on average, greater levels of minority stress than male-male couples. Indeed, LGBT-identified women in particular report lower levels of well-being than LGBT-identified men (Gates 2014).

We predict that female-female relationships will have lower stability, on average, compared to male-male and male-female relationships due to an interaction between minority stresses from minority status within two social systems of stratification—sexual orientation and gender. This prediction is not to say that female-female couples experience more discrimination than male-male couples as a result of their couple type but that LGBT-identified females may experience greater stressors due to identification as both LGBT and female, whereas LGBT-identified males may experience stressors due only to identification as LGBT and not based on their gender. Similarly, we predict that male-male couples will have a lower relationship stability compared to male-female couples, again due to minority stress, mediated through lower relationship quality. Several studies have found that female-female couples have higher dissolution rates than male-male couples (Andersson et al. 2006; Rosenfeld 2014; Ross et al. 2011; Wiik et al. 2014). It is also important to note, however, that Kalmijn, Loeve, and Manting (2007) and Lau (2012) concluded that male-male couples have higher dissolution rates, although their finding is an outlier in the literature. Further, Lau (2012) pointed out that the difference between male-male and female-female dissolution rates was only marginally statistically significant and therefore is merely suggestive.

The Current Study

Same-sex union stability is still understudied, and the literature that does exist is not in agreement over the existence or direction of differentials in dissolution rates among male-male, female-female, and male-female couples. This study seeks to provide a finer understanding of male-male and female-female dissolution rates relative to those for male-female couples by separating cohabitational and formalized unions in a representative sample of couples in the United States. We begin by investigating the extent to which dissolution rates of male-male, female-female, and male-female cohabitational and formalized unions differ. While we use the same How Couples Meet and Stay Together data used by Rosenfeld (2014), we include an additional wave of data from the study that had not yet been released at the time Rosenfeld published his 2014 article. We also provide a more detailed view of couples by categorizing couples into six groups by gender composition (male-male, female-female, or male-female) and relationship status (cohabitational or formalized) to explore interaction effects between gender composition and formal union status. Additionally, we seek to explore mechanisms that may drive differentials in union stability, found in our study as well as across much of the literature. Potential mechanisms are explored through interaction effects between gender composition of the couple and household income, presence of minor children, and metropolitan residence to better understand whether such predictors function similarly among male-male, female-female, and male-female couples.

While several studies have found gendered differences in dissolution rates of same-sex relationships, whether female-female or male-male couples are at a relative disadvantage, no study has yet disaggregated couples by couple type and formal union status such that male-male, female-female, and male-female couples are considered separately among those who are cohabiting and those who have formalized their
unions. Additionally, the mechanisms driving gendered differences in union stability merit further examination. We test whether predictors of union stability function differently for male-male and female-female couples, which may give rise to differences in dissolution rates.

**Methods**

**Data and Sample**

The How Couples Meet and Stay Together (HCMST) survey is a panel study of 3,009 coupled individuals over five waves from 2009 to 2015 (Rosenfeld et al. 2015). Waves 1, 2, and 3 were fielded in 2009, 2010, and 2011, respectively; wave 4 was fielded in 2013; and wave 5 was fielded in 2014–2015. The sample is nationally representative, with an oversample of gay, lesbian, and bisexual self-identified individuals. We include only individuals in coresidential unions in the first wave of the data, some of which have been formalized through civil union, domestic partnership, or marriage. In our restricted sample, we include 1,847 male-female couples and 327 same-sex couples, of whom 153 are male-male and 174 are female-female.

The HCMST sample was originally obtained through the Knowledge Networks’s (now GfK) large, nationally representative ongoing panel contacted through random digit dialing. Wave 1 of the HCMST study was completed over the Internet, and waves 2 through 5 were completed by phone and Internet, with Internet provided by Knowledge Networks for respondents who did not already have Internet access at home. The response rate for wave 1 was 13 percent, which is based on a 33 percent response rate resulting from the creation of the panel for Knowledge Networks through nationally representative random digit dialing, a subsequent demographic panel from Knowledge Networks before wave 1 with a response rate of 57 percent, and a response to wave 1 of HCMST of 71 percent. Response to waves 2, 3, 4, and 5 are calculated based on those who were eligible for follow-up—that is, those who reported being in a relationship at wave 1 and reported being in that same relationship at wave 2, 3, 4, or 5 for eligibility for inclusion in the following wave. The response rates are 85 percent, 73 percent, 60 percent, and 46 percent for waves 2 through 5, respectively, and are calculated relative to participation in wave 1 of the study (Stanford SSDS Social Science Data Collection 2018).

Respondents in the data set were asked to report on their current relationship at wave 1 and were followed up on that same relationship in subsequent waves. Relationships identified at wave 1 held different formal union statuses (noncohabiting, cohabiting, or formalized) and had a range of relationship durations. We account for some of the variability in relationship types by including only individuals who report coresidential unions at wave 1. Additionally, we essentially splice together a cross-section of data from these different marital or cohabitational cohorts by using only the relationship durations occurring between 2009 and 2015 (the observation period of the study) in the models. For example, an individual reporting that the couple had been in a cohabiting relationship for 15 years at wave 1 and stayed together and responded to all waves of the study would contribute information referring to the sixteenth to twenty-second years of coresidence in the current data, whereas another individual reporting that the couple had moved in together one year prior to wave 1 would contribute information referring to the second to eighth years of coresidence.

We include covariates in our models for commonly used predictors of relationship stability, all measured during either the demographic panel prior to the first wave or the first wave itself, including years of education, race of respondent, residence within a Metropolitan Statistical Area, household income, presence of minor children in the home, relationship quality, and age at union. All findings presented are based on unweighted data.

Descriptive statistics of selected variables are presented in Table 2. As can be seen from the descriptive statistics, approximately twice the proportion of male-female relationships are formalized at wave 1 compared to male-male relationships and greater than twice as many as female-female relationships. This likely reflects the availability of union formalization options for same-sex couples in 2009, the time of wave 1. Twice the proportion of individuals in same-sex unions as those in male-female unions report having a bachelor’s degree or higher. On average, those in male-male unions report household incomes $30,000 greater than their male-female counterparts, and those in female-female unions report household incomes $20,000 greater. Just over 95 percent of respondents in same-sex unions report living in a Metropolitan Statistical Area, compared to just 83 percent for those in male-female unions. Also of note, nearly 90 percent of male-male unions and just over 80 percent of female-female unions formed when the respondent was 25 years old or older, compared to only 57 percent of male-female unions. This is consistent with Orth and Rosenfeld’s (2018) finding, also analyzing HCMST data, that the average age of the respondent at the time of the start of his or her reported relationship at wave 1 is approximately 10 years older for male-male and female-female unions than male-female unions.

**Measures**

To identify individuals who broke up with their partner between waves during the observation period, at each follow-up, participants were asked to identify whether their relationship was still intact. Those whose unions had dissolved were dropped from future waves of the study. To identify those who transitioned from cohabitation to marriage, participants were also asked at each wave if they had entered into a formal union if their relationship was not formalized in previous waves. The data were gathered prior to Obergefell v. Hodges, and as such, same-sex marriages
were not universally available in the United States at the time of data collection. To account for this, respondents were asked to indicate whether they considered their union formalized (civil union, domestic partnership, or marriage) regardless of the legal status of their union in their city or state. Although civil unions and domestic partnerships were classified separately, in the current study, all types of formalized unions are considered together (i.e., marriages, civil unions, and domestic partnerships) under the umbrella formal union, as opposed to cohabitational unions in which the couple lives together but the couple has not registered the partnership or the couple does not consider themselves to be married.

Respondents were asked to self-identify their gender in a panel of demographic questions asked of Knowledge Networks’s larger adult sample prior to the first wave of HCMST. In the first wave of the survey, participants were asked if they were in a romantic or sexual relationship. Only those reporting romantic or sexual relationships at the first wave were included in the remainder of the survey. Respondents with partners were then asked to identify the gender of their partner and were then asked more explicitly if they were in a same-sex or opposite-sex relationship. The name of their partner was also asked and included in future questions to increase accuracy across waves and for those with multiple partners.

**Analytic Plan**

Our models are fully interactive with union type, separating those in cohabitational unions and those in formal unions. Time-invariant covariates for sex composition of couple, level of education, race or ethnicity of respondent, metropolitan residence, income, and presence of minor children in the household, all measured at wave 1, are included in the models predicting union stability. Two duration variables are included—one for length of cohabitation for those who had not formalized their unions and one for length of formal union for those whose unions were formal, both measured in years. Hazards of union dissolution are computed through discrete time event–history analysis with a complementary log-log link using the following model:

\[
\lambda_i(t) = \lambda_0(t) e^{\beta' X_i(t)},
\]

representing the hazard for individual \(i\) at time \(t\), where \(\lambda_0\) is the baseline hazard, \(X\) is the range of covariates, and \(\beta\) is the vector of their associated coefficients. Similarly, we calculate the hazard of transition from cohabitational to formal union over the study period using time-invariant covariates for sex composition of the couple, relationship quality (1 = excellent, 0 = otherwise), household income, age at union, level of education, and metropolitan residence, again using discrete time event–history analysis with a complementary log-log link.

**Results**

**Same-sex and Male-female Couple Stability**

As would be expected, being in a formal union, relative to being in a cohabitational union, is associated with a reduced risk of union dissolution (model not shown). This finding is consistent both with the concept that the barriers to union dissolution are higher once the union is formalized as well as the fact that couples self-select for commitment into formalizing their unions.
Across our base models, when same-sex couples of both sexes are considered together, there is no difference in risk of dissolution between same-sex couples and male-female couples (see Table 3, Models 1 and 4). When considering male-male and female-female couples separately, however, differences emerge between cohabitational unions and formal unions. Among those in cohabitational unions, there is no difference in risk of union dissolution by gender composition of the couple (see Table 3, Model 2). On the other hand, among those in formal unions, female-female couples have a higher risk of union dissolution compared to male-female couples (see Table 3, Model 5). The differential in union dissolution risk is only marginally statistically significant between female-female and male-male couples in formal unions (model not shown, coefficient = .945, \( p = .094 \)).

When taking into account the full range of covariates to control for many common predictors of union stability, that is, race of respondent, metropolitan residence, log of household income, and presence of minor children in the household, cohabitational unions of different gender compositions all have the same risk of union dissolution (see Table 3, Model 3), and female-female formal unions are predicted to be less stable than their male-female couple counterparts (see Table 3, Model 6). When considering the full range of covariates, as with the reduced model, female-female unions are not subject to a statistically significantly higher risk of union dissolution compared to male-male couples (model not shown, coefficient = .911, \( p = .106 \)). Given the small number of dissolutions of formal unions among female-female and male-male couples—15 and 4, respectively—the lack of statistical significance is not terribly surprising. The magnitude of the point estimate, .911, hints at the possibility of a “real” gender composition effect in the statistical sense if sample sizes were only somewhat greater.

Figure 1 shows the estimated proportion of couples’ unions dissolving based on Models 2 and 5 of Table 3 for couples by gender composition and formalization of the union over a 20-year period.

Figure 1 illustrates what we learn statistically from Table 3: Union stability varies both by union status as well as gender composition, with the stability of same-sex couples largely indistinguishable from that of male-female couples, except for that of female-female couples in a formal union, which is associated with an increased risk of union dissolution compared to male-male and male-female marital unions. The cumulative dissolution curves for male-female, male-male, and female-female cohabitational unions are not statistically significantly different from each other, nor are the curves for male-female and male-male formal unions. Last, we see that dissolution is considerably greater within cohabitational unions than formal unions.

### Other Predictors of Union Stability

In light of the small sample sizes, some results are suggestive even if not found to be statistically significant. In Table 3, Model 3, individuals who report identification with two or more races in cohabitational unions seem to have a higher risk of union dissolution compared to individuals who report their racial identification as white, given the magnitude of the coefficient and a \( p \) value of .109. This difference is not found among couples in formal unions, as evidenced by a small coefficient with a \( p \) value of .663. If we venture to interpret this difference, it could perhaps be due to the fact that individuals who identify as two or more races are more likely to be in a union with a partner who does not share their exact racial identity, whether it be a difference with respect to one or more of their racial identities. This difference in identity
Figure 1. Cumulative proportion of unions dissolving by couple type and duration of formal union or cohabitation, estimated from Table 3, Models 2 and 5.

between partners could produce friction that manifests itself earlier on in a relationship, such as during cohabitation, but is resolved or becomes moot later in the relationship, such as when a couple decides to formalize their union.

To test whether racial or ethnic homogamy was a predictor of union dissolution, we ran models that included whether the race of the respondent and the race of his or her partner were the same in conjunction with the full set of covariates (models not shown). Racial homogamy was measured by a constructed variable for whether both respondent and partner identified as white, non-Hispanic; black, non-Hispanic; Hispanic; or other, non-Hispanic (including two or more races). Within the model for cohabitational unions and the model for formal unions, the covariate for homogamy on this dimension was not found to be statistically significant. It is worth noting that individuals who identify as black and are in a formal union have a higher risk of union dissolution compared to those who identify as white and are married, which is consistent with findings in the literature (see Table 3, Model 6).

Among those who are in a formal union, residence in a metropolitan area is associated with a higher risk of union dissolution. Interacting metropolitan residence with gender composition of the couple suggests that female-female couples in formal unions and living in metropolitan areas are less likely to dissolve than male-female unions, noting that this finding is marginally statistically significant, likely due to the small sample size (model not shown, coefficient = −1.924, p = .087). There are no male-male couples in formal unions living in a metropolitan area that dissolve during the study period, and so no comparison can be made to male-female couples. No differential is found for metropolitan residence for those in cohabitational unions when considering all couple gender compositions together. However, when considering an interaction between metropolitan residence and gender composition of the couple, female-female couples are found to have a lower risk of union dissolution in a metropolitan context compared to male-female couples (model not shown, coefficient = −1.598, p = .047). No difference is found between cohabiting male-male couples and cohabiting male-female couples (or between cohabiting male-male and female-female couples).

Consistent across those in cohabitational unions and formal unions, higher household income is associated with a lower risk of union dissolution. When considering interaction effects between household income and gender composition of cohabitational couples (model not shown), no association between income and stability is found for male-female couples. On the other hand, male-male couples are much less likely to dissolve the higher their household income compared to male-female couples (coefficient = −.685, p = .040), and results are suggestive that the same is true for female-female couples (coefficient = −.361, p = .120). For couples in formal unions, an interaction effect reveals that there are no significant differences among couple types in the association between household income and union stability. Income in general may be associated with
higher stability due to reduced stress associated with less financial strain. The finding that income is a significant factor for all married couples as well as same-sex cohabiting couples but not male-female cohabiting couples may suggest that many same-sex cohabiting couples structure their relationship in a similar fashion to a marriage in which finances are shared between partners.

The presence of minor children in the household (measured dichotomously) is associated with a higher risk of union dissolution for those in a formal union but not for those in a cohabitational union. It is important to note, however, that while the coefficient for presence of minor children in the household for those who are married is positive and significant and the same coefficient for those who are cohabiting but not married is positive and not significant, the two coefficients are not statistically significantly different from each other. Interestingly, this differential in formal unions is substantial among female-female couples compared to male-male couples (model not shown, coefficient = 1.956, \( p = .005 \)). There were no cases of male-male couples with children who dissolved their formal unions in the data set, and therefore the comparison cannot be made for male-male couples.

**Probability of Transition into Formal Union**

To investigate one possible mechanism of the suggested relatively high risk of union dissolution associated with female-female couples in a formal union, we test whether female-female couples have a lower threshold compared to male-male couples for entrance into a formal union, perhaps reflecting a reduced selection effect for female-female couples. Figure 2 indicates that nearly 53 percent of female-female couples cohabiting during the first wave of HCMST formalize their union during the six-year study period, compared to approximately 40 percent of male-male couples. These descriptive statistics suggest that female-female couples may opt into formal unions more quickly and more often than their male-male peers, though this preliminary analysis does not take into consideration length of relationship.

To properly account for exposure to risk of marriage, in Table 4, we present discrete time event–history analyses for risk of transition from cohabitational union to formal union for same-sex couples. Male-female couples were excluded from this analysis due to differential access to formal unions between same-sex and male-female couples over the study period. Same-sex couples, however, have the same access to formal unions over the study period, whether male-male or female-female, and so can be more readily compared.

Table 4, Model 1 suggests that female-female couples have the same risk of union formalization as male-male couples. When controlling for other predictors of entrance into a formal union, it might be expected that high relationship quality would predict transition to a formal union; however, Table 4, Model 2 indicates that relationship
quality is not associated with risk of union formalization. Household income is positively associated, with modest statistical significance, with risk of union formalization (see Table 4, Model 3). When taking into account household income, female-female unions are found to have a higher risk of union formalization. This finding is robust to the inclusion of other covariates, that is, relationship quality, age at union, education, and metropolitan residence (see Table 4, Model 4).

To test whether differential selection occurs into cohabitation, we run discrete time event-history analyses on risk of cohabitation among non-coresident couples, but the results are not significant by couple type (models not shown). Over the study period, only nine male-male and five female-female couples transitioned from non-coresidence to cohabitation. The small sample size precludes our ability to test whether differences exist among male-female, male-male, and female-female couples (or between male-female and same-sex couples taken as a group) in the probability of forming a cohabitational union.

**Discussion**

While we hypothesized that unions among same-sex couples generally would be less stable than those among male-female couples and those of female-female couples less stable than those of male-male couples, we find that married female-female couples have a higher risk of union dissolution than other married couples. No other differences in union stability are found. Consistent with the work of Manning et al. (2016), when considering same-sex couples, regardless of gender composition, we find no significant differences between same-sex cohabiting couples and their male-female cohabiting peers. We also find that same-sex couples in a formal union, when taken as a single group, appear to have the same risk of union dissolution as their male-female counterparts, in agreement with Rosenfeld (2014).

Differing patterns between couple types are revealed, however, when considering male-male and female-female couples separately. Our findings suggest that patterns of union stability in same-sex unions are gendered. Female-female couples in a formal union experience a higher risk of union dissolution compared to male-female married couples. This elevated risk of union dissolution is not found for male-male couples in a formal union. Neither is any difference found in dissolution rates for male-male or female-female cohabiting couples compared to their male-female peers. Suggestive evidence is also found that female-female couples in formal unions experience higher risk of union dissolution compared to their male-male peers.

Our results agree in part with the common finding that female-female unions are associated with higher risk of union dissolution compared to male-female couples (Andersson et al. 2006; Rosenfeld 2014; Wiik et al. 2014); however, we do not find the elevated risk of union dissolution among male-male couples in a formal union that Andersson et al. (2006) and Wiik et al. (2014) found. We build on Rosenfeld’s (2014) analysis by disaggregating male-male and female-female couples who are cohabiting as well as in a formal union.

What drives the gendered differences in same-sex union stability may be a combination of factors, including reduced selection for entrance into formal union for female-female couples and differential effects of covariates of union stability for couples by gender composition. The differential threshold for entrance into a formal union by gender is consistent with untested predictions by Lau (2012) and Wiik et al. (2014), although Lau predicted that male-male couples could have a higher risk of union dissolution. The greater likelihood of union formation among female-female couples compared to male-male couples found in the present study suggests that selection effects into formal unions are weaker among female-female couples compared to male-male couples, which may in part explain why female-female couples in a formal union are found to have a higher risk of union dissolution, on average.

The differential effects of predictors of union stability may reflect gendered differences in society at large in which male-male and female-female unions may be perceived differently by society or structured differently, a reflection of the minority stress model. Indeed, same-sex couples face a variety of stressors that are absent in male-female relationships, such as

| Model | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Female-female (reference: male-male) | .49 | .47 | .61+ | .65+ |
| Relationship quality = excellent | | .11 | | .07 |
| Log household income | | | .59+ | .57+ |
| Age at union (≥ 25) | | | 1.17 | |
| Education ≥ 16 years | | | | -.03 |
| Metro residence | | | | .25 |
| N of couple-years | 594 | | | |
| Union formations | | 35 | | |

*p < .10.
managing disclosure of sexual orientation as well as minority stresses stemming from sexual identity. These factors have been found to influence stress within relationships as well as perceived relationship quality. Negative reactions to the relationship from family, friends, and co-workers may add additional stress to same-sex relationships. Indeed, using Gallup (2018) data, there is evidence that LGBT-identified females may feel less positively about their recent experiences and surroundings, as measured by experiences and attitudes. On an index comprising four dichotomous variables—feeling treated with respect yesterday, feeling safe walking home alone at night, feeling satisfied with city of residence, and feeling city of residence is getting better—being an LGBT-identified female is a statistically significant predictor of a lower score relative to non-LGBT-identified males, non-LGBT-identified females, and LGBT-identified males (models not shown). However, LGBT-identified males do not have statistically significantly different scores compared to non-LGBT-identified males. These findings may indicate that LGBT-identified women may experience greater stressors, both external and internal, compared to other groups. These stressors may in turn manifest themselves in a relationship. As Riggle and Rostosky (2007) discuss, stressors experienced by one couple member have an effect on the other member of the couple. However, they also argue that marriage and greater societal acceptance of same-sex marriage would decrease experiences of minority stress by same-sex couples. Minority stress alone cannot explain why female-female married couples experience higher risk of union dissolution compared to their married peers, while female-female cohabiting couples do not experience the same.

One possible explanation for this difference is that predictors of union stability function differently among couple types. Our finding (models not shown) that higher incomes are associated with greater union stability for male-male and female-female cohabiting unions but not for male-female cohabiting unions is evidence that cohabitation may function differently among same-sex and male-female unions despite the fact that no differences in union stability were found among the three gender compositions of cohabiting couples. This finding suggests that predictors of union stability do in fact function differently by couple type, building, for example, on the findings of Weisshaar (2014), who found that equal earnings are stabilizing among same-sex but destabilizing among male-female couples. It is possible that other predictors function differently by couple type within marriages; however, due to the small sample size of the HCMST data set, these differences cannot be identified by the current study.

It is also possible that lesbian and gay subcultures, taken separately from the larger LGBT subculture, treat relationships differently, such that age at union (and potentially other predictors) have different effects on same-sex unions by gender. Having common children in a relationship, for example, has been found to have a positive association with stability among female-female couples but a negative association among male-male couples (Wiik et al. 2014). Unfortunately, the present data do not allow the authors to test for this difference fully given that there are no male-male formal unions with children in the household in the sample.

These differential pressures on same-sex unions by gender may also include differentials in perceived barriers to union dissolution by gender in which female-female couples may not only be more weakly selected into formal unions but may also see the union as less permanent or easier to leave, as evidenced by findings from male-female relationships in which females were more likely to express dissatisfaction within the relationship or request divorce (Amato and Rogers 1997; Kalmijn and Poortman 2006; Sweeney 2002; Wiik et al. 2012).

It is worthwhile to note that outcomes of studies done in the European and U.S. contexts are somewhat inconsistent with each other. European studies indicate that same-sex couples in formal unions have higher rates of union dissolution than their male-female counterparts, and within same-sex couples, female-female couples have higher dissolution rates than male-male couples (Andersson et al. 2006; Wiik et al. 2014). In the U.S. context, we find that female-female couples in a formal union have a higher risk of union dissolution compared to male-female couples; however, we do not find this result for male-male couples in comparison to their male-female couple counterparts.

**Limitations**

Despite the oversample for lesbian, gay, and bisexual self-identified individuals in the How Couples Meet and Stay Together survey, the overall sample size for this sexual minority population is small. This problem is exacerbated when selecting for only those in coresidential unions as well as separating the sample by gender and relationship status (cohabitational or formal).

The first wave of the study identified individuals who were in a wide variety of relationships, regardless of the length or level of formality of the relationship. The design of the HCMST survey, however, creates an issue of left censoring in which couples are not identified at the start of their relationship. The data come from five waves conducted between 2009 and 2015, which is a relatively short observation period, especially when examining significant life events such as transition into marriage. To account for this study design, our analyses essentially construct period data based on individuals at risk for union dissolution or union formalization only during the observation period; however, a study that follows couples from the start of their relationships would allow for more rigorous analyses.

Finally, legal status of same-sex unions varied across time and place during the collection of the HCMST data. Some
state and city governments had legalized same-sex marriage, civil unions, or domestic partnerships while others had not, and many localities legalized same-sex unions during the observation period. This creates an uneven context temporally and geographically for same-sex couples. Additionally, all observations during the study period occur before the ruling of Obergefell v. Hodges, which was decided in June 2015; the last observations in wave 5 took place in March 2015. To account for the fact that not all couples had access to legal marriage, this study includes civil unions and domestic partnerships in the formal union category and allows for individuals to identify themselves as married regardless of governmental recognition of the union. To reduce variability in union status studied, future studies may be able to study only legal marriages given that all couples now have access to governmentally recognized marriage at the city, state, and federal levels.

Conclusion

While much research has examined relationship quality among same-sex couples and many studies have been conducted on same-sex couple stability, few studies have used nationally representative data. The HCMST panel survey provides an important step forward in the availability of nationally representative data to study same-sex and male-female couples that can be generalized to the U.S. population. Despite its relatively small sample size, no other data source in the United States can currently provide the same quality of data as the HCMST survey when considering couples of different type and level of relationship formality. Administrative-level data, such as those collected in Scandinavia (Andersson et al. 2006; Wiik et al. 2014), are extremely helpful in the effort to understand union dynamics, but such data are not available in the United States. Longitudinal data on formal and informal unions with a larger sample size and a longer observation period could provide the necessary information to explore the mechanisms for gendered differences in relationship stability. Comparative studies of formal and informal unions in the European and U.S. contexts would also provide greater insight into patterns of union dynamics and the mechanisms underlying them.

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