

The Influence of Social Approval and Support on the Maintenance Behaviors
of Same-Sex and Heterosexual Relationships

by

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ABSTRACT

Same-sex couples establish and maintain relationships for many of the reasons heterosexuals do, even without widespread acceptance. The manner in which couples maintain their relationships constitutes a subject of considerable research, though such research has primarily examined heterosexuals. Yet, two studies have evaluated relational maintenance behaviors for same-sex couples and heterosexuals: Haas and Stafford (1998, 2005). Although these studies found similarities between heterosexual and homosexual relationships, significant differences emerged involving social networks and meta-relational talk. Haas and Stafford attributed these differences to the lack of societal and legal support. The present thesis examined empirically the link between perceived social approval, and relational maintenance behaviors, focusing on differences between cross-sex and same-sex involvements. Dainton and Stafford's (1993) typology of social network compositions, measures of social approval and encouragement based on Felmlee (2001), and Canary and Stafford's (1992) five behavior relational maintenance typology tool with Haas and Stafford's (2005) measures of meta-relational talk were utilized for an online survey. A total of 157 online, geographically diverse surveys were collected from heterosexual and homosexual individuals involved stable, intimate relationships. Unique to this study, results demonstrate significant correlations between overall social approval and the use of relational maintenance behaviors for both heterosexual and same-sex couples. Previous literature has linked lack of social approval with the use of unique maintenance strategies employed by same-sex couples; however, findings from

the present study do not support this. Interestingly, increases in overall social approval, not decreases, are positively correlated with the use of meta-relational talk for same-sex couples.

DEDICATION

The thesis is dedicated to my partner Richard for his unwavering support through this long process.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
REVIEW OF LITERATURE	3
Overview of Relational Maintenance Research.....	3
Relational Maintenance Strategies.....	3
Strategic Versus Routine Behaviors	5
Definition of Key Terms.....	6
Early Gay and Lesbian Maintenance Research	8
Relevance of Social Support and Social Network Research	11
Friendships and Family Members in Social Networks	12
Influence of Social Support on Same-Sex Relationships	15
RATIONALE AND PURPOSE STATEMENT.....	21
METHOD	24
Procedures and Sample.....	24
Instrumentation	25
Social Network Experience.....	25
Social Approval and Encouragement.....	26
Perceptions of Maintenance Behavior	28
RESULTS	30
DISCUSSION	34
Self-reported Use of Relational Maintenance Behaviors.....	34

	Page
Overall Social Approval and Social Networks	35
Overall Social Approval and Relational Maintenance Use	37
LIMITATIONS.....	41
FUTURE RESEARCH.....	42
CONCLUSION.....	43
REFERENCES	50

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table	
1. Social Network Approval (SNA) Measures	45
2. Factor Loadings for Final Exploratory Factor Analysis Solution with Oblimin Rotation	46
3. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Self-Reported Use of Canary and Stafford's (1992) Maintenance Strategies for Homosexual and Heterosexual Respondents (N = 146)	47
4. Correlations Between Perceptions of Overall Social Approval and Self-reported use of Relational Maintenance Behaviors	48
5. Differences Between Standardized Correlation Coefficients for Overall Social Approval and Relational Maintenance Use	49

Introduction

For the first time in history, the United States began compiling data, regarding the number of citizens living with their same-sex partners with the 2000 census. From this census, 594,000 households were identified as same-sex, and gay and lesbian families were found to live in 99.3 percent of all counties within the United States (Sears, Gates, & Rubenstein, 2005). Kurdek (2004) points out that 18 percent to 28 percent of gay male same-sex couples and 8 percent to 21 percent of lesbian couples have been in an intimate personal relationship for more than 10 years. Even without social acceptance, legal parity, and formal institutionalized barriers to leaving (e.g. marriage equality), gay and lesbian couples form and maintain durable relationships, and they do so in much the same manner as heterosexual couples (Attridge, 1994). According to Haas and Stafford (2005), same-sex couples and heterosexual couples maintain their relationships similarly, with importance placed by both couple types on sharing household tasks that enable the running a joint household (e.g. paying bills, cooking meals, cleaning, doing laundry, and performing household maintenance). Research has found that similarities between same-sex couples and heterosexual couples are also evident in the relational outcomes between the two groups. In a study examining 213 same-sex and heterosexual couples, Kurdek (2004) found that partners from gay and lesbian relationships did not differ from heterosexual couples in terms of psychological adjustment. Additionally, Kurdek found no significant differences between same-sex and heterosexual couples on the personality traits of neuroticism and conscientiousness, and only minor

differences between lesbian couples and heterosexual couples on measures of extroversion and openness. Similarly, in a study of 121 cohabiting couples (42 heterosexual married, 46 gay male, and 33 lesbian), Julien, Chartrand, Simard, Bouthillier, and Begin (2003) found no sexual orientation effect on levels of communication behaviors, namely behaviors related to help and conflict tasks. Although similarities have been found between same-sex and heterosexual couples, few studies have focused on gay and lesbian relationships in and of themselves.

Although same-sex relationships are forged for many of the same reasons as cross-sex relationships, the influence of social acceptance is unique to them because of the marginalized status of same-sex couples. In a comparison of three marginalized couple types, same-sex, interracial, and age-gap, Lehmillier and Agnew (2006) found that although there were no significant differences in perceived levels of marginalization, relational commitment, and investments among the three marginalized couple types, there were significant differences between marginalized couples and more traditional couples across these variables. Marginalized couples felt more marginalization, invested less, but were more committed, than were non-marginalized couples. More specifically, same-sex couples do feel more marginalized than their heterosexual counterparts and subsequently experience their relationships differently in terms of commitment and investments.

While studies involving same-sex relationships are limited in number, one area that has received some, but not sufficient, attention is the area of relational

maintenance. A brief overview of relational maintenance will follow, including an overview of two studies that focus on relational maintenance and same-sex couples.

Review of Literature

Overview of Relational Maintenance Research

Relational maintenance constitutes an essential component of close relationships. Communication researchers recognize that people maintain their interpersonal relationships through the use of a variety of communicative behaviors. The term “relational maintenance” has been defined in various ways. Baxter and Dindia (1990) defined relational maintenance as the use of “communicative strategies and behaviors to prevent relational dissolution through ‘parties’ efforts to sustain a dynamic equilibrium in their relationship, definition, and satisfaction levels as they cope with the ebb and flow of everyday relating” (p. 188). Dindia and Canary (1993) indicated there are four common definitions of relational maintenance: to keep a relationship in existence (relationship continues without termination), to keep a relationship in a specific state or condition (sustaining the present level of important dimensions), to keep a relationship in satisfactory condition (maintaining a satisfying relationship), and to keep a relationship in repair (keep a relationship in good condition and repair a damaged relationship) (p. 163). Dindia and Canary (1993) also indicated there is behavioral overlap between the four definitional categories.

Relational maintenance strategies.

Relational maintenance is essential in close relationships. Examining relationships through maintenance involves assessing relational satisfaction, and endurance (Dindia & Canary, 1993). Considerable research has focused on how people maintain close relationships, especially the types of strategies they employ. Canary and Stafford (1992) defined maintenance strategies as “the communication approaches people use to sustain desired relational definitions.” These strategies have been operationalized differently by researchers. In perhaps the most widely used taxonomy on the topic, Stafford and Canary (1991) developed a representative list of relational maintenance strategies. More precisely, five maintenance strategies emerged from the answers of heterosexual couples to open-ended: *positivity*, *openness*, *assurances*, *networks*, and *sharing tasks*. *Positivity* involves interacting with a relational partner in a way that is pleasant, cheerful, optimistic and enjoyable. This is often enacted by giving compliments, taking interest in the other person, and being polite in interactions. *Openness* is a strategy that entails directly discussing the nature of the relationship as well as one’s intentions or desires for the relationship. These behaviors include encouraging the disclosure of feelings about the relationship, and reminding the other about past decisions made in the relationship. *Assurances* are messages that convey commitment to the other person in the relationship. These may involve telling the other person you still care, discussing the future of the relationship and being faithful. *Networks* describe interactions with or reliance on common affiliations. This is employed by accepting each other’s’ friends, including

friends and families in the activities of the couple, and showing that you are willing to do things with the other's family and/or friends. Lastly, *Task sharing* is a strategy in which relationships are maintained through carrying out one's responsibilities and through performing routine chores together. Task sharing includes an equitable division of the household chores, and sharing in joint responsibilities such as financial planning or writing a paper (Canary & Stafford, 1992).

Strategic versus routine behaviors.

Maintenance behaviors can be performed either strategically or routinely. Strategic behaviors are those that are intentionally enacted to sustain the relationship while routine behaviors may occur without the actor being conscious of them (Canary & Stafford, 1992). Dindia (2000) suggested that there are three ways in which routine and strategic maintenance behaviors may relate. A behavior may be strategic in one situation and that same behavior may be routine in another. Secondly, the nature of the behavior may be routine when enacted by one relational partner and strategic when enacted by the other. Lastly, behaviors which start as strategic may become routine as they are enacted over time (as cited in Dainton & Aylor, 2002, p. 52).

It is important to note that the use of the aforementioned maintenance behaviors in either strategic or routine ways varies based on relationship type. Although this list of behaviors was composed based on a study of heterosexual romantic relationships, studies have found that certain maintenance behaviors are used at different frequencies in different relationship types. For example, people

generally put less work into their friendships than their romantic relationships; therefore they will use fewer maintenance behaviors. Because the scope of relational maintenance research is broad, the following key terms require definition.

Definition of Key Terms

The term “relational maintenance” has been defined in various ways. For example, Baxter and Dindia (1990) defined relational maintenance as the use of “communicative strategies and behaviors to prevent relational dissolution through ‘parties’ efforts to sustain a dynamic equilibrium in their relationship, definition, and satisfaction levels as they cope with the ebb and flow of everyday relating” (p. 188). Canary and Stafford (1992) defined maintenance strategies as “the communication approaches people use to sustain desired relational definitions.” Given the scope of this proposal and the variety of definitions of relational maintenance found within existing literature, here we define relational maintenance as the following:

Communicative acts that keep a relationship in existence and in a specified state (stability) that are influenced by contextual levels and are demonstrated in either strategic or routine behaviors.

For clarification, several key terms in this definition need elaboration.

Communicative acts reference behaviors that are expressed either verbally or nonverbally, which implicates all interaction between relational partners.

According to Dindia (2003), keeping the relationship in existence constitutes the most *basic* definition of relational maintenance, whereas keeping the relationship

in a specified state reflects what most people consider when they study relational maintenance. The term *contextual levels* refer to the idea that relationships do not exist in a vacuum, but rather connect to levels beyond the relational dyad (Waldron, 2003). In other words, relationships are connect to and influenced by various groups, such as work associates, club associations, neighbors, close friends, relatives, etc. *Routine and strategic* reference the intention in which the relational maintenance behaviors are enacted, where strategy choices reflect intention to use behaviors for the purpose of maintaining the relationship. For instance, Dainton and Stafford (1993) defined strategic behaviors as those that are intentionally enacted by one or both partners, whereas routine behaviors occur unconsciously. However, Kellermann (1992) argued that all communicative behavior can be both strategic and unconsciously performed. I adopt Dainton and Stafford's position, however, because it provides clarity to the manner in which seemingly routine actions can be used directly for purposes of relational maintenance as opposed to routine actions that have as a byproduct the maintenance of close involvements.

The definition I offer is useful to the present study because it accounts for both relational maintenance as a key stabilizing agent utilized for the continuation of the intimate relationship and for the influences of factors beyond the relational dyad, such as social support and social acceptance. This definition also accounts for the stabilizing nature of relational maintenance behaviors through strategic use in possible response to relational pressures, such as decreased social support and waning social acceptance.

To date, much of the research regarding relational maintenance behaviors has involved heterosexual couples. Whereas heterosexual couples are more prevalent in size and visibility, much of the diversity of intimate human dyadic interactions situated within the larger social context remains uncovered. Two studies, however, have evaluated the use of relational maintenance behaviors for same-sex couples by comparing with heterosexual couples: Haas and Stafford (1998), and Haas and Stafford (2005). Given their centrality to the present effort, these two studies are briefly reviewed next.

Early Gay and Lesbian Maintenance Research

Perhaps the first study to evaluate the manner by which gay and lesbian couples maintain their relationships was conducted by Haas and Stafford (1998). Haas and Stafford utilized the five primary relationship maintenance strategies (positivity, openness, assurances, networks, and sharing tasks) developed by Canary and Stafford (1992), and six additional behaviors developed by Dainton and Stafford (1993). These additional strategies include *joint activities* (spending time with each other, for example going to movies), *affection* (display of fondness, sexual intimacy), *avoidance* (evasion of relational partner or relational issues), *antisocial* (socially unfriendly or unacceptable behaviors, such as using teasing to point out partner's bad behaviors), *small talk* (verbal communication that is more superficial in nature, not as deep as "openness" communication), and *focus on self* (behaviors that are self-directed rather than toward the partner or relationship). Additionally, Haas and Stafford defined *social networks* as "relying on support and love of common friends and family, or use of people outside the

relationship” (p. 850). The authors hypothesized that gay and lesbian couples developed specific maintenance behaviors in response to the lack of widespread social acceptance. In support of this hypothesis, Haas and Stafford (1998) found that two unique relational maintenance behaviors involving social networks, being “out” as a couple and introducing the relational other as “partner,” were more important for same-sex individuals than for heterosexuals. Haas and Stafford claimed that the lack of social support and acceptance influenced the manner by which social networks were utilized; however, this association has yet to be empirically tested.

Subsequently, Haas and Stafford (2005) explored the use of relational maintenance behaviors of same-sex couples by comparing responses from 30 gay and lesbian individuals involved in same-sex relationships with existing data from 30 heterosexual couples. The couples were matched on four demographic categories (age, sex, education level, and length of relationship), and Haas and Stafford also assessed similarities and differences in strategies between the two groups. Participants were asked to offer examples of their own and their partner’s use of relational maintenance behaviors and responses were coded into one of 13 categories used in Haas and Stafford (1998).

Results from Haas and Stafford (2005) showed that similarities existed in the type and use of relational maintenance behaviors between same-sex and heterosexual couples. For example, both groups most frequently reported the maintenance behavior of *shared tasks* (performing tasks that jointly face partners, such as make dinner and pay the bills): 83.3% for heterosexual couples and 73.3%

for same-sex couples (Haas & Stafford). Differences, however, were uncovered between the two groups in the subsequent reported behaviors. Heterosexual couples next reported *proactive prosocial behaviors* (66.7%), whereas, same-sex couples next reported *meta-relational communication* (53.3%) (Haas & Stafford). *Proactive prosocial* behaviors are categorized as positivity behaviors such as, “I use humor,” whereas meta-relational communication is categorized as openness behaviors such as “discussing problems” (Haas & Stafford). Same-sex couples next reported *sharing time together* (50.0%) followed by *reactive prosocial*, such as “I am willing to change things that bother her” (46.7%), whereas heterosexual couples next reported *favors/gifts* (60.0%) and *comfort and support* (60.0%). In evaluation of these findings, Haas and Stafford reported that, after shared tasks, married heterosexual couples were able to better focus their attention on making the relationship “positive and pleasant,” whereas same-sex couples needed to focus more of their attention on behaviors that continually evaluate the state of the relationship, such as relationship talk about the state of the relationship (meta-relational communication). In further discussion of the results, Haas and Stafford (2005) indicated these differences could reflect the influence of the lack of legal relational recognition, which might force same-sex couples to frequently “take the pulse of the status of the relationship.” In other words, legal relational recognition may act as a stabilizing agent that would allow heterosexual married couples the ability to work more on making the relationship comfortable versus having to replicate relational stability through the use of relational maintenance strategies (e.g. meta-relational talk and reactive prosocial behaviors), as was

found with same-sex couples. Again, findings from Haas and Stafford underscore the influence of social acceptance and support on relational maintenance behaviors of same-sex couples, but the link remains speculative and has not been empirically established.

The influence of social acceptance and support is potentially a key contributing factor accounting for the differences between the two groups. According to Julien et al. (2003), the majority of gay male and lesbian individuals want to engage in stable relationships because they provide a critical source of affection and companionship. In other words, same-sex relationships provide important forms of social and emotional support that might be lacking in other areas of the individual's life. Because social support and acceptance seem to be especially salient for same-sex couples, a brief overview of this research follows, including research demonstrating the influence of social support on gay and lesbian individuals and the same-sex dyad.

Relevance of Social Support and Social Network Research

According to Cutrona (1996), social support refers to “the fulfillment by others of basic ongoing requirements for well-being . . . and the fulfillment of more specific time-limited needs that arise as the result of adverse life events or circumstances” (p. 3). This definition addressed the psychological perspective of social support, but it neglected more salient and observable aspects of social support. Burlinson and McGeorge (2002) indicated that social support also reflects a sociological perspective that identifies the individual as part of a larger network. In other words, people fulfill a social support role *for* and receive

support *from* others. In essence, people need people. Although most of the research regarding social support has focused on heterosexual married couples, several studies have compared social support and social networks for same-sex couples to those of heterosexual couples. More specifically, research has focused on the role that family and friends play in providing support to the relational dyad and in the overall composition of their social networks. Because research involving same-sex social network composition is especially salient to this effort, a brief review of this literature will follow.

Friendships and family members in social networks.

One area that has received attention involves the role that family and friends play in the composition of social networks. By surveying 446 students involved in a romantic relationship, Felmlee (2001) sought to discover if approval from their social networks increased relational stability, if network embeddedness was related to relational durability, and the role of familial disapproval played on breakups. Felmlee found that rates of relational dissolution are increased the more centralized the individual is within their social network. Additionally, Felmlee found that perceptions of approval from their friends and partner's family reduced the possibility of dissolution. Felmlee further indicated that the effects associated with social networks on relational stability might be due primarily to the couple's selection of network members. The creation and mix of individuals within social networks is especially critical for same-sex couples because they may experience social support differently than heterosexual couples (e.g.

marriage inequality, prejudice, and discrimination). Research has shown that differences occur in the forms, creation, and maintenance of social networks.

Gay and lesbian individuals and couples tend to rely more heavily on friendships than on family members for forms of support (e.g., Kurdek, 1988). Galupo (2007) found that attitudes towards gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals influenced the context in which individual friendships develop. These attitudes are likely to influence the development and creation of the social network. In a study of 156 cohabiting gay male couples, Smith and Brown (1997) found that participants report higher percentages of friends (72.2%) versus family (25.64%) in the composition of their social networks. Similarly, Smith and Brown (1997) found in a study of 156 cohabiting gay male couples, that a “gay male friend” was named as the primary provider of support for both the gay male individual and the gay male couple.

The importance of friends within social networks is also evident in areas involving self-disclosure. In a study of the sexual orientation disclosure patterns across social networks, Beals and Peplau (2006) found that gay and lesbian individuals more likely to directly disclose their sexual orientation to friends than to family members. Such disclosure patterns probably occurred because initial and ongoing acceptance of one’s sexual orientation was significantly lower for family members than for other network members (Beals & Peplau). Beals’ and Peplau’s findings indicated that gay and lesbian participants had very good relationships with individuals in their social networks and perceived increased levels of acceptance by surrounding themselves with positive relationships and

accepting individuals (Beals & Peplau). Same-sex couples also *receive* (Kurdek, 2001) and *perceive* (Kurdek, 2004) less social support from their families than do heterosexual couples. Although the lack of familial social support can have a detrimental impact on same-sex relationships, social networks in which partners and friends are the critical elements can offer sufficient instrumental and emotional support (Shippy, Cantor, & Brennan, 2004). Smith and Brown (1997) indicated that having an adequate support network is an important factor for relational quality and gay couples who seek to increase relational quality should actively seek out supportive environments.

Although friends comprise the most important portions of social networks for gay and lesbian individuals and same-sex couples, families are found to be present within the overall composition of social networks, as well. In a study of 133 cohabiting couples (50 heterosexual, 50 gay, and 33 lesbian), Julien, Chartrand, and Begin (1999) found that same-sex couples and heterosexual couples had more similarities than differences in terms of their social networks. More specifically, Julien et al. found that, when single, sexual orientation did not influence the number of family or number of friends within participants' social networks; however, as a couple, joint same-sex networks contained more friends and fewer family members than did heterosexual couple social networks. Julien et al. also found that gay and lesbian couples shared a larger portion of their social network than did heterosexual couples. Similarly, Shippy et al. (2004) discovered that at least 36% of gay males reported at least one biological parent and 75% reported at least one sibling within their social networks. The reasons for these

differences between same-sex and heterosexual couples are not clear. As with Haas and Stafford (1998, 2005), research seems to underscore the influence of social factors on the differences between heterosexual and same-sex couples. A brief examination of research demonstrating this influence will follow.

Influence of social support on same-sex relationships.

According to Felmler (2001) social support and social networks can have profound effects on relational development, individual well-being, and stability of couples. Julien et al. (2004) indicated that gay and lesbian couples tend to share more of their networks than do heterosexual couples in response to social pressures. In a study examining the influence of marginalized relationships status on perceptions of marginalization, investment levels, and relational commitment, Lehmler and Agnew (2006) compared data from 392 marginalized couple types, including same-sex, interracial, and age-gap, and data from 193 non-marginalized couples. Lehmler and Agnew found significant differences between the marginalized couple types and the traditional couples in terms of perceptions of marginalization. Additionally, Lehmler and Agnew found significant and negative associations between commitment level and relational disapproval, and significant and negative associations between perceptions of marginalization and investment levels. In other words, marginalized status does influence the relational outcomes of commitment and investment levels. More specifically, as relational disapproval and perceptions of marginalization increase, partners invest less in the relationship and commitment declines. Conversely, as perceptions of marginalization and disapproval decrease, Lehmler and Agnew found that

investment levels increased and commitment levels were higher. These findings not only demonstrate the influence of couple status on the perceptions of marginalization, but they also demonstrate that perceived social acceptance influences other aspects of the same-sex dyad, such as relational commitment.

Relational quality has also been shown to be influenced by social support. In a study of 156 cohabiting gay male couples, Smith and Brown (1997) found that social support substantially correlated with relationship quality across four key factors: couple satisfaction, love, liking, and individual satisfaction. This correlation indicated that levels of social support influence same-sex relational quality. Similarly, in a study of 458 participants from either a same-sex or cross-sex relationship, Blair and Holmberg (2008) evaluated the influence of perceived social network support on relationship well-being and participant mental and physical health. Blair and Holmberg found that social support was an important predictor of relationship well-being, accounting for 57% of the variance. In other words, adequate social support is a significant influencing factor towards the relational health of same-sex couples. These findings support the concept that relationships, namely same-sex relationships, do not exist in isolation, but rather are connected to larger social networks, whose support *can* and *does* significantly influence the relationship. Additionally, social support and acceptance has been shown to influence gay and lesbian physical and mental health, both as individuals and as members of a same-sex couple. A brief examination of this research will follow.

Individual health-related factors.

Whereas gay and lesbian relationships develop and maintain each other as a key source of support, the lack of social support *beyond* the relational dyad has a profound and potentially negative impact on the health of individuals within same-sex relationships. The quality of intimate relationships is positively associated with people's individual health, subjective well-being, psychological health, longevity, and other health-related factors, as the quality of intimate relationships increases, so too does physical health, well-being, and mental health (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Otis, Rostosky, Riggle, & Hamrin, 2006). However, marginalized identities of gay and lesbian individuals may lead them to experience chronic stress from family and social pressures such as discrimination and prejudice. In a meta-analysis of literature involving prejudice, social stress, and mental health of gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals, Meyer (2003) indicated that *minority status* (e.g. sexual orientation) and *minority identity* (self-identification as gay, lesbian, or bisexual) had related social stresses that impacted the mental health outcomes of individuals both positively and negatively. According to Meyer, *minority status* produced societal level stressors including prejudice, discrimination, and violence; whereas, *minority identity* produced more proximal forms of stress such as expectations of rejection, sexual identity concealment, and internalized homophobia. Meyer's meta-analysis found that stress is mitigated by the valence one ascribes to their minority identity and by the degree to which they have adequate forms of social support. In other words, the qualities assigned to the minority status, whether positive or negative, by the gay,

lesbian, or bisexual individual, as well as the support network available and utilized by the same individual will impact whether the mental health outcomes are more positive or more negative.

The age of the gay or lesbian individual seems to be especially sensitive to issues of social approval and support. In a study of 90 gay and lesbian youth, Grossman and Kerner (1998) reported that 50 respondents indicated that they had had suicidal thoughts and 27 had actually attempted suicide. This was due, in large part, to the phenomenon of internalized homophobia. According to Mohr and Daly (2008), internalized homophobia is the application of anti-LGBT sentiments and beliefs to concepts of the self. Haas (2003) used the term “self-oppression,” which was defined as “learned and internalized antigay prejudice,” and Haas indicated that it can lead to distressing emotional effects for the gay and lesbian individual, including lowered self-esteem, increased isolation, embarrassment etc. Although youth are particularly at risk for forms of stigmatization, elderly gay and lesbian individuals are also subject to forms of discrimination. Advocacy groups estimate that the 2.5 million gay and lesbian seniors living in the United States are twice as likely to live alone and are far more fearful of discrimination at the hands of health care workers than are heterosexual contemporaries (Crary, 2008). In a study of the prevalence of psychological disorders among gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults, Cochran, Sullivan, and Mays (2003) found that although the majority of gay and lesbian respondents as a whole did not show evidence of mental disorders, sexual minority participants had higher rates of mood, anxiety, and substance use

disorders than did heterosexuals of the same gender. Cochran et al. indicated that specific causes remain unknown but could be attributed to factors such as discrimination, social stigma, and social support deficits. The influence of social acceptance and support impact *both* the individual *and* the relational dyad (Otis et al., 2006); therefore, a brief review of the impact of social acceptance and support on the relational dyad will follow.

Dyadic health-related factors.

Social support and acceptance also influences the same-sex relational dyad. Felmler (2001) indicated that “couples do not exist in isolation; rather they are embedded in social networks that influence them in a variety of ways” (p. 1259). This influence is demonstrated in an early study of social networks. Berkman and Syme (1979) found that same-sex partners who were more socially integrated experienced fewer health-related problems, including heart, digestive, and respiratory illnesses. Moreover, Lakey and Cohen (2000) concluded that people’s perceptions of adequate social support functioned as a buffering agent against stress and potentially detrimental health effects.

Internalized homophobia can also lead to detrimental effects on same-sex dyads (Haas, 2003; Otis et al., 2006). More specifically, in a study of 51 students involved in a same-sex romantic relationship, Mohr and Daly (2008) examined the influence of sexual minority stress on the overall quality of same-sex relationships by measuring relational commitment across six variables: rewards, costs, match to ideal standard, attractiveness of alternatives, investments, barriers, and satisfaction. These six items were subsequently divided into three categories:

attractions, constraints, and satisfaction. Mohr and Daly found that increases in internalized homophobia were associated with decreases in attractions and satisfaction and this, in turn, may lead to the deterioration of relational commitment. In a study of 299 same-sex couples, Otis et al. (2006) found that individual internalized homophobia was significantly and negatively related to perceptions of relational quality. In other words, if internalized homophobia was present to a high degree within individuals involved in a same-sex relationship, relational satisfaction was low.

Positive health-related factors, associated with support and acceptance, are also found when examining the same-sex relational dyad. Research indicates that the relationship itself provides positive forms of support for individuals within that relationship. In a study of 51 partnered gay men, Schmitt and Kurdek (1987) evaluated the personality variables of *social anxiety*, *trait anxiety*, *locus of control*, *sensitization*, *depression*, and *self-concept*. These personality variables were correlated with the positive gay identity factors of *degree of comfort being gay* and *degree of communication about being gay*, as well as with relational factors such as *being in a gay relationship*, *number of months in a gay relationship*, and *living with partner*. Schmitt and Kurdek found that being in a relationship strengthened each partner's positive gay identity, and increased their overall self-concept. Similarly, Schmitt and Kurdek found that maintaining a relationship led gay and lesbian individuals to believe they had control over their lives, and consequently, they experienced decreased levels of anxiety and depression. In the face of social pressures, the establishment and maintenance of

stable same-sex relationships act as a buffer against the lack of social support external to the relational dyad (Schmitt & Kurdek).

The influence of social support and acceptance has been shown to influence same-sex relational commitment and satisfaction, as well as gay and lesbian individual and relational health. Increases in perceived support and acceptance lead to increases in positive relational outcomes. Additionally, Haas and Stafford (1998, 2005) hypothesized that social support also influences the manner by which same-sex couples maintain their relationships. However, the link between social support and relational maintenance for same-sex couples remains unclear. In order to establish whether a link exists between social support and relational maintenance, the following rationale and purpose statement is advanced.

Rationale and Purpose Statement

Research has shown that social acceptance and support influence same-sex relationships and gay and lesbian individuals in a number of ways. For example, social acceptance can influence the overall mix of friends versus family in the social networks of same-sex couples (Galupo, 2007; Kurdek, 1988, 2001, 2004). Social networks in turn influence relational stability (Felmlee, 2001) and sexual identity disclosure patterns (Beals & Peplau, 2006). Social networks are a primary form of social support, which influences relational development (Felmlee, 2001), commitment and investment level (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006), overall relational quality (Blair & Holmberg, 2008; Smith & Brown, 1997), individual health of gay and lesbian participants (Cochran et al., 2003; Crary,

2008; Diener et al., 1999; Grossman & Kerner, 1998; Meyer, 2003; Otis et al., 2006), and dyadic health (Berkman & Syme, 1979; Haas, 2003; Lakey & Cohen, 2000; Mohr & Daly, 2008; Otis et al., 2006; Schmitt & Kurdek, 1987). In addition, two studies by Haas and Stafford (1998, 2005) examined the possible influence of social acceptance and support on the manner by which same-sex couples maintain their relationships. Yet, to date, too few studies have empirically examined the influence of this social acceptance and development of social networks on the maintenance of stable same-sex relationships.

Accordingly, the following purpose statement is offered:

The purpose of this research is to examine empirically the influence of social acceptance and support on the use of maintenance strategies by same-sex relationships compared to heterosexual couples.

Haas and Stafford (1998) found that same-sex couples are more likely to find it important to be “out” as a couple. Likewise, in a study of 30 gay male couples and 30 lesbian couples, “outness” was related to higher levels of relational satisfaction and the display of more positive and less negative affect (Clausell & Roismann, 2009). Cain (1991) indicates that “outness” disclosures are indicative of the desire to build and maintain more authentic relationships with significant others. Current research argues that being seen as a couple holds particular salience for same-sex couples, yet this fact has not been established; consequently, the following research hypothesis is posed:

H1: Being viewed as a couple will be more important for same-sex couples than heterosexual couples.

Haas and Stafford's (2005) exploration of the use of relational maintenance behaviors for same-sex couples found that same-sex couples generally reported similar relational maintenance strategies and behaviors as did heterosexual couples, except in the reported frequency of relational maintenance behavior use, specifically meta-relational communication. In the discussion of these results, Haas and Stafford (2005) indicated that the use of meta-relational talk is potentially determined by a lack of social acceptance and support. Social support and acceptance has been shown to influence the same-sex relational dyad in a variety of ways and it is possible that social support and acceptance are factors contributing to the differences in the use of relational maintenance behaviors reported in Haas and Stafford; however, their claims were based on supposition, not on participant response. Understanding the influence of social acceptance and support on the same-sex relational dyad helps round out our understanding of the same-sex couple within the larger social context. Because the link between social acceptance and the use of relational maintenance strategies, specifically meta-relational talk, has not been empirically verified and remains unclear, the following research question and hypothesis are posed:

RQ₁: Does perceived social acceptance correlate with self-reported use of positivity, openness, assurances, networks, and sharing tasks?

RQ₂: Does perceived social acceptance correlate with the self-reported use of meta-relational talk?

Although most of the social support and social network research has focused on heterosexual married couples, several studies have compared social support and

social networks for same-sex couples to those of heterosexual couples. Previous research has found that same-sex couples reported a higher number of friends than family in the composition of their social networks (Smith & Brown, 1997; Kurdek, 2001; Beals & Peplau, 2006; Kurdek, 2006). Thusly, the following hypotheses are posited:

H_{2a}: Compared to heterosexual couples, same-sex couples report having fewer family members than close friends in their social networks.

H_{2b}: Compared to heterosexual couples, same-sex couples report having more close friends than family in their social networks.

Method

Procedures and Sample

Participants, who were in either a same-sex or cross-sex relationship and were at least 18 years of age, were recruited from communication classes at a large Southwestern university and through social and professional networks of associates. Participants from communication classes were offered extra credit for participation. In all cases, participants were asked to “snowball” the survey by forwarding survey information on to those in their social networks who met participation requirements.

A total of 157 surveys were collected, 11 of which were not utilized due to incomplete responses. The final sample consisted of 37 homosexual men, 25 lesbians, 24 heterosexual men, and 60 heterosexual women ($N = 146$).

The average age of respondents was 33.5 years (range = 19 to 74, $SD = 11.9$). The average duration in a relationship was 7.2 years (range = 1 to 31, $SD =$

7.1). Overall, the sample was well educated and compensated. The entire sample had completed at least a high school education, with 62.3% earning a Bachelor's Degree or higher. The plurality of reported household income category was between \$50,000 and \$59,999 per year. Of the 146 participants, 52.1% ($n = 76$) reported household incomes of \$50,000 or higher, with 31 participants (21.2%) reporting household incomes in excess of \$100,000. The vast majority of participants were white (91.1%, $n = 133$), followed by Hispanic (3.4%, $n = 5$), Other (2.1%, $n = 3$), Asian (1.4%, $n = 2$) and Native American (1.4%, $n = 2$). One participant did not report ethnicity. The sample was geographically diverse with 21 states being represented.

Instrumentation

All surveys were completed online using a web-based survey site. Participants were given access to the website address in a printed letter outlining the study or were provided with an internet link in an email outlining the study. Each participants' completed survey was numbered, but no data were captured that could link individuals with their completed survey information. The survey was comprised of three main sections. Part One of the survey was utilized to describe the social networks of participants. Part Two of the survey focused on perceptions of social acceptance and encouragement. Finally, Part Three of the survey examined perceptions of maintenance behavior.

Social network experiences.

First, participants were asked to rate how strongly they agree with statements related to their social network experiences and to report on people that

comprise their social networks. Statements related to social network composition were measured on a 7 point, Likert-type scale with the following labels: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = somewhat agree, 6 = agree, and 7 = strongly agree. Statements, from Dainton and Stafford's (1993) typology were included in the survey to measure social network composition. Examples included: "Our friends are very accepting and tolerant," "We are open with and accepted by our families," and "We introduce each other to people as our partner, or a similarly related term." All 7 items were combined, and internal consistency of the composite score was assessed for this sample by Cronbach's alpha. Obtained alpha was .78 ($M = 5.99$, $SD = 6.15$). Second, participants were asked to think about the number of family members versus friends in the composition of their social network. Participants were asked to select one of three items: "We have more friends (than family members) in our social network," "We have more family members (than friends) in our social network," or "We have the same number of friends and family members in our social network."

Social approval and encouragement.

The second part of the survey referenced perceptions of social acceptance and encouragement. Statements based on Felmler's (2001) Social Network Approval Measures were used to determine perceptions of social approval on a 7 point, Likert-type scale with the following labels: 1 = strongly disapprove, 2 = disapprove, 3 = somewhat disapprove, 4 = neither approve nor disapprove, 5 = somewhat approve, 6 = approve, and 7 = strongly approve. Items included: "To

what degree do you think your family disapproves/approves of this relationship?,” “To what degree do you think your friends disapprove/approve of this relationship?,” and “To what degree do you think your partner’s family disapproves/approve of this relationship?” Statements based on Felmler’s (2001) Social Network Approval Measures were also used to determine perceptions of encouragement on a 7 point, Likert-type scale with the following labels: 1 = discouraged to a great deal, 2 = discouraged, 3 = somewhat discouraged, 4 = neither encouraged nor discouraged, 5 = somewhat encouraged, 6 = encouraged, and 7 = encouraged to a great deal. Items included: “Overall, how much actual discouragement or encouragement do you get from your friends to continue to remain with each other;” “Overall, how much actual discouragement or encouragement do you get from you and your partner’s immediate family members to continue to remain with each other,” and “Overall, how much actual discouragement or encouragement do you get from you and your partner’s extended family members to continue to remain with each other.” Table 1 contains a full listing of the Social Network Approval (SNA) Measures.

Initially, the factorability of the 9 SNA items was examined. Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity, $\chi^2(36) = 538.90$, $p < .001$, and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin, .74 indicated that the assumption of multicollinearity was met. Thus, an exploratory factor analysis was first run using maximum likelihood and direct oblimin. Requesting Eigenvalues greater than one, the initial EFA revealed a two factor solution accounting for approximately 48% of the variance. 50/30 was used to analyze the two factor solution. Four of the 9 items were complex and the final

factors did not make sense conceptually. In order to preserve the highest number of items in the final measure, a second EFA was conducted using maximum likelihood with oblimin rotation with forced one factor solution. 50/30 was again used to evaluate the one factor solution. Eight of the 9 factors loaded with values over .50. One item – “To what degree do you think your community disapproves/approves of this relationship?” loaded at .30 and was dropped from the final analysis. The remaining 8 items all loaded with .50 or higher. See Table 2 for specific factor loadings. The one factor solution, Overall Social Approval, accounts for 48% of the variance and all items loaded empirically and conceptually.

Perceptions of maintenance behavior.

The third part of the questionnaire asked participants to report on their use of relational maintenance behaviors. All items were evaluated on a 7 point, Likert-type scale with the following labels: 1 = very infrequently, 2 = infrequently, 3 = sometimes, 4 = commonly, 5 = often, 6 = frequently, and 7 = very frequently. The survey utilized Canary and Stafford’s (1992) five behavior typology tool (Positivity, Openness, Assurances, Social Networks, and Sharing Tasks) with the addition of Meta-relational Talk factors from Haas and Stafford (2005). Participants were asked to report on the frequency of use for the maintenance strategies identified by Canary and Stafford (1992) for the following five maintenance categories: Positivity, Openness, Assurances, Social Networks, and Sharing Tasks. Examples of *Positivity* statements included the following: “I attempt to make our interactions very enjoyable;” “I am cooperative in the ways I

handle disagreements between us,” and “I try to build up his/her self-esteem, including giving him/her compliments, etc.” All 10 positivity items were utilized and had a Cronbach’s alpha of .90 ($M = 5.62, SD = .88$). Examples of *Openness* statements included the following: “I encourage him/her to disclose thoughts and feelings to me,” and “I simply tell him/her how I feel about our relationship.” All 6 openness items were utilized and had a Cronbach’s alpha of .93 ($M = 4.70, SD = 1.44$). Examples of *Assurances* statements included the following: “I stress my commitment to him/her,” and “I show myself to be faithful to him/her.” All 4 assurances items were utilized and had a Cronbach’s alpha of .82 ($M = 5.75, SD = 1.17$). *Social Network* statements included the following: “I like to spend time with our same friends;” “I focus on common friends and affiliations;” “I show that I am willing to do things with his/her friends or family,” and “I include our friends or family in our activities.” All 5 social network items together had a Cronbach’s alpha of .79 ($M = 5.11, SD = 1.10$). In order to increase reliability of the network measure, the item “I include our friends and family in our activities” was removed and without this item the 4 remaining social network items had a Cronbach’s alpha of .83 ($M = 5.31, SD = 1.12$). Examples of *Sharing Tasks* statements included the following: “I help equally with tasks that need to be done,” and “I perform my household responsibilities.” All 5 sharing task items were utilized and had a Cronbach’s alpha of .87 ($M = 5.63, SD = 1.07$). The following statements were used for self-reported use of *Meta-relational Talk*: “We routinely engage in discussions regarding our relational problems,” and “We

routinely discuss the overall state of our relationship.” Both items were utilized and had a Cronbach’s alpha of .86 ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.56$).

Results

Hypothesis 1 proposed that same-sex couples will report introducing their relational other as “partner” or similarly related term more frequently than will cross-sex couples. Before a test of H1 was conducted, it was important to determine if the four groups differed from one another. Accordingly, one-way ANOVA compared perceptions of couple identity among the four groups sampled (i.e. heterosexual men; heterosexual women; homosexual men; and homosexual women). The ANOVA did reveal a significant finding [$F(3, 142) = 3.78$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .07$]. In accordance with H1, a planned contrast was conducted to compare the two sexual orientation groups. Homosexual male and homosexual female responses were assigned the same coefficients, as were heterosexual male and heterosexual female responses. Contrast coefficients for homosexual male, homosexual female, heterosexual male, and heterosexual female were labeled as follows: -1, -1, 1, 1, respectively. This test was not significant [$t(142) = .62$, $p > .05$]. Gay and lesbian, and heterosexual couples were not significantly different in their reported use of introducing their relational other as “partner” or similarly related term thus, hypothesis 1 was not supported as predicted. A post hoc Scheffe multiple comparison test found that the significant difference was between the homosexual male and heterosexual female groups, but no other significant differences existed.

Correlations were conducted to determine the influence of social support on reported rates of introducing relational other as “partner.” Significant correlations between overall social approval [$r(145) = .37, p < .001$] and importance of being seen as a couple was found for all study participants. Further analysis was conducted for both heterosexual and homosexual couples. Overall social approval was significantly correlated with the importance of being seen as a couple for both heterosexual [$r(83) = .40, p < .001$] and homosexual couples [$r(62) = .32, p < .05$].

Research Question 1 pertained to the correlation between reports of perceived overall social approval on the self-reported use of relational maintenance strategies and sought to determine whether perceived social approval influences the perceived use of Canary and Stafford’s (1992) five maintenance categories: Positivity, Openness, Assurances, Networks, and Sharing Tasks. A complete listing of the mean scores and standard deviations for the use of each of the 5 maintenance strategies can be found in Table 3. Although data show there are differences in the self-reported use of each of the 5 maintenance strategies, only with Sharing Tasks was there a significant difference between the two groups [$t(144) = 2.24, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$]. An examination of the mean scores demonstrates that gay and lesbian couples reported sharing tasks more frequently than did heterosexual couples.

To fully test RQ1, it was also important to determine if same-sex couples experience differences in terms of overall social support. A one way ANOVA [$F(3,141) = 1.33, p > .05, \text{observed power} = .35$] did not reveal significant

between group differences in perceptions of overall social approval. Accordingly, same-sex couples and heterosexuals perceive similar levels of overall social approval.

Although significant between group differences regarding overall social approval were not found, significant correlations between overall social approval and reported use of each the 5 maintenance tasks of positivity, openness, assurances, networks, and sharing tasks were found for the homosexual group and the heterosexual groups. A complete list of correlation values can be found on Table 4. Homosexual and heterosexual group correlation coefficients were compared to determine if homosexual and heterosexual participants differed significantly in the correlations between perceived overall social approval and relational maintenance use. The formula for testing the correlation differences of two independent samples was utilized. The standard error of the statistic was calculated at .17 for all correlation comparisons. Correlation values were standardized for both groups using Fisher's z-transformation (see Table 5). Standardized correlation coefficients for each of the maintenance behaviors of the heterosexual group were then subtracted from those of the homosexual group and scores were divided by the standard error of the statistic to determine standardized correlation differences between group values (see Table 5). The non-standardized (r values) were calculated based on the standardized between group values (see Table 5). Perceived overall social approval correlated more strongly in the use of the maintenance strategies for homosexual participants than for heterosexual participants on three maintenance strategies: Positivity [$r(140) = .34, p < .01$],

Openness [$r(140) = .57, p < .01$], and Social Networks [$r(140) = .64, p < .01$]. Perceived overall social approval correlated more strongly for heterosexual participants on one maintenance strategy: Sharing Tasks [$r(140) = -.86, p < .01$]. Only Assurances [$r(140) = .06, p > .05$] showed no significant between group difference in the correlation concerning use of the maintenance behavior and perceptions of overall social approval.

Research Question 2 pertained to the influence of perceived social approval on the self-reported use of relational maintenance of meta-relational talk. Mean scores and standard deviations can be found in Table 3. Although data show there are differences in the self-reported use of meta-relational talk between the same-sex and heterosexual groups, an independent samples t-test demonstrates this difference is not significant [$t(144) = -.95, p > .05$]. Next, analysis was conducted to determine if overall social approval was significantly correlated with the self-reported use of meta-relational talk for the two groups. Overall social approval was significantly correlated with the use of meta-relational talk only for the homosexual group [$r(140) = .39, p < .01$].

Hypothesis 2 posited that homosexual respondents versus heterosexual respondents would report fewer family members than friends in the composition of their relational social networks. A chi-square test was used to determine whether there was a significant difference between homosexuals and heterosexuals in the reported numbers of family versus friends in the composition of their social networks. Both homosexuals and heterosexuals reported having more friends than family in their social networks, 80.6% more friends versus

3.2% more family (16.1% same number of friends and family) and 49.4% more friends versus 19.3% more family (31.3% same number of friends and family), respectively. Additionally, the between group difference was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 16.19, p < .001$. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to empirically test previous research regarding the influence of social support on the manner in which couples maintain their relationships. More specifically, Hypothesis 1 posited that same-sex couples will report introducing their relational other as “partner” or similarly related term more frequently than will cross-sex couples; Research Questions 1 and 2 sought to determine the influence of family and friend support and approval on the relational maintenance behaviors of positivity, openness, assurances, networks, sharing tasks, and meta-relational talk; and Hypothesis 2 posited that compared to heterosexuals, homosexuals perceive fewer family members than close friends in their social networks. All surveys were completed online using a web-based survey site.

Self-Reported Use of Relational Maintenance Behaviors

Previous research has found differences in the self-reported rates of relational maintenance strategies between same-sex and heterosexual couples; however, aside from one maintenance behavior, the present study did not substantiate this finding. Same-sex couples did not differ from heterosexual couples in their self-reported use of positivity, openness, assurances, networks, and meta-relational talk. Findings indicate that same-sex couples reported using

the maintenance strategy of sharing tasks significantly more than heterosexual couples. The egalitarian nature of same-sex couples has been identified in previous research (Kurdek, 2004) and according to Boren (2008), same-sex couples maintain ongoing discussions about who does what which leads to a more equitable division of labor. The findings of the present study substantiate previous research. Accordingly, an enduring feature of the same-sex couple type is the more egalitarian nature of sharing tasks.

Overall Social Approval and Social Networks

A new measure, overall social approval, was established that considered support from both friends and family members. Previous research has attempted to link between group differences in relational maintenance use to differences in social support and acceptance. More specifically, gay and lesbian couples are subject to decreased relational acceptance; therefore their relationships are maintained differently. Given that same-sex couples do not enjoy widespread acceptance, differences between gay and lesbian and heterosexual couples should be evident within the present study. Interestingly, an examination of perceived overall social approval between same-sex and heterosexual couples found no significant differences. It may be that changing attitudes towards gay and lesbian relationships are influencing perceptions of overall social approval in a positive manner; bringing perceptions more in line with those of heterosexual couples. Although the present study has not found significant differences between the two groups, given the low observed power of this analysis, it might very well be that the effect is present, but unaccounted for with this sample.

Previous research has determined that gay and lesbian couples will establish social networks differently than will heterosexual couples. More specifically, same-sex couples will report having more friends than family in their social network composition. The present study found that although both couple types reported having more friends than family members in the composition of their social networks, same-sex couples perceived significantly fewer family members than friends when compared to heterosexual couples. This finding demonstrates that gay and lesbian couples will seek to establish more supportive networks and is in accordance with previous research that found similar results (Beals & Peplau, 2006; Kurdek, 1988, 2001, 2004; Smith & Brown, 1997; Shippy et al., 2004). Previous research has linked social network composition differences to lower levels of social approval and support. However, because homosexual participants in this study perceived similar levels of overall social approval as heterosexual participants, perceptions of overall support cannot account for the differences in the composition of social networks between the two groups. Because couples within this study report relationships of just over 7 years, the issue of overall social approval on the structure of the social network might be negated. In other words, longer relational length equates to more stable social networks that are less subject to changes in overall social approval.

The present study also hypothesized that being identified as couple to their social networks is more important for gay and lesbian couples than for heterosexual couples. When examining the relational behaviors of gay and lesbian couples, previous research has found this to be an especially salient

strategy used in response to lack of widespread relational acceptance (Clausell & Roisman, 2009; Haas & Stafford, 1998). Haas and Stafford (1998), however, did not examine the differences between heterosexual and homosexuals couples regarding this strategy. When examining the importance of being seen as a couple, current analysis found significant differences between gay males, lesbians, heterosexual males, and heterosexual females, in line with previous research. However, subsequent analysis was unable to attribute this finding to sexual orientation alone. It appears that although gay and lesbian couples indicate this is of importance to the maintenance of their relationships, as in Haas and Stafford (1998), they do not differ significantly when compared specifically to heterosexual couples. Additionally, further analysis seems to indicate an interaction effect of sexual orientation and gender. This finding, however, requires that more research needs to be conducted in order to pinpoint where these differences originate. Additionally, it should be noted that the present study did not specifically seek to replicate the studies of Clausell and Roisman (2009) and Haas and Stafford (1998), and the different measures utilized in the current study could account for differences in the findings.

Overall Social Approval and Relational Maintenance Use.

Unique to the present study was an examination of the associations between perceptions of overall social approval, and reported use of the relational maintenance strategies of gay and lesbian, and heterosexual couples. Previous research has hypothesized that differences in relational maintenance use was attributed to differences in overall social support, but this link was not empirically

verified. Perceived overall social approval was significantly and positively correlated with the use of each of the 5 relational maintenance strategies of positivity, openness, assurances, networks, and sharing tasks for both same-sex and heterosexual couples. In other words, as perceived rates of overall social approval increases, so does self-reported use of each of the 5 Canary and Stafford (1991) maintenance strategies.

A more detailed examination of the findings shows that perceived overall social approval is more strongly correlated with the use of social networks for same-sex couples than for heterosexual couples. Social networks includes interacting with or relying on common friends and family members. Since social networks is a measure that is inclusive of family and friends, it makes sense that both groups would engage in this maintenance behavior more if overall social approval from family and friends was higher. However, the finding that gay and lesbian couples' use of social networks is more strongly related to perceptions of overall social approval could indicate that heterosexual couples take support from these groups more for granted, whereas gay and lesbian couples' relational maintenance may be more sensitive to the support of those outside the dyad. Additionally, Haas and Stafford (1998) found social networks to be of particular importance to gay and lesbian couples. The findings of the current research support this assertion.

The importance of social support on the maintenance strategies utilized by same-sex couples is also evident when examining the maintenance behaviors of positivity and openness. Although no significant differences between the couple

types were found in self-reported use of positivity and openness, findings indicate that increases in use of these strategies by same-sex couples is more closely related to increases in perceptions of overall social approval. Positivity and openness are both proactive and prosocial behaviors and according to Haas and Stafford (2005), heterosexual couples utilize them more frequently than do same-sex couples, because heterosexual married couples take their legal bond for granted and are able to turn their attentions to making the relationship more pleasant. The implication Haas and Stafford's assertion is, that without institutionalized forms of support, same-sex couples' relational maintenance behavior is more closely associated with other forms of support (i.e. family and friends). Whereas the present study did not find a difference in overall use between the couple types, the implication that same-sex couples' behaviors are more closely related to issues of social support from family and friends than are heterosexual couples is validated by the study's findings.

As discussed earlier, same-sex couples reported using significantly more sharing tasks than did heterosexual couples; however, overall social approval was more strongly related to use of sharing tasks for heterosexual couples than for same-sex couples. According to previous research, same-sex couples are more egalitarian in their division of tasks. Because of this, sharing tasks appears not to be as closely related to issues of overall social approval and support for same-sex couples as it is for heterosexual couples. Previous research has indicated the importance and use of this maintenance behavior for heterosexual couples. Stafford and Canary (1991) indicate that perceptions of sharing tasks promotes

couple issues such as liking and satisfaction, and Haas and Stafford (2005) found that sharing tasks was the top most reported maintenance behavior for both same-sex and heterosexual couples. The present study adds to these findings by demonstrating the significant relationship this maintenance behavior has with overall social approval for both couple types, especially for heterosexual couples.

In addition to examining the five Canary and Stafford (1998) relational maintenance behaviors of positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, and sharing tasks, the present study also examined correlations between overall social approval and the use of meta-relational talk. Haas and Stafford (2005) found that meta-relational talk was the second most reported relational maintenance strategy by same-sex couples which differed from heterosexual couples. Haas and Stafford (2005) explain this finding by linking the difference between the two groups to issues of social acceptance and approval stating, “This finding may be an important indication of relational focus for same-sex versus heterosexual couples in maintaining their relationships. For gay and lesbian couples, the focus on meta-relational communication (which involves open discussions regarding the current state of the relationship) may be a reflection of lacking a legal bond to hold the relationships together” (Haas & Stafford, 2005, p. 56). Additionally, Haas (2003) states that the use of meta-relational talk by same-sex couples is used to “compensate for lack of legal and social validation” (p. 222). Two important items are suggested by these previous findings: same-sex couples use more meta-relational talk than do heterosexual couples and this difference is attributed to lack of social approval and support. This suggestion that same-sex couples engage in

more meta-relational talk is not validated with the current research. The present study found that same-sex and heterosexual couples reported using meta-relational talk in similar frequencies. Still, the current analysis does partially support the finding that same-sex couples' use of meta-relational talk is related to issues of social approval. Findings from the present study indicated that same-sex couples' use of meta-relational talk was significantly related to perceptions of overall social approval, but was not for heterosexual couples. However, the use of meta-relational talk and the relationship to overall social approval is not in the direction hypothesized by Haas and Stafford (2005). If the use of meta-relational talk is a response to lack of social support, data should show an increase in meta-relational talk as rates of overall social approval decrease and conversely data should show a decrease in its use as rates of social approval increase. Rather, findings demonstrate that as perceptions of overall social approval increase, so do rates of meta-relational talk for same-sex couples. Of significant importance, this study refutes the notion that meta-relational talk is a *reactive* prosocial maintenance strategy employed because of prevailing social approval influences. Rather, in terms of social approval, meta-relational talk follows similar correlational patterns as self-reported use of *proactive* prosocial behaviors such as positivity, openness, and assurances.

Limitations

Two study limitations are worthy of note. First, the demographics of this study may limit the generalization of these findings. Whereas, the sample was geographically diverse, several demographic categories were less so. The average

age of the sample was 33.5 years with average length of relationship of 7.2 years. These two demographic factors are indices of more stable relationships that may be influenced differently by forms of support and approval than are relationships with shorter tenure. Likewise, longer relationships have demonstrated ability to be “better” at the use of relational maintenance behaviors. The sample was highly educated, had relatively high household incomes, and was overwhelmingly white. These demographic factors potentially influence the form of social pressures experienced by both same-sex and heterosexual couples versus a more racially diverse sample. Additionally, of 146 respondents 41% were heterosexual female. More similar sizes for each of the four categories would be ideal.

Secondly, the study evaluated overall social approval from the entire social network, but did not address the type of support. There may be forms of support that are qualitatively superior to other forms of support and these forms are not differentiated within this study. Also, the type of support received from family is likely to be different from the type of support from friends. More research is necessary to determine the “quality” dimension of support from both family members and friends.

Future Research

In addition to the need to uncover the “quality” of support, future research regarding the role of social approval and use of relational maintenance strategies should include a more racially/ethnically diverse sample from a broader range of life experiences (length of relationship, age, income, geographical location, etc.). Each of these demographic factors is likely to be a covariate in the findings.

Understanding this covariation would deepen our understanding of relational maintenance for all couple types.

The present study has sought to determine factors of social approval/support on the maintenance of same-sex relationships. However, no studies have sought to determine the influence of social support/approval on relational maintenance in states that enjoy full legal relational equality (i.e. same-sex marriage) like Massachusetts and Iowa. Additionally, these experiences should be contrasted with the maintenance of same-sex couples who reside in state without full legal recognition like Arizona. This would develop a better understanding of the influence of institutionalized forms of support addressed in previous relational maintenance research.

Conclusion

Overall, the present study adds to our understanding of the maintenance of relationships. Previous research hypothesized that same-sex couples utilize relational maintenance behaviors differently in response to differences in social support, but this relationship has never been tested empirically until now. The present study found that social approval and relational maintenance use are significantly related. However, the relationship between overall social approval is not negative in nature, but is positive. In other words, same-sex couples do not engage in more behaviors in response to *lack* of support, but in response to *increases* in it. Whereas use of the maintenance behaviors is similar between the

two groups, the present study demonstrates that there are differences between the couple type's relations to overall social approval relative to relational maintenance use.

Table 1

Social Network Approval (SNA) Measures

- To what degree do you think your family disapproves/approves of this relationship?
- To what degree do you think your friends disapprove/approve of this relationship?
- To what degree do you think your partner's family disapproves/approves of this relationship?
- To what degree do you think your partner's friends disapproves/approves of this relationship?
- Overall, how much actual discouragement or encouragement do you get from your friends to continue to remain with each other?
- Overall, how much actual discouragement or encouragement do you get from you and your partner's immediate family members to continue to remain with each other?
- Overall how much actual discouragement or encouragement do you get from you and your partner's extended family members to continue to remain with each other?

Table 2

Factor Loadings for Final Exploratory Factor Analysis Solution with Oblimin Rotation

Item	
To what degree do you think your family disapproves/approves of the relationship?	.50
To what degree do you think your friends disapprove/approve of this relationship?	.57
To what degree do you think your partner's family disapproves/approves of this relationship?	.58
To what degree do you think your partner's friends disapprove/approve of this relationship?	.59
Overall, how much actual discouragement or encouragement do you get from your friends to continue to remain with each other?	.73
Overall, how much actual discouragement or encouragement do you get from you and your partner's immediate family members to continue to remain with each other?	.73
Overall, how much actual discouragement or encouragement do you get from you and your partner's extended family members to continue to remain with each other?	.72
Overall, how much actual discouragement or encouragement do you get from other supportive and social groups to continue to remain with each other?	.66

Table 3

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Self-Reported Use of Canary and Stafford's (1992) Maintenance Strategies for Homosexual and Heterosexual Respondents (N = 146).

Strategy	Homosexual Respondents		Heterosexual Respondents	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Positivity	5.73	.83	5.57	.92
Openness	4.49	1.63	4.92	1.26
Assurances	5.77	1.27	5.76	1.10
Sharing Tasks	5.88	.97	5.48	1.12
Networks	5.48	1.22	5.19	1.04
Meta- Relational Talk	3.92	1.63	4.17	1.51

Table 4

Correlations Between Perceptions of Overall Social Approval and Self-reported use of Relational Maintenance Behaviors

Maintenance Strategy	Overall Social Approval	
	Same-Sex Couples	Heterosexual Couples
Positivity	.37**	.32**
Openness	.33**	.23*
Assurances	.44***	.43***
Networks	.43***	.32**
Sharing Tasks	.29*	.42***
Meta-relational Talk	.39**	.19

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 5

Differences Between Standardized Correlation Coefficients for Overall Social Approval and Relational Maintenance Use

Group	Positivity	Openness	Assurances	Networks	Share Tasks	Meta Talk
Homosexual						
Standardized Scores	.39	.34	.47	.46	.23	.41
Heterosexual						
Standardized Scores	.33	.23	.46	.33	.45	.19
Standardized						
Between						
Group	.35	.65	.06	.76	-1.29	1.29
Correlation						
Values						
Non-						
standardized						
correlation	.34**	.57**	.06	.64**	-.86**	.86**
values (r						
values)						

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

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