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Same-Sex and Mixed-Sex Couples in the Netherlands: The Association Between Life Satisfaction and Relationship Dynamics

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Abstract

Using a national sample of Dutch ($N = 5,854$) individuals in same-sex and mixed-sex relationships we explored the associations between relationship dynamics, both positive (partner support) and negative (conflict), and life satisfaction. We found that individuals in same-sex relationships reported lower life satisfaction compared with their peers in mixed-sex relationships but there were no differences in the amount of partner support or level of relationship conflict. Across all couples, greater partner support and lower relationship conflict was associated with greater individual life satisfaction. Interestingly, for individuals in mixed-sex relationships, low level of conflict was associated with greater life satisfaction, whereas the association was not as pronounced for individuals in same-sex relationships. In sum, the impact of some relationship factors (such as conflict) on individual life satisfaction may vary in different ways across couple type.

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Keywords

same-sex, intimate relationships, relationship conflict, life satisfaction, LGB, partner support

Research examining individual well-being and romantic relationships of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people is of great interest. Much of existing research indicates that LGB people have more negative psychological outcomes and poorer well-being compared with their heterosexual peers (Institute of Medicine, 2011; Meyer, 2003, 2013). The discussed reason for these differences is that sexual minority individuals' are confronted with unique, chronic stress related to their sexual orientation and are therefore at risk for developing more mental health problems compared with their heterosexual peers (Meyer, 1995, 2003, 2013). These added negative stressors can have a lasting impact on individuals' lives and couple functioning. There is also support for the idea that romantic relationship dynamics, specifically conflict and social support, can affect the functioning of the individuals (Dush & Amato, 2005; Myers & Diener, 1995). In this study, we compare the associations between individual life satisfaction and couple dynamics of same-sex and mixed-sex couples through the use of a large national sample of Dutch couples.

The legal and social climate for LGB individual varies across cultures (Keuzenkamp, 2011; Sandfort, McGaskey, & Bos, 2008a, 2008b). For example, the Netherlands, in which the present study was carried out, differs in important ways from countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States where most studies about same-sex couples have been conducted. In the Netherlands, the discussion about marriage among individuals of the same-sex began in the mid-80s, and in 2001, it became the first country to legalize marriage between same-sex couples (e.g., Vonk, 2004). This early legalization can be seen as an indication of the high level of social acceptance of lesbian and gay people and same-sex parent households. The proposition that same-sex couples should be able to adopt children also receives a much higher level of agreement in the Netherlands (69%; Keuzenkamp, 2011) than, in the United Kingdom (32%; Keuzenkamp, 2011) and the United States (52%; Pew Research Centre, 2012). Although it seems that the Netherlands is a more socially and legally supportive country regarding LGB individuals, here also sexual minorities are confronted with minority stressors and these negative experiences have impact on several aspects of their lives such as psychological well-being and relationship satisfaction (Gevonden et al., 2014; De Graaf, Sandfort, & ten Have, 2006; Sandfort, De Graaf, Bijl, & Schnabel, 2001; Sandfort, De Graaf, ten Have, Ransome, & Schnabel, 2014).

Romantic relationships can significantly influence the psychological well-being of individuals across all sexual orientations (Dush & Amato, 2005; Myers & Diener, 1995). Being married or having a romantic partner has consistently been predictive of better mental health (e.g., Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, 2010; Coombs, 1991; Simon, 2002), partially because intimate partners serve as a key source of intimacy, companionship, and a connection to a larger social network (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). In many ways, same-sex couples' relationships have been found to be similar to those of mixed-sex couples (e.g., Fingerhut & Peplau, 2013; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). However, though relationship quality may not vary across couple types, for same-sex couples the individual impact of these relationships, both positive and negative, may differ from individuals in mixed-sex couples.

For individuals in same-sex relationships having a romantic partner has been found to be a particularly salient source of support (Kurdek, 1988). Research has indicated that for sexual minority individuals having a romantic partner is often used as a way to help counteract the negative stigma projected by the world around them (Rostosky, Riggle, Gray, & Hatton, 2007). Rostosky and colleagues interviewed 40 couples (20 female and 20 male) and found that many couples felt stigmatized by family, friends, and coworkers. However, the partners in these couples were able to cope and support each other through these potentially negative experiences. In a daily diary study examining the life stressors and romantic relationships of 95 same-sex couples (40 male and 55 female), Totenhagen, Butler, and Ridley (2012) found that daily levels of closeness between romantic partners was associated with a decrease in the impact of daily life stressors. In other words, romantic partners appear to be a key protection against the negative life experiences which people in same-sex relationships are more likely to experience. Based on prior research, having a romantic partner can buffer some of the negative experiences of sexual minority individuals.

In addition to positive aspects, negative couples' dynamics such as conflict, can also affect individual well-being (e.g., Choi & Marks, 2008; Marchand-Reilly, 2009; Reese-Weber & Marchand, 2002). Prior research has found that among heterosexual couples, negative conflict is associated with poorer individual well-being (Marchand & Hock, 2000). Similarly, Marchand-Reilly (2009) found that couples who used more negative conflict strategies such as aggressive behaviors reported higher rates of depressive symptoms. In all, conflict within romantic relationships has a negative impact on an individual's well-being and psychological functioning. The majority of this area of research has focused on mixed-sex couples with much less known about individuals in same-sex relationships.

We do know some information regarding the frequency and types of relationship conflicts between individuals in same-sex relationships but do not know much about how this conflict affects their individual well-being. Same-sex and mixed-sex couples tend to experience conflict about similar topics and with comparable frequency (Kurdek, 1994; Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2005). Researchers explored 17 common topics of conflict among individuals involved in same-sex relationships and mixed-sex relationships and found almost no differences between the groups (Solomon et al., 2005). Similarly, Kurdek (1994) compared relationship functioning and conflict over a 1-year period in 75 male same-sex couples, 51 female same-sex couples, and 108 mixed-sex couples; all couples had similar frequencies and topics of conflict. For all couples, the frequency and topic of conflicts were similar regardless of the gender makeup of the couple.

Some researchers have discussed that the handling of conflict may differ across couple types. Gottman et al. (2003) conducted detailed lab observations of same-sex and mixed-sex couple interactions. For one of these exchanges researchers observed a 15-minute discussion regarding a recent conflict. Researchers examined the speech tone, emotional responses, and emotional displays during these conflict-related conversations. They found that when initiating conversations individuals involved in same-sex relationships presented the conflict in a more positive fashion (e.g., using humor) and were less belittling, less intimidating, and less likely to display power compared with the mixed-sex couples. Moreover, individuals in same-sex relationships were more likely to maintain positive emotions during conflict compared with the mixed-sex couples (Gottman et al, 2003). Related, Metz, Rosser, and Strapko (1994) found that female same-sex couples had more positive and more effective discussions regarding conflict than heterosexual women in mixed-sex couples. In addition, gay men compared with heterosexual men reported putting in more personal effort into conflict resolution and they perceived greater partner effort to compromise or be more flexible regarding the topic of the conflict. In all, conflict among same-sex and mixed-sex couples is often about the same topics and occurs with the same frequency, although, the conflict itself is sometimes less negative and dealt with in a more positive way among same-sex couples. The differential impact of relationship conflict on life satisfaction across couple types is unknown.

In sum, we have two major research questions regarding life satisfaction and couple dynamics of individuals involved in same-sex and mixed-sex relationships. We will compare the impact of relationship dynamics on the life satisfaction of individuals involved in mixed-sex and same-sex relationships using a national sample of Dutch individuals, currently residing in the Netherlands, by means of the following hypotheses:

1. Are there differences in life satisfaction between individuals in same-sex relationships compared with individuals in mixed-sex relationships? Prior research would indicate that individuals involved in same-sex relationships would report lower life satisfaction compared with individuals involved in mixed-sex relationships.
2. Do both the positive (partner support), as well as, the negative aspects (conflict) of relationship dynamics affect individuals in same-sex relationships differently than their peers in mixed-sex relationships? Partner support and relationship conflict will be similar but the association between relationship factors and individual life satisfaction will vary across couple types. Specifically, romantic partner support will have a greater positive impact on the individual life satisfaction of those in same-sex relationships compared with those in mixed-sex relationships. Prior research highlights the importance of romantic partners on individual well-being among those in same-sex relationships. In contrast, relationship conflict will have a greater impact on the life satisfaction of those in mixed-sex relationships compared with those in same-sex relationships. This is based on prior research which has found less negativity in relationship conflict among individuals in same-sex relationships compared with those in mixed-sex relationships.

Method

The sample for the present study consists of participants who took part in the first wave of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS; Dykstra et al., 2005). The NKPS is a longitudinal national study of Dutch individuals residing in the Netherlands. In Wave 1 of the NKPS, 8,161 individuals aged 18 to 79 years participated (also called “anchors”). The NKPS participants were selected from a random sample of private addresses in the Netherlands. The first wave was conducted in 2002-2004 and had a response rate of 45% (Dykstra et al., 2005), which is not atypical for the Netherlands. Dutch response rates tend to be lower than elsewhere and have been declining over time, likely because the Dutch are particularly sensitive about privacy issues (De Leeuw & De Heer, 2001; Stoop, 2005). In the final NKPS sample, men and young adults living with their parents were underrepresented compared with national demographic statistics. Furthermore, men in the age category 45 to 69 years and women in the age category 35 to 54 years were overrepresented compared with the national age distribution statistics. Finally, individuals residing in highly rural and highly urban areas were also somewhat underrepresented (additional information can be found in Dykstra et al.,

2005). The data were collected via computer-assisted face-to-face interviews, as well as, through separately completed questionnaires. For a number of variables, identical data were collected from a number of significant others (also called “alters”), including the participants’ current partners.

As we were interested in the association between relationship dynamics and life satisfaction, we focused on individuals who had a partner at the time of the data collection (71.7% of Wave 1 respondents, $n = 5,854$, data missing for two respondents). Of those participants 5,747 were involved in a mixed-sex relationship and 107 in a same-sex relationship (1.8% of the participants with a partner). Of the same-sex couples, 51 were male/male and 56 were female/female relationships. Of these 107 couples, we had the self-reported data from 73 partners. We used the data of these partners as a way to increase our final sample size (of particular importance for individuals in same-sex relationships). In other words, our final analytical sample for individuals with a same-sex partner consisted of 180 individuals, nested in 107 couples. For the individuals with a mixed-sex partner, we used the self-reported data of 4,121 partners (i.e., a final analytical sample of 9,868 individuals, nested in 5,747 mixed-sex couples). Detailed demographic information about our sample is displayed in Table 1. As described subsequently, we accounted for the fact that not all observations were independent (i.e., individuals nested in couples). Though the data were longitudinal, we restricted our analyses to the information collected at the first wave because of the loss of respondents in same-sex relationships across the waves (e.g., of the initial 107 anchors in a same-sex couple at Wave 1, only 89 participated at Wave 2).

Measures

Life Satisfaction. Life satisfaction was measured by the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Pavot & Diener, 1993), which has been tested and used extensively (e.g., Wu, Chen, & Tsai, 2009). All individuals answered the following questions: “In most respects, my life is ideal,” “My life circumstances are excellent,” “On the whole, I am satisfied with my life,” “If I could live my life again, I would change very little.” The responses were coded from 1 = *Strongly agree* to 5 = *Strongly disagree*. The scale was created based on the mean of the items; Cronbach’s alpha of the scale was .80 for individuals in mixed-sex relationships and .78 for individuals in same-sex relationships. The items were recoded so that a higher value represented higher life satisfaction.

Support From Partner. All individuals provided information about the level of support they received from their partner by answering the following five questions:

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Variables Used in Multivariate Analyses, Including Demographic Data About Analytical Sample.

Variable	Mixed-sex respondents, N = 9,868		Same-sex respondents, N = 180		t or χ^2
	n	M (SD)/Percent of responses	n	M (SD)/Percent of responses	
Life satisfaction ^a	9,358	3.81 (0.63)	168	3.66 (0.63)	$t(9,524) = 3.12, p < .001$
Support from partner ^b	9,274	2.31 (0.54)	169	2.35 (0.51)	$t(9,441) = 1.01, p = .31$
Relationship conflict ^c	9,277	0.52 (0.47)	167	0.56 (0.54)	$t(9,442) = 1.15, p = .25$
Support from family ^a	9,412	3.89 (0.80)	170	3.74 (0.87)	$t(9,580) = 2.45, p = .01$
Support from friends ^a	9,362	3.86 (0.72)	170	3.98 (0.64)	$t(9,530) = 2.02, p = .04$
Educational attainment ^d	9,854		179		
Low		36.4%		22.3%	$\chi^2(2, N = 10,033) = 33.75, p < .001$
Intermediary		30.4%		24.0%	
High		33.2%		53.6%	
The respondent is employed ^e	9,859	67.5%	179	78.8%	$\chi^2(1, N = 10,038) = 10.21, p < .001$
The respondent is female ^f	9,868	51.8%	180	51.1%	$\chi^2(1, N = 10,048) = 0.04, p = .85$
Duration of the relationship (in years)	9,843	22.87 (15.03)	179	15.91 (12.30)	$t(10,020) = 6.16, p < .001$
There are children living in the household ^g	9,868	48.7%	180	21.1%	$\chi^2(1, N = 10,048) = 53.94, p < .001$

Note. Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

^a 1 = Strongly agree to 5 = Strongly disagree. ^b 0 = No support to 3 = A lot of support. ^c 0 = not at all to 2 = several times. ^d 1 = (incomplete) elementary only, lower vocational / lower general secondary, 2 = intermediate general secondary/upper general secondary, intermediate vocational, and 3 = higher vocational/university/postgraduate. ^e 0 = Employed and 1 = Unemployed. ^f 0 = Male and 1 = Female. ^g 0 = No children living in the household and 1 = There are children living in the household.

To what extent does your partner support you: a) in decisions about your work or education; b) when you have worries or health problems; c) in your leisure time activities and social contacts; d) with all kinds of practical things you need to do; and e) in personal matters that are on your mind? (0 = *No support* to 3 = *A lot of support*).

The scale was created based on the mean of the items. This scale has been successfully used in earlier works on intracouple dynamics (e.g., Ivanova, 2015). The reliability of the measure was high for both groups of interest ($\alpha = .85$ for individuals in mixed-sex relationships and $\alpha = .82$ for individuals in same-sex relationships).

Relationship Conflict. The level of conflict in the relationship was assessed using the following three items:

Please indicate whether the following situations have occurred between you and your partner in the past 12 months: 1) heated discussions between you and your partner; 2) one of you putting down and blaming the other; and 3) you didn't want to talk to each other for a while.

All individuals responded to these questions on a scale from 0 = *not at all* to 2 = *several times*. The scale was created based on the mean of the items. The reliability of the scale was $\alpha = .71$ for individuals in mixed-sex relationships and $\alpha = .78$ for individuals in same-sex relationships. The scale has been used previously in studies on couple dynamics and well-being (e.g., Keizer & Ivanova, 2016).

Control Variables. In our analyses, we controlled for potentially confounding variables (i.e., variables which could be associated with the independent and dependent variables in our models). Foremost, being that social support could affect both life satisfaction and relationship dynamics (e.g., Diener & Diener, 2009; Heller, Watson, & Ilies, 2006), we controlled for the self-reported *support from family* and *support from friends*. Each source of support was assessed using the following questions: "When I am troubled, I can always discuss my worries with my family/friends," "I place confidence in my family/friends," "Should I need help, I can always turn to my family/friends," and "I can always count on my family/friends." The responses were coded from 1 = *Strongly agree* to 5 = *Strongly disagree*. The scales were created based on the mean of the items; Cronbach's alpha was .91 for the individuals in mixed-sex relationships and .92 for individuals in same-sex relationships for the family scale; for the friends scale, Cronbach's alpha

was .93 for those in mixed-sex relationships and .91 for those in same-sex relationships. The items were recoded so that a higher value represented higher levels of support.

In addition, we controlled for a number of demographic characteristics which have been found in the literature to be related to life satisfaction including age at the time of the interview and gender (0 = *male*, 1 = *female*; Diener & Suh, 2000). Factors regarding socioeconomic status have also been linked to life satisfaction in prior work and are controlled for in all models (e.g., Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002; Diener & Suh, 2000). We included a control for the highest attained level of education which was coded as 1 = (*incomplete*) *elementary only, lower vocational/lower general secondary*, 2 = *intermediate general secondary/upper general secondary, intermediate vocational*, and 3 = *higher vocational/university/postgraduate* and current employment status (coded as 0 = *Employed* and 1 = *Unemployed*). Finally, we controlled for the duration of the current relationship in years and for the presence of children in the household as these factors have been found to be associated with life satisfaction and/or relationship dynamics (e.g., Hansen, 2012; Kurdek, 2003; Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993; Wendorf, Lucas, Imamoglu, Weisfeld, & Weisfeld, 2011). Detailed information about all variables can be found in Table 1.

Analytical Approach

Our analyses proceeded in two steps. At the first step, we examined whether we could observe differences between individuals involved in same-sex and mixed-sex relationships in their self-reported life satisfaction. Subsequently, we examined whether the association between life satisfaction and partner support and relationship conflict differed between the participants in same-sex and mixed-sex relationships. The research questions were addressed using linear regression models. We accounted for the fact that not all observations were independent from each other by clustering the standard errors within relationships, using the *vce(cluster)* option in Stata (StataCorp, 2015; Wooldridge, 2013). Our choice of how to treat the correlation across observations was guided by the fact that we were not interested in modeling the couple-level effects but only in controlling for any such possible effects. The *vce(cluster)* option in Stata specifies that the standard errors allow for intragroup correlations. In other words, the observations are independent across groups (i.e., couples) but not necessarily within groups.

Our examination of the association between relationship dynamics and life satisfaction required the inclusion of interaction terms in our models

(i.e., between the type of relationship (same-sex or mixed-sex) and the covariate of interest—conflict and support). To facilitate the interpretation of any significant interaction terms, we used the *margins* command in Stata to estimate and plot the marginal effects at representative values for the individuals in same-sex and mixed-sex relationships. It also allowed us to estimate the slopes for the two groups of interest (i.e., individuals in same- and mixed-sex relationships), as well as, the specific values at which the groups differed (if the interactions indicated a significant difference). All marginal effects were estimated for the reference categories of the categorical control variables, with the continuous variables kept at the sample mean.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

As can be seen in Table 1, the participants in same-sex relationships were higher educated, $\chi^2(2, n = 10,033) = 33.75, p < .001$, and more likely to be employed, $\chi^2(1, n = 10,038) = 10.21, p < .001$, than the participants in mixed-sex relationships. In terms of the characteristics of the relationships, the mixed-sex relationships were significantly longer, $t(10,020) = 6.16, p < .001$, and it was more likely that there were children living in those households, $\chi^2(1, n = 10,048) = 53.94, p < .001$, than in the same-sex households. As for the support which the respondents reported to be receiving from family and friends, the participants in same-sex relationships received less support from their families, $t(9,580) = 2.45, p = .01$, but more support from friends, $t(9,530) = 2.02, p = .04$. As for the central dependent variables, participants in same-sex relationships reported significantly lower life satisfaction, $t(9,524) = 3.12, p < .001$. Finally, Table 2 displays the bivariate correlations between the continuous variables in our analyses (above the diagonal for individuals in same-sex relationships and below the diagonal for individuals in mixed-sex relationships). Though we did not examine gender differences in our analyses, our descriptive analyses did demonstrate that gender was significantly associated with both the dependent, as well as, some of the key independent variables (life satisfaction $M_{\text{male}} = 3.79, SD_{\text{male}} = 0.63, M_{\text{female}} = 3.84, SD_{\text{female}} = 0.64, t(9,492) = 3.74, p < .01$ and partner support $M_{\text{male}} = 3.33, SD_{\text{male}} = 0.51, M_{\text{female}} = 3.28, SD_{\text{female}} = 0.57, t(9,409) = 4.80, p < .01$), which reaffirmed our decision to include gender as a control in the multivariate analyses.

Table 2. Bivariate Correlations Between Dependent Variable and Key Independent Variables (Above Diagonal for Individuals in Same-Sex Couples and Below the Diagonal for Individuals in Mixed-Sex Couples).

	Life satisfaction	Support from partner	Relationship conflict	Support from family	Support from friends	Duration of relationship (in years)
Life satisfaction ^a						
Support from partner ^b	.31***		-.14†	.23***	.32***	-.03
Relationship conflict ^c	-.25***	-.27***	-.15†	.01	.31***	-.15†
Support from family ^a	.28***	.16***	-.12***	-.16*	-.09	-.24*
Support from friends ^a	.23***	.17***	-.04***	.32***	.21*	-.02
Duration of the relationship (in years)	.06***	-.05***	-.13***	-.04***	-.14***	-.26***

^a 1 = Strongly agree to 5 = Strongly disagree. ^b 0 = No support to 3 = A lot of support. ^c 0 = not at all to 2 = several times.
[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

Same-Sex and Mixed-Sex Relationships' Life Satisfaction

Results of the multivariate analyses (see Model 1, Table 3) showed that participants in same-sex relationships report somewhat lower life satisfaction. After controlling for the relevant individual and couple-level variables, being in a same-sex relationship was associated with a 0.13-point drop in life satisfaction.

Life Satisfaction of Individuals in Mixed-Sex and Same-Sex Relationships: Partner Support and Conflict

At the next step, we examined the association between relationship dynamics and life satisfaction among individuals involved in same-sex and mixed-sex relationships. Our findings are displayed in Models 2 to 5 in Table 3. As can be seen in Models 2 and 4, the variables of support from partner and level of relationship conflict had the expected effects on life satisfaction. Whereas a 1-point increase in support was associated with a 0.31-point increase in life satisfaction, a one-point increase in conflict was associated with a 0.30-drop in the dependent variable. What is more interesting here, however, are the interactions displayed in Models 3 and 5. As can be seen in Model 3, the association between support received from one's partner and life satisfaction did not differ between individuals in same-sex and mixed-sex relationships. In other words, we did not find evidence that participants in same-sex relationships were more strongly affected by the positive aspects of their relationships than participants in mixed-sex relationships.

We did, however, find evidence of differences in the association between conflict and life satisfaction. For ease of interpretation, the estimated marginal effects at representative values are plotted in Figure 1. As can be seen in Model 5 of Table 3 and Figure 1, only the slope for the participants in mixed-sex relationships ($b = -.31$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% confidence interval $[CI] = [-.34, -.28]$) was significant (slope for the participants in same-sex relationships: $b = -.09$, $SE = .08$, 95% $CI = [-.26, .07]$). An additional check demonstrated that the difference among the participants in same-sex and mixed-sex relationships was significant only at particularly low levels of conflict (at or less than 0.5). In other words, for respondents in same-sex relationships, the lack of conflict with their partner did not "translate" into higher life satisfaction in the same way it did for participants in mixed-sex relationships. It should be pointed out here that the magnitude of the difference was not large (ranging from a .25-point difference in life satisfaction at *frequency of conflict* = 0, $b = -.25$, $SE = .08$, 95% $CI = [-.41, -.09]$, to a .14-point difference at *frequency of conflict* = 0.5, $b = -.14$, $SE = .05$, 95% $CI = [-.25, -.03]$). Such low levels of conflict were reported by slightly more than half of the total analytical sample (i.e., 52.5%).

Table 3. Life Satisfaction of Individuals in Mixed-Sex and Same-Sex Partnerships, Partner Support, and Relationship Conflict.

	Model 1: Type partner		Model 2: Support		Model 3: Support Int		Model 4: Conflict		Model 5: Conflict Int	
	Coeff	SE	Coeff	SE	Coeff	SE	Coeff	SE	Coeff	SE
Participant is in a same-sex relationship (ref. = mixed-sex)	-.13*	.05	-.13*	.05	-.06	.20	-.13*	.05	-.25*	.08
Support from partner			.31**	.01	.31**	.01				
Interaction: Type of partnership × support from partner					-.03	.09				
Relationship conflict							-.30**	.02	-.31**	.01
Interaction: Type of partnership × relationship conflict									0.22*	0.08
Controls										
Support from family (range 1-5, 5 = highest)	.18**	.01	.16**	.01	.16**	.01	.16**	.01	.16**	.01
Support from friends (range 1-5, 5 = highest)	.14**	.01	.10**	.01	.10**	.01	.13**	.01	.13**	.01
Respondent is female (ref. = male)	.02	.01	.04**	.01	.04**	.01	.03*	.01	.03*	.01
Educational level of the respondent (ref. = high)										
Low	-.06*	.02	-.06**	.02	-.06**	.02	-.11**	.02	-.11**	.02
Middle	-.04*	.02	-.04*	.01	-.04*	.01	-.06**	.01	-.06**	.01

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

	Model 1: Type partner		Model 2: Support		Model 3: Support Int		Model 4: Conflict		Model 5: Conflict Int	
	Coeff	SE	Coeff	SE	Coeff	SE	Coeff	SE	Coeff	SE
The respondent is not employed (ref. = employed)	-.10**	.02	-.10**	.02	-.10**	.02	-.10**	.02	-.10**	.02
Duration of the relationship (in years)	.01**	.00	.01**	.00	.01**	.00	.00**	.00	.00**	.00
There are children living in the household (ref. = no)	-.01	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01
Constant	2.51**	0.05	1.99**	0.06	1.99**	0.06	2.82**	0.05	2.83**	0.05
Observations	9,377		9,231		9,231		9,233		9,233	
Clusters (partnerships)	5,422		5,377		5,377		5,367		5,367	
R ²	.11		.18		.18		.16		.16	

Note. SE = standard error.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

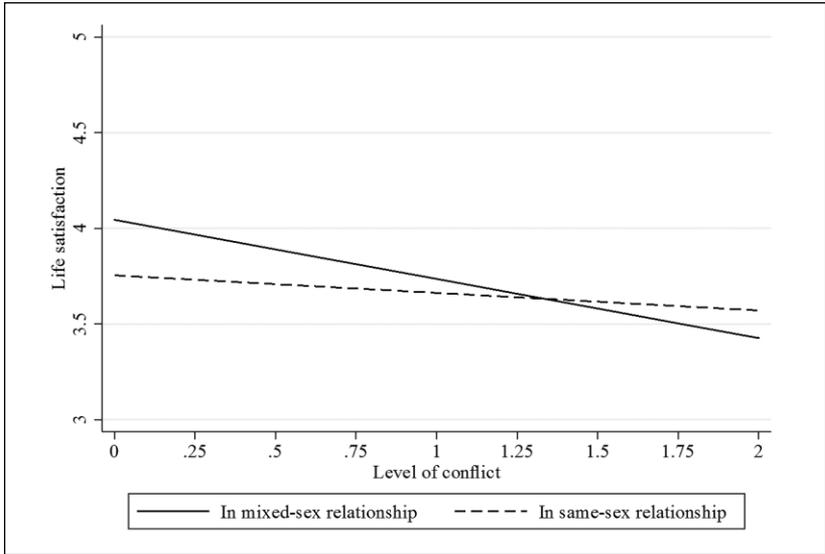


Figure 1. Plot of estimated marginal effects at representative values^a for interaction between relationship conflict and type of partnership, Model 5, Table 3. ^aAll categorical variables at the reference category (male respondent, highest educational level, no children at home, and employed) with the continuous variables kept at the sample mean.

Discussion

This study was the first to explore individual life satisfaction in relation to the level of partner support and conflict among a sample of Dutch individuals, involved in same-sex and mixed-sex relationships. As with prior research, individuals in same-sex relationships reported lower life satisfaction compared with their peers in mixed-sex relationships, but did not show differences in the level of relationship conflict or romantic partner support. In addition, we found that the association between partner support and individual well-being was similar across couple types. However, our results indicate that whereas couple conflict was significantly associated with life satisfaction for mixed-sex couples, this was not always the case for same-sex couples. These findings indicate that life satisfaction among individuals involved in same-sex and mixed-sex relationships may be differently affected by the (negative) dynamics in their romantic relationships.

Not surprisingly, we found that individuals involved in same-sex relationships reported significantly lower life satisfaction compared with their peers

in mixed-sex relationships. This finding replicates prior research which has shown that the added stressors of being a sexual minority individual is linked to lower psychological functioning and well-being (Institute of Medicine, 2011; Meyer, 2003, 2013). Although life satisfaction was different across the couple types, we found that level of partner support and relationship conflict did not differ by couple type.

We found that individuals in mixed-sex and same-sex relationships reported similar levels of partner support, specifically, that greater social support from a partner was associated with greater life satisfaction. Contrary to our hypothesis, there was no difference across couple types in the association between partner social support and life satisfaction. Prior research has found that support from a romantic partner among individuals involved in same-sex relationships may help counteract some of the minority stress experienced by sexual minority individuals (Rostosky et al., 2007). Most of the research in this area has explored the impact of partner support on individual functioning among sexual minority individuals without a heterosexual comparison group. The use of comparison across couple types can help researchers and practitioners understand the variation by couple type without relying on heterosexual assumptions that all relationships are designed and function similarly. Our findings could indicate that all couples use their partner as a support but that the topic or focus of that support may vary across couple type: the notion that same-sex couples specifically use their romantic partner for combating and supporting through stigma and everyday biases surrounding being a sexual minority but that mixed-sex couples use their romantic partner in a different way. Understanding that these differences exist can help practitioners understand the role of romantic partners in individual well-being and the variation based on the couple type. These data did not allow for detailed exploration of these external factors. Future research should explore the nature of support, along with the impact that partner support has on individual well-being.

The finding for relationship conflict was a bit more complex. Again, we found no differences across couple type in overall levels of conflict. This finding supports prior research, individuals in same-sex and mixed-sex relationships tend to have similar levels of conflict (Kurdek, 1994; Solomon et al., 2005). In addition, prior research has found that conflict is associated with individual psychological functioning, specifically, the more negative the conflict the poorer the individual well-being (e.g., Choi & Marks, 2008; Marchand-Reilly, 2009; Reese-Weber & Marchand, 2002). Among this national sample of Dutch couples, we found that greater conflict was associated with lower life satisfaction but this was much more pronounced among mixed-sex couples. This difference across couple type may, in part, be due to

the nature or tone of the conflict among same-sex couple being less negative. However, there were variations in the impact of the conflict based on the frequency of the occurrence across couple type.

For those in mixed-sex relationships who reported low levels of conflict, they also reported an increase in life satisfaction but this was not the case for individuals in same-sex relationships. Although when the same-sex couples reported high levels of conflict, this conflict did have a negative impact on the individual's life satisfaction. We can attempt to understand this finding by examining previous research which has shown differences in conflict styles among same-sex couples (Gottman et al., 2003; Metz et al., 1994). In an observational study, Gottman et al. (2003) examine a conflict-based discussion between same-sex and mixed-sex couples and found that the conversations between same-sex couples were more likely to include positive emotions and less negative behaviors (belittling or use of power) compared with the mixed-sex couples. If same-sex couples are having conflicts which include less negativity, it could be that experiencing lower frequencies of conflict could negate the positive impact of low conflict on life satisfaction. For those who had high conflict, regardless of the negative or positive emotions being portrayed, this level of conflict has the same negative impact across couple types. Future research should examine these group differences in further detail by exploring the nature of the conflict as it is occurring, such as the type of affect or verbal/body language being used by members of the couple.

Our work has a number of limitations that we would like to address. Foremost, though we drew our sample from a national study, the participants were not fully representative of the Dutch population at large (e.g., in terms of age distribution). Still, it is important to note that the majority of research exploring individuals in same-sex relationships relied on convenience sampling, which was not the case for this study. Second, participants did not report their self-identified sexual orientation. The data provided the ability to examine gender makeup of the couple (same-sex vs. mixed-sex) and we cannot generalize these findings to all lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual individuals since they did not specify their self-identified sexual orientation. Additionally, these data are a bit dated, collected about 12 years ago. We have no reason to believe that these results would change based on this factor but future research should attempt to replicate these results using a more modern sample. Another point which we would like to address here is the fact that we only examined differences between same-sex and mixed-sex relationships. In our analyses, we controlled for the gender of the respondent but due to our sample size (e.g., 88 male respondents nested in 51 male/male couples), we did not examine if the members of the three different types of couples (i.e.,

female/male, male/male, and female/female) were differentially affected by the dynamics of their relationships. Here, as a first step, we only present evidence that partners in same-sex couples differ from partners in mixed-sex couples in how they experience their relationships. Last, we do not know the actual nature of the conflict that the participants are describing. Knowing the actual nature of the conflict would give us greater insight into the impact that specific types of conflict have on couples and individuals. Due to the lack of information surrounding these issues, we could not explore these factors using this data set.

Overall, this study provides interesting insights and practical implications regarding relationship dynamics and life satisfaction for all couples. Regardless of couple type, romantic partners provide psychological support, which is essential for individual well-being and functioning. Professionals working with couples need to acknowledge the importance of support but the nature of support may vary across couple type. In addition, conflict has detrimental impacts on all couples but this too can vary across couple types. Although, same-sex couples have more positive patterns of conflict, this study showed that these patterns may only protect those in low-conflict relationships. Professionals working with these couples need to acknowledge that frequent conflict has the same detrimental impact regardless of couple type. Providing guidance to all couples on how to decrease conflict and increase partner support will improve individual functioning but the methodology could vary based on couple design.

In sum, using a national sample of Dutch individuals involved in same-sex and mixed-sex relationships we found relatively small differences across couple types, with a few exceptions. As with prior research, individuals in same-sex relationships did report lower life satisfaction compared with their peers in mixed-sex relationships (Institute of Medicine, 2011; Meyer, 2003, 2013). In this study, we examined whether these differences in life satisfaction could be driven by couple dynamics (both positive and negative). We found that feeling supported by your romantic partner was associated with better life satisfaction, regardless of couple type. For relationship conflict, we found a similar trend, greater relationship conflict was associated with lower life satisfaction. Although it is important to note that this was not the case among low-conflict couples. For individuals in same-sex relationships, low levels of conflict between partners did not have the same protective influence on life satisfaction as individuals in mixed-sex relationships. It remains to be explored whether this lower susceptibility to the potentially harmful impact of conflict is indeed due the different nature of partner conflict experienced among same-sex and mixed-sex couples. Individual functioning is greatly

influenced by many factors but it is important to note that these influences are not always uniform across all types of couples.

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