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Authors: Richard A. Mackey, Matthew A. Diemer, Bernard A. O'Brien

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in the lasting relationships of heterosexual and same sex couples**

Richard A. Mackey, Matthew A. Diemer & Bernard A. O'Brien

Boston College

Correspondence should be addressed to:

Dr. Richard A. Mackey

Graduate School of Social Work

Boston College

Chestnut Hill, MA 02167-3807.

Home page: www2.bc.edu/~mackey

E-mail: mackey@bc.edu

Fax: (617) 552-6190

Abstract

Satisfying relationships are important to the well being of individuals and families. Because of increased longevity, many couples are staying together for extended periods of time. Thus, it is valuable to understand the factors that contribute to a sense of satisfaction among partners in lasting relationships. Relatively little attention has been paid in the research literature to relationships among older couples who have remained together for many years. Even less attention has been paid to the lasting relationships of couples of color and to gay male and lesbian couples. This paper focuses on understanding the factors that contribute to satisfaction of partners in the long-term relationships of a purposive sample of heterosexual and same sex couples. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with 216 partners in 108 relationships that had lasted an average of 30 years. Using logistic regression analysis, two factors were identified as predictive of satisfaction during the recent years of these relationships: containment of relational conflict and psychologically intimate communication between partners. Based on these findings, a theoretical model for understanding satisfaction in lasting relationships is discussed.

Key Words

older couples, marriage, lasting relationships, same sex relationships, lesbian relationships, gay relationships, satisfying relationships

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Research suggests that satisfying relationships are critical to the mental and physical well-being of individuals (Berscheid, 1999; Praeger, 1996; Haynes, 1992). In addition to enhancing one's physical and psychological well-being, satisfying relationships may serve as a "buffer" from "psychological stress and negative life events" (Karney and Bradbury, 1995, p. 3). With increasing numbers of couples spending longer periods of time together because of extended life expectancies, it is important to understand factors in lasting relationships that may contribute to a sense of satisfaction between partners. Until recent years, relatively little attention has been paid to satisfaction in the relationships of older married couples who have been together for many years, especially those from culturally diverse backgrounds (Karney and Bradbury, 1995). Even less attention has been given to satisfaction in lasting same sex relationships (Johnson, 1991).

Based on a study of adaptation in relationships that had lasted an average of 30.22 years (S.D.=10.28), this paper focuses on identifying relational factors that enhanced satisfaction during the recent years of these relationships. In-depth interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 216 ethnically and socioeconomically diverse partners in 72 heterosexual marriages and 36 same sex relationships. The research started 12 years ago and has been conducted in two phases. In phase one we focused on qualitative analysis of the interview data (Mackey and O'Brien, 1995; Mackey, O'Brien and Mackey, 1997). In the second or current phase, we have re-coded the interview data so as to analyze them from qualitative and quantitative perspectives.

The goal of the paper is to develop an understanding of the factors that contributed to satisfaction within lasting relationships. Those factors were elicited from the perspectives of individual partners in these relationships (note: the term, partners, is used throughout this paper for respondents in both heterosexual and same sex relationships). The paper focuses on reported satisfaction during the recent years, defined as the last 5 to 10 years of these relationships.

The research questions are as follows:

1. What factors are related to satisfaction of partners in lasting relationships?
2. Are the factors associated with satisfaction different for heterosexual and same sex couples?

Literature Review

There has been a long history of research on understanding marital satisfaction (Aida and Falbo, 1991; Argyle and Furnham, 1983; Broderick and O'Leary, 1986; Fowers, 1991; Kelley and Burgoon, 1991; Shachar, 1991). Most studies, however, have focused on marriages that have not lasted as long as those in the present study.

In recent years, there has been increasing attention to satisfaction in long-term marriages (Gottman and Krokoff, 1989; Haefner, Notarius and Pellegrini, 1991; Kelly and Conley, 1987; Lauer, Lauer and Kerr, 1990; Levenson, Corstensen and Gottman, 1993; Vaillant and Vaillant, 1993). Of special interest to our research were studies that explored the potential connection between satisfaction and stability in marital relationships. There is a connection between being satisfied and staying in relationships although the exact nature of that connection is unknown (Hicks and Platt, 1970; Kelly and Conley, 1987). Even though many marriages remain intact because partners are satisfied with their

relationships, other relationships may endure despite dissatisfaction (Lewis and Spanier, 1979; Spanier and Lewis, 1980).

In the past 20 years investigators have begun to study factors that affect the quality of same sex relationships (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek, 1991; McWhirter and Mattison, 1984; Slatter and Mencher, 1991). Compared to studies of marriage, relatively little research has been done on satisfaction in same sex relationships that have lasted ten years or more (Dorn, 1991; Johnson, 1991).

Communication

The quality of communication between spouses in marriage has been identified as an important factor in relational satisfaction. Effective communication, defined as open and honest discussion between partners, has been studied in the context of specific dimensions of relationships including conflict management (Gottman, 1994), intimacy (Kelly and Burgoon, 1991) and sexual relations (Cupach and Comstock, 1990). In a study of 100 middle class couples together at least 45 years, Lauer and Lauer (1986) concluded that effective communication enhanced satisfaction with and commitment to their marriages. These studies suggest that satisfaction was nurtured when partners were able to engage in mutual discussions about matters that were important to their lives together.

Mutuality in trust, respect and understanding have been instrumental to developing effective communication and satisfaction in same sex relationships (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983; McWhirter and Mattison, 1984; Rempel, Holmes and Zanna, 1985; Kurdek, 1988). However, there are studies that raise questions about the quality of communication and satisfaction in same sex relationships. Some studies have found emotional distancing and impaired communication (George and Behrendt, 1987) between gay male partners. McWhirter and Mattison (1984) found that gay males “over communicate” with each other during the early years of their relationships. After a decline in the quality of

communication during the middle years, gay partners reported a “renewal” of positive communication in their later years.

Our research (Mackey, O'Brien and Mackey, 1997) on relational processes over time in gay male and lesbian relationships suggest that "lesbians seemed to have more comfort than did gay males in reflecting on how their family backgrounds affected their capacity to be open with their partners, how they may have avoided closeness in relationships and how they had made progress in communicating with their partners" (p. 71). Gay male respondents tended to report a decline in the quality of communication between them after being together for several years, which may have been related to conflict about sexual relations between at least one partner and other men. By the recent years of these relationship 54 % of gay males compared to 85 % of lesbians were satisfied with communication (Mackey, O'Brien and Mackey, 1997).

Studies that purport to measure the potential connection between communication and relational satisfaction may not account adequately for the "messiness" inherent in ongoing human relationships (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996). In our earlier analyses on communication patterns in these lasting relationships, we found that partners valued the positive quality of their communication, especially when there were identifiable differences between them. As we will discuss later, openness and honesty in discussing differences were the cornerstone of developing a sense of intimacy between partners.

Conflict management styles

Studies have found that marriages in which at least one partner employed avoidant defenses to deal with marital conflict were less satisfying than those in which partners confronted conflict by talking directly with each other about their differences (Gottman and Krokoff, 1989). Based on research into physiological responses of men and women to conflict in marriage, Gottman and Levenson (1988) found

that men reacted to stress associated with conflict by withdrawing so as to avoid negative affect.

Women reacted differently to conflict. They were more likely than men to initiate face to face discussions of relational conflict. Gottman, Coan, Carrere and Swanson (1998) reported that women initiated the majority of discussions of marital conflict in their laboratory setting.

Chronic inability to resolve disagreements not only may erode marital satisfaction but may result in psychological and physical impairments, especially among wives (Levenson, Carstein and Gottman, 1993). In a study of couples married over 30 years, the Vaillants (1993) found a decrease in marital satisfaction, particularly among wives who reported unhappiness with their relationships because of difficulties in confronting and solving disagreements with their husbands. These studies of heterosexual relationships suggest that women are more likely than men to employ face to face, confrontive styles of managing marital conflict.

Mackey, O'Brien and Mackey (1997) found that lesbian partners tended to avoid face to face discussions about interpersonal differences early in their relationships. After many years, in which each partner grew increasingly unhappy with the lack of open communication between them about differences, 85 % of lesbian couples sought psychotherapy for their relational difficulties. By the recent years of their relationships, lesbian partners reported a substantial improvement in their abilities to discuss differences and an increase in satisfaction with their relationships.

In the Mackey, O'Brien and Mackey research (1997), the pattern of identifying and dealing with relational conflict over the years was different for gay male partners. Although both gay male and lesbian partners reported progress in developing problem solving skills by the recent years of their relationships, a higher percentage of gay males compared to lesbians reported using avoidant styles of conflict management. Gay males tended to avoid discussing their thoughts and feelings about conflict unless difficulties threatened the viability of their relationships (Mackey, O'Brien and Mackey 1997).

Equity

Researchers have found that equity, defined as a reported sense of fairness with relationships despite individual differences, is related to marital satisfaction (Fowers, 1991; Shachar, 1991). In a recent study of long-term marriages, “a sense of fairness in relationships despite differences had a significant effect on how satisfied respondents were with their relationships” (Mackey and O'Brien, 1995, p.142).

The achievement of a sense of equity has been associated with mutuality in decision making among heterosexual and same sex couples (Howard, Blumstein and Schwartz, 1986). Although research has found that most homosexual partners think of equity as an important value, only a minority of partners report that it characterized their relationships (Caldwell and Peplau, 1984; Reilly and Lynch, 1990). When partners in a relationship have felt relatively equal in their capacity to influence decisions, negotiation and discussion have characterized decision making (DeCecco and Shively, 1978). Although equity has been associated with the quality of relationships, in general, it appears to be especially significant for satisfaction in lesbian relationships (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek, 1988; Lynch and Reilly, 1986; Peplau, 1982; Schneider, 1986).

Intimacy

Intimacy refers to two aspects of relationships: psychological openness based on effective verbal communication and sexual relations.

Studies of lasting marriages have identified several factors, but not the quality of sexual relations, as important contributors to satisfaction with relationships (Kaslow and Robinson, 1996; Lauer, Lauer and Kerr, 1990; Robinson and Blanton, 1993). As couples grow older, there may be a decline in the frequency and satisfaction with sexual relations but an increase in psychological intimacy

that contributes to overall satisfaction (Bograd and Splilka, 1996; Lauer, Lauer and Kerr, 1990; Mackey and O'Brien, 1995; Robinson and Blanton, 1993).

Due to the lack of studies of same sex relationships that last more than 10 years, relatively little information is available about the quality of psychological and sexual intimacy over the life span of long term relationships and how intimacy may contribute to satisfaction. Several studies found that gay male partners who do not practice monogamy stay together longer than those who maintain monogamous relationships (Blasband and Peplau, 1985; Kurdek and Schmitt, 1985/1986; McWhirter and Mattison, 1984) and hypothesized that sexual openness may have facilitated stability and satisfaction in gay male relationships. Lesbians reported higher levels of satisfaction with their relationships when they were monogamous (Kurdek, 1991). Higher levels of psychologically intimate interactions have been found in studies of lesbian relationships compared to gay male relationships (Kurdek, 1998). A similar trend was found in reports of psychological intimacy between lesbian and gay male partners in relationships that had lasted more than 15 years (Mackey, O'Brien and Mackey, 1997).

Summary

There is recognition among scholars of the importance of understanding factors that contribute to satisfaction among partners in stable relationships (Berscheid and Reis, 1998). Studies of marriage and same sex relationships have identified several factors that may contribute to relational satisfaction. These factors included communication, conflict management styles, equity, psychological and sexual intimacy. Given demographic trends, it is timely to explore how partners in lasting relationships experience satisfaction.

Our approach to studying satisfaction among both heterosexual and same sex couples builds upon and complements the work of other researchers. We focused on relational processes with the goal of understanding what factors may have contributed to satisfaction in heterosexual and same sex

relationships that had lasted an average of thirty years. In-depth interviews explored factors that may have contributed to satisfaction from the perspectives of individual partners. From that understanding, statistical techniques were used to assess those factors that contributed to satisfaction in these lasting relationships.

Method

A semi-structured interview format was developed and pretested by the researchers. The resulting interview guide consisted of focal questions that were designed to elicit how respondents viewed several dimensions of their relationships. Collaborative researchers conducted additional pilot testing and provided feedback that led to further refinement of the interview guide.

The guide, which was used in all of the interviews, was divided into four sections: the relationship, social influences including economic and cultural factors, the relationships of parents' marriages (all respondents - straight, gay or lesbian - had been reared by heterosexual parents), and experiences of respondents and views of their relationships from the early to recent years. The recent years, which are the focus of this paper, were the last 5-10 years prior to the interviews.

The interview structure was designed to acquire in-depth information from the point of view of individual respondents in order to develop an understanding of how each partner adapted over the span of their relationships. An open-ended style of interviewing allowed for freedom of expression in order to elicit information from the perspectives of respondents about interactions with partners. The approach, which adapted clinical interviewing skills to the needs of the research, explored the experiences of individuals within relationships as they remembered and reported them.

Interviewers, who were advanced doctoral students with extensive clinical experience, were trained in the use of the interview guide. They were respectful and accepting of the uniqueness of each

respondent's perceptions. Their empathic interviewing skills were a valuable resource in collecting the data (Hill, Thomson and Williams, 1997).

The interviews were held in the homes of respondents, which provided additional information about lifestyles and environments. Prior to each interview, respondents were told about the purpose of the study, given an overview of the interview schedule and were assured their identities would remain anonymous. Informed consent for audiotaping and the research use of interviews were obtained. Each partner was interviewed separately; the length of each of the interviews was approximately two hours.

Sample

Couples were recruited through business, professional and trade union organizations as well as through churches, synagogues, and a variety of other community organizations. Most couples resided in the northeast part of the country.

The sample was chosen purposively to fit with the goal of developing an understanding of a diverse and older group of heterosexual and same sex couples in lasting relationships. Couples were recruited who met the following criteria:

1. married or in a committed same sex relationship at least 15 years;
2. diversity of race/ethnicity, education, religious background and sexual orientation.

Of the 216 partners who were interviewed, 76% were White and 24 % were people of color (African-Americans and Mexican-Americans). Religious background was as follows:

46 % were Protestant; 34 % were Catholic; and 20% were Jewish. Fifty-six percent were college graduates and 44% were non-college graduates. The mean age for the sample as a whole was 57 years (S.D.=10.24): 27% of respondents were in their 40's, 33% in their 50's, 26% in their 60's, and 14% in their 70's. Sixty-seven percent of couples were heterosexual and 33% in same sex relationships. The mean number of years together was 30.22 (S.D.=10.28): 18% of couples had been together 40 years or

longer; 29% between 30 and 39 years; 34% between 20 and 29 years; and 19% less than 20 but more than 15 years. Seventy-seven percent of couples had children; 23% did not have children. By total gross family income, 7% of couples earned less than \$25,000; 25% between \$25,000 and \$49,999; 29% between \$50,000 and \$74,999; and 39 % had gross incomes of \$75,000 or more.

Coding

Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed to facilitate coding and to prepare the data for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Interview passages were coded for relational themes that were then developed into categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Initially, a research team (2 women, 2 men) coded eight transcriptions blindly and individually. Detailed notes were kept and categories were generated. A relationship coding sheet was developed and used in subsequent coding of eight additional interviews. As new categories arose previous interviews were re-coded in keeping with the constant comparative process. Having both genders involved in that process helped control for gender bias and contributed to the development of a shared conceptual analysis. Using this method, a scoring system was developed to identify themes that evolved from each section of the interviews. There were over 90 categories in 24 topic areas for every respondent.

Once the relationship coding sheet was developed, each interview was coded and scored independently by two raters (one male and one female) who noted themes and categories as they emerged from the transcripts. One of the authors coded all 216 interviews to insure continuity in the operational definitions of variables and consistency of judgments from case to case. The agreement between raters, determined by dividing the number of identical judgments by the total number of codes, was 87%. Cohen's kappa, used as a measure of inter-rater reliability, ranged from .79 to .93. When discrepancies occurred, the raters met to discuss their differences and to re-examine the original transcripts until a consensus was reached as to how a particular item was to be scored.

HyperResearch software (Hesse-Biber, Dupuis and Kinder, 1992) enabled the researchers to do a thorough content analysis of interview transcripts, which totaled over 8,000 double-spaced pages, and to identify, catalogue and organize specific interview passages on which categorical codes were based.

In the second phase of the study, we re-examined the codes so as to prepare the data for quantitative analysis. In order to use logistic regression, many variables were re-coded into dichotomous categories. For example, satisfaction was coded originally into three categories (positive, mixed and negative). Because we were interested in understanding factors that contributed to satisfaction during recent years, the positive category was retained and compared with a re-coded mixed/negative category. Quantitative analysis of the qualitative data represents the current phase of this research.

Data analysis

The coded data from the scoring sheets yielded frequencies, which were analyzed using SPSS software. Chi square analysis was used to examine the relationship between the independent variables - which included personal, demographic and respondents' reports of various dimensions of relationships - and the dependent variable of satisfaction in recent years (see Table 1). The Alpha criterion was set at .01 for the chi-square analysis.

The chi-square statistic was appropriate since certain conditions were met. First, it has been very difficult to ensure randomness of samples in social and behavioral research, especially in exploratory studies, which focus on new territory. This non-probability sample was selected deliberately to include older couples who have been understudied in previous research; namely, heterosexual and same sex relationships that had lasted an average of 30 years; the goal was to identify factors that contributed to satisfaction from the perspectives of individual partners rather than to test hypotheses. Second, compared to other tests of statistical significance, chi-square has fewer requirements about population characteristics. Third, the expected frequency of 5 observations in most cells was met.

Variables that were related significantly to satisfaction in the chi-square analysis and which had been identified in previous studies as having importance to understanding satisfaction were selected for building a theoretical model. Three models were tested using logistic regression. One model included only the relational variables that were significant in the chi-square analysis and not the sexual orientation of couples (which was not significant in the chi-square analysis). A second model included the sexual orientation of couples (heterosexual, lesbian and gay) with the relational variables in the first model. To determine the potential effects of gender on the regression of the relational variables, sex (male or female) was substituted for sexual orientation in a third model. Logistic regression was a useful tool in this exploratory research where the goal was to develop theory rather than to test theory (Menard, 1995).

Definition of dependent variable

The definition of satisfaction was based on how respondents talked about what was satisfying to them in their relationships. Interviewers focused on predominant patterns in relationships which was compatible with the goal of developing an understanding of satisfaction. A central theme was the observation of relationships as fulfilling individual needs, so that respondents were usually content and happy about being with their partners. Interview questions used to assess satisfaction were focused on how respondents felt about their relationships, what the partner meant to them and what was good and not so good about their relationships in recent years. The meaning of being satisfied with relationships was captured in the response of this African-American couple who had been together for over 35 years. The husband said:

Every day ain't peaches and cream but it's a lot better than what it used to be. We laugh and talk about some of the things that almost broke our marriage up ... I know she loves me and she knows that I love her. We just know that about each other ... in my own way of thinking, I loved her all

along but I didn't know how to say it ... now I can say it but I still get a funny feeling. I almost drove her completely away from me ... we talk about some of that stuff now, and laugh about it ... the closeness has improved greatly over the last two or three years; we're more understanding and more respectful of one another. We've become like one.

His wife observed:

Most people who go into marriage feel like the storybook romance is going to go on forever. But it doesn't. It's a thin line between love and hate ... I said these vows to this man, and half of them, I didn't mean because that was my ticket for out of the house. My love grew ... We've had good times and we've had bad times. But that's life, you know ... There's been times in our lives when I could say: "I don't think this is what I want out of life." But we always sit down and we talk about it and we give it another go ... He's my world. That's what he means to me. You know, the world out there is the world, but he's my world.

When respondents spoke in ways that reflected themes evident in the responses of these two individuals, satisfaction in recent years was coded "positive." When responses reflected negativity or considerable reservations about relationships, responses were coded "negative." The Kappa coefficient of inter-rater reliability for this variable was .89.

Definitions of independent variables

Our goal was to develop an understanding of satisfaction through exploring patterns of behavior reported independently by each partner. The focus was on predominant patterns of interpersonal behavior that may have contributed to satisfaction.

There were questions that explored the nature of conflict. If disagreements and differences between partners had a negative effect on a respondent and were viewed as disruptive to relationships, such as a cutoff in all positive verbal communication, conflict was coded as "major." Other conflictual

matters between partners were coded “minimal.” In the above couple, conflict during recent years was rated “minimal” although the marriage had been characterized by major conflict in past years. The Kappa coefficient of inter-rater reliability for this variable was .91.

Conflict management style was defined as the predominant way in which a respondent and the partner dealt with differences and disagreements. Direct or face to face discussions were coded “confrontive.” If respondents reported that they did not or could not discuss their thoughts and feelings about their relationships in face to face encounters with their partners, such as denying their feelings or leaving the scene, the style was coded as “avoidant.” The same coding scheme was used for the observations of respondents about their partners’ style. The Kappa coefficient of inter-rater reliability for ratings on this variable was .79.

A lesbian couple together over 25 years talked about their ways of managing relational conflict between them. As with several couples, the pattern in their conflict management styles changed over the years. One partner reported:

When there was something that needed to be talked about, that was a little hot, I would tend to retreat. I would not do it ... in the beginning I was more inclined to give in. As we've been together over time, I've become more assertive about getting my opinion and my feeling out, than I was at one time.

Her partner offered the following observations:

We were always very civilized with each other but our styles are vastly different. I am confrontational ... Most people would not believe how I hated being confrontational when I have to. But if I have to then I can do it. That was her style, and I had my style ... in the middle of the most horrific, mud-slinging, campaign, she was able to remain calm. That was hard ... the rest is just hard work. We learned. We learn one thing and we keep learning it

again and again ... You're got to take care of business. There is no easy way. When you forget, that is when you get in trouble.

Respondents were asked to discuss their “ways of making decisions.” If decisions were usually made separately by one partner without the involvement of the other one, decision-making was coded “separate.” If important decisions were made together, this variable was coded “mutual.” The latter involved separate decision-making depending on circumstances and how significant a decision was to both partners. For example, mothers at home with children often made decisions about discipline without talking with their partners. Coding of this variable was based on predominant modes of making decisions about significant matters, such as major purchases. The Kappa coefficient of inter-rater reliability for this variable was .81.

Equity referred to the sense of fairness in relationships. The questions were framed as follows: Overall, have you felt a sense of fairness in the marriage? Despite differences, have things balanced out? Do you feel that your ways of solving problems, as a couple has been generally fair to each of you? If the responses to these inquiries were in the direction of an overall sense of fairness, this variable was coded “yes;” if not, it was coded “no.” The Kappa coefficient of inter-rater reliability for this variable was .83.

Physical affection referred to bodily touching, such as hugging. If touching was regularly a part of relationships, physical affection was coded “yes” and if not a regular part of relationships, it was coded as “no/mixed.” This factor was explored as part of the exploration of sexual relations which included questions such as: How have you gotten along sexually? (Kappa = .93). In terms of non-sexual intimacy like hugging and touching? (Kappa = .86). Respondents were also asked to assess the importance of genital sex in their relationships which was coded as “important” or “not important” (Kappa = .91). A gay male respondent who had been with his partner for over 20 years reported:

Sex has become more work ... neither one of us are as sexual towards each other. But I think it's an important part of a relationship and we have to work on it ... compared to the beginning when sex was paramount ... now, things have, as we've gotten older, flipped around a little bit, where although I still absolutely believe you can't ignore sex; it has to be an important part of the relationship but it is definitely not as important as it was.

That response illustrated a common theme in the reports of most partners, regardless of their sexual orientation: sexual relations, while less frequent and less satisfying in recent years, were still considered important. With the decline in the significance of sex to relational satisfaction, psychological intimacy became even more important than it had been earlier in relationships.

Psychological intimacy involved being able to share inner thoughts and feelings not done customarily in other relationships, such as those at work. While this factor included effective communication, the distinction between communication and intimacy was a matter of degree, at least theoretically. That is, one could have effective communication with a partner without experiencing psychological intimacy that was characterized by mutuality of understanding, acceptance, trust and respect based upon an openness and honesty of thoughts and feelings not customarily shared in other social relationships. If responses reflected those themes, psychological intimacy was coded "yes;" otherwise, it was coded "no/mixed." The Kappa coefficient of inter-rater reliability of ratings on this variable was .87. A lesbian respondent, with her partner for over 17 years, talked about the meaning of psychological intimacy in their relationship:

I feel like I can be who I am. Now, she doesn't always like everything about that. But I can still be that way, and I don't have to pretend ... I don't see us as fused. It's important to me not to be. I don't like it. I don't think it's healthy ... people can stay in relationships for years and years and years and

they lose their individuality. I don't want to be in a relationship like that. It's important to me, for us, to be individuals as well.

The partner described what the relationship meant to her in recent years:

She's my best friend. Probably that's always been, but that means something different to me now. There's a peacefulness about that. We spend a lot of time together ... if we're not together, I'm also happy ... She's with me wherever I am. I can be whoever I am. I can say stuff to her that I would never say to anyone else. There are parts of myself that I don't particularly like, and I don't really share with other people, but it's OK to share with her. She'll take them in. She'll understand where it's coming from.

These responses reflected two themes that were central to defining psychological intimacy. One theme reflected a sense of comfort in “being one’s self;” to be able to reveal and say things to a partner that one felt could not be said to others; the use of the expression, “best friend,” was often used by respondents in describing this dimension of their relationships. The second theme was maintaining separateness within the attachment. Maintaining interpersonal boundaries in these relationships apparently helped to sustain a sense of psychological intimacy; that is, individuals felt “safe” in revealing their inner thoughts and feelings when they were confident of being accepted by partners who respected their individuality.

Assessment of the quality of communication was based on responses to the following question: How would you describe the communication between you? Communication in recent years was coded “positive” when respondents spoke affirmatively about their ability to discuss issues between them, as in the responses of the partners above. Otherwise, communication was coded as “negative or mixed.” The Kappa coefficient of inter-rater reliability for this variable was .88. Communication between partners was closely linked to psychological intimacy, at least as we defined these variables in this study.

Results

Eighty-five percent of all respondents reported satisfaction with their relationships in recent years. No significant differences were found among heterosexual men, heterosexual women, lesbians and gay males ($p=.64$), nor between heterosexual and homosexual respondents ($p=.79$). Mexican-Americans were more satisfied than African-Americans and Whites with their relationships in recent years ($p=.09$): all 24 Mexican-American partners reported being satisfied in recent years compared to 86% of African-Americans and 83% of Whites. Other personal and demographic variables (age, religion, number of years together, children or no children, education and income) were also not related significantly to satisfaction in recent years.

Cross tabulations were made between relational factors and satisfaction in recent years and a chi-square was computed for each cross tab. The results of that bivariate analysis are shown in Table 1:

[insert table 1]

The quality of communication along with reports of psychological intimacy were related significantly to satisfaction as were the severity of interpersonal conflict between partners and the equity of relationships. Other significant associations were found between satisfaction and conflict management style of partners, decision-making, the quality of sexual relations, the importance of sexual relations and physical affection.

Because of our concerns about the close relationship between the quality of communication and psychological intimacy (i.e. it was only possible to experience psychological intimacy if communication between partners was positive), a phi statistic was computed to assess the strength of that association. The phi value of the correlation between communication and psychological intimacy was .50. Therefore, we decided to eliminate communication as a separate variable in the logistic regression

analysis. Thus, a precise way of identifying the variable, psychological intimacy, is to refer to it as psychologically intimate communication.

A theoretical model of relational factors was constructed and tested with logistic regression. The results are shown in Table 2:

[insert table 2]

Relative to other variables in the model, psychologically intimate communication and minimal conflict emerged as the most powerful contributors to reported satisfaction with relationships in recent years. Other interpersonal factors (conflict management styles of partners as reported by respondents, couple decision-making, expressing physical affection, equity, quality of sexual relations and the importance of sex) did not emerge as significant predictors of satisfaction in the regression analysis.

To test the potential effects of sexual orientation on the regression of relational factors, the sexual orientation of couples (heterosexual, lesbian and gay) was introduced into the theoretical model. The results are shown in Table 3:

[insert table 3]

The introduction of the sexual orientation of couples did not substantially change the values from those reported in the model without sexual orientation. The model does suggest that more lesbians compared to gay males reported satisfaction with their relationships although that finding was not statistically significant ($B=2.07$; $p=.07$).

To test the potential effects of gender, a separate regression analysis was conducted in which sex (male or female) was substituted for the sexual orientation of couples. Those results are shown in Table 4:

[insert table 4]

Similar to the sexual orientation of couples, the sex of respondents did not have a substantial effect on the original model.

Discussion

In evaluating these results and discussing their significance for understanding satisfaction of partners in relationships that last, it is as important to note those factors that were not significant contributors to satisfaction in recent years. We found no evidence to suggest that the sexual orientations of partners played an important role in how satisfied they were with their relationships, a finding similar to that in Metz, Rossner and Strapko's recent study (1994).

As Lee (1988) found in his research on couples who had been married an average of 35 years, socioeconomic factors, as measured by educational level and income, were not related significantly to satisfaction with relationships, nor were race and religion. Although those factors may contribute significantly to satisfaction with relationships that have not lasted as long as those in this study, processes within relationships themselves appeared to have a more important effect in shaping satisfaction after couples have been together for a long period of time which, in this study, averaged 30 years. Perhaps, the quality of interaction in relationships that last may eclipse factors such as religion, income, education, race and sexual orientation.

In the following discussion, we will, therefore, focus on relational processes that have an important role in shaping satisfaction with these relationships, regardless of the sexual orientations of

the partners. Interpretation of our findings needs to be framed in a way that respects the dynamic interplay of the orientations of men and women within the context of heterosexual and same sex relationships. "Unidimensional views which purport to present an accurate understanding of human beings as they live out their lives together fall short of appreciating the complexity and dynamism of heterosexual and same sex relationships" (Mackey, O'Brien and Mackey, p.173). The data also underscore the importance of dialectical dynamics (Montgomery and Baxter 1998) as two human beings attempt to navigate the relational journey through their middle and older years.

The data have implications for understanding the quality of long-term relationships and for developing hypotheses that may be tested in subsequent research. Two relational processes were identified in the logistic regression analysis as most influential in contributing to satisfaction: minimal conflict (Beta = -2.88; $p = .<001$) and psychologically intimate communication (Beta = 2.83; $p = .<001$). The power of these factors in shaping satisfaction did not change substantially when sexual orientation of couples and the sex of respondents were introduced into the model.

Communication appears to be a key element in understanding how the factors of minimal conflict and psychological intimacy may contribute to satisfaction. Effective communication has long been identified as an important variable in understanding the quality of relationships (Markman, 1991). Open and honest communication is a crucial element in nurturing and sustaining an attachment between two human beings. Openness and honesty characterize a good friendship which was frequently used by respondents to convey what their relationships meant to them in recent years. So closely related to psychological intimacy was the quality of communication in this study that communication was eliminated as an independent variable. Psychological intimacy was more precisely defined as psychologically intimate communication (Mackey, Diemer and O'Brien 2001).

Talking about how one was troubled by the behavior of a partner may have had the effect of defusing interpersonal differences before they began to erode the quality of relationships. There is more than sufficient evidence that avoiding discussion of differences leads to estrangement which fuels major conflict (Gottman, 1994; Markman, 1991; Metz, Rossner and Strapko, 1994). The process of developing effective communication characterized by openness and honesty between partners in the present study may have had the critical function of containing conflict to manageable levels. With ineffective communication, unspoken differences may have festered and resulted in resentments leading to major conflict. The data suggest such a hypothesis.

When individuals felt safe enough to be themselves with their partners and to reveal inner thoughts and feelings that were not customarily part of other relationships, a sense of psychological intimacy developed. Being connected in a close relationship that included having one's inner thoughts and feelings accepted may have contributed progressively to deeper feelings of satisfaction in recent years. Similar observations have been reported by Bograd and Spilka (1996), Kaslow and Robinson (1996) and Robinson and Blanton (1993).

Achieving a sense of mutual intimacy in relationships may emerge from relational processes that involve past conflict. In referring to the research of Gottmann and Krokoff (1989) which was replicated by Heavy, Layne and Christensen (1993), Karney and Bradbury (1995) observed that "behaviors perceived as negative concurrently may benefit marriages longitudinally" (p.22). Perhaps, the honest expression of thoughts and feelings associated with interpersonal differences within a relationship, in which mutual acceptance and respect prevail, results in higher levels of satisfaction in the long run. Our data resonates with the hypothesis that psychological intimacy, at least in some relationships, may result from interpersonal processes that are not free of conflict. The narratives of subjects in our study often contained reports of earlier conflictual periods, especially after couples had

been together for several years. Among parents, an increase in major conflict accompanied by a decline in intimacy and satisfaction was associated with the rearing of children. However, a similar decline was also found among couples who did not have children. The key in understanding psychological intimacy between partners after they have been together for many years may lie in how partners deal with differences between them; that is, intimacy may develop when partners find ways of talking about conflict so that negativity is contained. As Markman (1991) observed, “constructive marital conflict is not an oxymoron.”

The findings and our interpretation of them do not fit well with previous research about the association between conflict management styles and relational satisfaction (Christensen and Shenk, 1991; Gottmann and Levenson, 1992; Markman, 1991; Vaillant and Vaillant, 1993). Those studies suggested that avoidance in discussing conflict led to dissatisfaction with relationships. In our study, over half of the respondents, usually men, reported avoidant conflict management styles during recent years; yet, 85 % of respondents reported satisfaction with their relationships. Among many couples in which there was at least one avoidant partner yet reported satisfaction with relationships, there was a quality in many responses that we refer to as “communicating about communication.” If an avoidant partner could offer what appeared to be an understandable explanation for his/her difficulties in confronting conflict, the process gradually appeared to neutralize the development of resentment, guilt and estrangement associated with festering conflict. The explanation, more often than not, was connected to how an individual was reared. If one had not been part of a family that was accepting and supportive of direct expressions of feelings about interpersonal differences, it was very difficult to modify avoidant styles of conflict management. Acknowledging that characteristic and “selectively understanding” it was often enough to reduce the insidious process of estrangement between partners.

Even when thoughts and feelings about conflict were difficult to discuss, our data suggested that satisfaction with relationships may be sustained.

Such a conversation may have had the effect of enabling the other partner to “know” why there were difficulties in discussing differences. As a consequence, anger at perceived withholding behavior was defused and guilt of feeling responsible for the “problem” may have been attenuated.

Acknowledgement and acceptance of how difficult it was for individual partners to express their thoughts and feelings about relationships were considered part of effective communication, which was an indispensable element in psychological intimacy. By reducing the stress and pressure for change, acceptance was a vehicle for the development of dialogue about relationships, which probably resulted in higher levels of satisfaction in recent years (Mackey, Diemer and O'Brien 2000).

A psychosocial by-product of “communication about communication” and “selective understanding” was the recognition of compensatory qualities in partners, especially those who had difficulty in confronting differences. Loyalty, kindness, fidelity and sharing equitably in household responsibilities served as balances to difficulties in expressiveness. Perceived strengths of a partner may have served as a buffer to the development of negativity. The hypothesis of compensatory qualities is important since much of the research on satisfaction hypothesizes that mutual confrontation is an important characteristic of happy relationships. When there is difficulty confronting thoughts and feelings about differences, the perception of positive qualities in a partner may serve as balances and compensate for limitations.

Another perspective for understanding satisfaction in these relationships needs to be considered. It is related to the way in which respondents may have needed to frame their perceptions of their relationships after many years together. Respondents may have needed to emphasize positive aspects of their relationships and to de-emphasize negative ones in order to be consistent cognitively about

remaining together. People in relationships may need to “construct idealized images of their partners to sustain feelings of confidence and commitment in the face of disappointing realities” (Murray and Holmes, 1996, p. 91). In referring to cognitive consistency theory, Spanier, Lewis and Cole (1975) suggested that framing perceptions in that way constructs a rationale for staying in relationships. We have no way of knowing how much the need to be cognitively consistent shaped the observations of respondents. However, the forthrightness of respondents about sensitive aspects of their lives such as a decline in the quality of sexual relations, frequently related to sexual dysfunction, suggest that a need to be cognitively consistent may not have been a significant dynamic in shaping their reports. The stories which we were privileged to hear contained a broad range of positive and negative observations about the quality of relationships. Rarely did these reports appear to be shaped primarily by idealized illusions.

Limitations

Qualitative modes of data collection based on in-depth interviews conducted by skilled researchers are an effective tool for studying elusive phenomena, such as perceptions of partners about satisfaction with relationships that have lasted more than 30 years . The richness of data elicited through the method used in this study is quite different from data collected through other means, but there are concerns about validity and reliability as well as the nature of the sample.

It is difficult to assess the validity of the data in the traditional sense of that concept since we were eliciting the personal perceptions and evaluations of respondents about the meaning of satisfaction with their relationships at a particular point in time. The candor of respondents about highly personal matters, such as the decline in sexual relations because of sexual dysfunctions, suggests that respondents were equally candid about other aspects of their relationships, such as

satisfaction. By interviewing partners separately and asking them to talk about themselves as well as their observations of their partners in these relationships, we were able to compare responses to determine if there were significant differences about common realities. For example, did both partners assess the nature of conflict in their relationships similarly? Did a respondent, in commenting on an aspect of a partner's behavior, come close to the partner's observations about the same factor? There was a correspondence between partners on the data that was illustrated in responses to conflict management styles, which asked respondents to describe their style as well as the style of their partners. For example, partners who described themselves as having an avoidant style, were viewed by their partners in an equivalent way.

In a cross sectional design in which subjects are asked to report on their life today and in the past, traditional measures of reliability are inadequate. The meaning of life events and an individual's response to these events will vary, and may even vary within the same person at different points over the life span. While longitudinal designs may be superior in contending with problems of validity and reliability, cross sectional designs that use interviews to uncover the meaning of behavior have the strength of eliciting the richness in the experiences of human beings.

Another limitation is related to the re-coding of the data in this phase of the research. There is a shortfall in re-coding data from multiple categories into dichotomous ones. This step built onto the earlier qualitative analysis by offering a different lens through which to understand the data. To offset the potential reductionistic effects of re-coding, we have incorporated a discussion of the qualitative data into the results. The integration of qualitative and quantitative procedures was intended to enhance the theory development objective of the research.

The use of an interdisciplinary team throughout the research process enhanced the quality of the study. Issues of bias and misinterpretation were discussed along with other matters that could affect the validity and reliability of the data. One of the principal investigators read all 216 interview transcripts and served as a second blind coder for each interview. Having one researcher read and code every interview provided for continuity in the operational definitions of variables. To insure that there was both a male and a female perspective on the data, the second coder was a woman. As a measure of inter-rater reliability, Cohen's kappa was used and ranged from .79 to .93.

The sample was selected purposively to include subjects in lasting relationships that are often not included in other studies; namely, people of color, blue collar respondents and same sex couples. The goal was not to test theory but to develop an understanding of a subject, satisfaction among an older group of diverse partners in lasting relationships, that has not received much attention by researchers. The sample fit with the goal of this exploratory study.

Conclusion

This study identified two factors, containment of major conflict and psychologically intimate communication, that have a substantive role in shaping satisfaction reported by partners in the lasting relationships of heterosexual and same sex couples. The sexual orientation of couples was not a significant factor. The data are useful in developing an understanding of satisfaction in stable relationships and in building hypotheses that may be tested in subsequent research. Partners found ways to be satisfied with their relationships even when there were persistent difficulties in confronting thoughts and feelings about conflict. We propose that communication about communication, selective understanding and balances facilitate the containment of conflict through the development of psychologically intimate communication,

both of which may result in satisfaction with relationships. Those relational processes may eclipse socioeconomic and other exogenous factors in shaping satisfaction after couples have been together for many years.

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Table 1
Satisfaction with relationships during recent years by relational variables

Relational Variables	Satisfaction with Relationships			X ² (1DF)
	%Negative	%Positive	%Totals	
Communication				
poor/mixed	81	24	32	
positive	19	76	68	
totals	100	100	100	40.91*
Conflict				
minimal	47	94	87	
major	53	6	13	
totals	100	100	100	53.70*
Conflict Manage Style Partner				
avoid	59	32	36	
confront	41	68	64	
totals	100	100	100	9.21**
Decision-making				
seperate	28	9	12	
mutual	72	91	88	
totals	100	100	100	9.18**
Equity				
no	41	13	17	
yes	59	87	83	
totals	100	100	100	15.53**
Physical Affection				
no/mixed	66	36	40	
yes	34	64	60	
totals	100	100	100	10.03**
Psychological intimacy				
no/mixed	81	14	24	
yes	19	86	76	
totals	100	100	100	69.19*
Sexual relationship				
negative/mixed	78	47	51	
positive	22	53	49	
totals	100	100	200	10.75*
Importance of sex				
not important	44	19	22	
important	56	81	78	
totals	100	100	100	10.07**

N=216 * p= <.001 ** p= <.002

Table 2

Logistic regression coefficients for variables associated with relational satisfaction in recent years

Variable	B	S.E.	Sig	Exp(B)
Conflict	-2.88	.66	<.001	.06
Conflict management style of partner	.21	.56	.20	1.24
Decision-making	.16	.73	.83	1.17
Equity	-.002	.61	.996	.98
Intimacy	2.83	.66	< .001	16.98
Physical affection	.15	.64	.82	1.16
Sex relations	.69	.70	.32	1.99
Importance of sex	.82	.62	.19	2.26
Constant	-.17	.71	.81	

N=216

Model X^2 (8DF) = 86.04 $p < .001$

Table 3

Logistic regression coefficients for variables associated with relational satisfaction in recent years: Sexual orientation of couples included in model

Variable	B	S.E.	Sig	Exp(B)
Conflict	-3.40	.79	<.001	.03
Conflict management style of partner	.33	.59	.58	1.39
Decision-making	.02	.75	.98	1.02
Equity	-.09	.64	.88	1.01
Intimacy	2.68	.65	<.001	14.52
Physical affection	.46	.70	.51	1.59
Sex relations	.75	.75	.32	2.11
Importance of sex	.59	.65	.37	1.80
Sexual orientation couples*				
hetero-lesbian	.78	.96	.42	2.18
hetero-gay	-1.30	.81	.11	.27
Constant	.04	.89	.96	

N=216

Model X^2 (10DF) = 89.86 $p < .001$

* In a separate model with gay males as the reference group, the following values were found for the category gay-lesbian: B=2.07; S.E.=1.14; Sig=.07; Exp(B)=7.96. Other values in that model were the same as those in this model with heterosexual couples as the reference group.

Table 4

Logistic regression coefficients for variables associated

with relational satisfaction in recent years:

Sex substituted for sexual orientation of couples

Variable	B	S.E.	Sig	Exp(B)
Conflict	-3.18	.72	<.001	.04
Conflict management style of partner	.60	.62	.34	1.81
Decision-making	.13	.73	.86	1.13
Equity	.06	.62	.93	1.06
Intimacy	2.67	.65	<.001	14.50
Physical affection	.18	.65	.78	1.20
Sex relations	.77	.72	.28	2.16
Importance of sex	.71	.63	.26	2.03
Sex	.97	.64	.13	2.63
Constant	-.72	.81	.37	

N=216

Model X^2 (9DF) = 88.41 $p < .001$