Published in final edited form as:

J Marriage Fam. 2015 April 1; 77(2): 542–556. doi:10.1111/jomf.12178.

Intimacy and Emotion Work in Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Relationships

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Abstract

Knowledge about how gender shapes intimacy is dominated by a heteronormative focus on relationships involving a man and a woman. In this study, the authors shifted the focus to consider gendered meanings and experiences of intimacy in same-sex and different-sex relationships. They merged the gender-as-relational perspective—that gender is co-constructed and enacted within relationships—with theoretical perspectives on emotion work and intimacy to frame an analysis of in-depth interviews with 15 lesbian, 15 gay, and 20 heterosexual couples. They found that emotion work directed toward minimizing and maintaining boundaries between partners is key to understanding intimacy in long-term relationships. Moreover, these dynamics, including the type and division of emotion work, vary for men and women depending on whether they are in a same-sex or different-sex relationship. These findings push thinking about diversity in long-term relationships beyond a focus on gender difference and toward gendered relational contexts.

Keywords

emotion work; fairness and equality; gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender; intimacy; qualitative research

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Long-term committed relationships, and in particular the quality of relationships, are profoundly important to the health and well-being of men and women (Umberson, Williams, Powers, Liu, & Needham, 2006). *Intimacy*, defined as a sense of mutual closeness and connection, is widely recognized as contributing to relationship quality (Julien, Chartrand, Simard, Bouthillier, & Bégin, 2003; Peplau, 2001). Past research has centered on how men and women view and experience intimate relationships in different ways, but almost everything we know about intimacy in long-term relationships is based on heterosexual (i.e., different-sex) couples. The *gender-as-relational* perspective emphasizes that how men and women enact gender is influenced by social interactions within relational contexts. In this study, we worked from this perspective to consider the possibility that intimacy is enacted

and experienced by men and women in different ways depending on whether they are in a relationship with a man or a woman.

Research has also emphasized that women are more likely than men in heterosexual relationships to view the absence of boundaries (i.e., autonomy and separation of partners that preclude the sharing of personal thoughts, feelings, and emotions with each other) between partners as central to intimacy (Rubin, 1990). Gerstel and Peiss (1985) suggested that "boundaries are an important place to observe gender relations . . . boundaries highlight the dynamic quality of the structures of gender relations, as they influence and are shaped by social interactions" (p. 319). Achieving intimacy may involve working to influence boundaries between partners (e.g., to reduce boundaries by encouraging expression of feelings). This boundary work may be a component of *emotion work*, globally defined as "activities that are concerned with the enhancement of others' emotional well-being and with the provision of emotional support" (Erickson, 2005, p. 338; also see Hochschild, 2003). Emotion work is a common strategy for enhancing intimacy between partners and, in heterosexual relationships, women are much more likely than men to do this kind of emotion work (Elliott & Umberson, 2008).

Current knowledge about how gender shapes intimacy is dominated by a heteronormative focus on relationships involving a man and a woman (i.e., a focus premised on heterosexuality and conventional ideas about gender; Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005). Although research has demonstrated gendered (and unequal) emotion work in heterosexual relationships, we do not know how intimacy and emotion work unfold in relationships involving two women or two men. The present study innovates the extant literature by broadening the scope of research to consider gendered meanings and experiences of intimacy (including emotional intimacy and sexual interactions in relation to intimacy) in same-sex and different-sex relational contexts. Specifically, we drew on the concepts of boundaries and emotion work to better understand how gendered experiences within relational contexts may structure intimacy.

The significance of the present study is both conceptual and analytical. Conceptually, we aim to shift thinking about intimate relationship dynamics from a heteronormative focus on differences between men and women in intimate relationships. We encourage a broader focus on the gendered relational contexts of same-sex and different-sex couples and the influence of such contexts on relationship dynamics. We used this approach to ground the first empirical assessment of how men and women in couples undertake emotion work to achieve intimacy in same-sex and different-sex relationships. Analytically, we relied on in-depth interviews with both partners in 15 lesbian couples, 15 gay couples, and 20 heterosexual couples to highlight overlap and contrast across relational contexts in the meanings and experiences of intimacy. We considered how intimacy is related to boundaries between partners, sexual interactions, and emotion work.

Background

Intimacy, Sex, and Boundaries Within Intimate Relationships

For decades, research has pointed to a gendered experience of intimacy in heterosexual relationships. Compared with men, women express a desire for more emotional intimacy and report more frustration with levels of intimacy in their relationships (Peplau, 2001). Traditional views of gender and heterosexual relationships suggest that women desire more permeable boundaries between partners to feel a sense of intimacy in their relationships (Rubin, 1990). Specifically, women are more likely than men to express their emotions (Simon & Nath, 2004), and women work harder to promote emotional intimacy in their relationships by urging communication and the sharing of personal feelings (Elliott & Umberson, 2008; Rubin, 1990). Women in heterosexual relationships are more likely than men to repress their own feelings (a form of emotion work) to foster intimacy and their partner's well-being (Elliott & Umberson, 2008; Erickson, 2005; Thomeer, Umberson, & Pudrovska, 2013). The experience of intimacy in heterosexual relationships is further characterized by a gendered view of the link between emotional intimacy and sexual interactions. Studies have suggested that women are more likely than men to view emotional intimacy as essential for positive sexual interactions (Peplau, 2001). In heterosexual relationships, gender differences in emotional expression, sexual expression, and desire often contribute to relationship strain and conflict, sometimes compromising intimacy (Elliott & Umberson, 2008).

We know less about intimacy in long-term gay and lesbian couples than in heterosexual couples; however, the available evidence suggests that differences exist between couples involving two women and couples involving two men. Research on lesbian couples has highlighted the relative lack of boundaries between lesbian partners, in particular with regard to intimacy and emotions (see overview in Rothblum, 2009). Compared with men in same-sex relationships, women in same-sex relationships (similar to women in different-sex relationships) place greater emphasis on emotional intimacy and the importance of intimacy for positive sexual interactions (Kurdek, 2006; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). Men in same-sex relationships are more likely to approve of and have sexual relationships outside of their committed relationship and to separate sex from emotional intimacy (Patterson, 2000; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007).

Nonmonogamous gay couples sometimes establish sexual contracts that set rules against emotional intimacy with sexual partners outside the relationship (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). Although studies have compared the relationship experiences of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples (e.g., Julien et al., 2003; Kurdek, 2006), they have not focused explicitly on meanings and experiences of intimacy; neither have they considered how partners work to promote intimacy in their relationships. Given evidence that gender structures intimacy and relationship dynamics in social interactions, these dynamics may unfold in different ways for couples with two men compared with couples with two women, or couples with one woman and one man. The gender-as-relational perspective provides a theoretical lens for assessing this possibility.

Gender as Relational

Culturally, men and women tend to be viewed as dichotomous in their relationship desires and proclivities, particularly with regard to intimacy, emotions, and sex (England, 2010; Ridgeway, 2009; C. West & Zimmerman, 1987). Furthermore, “cultural ideas about women (as more emotional, supportive, and reactive) and men (as less emotional and more independent, and proactive) shape behavioral norms, reproducing beliefs about purportedly ‘natural’ gendered behavior” (Ganong & Larson, 2011, p. 157). These cultural ideas are then reflected in men's and women's experiences of intimacy in their relationships (Elliott & Umberson, 2008; C. West & Zimmerman, 2009). In contrast to a dichotomous view of men and women in relationships, a gender-as-relational approach recognizes “gender as dynamic and situational, [with] attention to differences among women and among men” (Springer, Hankivsky, & Bates, 2012, p. 1661). This approach has the power to advance our understanding of gendered experiences in relationships by emphasizing that intimacy might be experienced and expressed differently by men and women depending on their social contexts and with whom they are interacting (Goldberg, 2013). Furthermore, a focus on boundaries between partners provides an opportunity to narrow in on a specific examination of gender as relational. For example, gendered ideas about men and masculinity are likely to play out differently depending on whether one's partner is a man or a woman; men partnered with men may be more likely to mutually reinforce certain aspects of intimacy associated with masculinity, such as strong boundaries between partners (e.g., autonomy and independence), whereas a man partnered with a woman might not be reinforced and might even be challenged for such behavior.

The gender-as-relational approach allows us to consider how same-sex couples might queer intimacy (Goldberg, 2013; Oswald et al., 2005). *Queering intimacy* means challenging heteronormative gendered views of intimacy (e.g., women want intimacy, men resist intimacy, and partners have different beliefs about the meanings and experiences of intimacy). Same-sex couples may diverge from heteronormative patterns of intimacy and inequality. They may do so, in part, by engaging in different types of work to promote intimacy and influence boundaries in their relationships. Alternatively, same-sex couples may enact intimacy in ways that parallel heteronormative scripts of different-sex partners. To shed light on the ways that relationships might shape intimacy dynamics, we draw on research and theory on emotion work.

Emotion Work and Intimacy

Hochschild (1979) originally coined the term *emotion work* to refer to efforts involved in managing personal emotions in an attempt to promote positive emotions in others. She suggested that emotion work would be most prevalent in the context of intimate relationships and that emotion work would be strongly gendered as a result of gendered expectations and inequality in heterosexual relationships. Consequently, women would be more likely than men to “cultivate the habit of suppressing their own feelings [when doing so] affirms, enhances, and celebrates the well-being and status of others” (Hochschild, 2003, p. 165). Several studies of heterosexual couples have documented that women undertake substantially more emotion work than men in an attempt to bolster self-esteem and positive emotions in their partner (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993; Erickson, 2005). Elliott and

Umberson (2008) found that emotion work extends to sexual interactions, whereby individuals alter their own sexual desires to conform to those of their partner "in an effort to reduce marital conflict, enhance intimacy, [and] help a spouse to feel better about himself or herself" (p. 403); they also found that wives were more likely than husbands to do such work and to resent doing so. Nevertheless, emotion work can be a way of showing love and affection in a relationship and may foster intimacy (Elliott & Umberson, 2008; Erickson, 2005; Hochschild, 2003), perhaps particularly if the emotion work is reciprocated.

Given the research on heterosexual couples showing that women are more likely than men to value emotional intimacy with minimal boundaries between partners and that women do more emotion work to promote their partner's well-being, women may also be more likely than men to undertake emotion work to promote intimacy and reduce boundaries between partners. But this process may unfold in different ways for men and women in same-sex and different-sex couples, particularly if partners in same-sex relationships are more similar to each other in their views of intimacy and the emotion work they do in relation to intimacy. We analyzed dyadic qualitative data from in-depth interviews with same-sex and different-sex couples to ask the following two questions: (a) (How) do experiences of relationship intimacy (including boundaries between partners and sexual interactions) differ for men and women in same-sex relational contexts, compared with men and women in different-sex contexts?, and (b) (How) do men and women in same-sex and different-sex relational contexts perform emotion work in relation to intimacy, boundaries between partners, and sexual interactions?

Data and Method

The sample for this study included 20 couples in heterosexual marriages, 15 couples in cohabiting gay relationships, and 15 couples in cohabiting lesbian relationships ($N = 50$ couples; 100 individuals). The sample was restricted to couples with a relationship duration of 7 years or longer because our interest was in long-term relationship dynamics. Although same-sex marriage was not legal in the state where this study took place, all but one of the long-term same-sex couples said they would legally marry if they could. Eighty-one respondents self-identified as White, eight as Latino/a, seven as Black/African American, one as Asian American, one as Native American/American Indian, and two as multiracial or multiethnic. Household income ranged from $40,000 to $120,000, with an average of $60,000. The average relationship duration was 17 years for heterosexual couples, 20 years for gay couples, and 14 years for lesbian couples (range: 8–32 years). The average age was 49 years for gay men, 43 years for lesbian women, 46 years for heterosexual men, and 43 years for heterosexual women (range: 29–72 years). Eleven heterosexual couples, five lesbian couples, and no gay couples lived with at least one minor child at the time of the interview, and none of the couples lived with adult children.

With institutional review board approval, respondents were recruited in a large southwestern U.S. city between 2003 and 2007. For recruitment, we used a variety of methods (e.g., a newspaper article, flyers, snowball sampling). All respondents were screened by phone prior to enrollment to obtain the desired sample characteristics (e.g., average relationship duration and same-sex or different-sex relationships). Face-to-face interviews lasted 1.5 to 2.5 hours

and typically occurred in respondents' homes. Each partner was interviewed separately to preserve individual perspectives and provide a comfortable environment in which to discuss sensitive topics (e.g., sex, conflict). Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect confidentiality.

The semistructured in-depth interviews addressed relationship dynamics, intimacy, conflict, sex, stress, and health over the course of long-term relationships. Respondents were also asked to discuss how the meanings and experiences of intimacy with their partner had changed over time. Open-ended questions addressed how partners defined intimacy, shared emotions with each another, viewed sex in relation to intimacy, communicated about intimacy, and when they felt closest to each other. Regarding emotion work, respondents were asked about their (and their partner's) attempts to make their partner feel better (e.g., happier, better about him- or herself, sexier, calmer) and to promote relationship intimacy, whether they were successful in these efforts, and how they and their partner were affected by these efforts. In addition, respondents were asked about sexual experiences with their partner (as well as affairs) and how these experiences changed with time and related to emotional intimacy.

Although respondents were not directly asked about "boundaries," their descriptions of intimacy consistently referred to the degree to which partners shared their thoughts, feelings, and emotions with each other. We coded these descriptions as indicating the presence or absence of boundaries between partners. *Minimal boundaries* meant disclosing all emotions and feelings to each other, whereas *strong boundaries* suggested complete emotional autonomy and lack of emotional disclosure. Our analysis suggested that boundaries were not an all-or-none experience but occurred along a continuum and changed over the course of relationships.

We analyzed and coded interview data using Charmaz's (2006) qualitative analytic approach, which emphasizes the construction of codes for the development of analytical, theoretical, and abstract interpretations of data. Coding categories emerged from interviews; however, some conceptual and theoretical topics were predetermined for exploration through open-ended questions (e.g., emotion work). All three authors were involved in each stage of the coding process. First, we carefully read through the transcripts and field notes several times, extracting passages relevant to intimacy, sex, and emotion work. We then analyzed these passages multiple times, identifying key initial codes. We met several times to compare themes and subthemes until we agreed on a set of focused codes that connected initial codes. In doing so, we established intercoder reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1984) and developed a standardized codebook based on the focused codes. We performed our analysis with the assistance of QSR International NVivo 9 qualitative software. We verified theoretical saturation—achieved when no new themes regarding emotion work and intimacy emerged and when existing themes had sufficient data—during the multistage coding process (Charmaz, 2006). In the final stage of analysis, we examined how recurring themes and subthemes related to one another on a conceptual level and examined systematic differences across relational contexts.

Results

We organize our findings around the two most prevalent themes involving intimacy and emotion work dynamics: (a) boundaries between partners and emotion work to influence those boundariesand (b) sex as connected to emotional intimacy and emotion work to influence that connection. We found similarities and differences among and within relational contexts with regard to the symbolic meanings and lived experiences of intimacy and the extent to which emotion work was undertaken to achieve intimacy.

Minimizing Boundaries Between Partners

Meanings and experiences of intimacy—Some respondents described the essence of intimacy as the absence of boundaries between partners, achieved by talking and sharing feelings. Compared with men, women devoted much more discussion to the importance of minimizing boundaries between partners in an effort to promote intimacy; approximately half of the women in lesbian and in heterosexual relationships emphasized the importance of minimizing boundaries between partners to sustain intimacy, compared with approximately one-fifth of men in gay and heterosexual relationships. Yet the lived experiences and emotion work involved in minimizing boundaries were substantially different for women in heterosexual relationships than for women in lesbian relationships. Partners in lesbian relationships tended to agree with each other on the value of talking, sharing intimate thoughts, and eliminating boundaries between partners. For example, Gretchen said that she and Danielle shared everything, in good times and bad: “There is just nothing that we can't talk about . . . this one issue I shouldn't go into or whatever. We don't have that.” Sarah said, “There is probably not one thing in this relationship that we don't discuss.” Sarah's partner, Jessica, described their relationship as “ideal.”

The sacred nature of minimal boundaries in lesbian relationships surfaced as a clear and unique theme in our analysis. Approximately one fourth of women in lesbian relationships described experiences in which one partner had an “emotional affair,” “mental affair,” or “emotional relationship” with another woman (an experience not described by men and women in other relational contexts). In these situations, one partner developed an emotionally close relationship with another woman (i.e., with minimal boundaries) even in the absence of a sexual relationship or physical attraction. Carol described the stress when Angela had a “mental affair”:

> I told her, “You have to end that friendship because [it] is making me uncomfortable and if you love and respect me, then you will stop. I don't care if you have friends but friends that you talk to for two hours at 1:00 in the morning is crossing the line.”

Both Carol and Angela said that they had grown closer since this incident occurred 2 years ago, and Carol said that they are “best friends” who “complete each other's thoughts.”

Approximately half of the women in heterosexual relationships also placed importance on minimizing boundaries between partners, but they faced a very different experience than women in lesbian relationships. The majority of women in heterosexual relationships reported (and their partner corroborated) that they valued emotional intimacy more than

their partner, and many said that their partner had fewer skills in this area (an experience rarely described by men or women in same-sex relationships). Tonya said of Aubrey, “He more or less represses . . . he'll . . . solve it in the head and get it out of the way.” Aubrey concurred: “She has always been the talker. The one who is encouraging communication . . . I am the type of person that will shut down.” Aubrey went on to explain that he thought this pattern was typical in men: “For most men, we don't want to talk about it unless it is something that is very, very big that we can't keep it in.” Women in heterosexual relationships often described frustration with the level of emotional intimacy in their relationship and their inability to reduce boundaries in the relationship, partly because their partner resisted such efforts (a theme rarely described by men and women in other relational contexts). In contrast to women, few men in gay or heterosexual relationships talked about wanting to reduce boundaries between partners.

Emotion work to minimize boundaries—Men and women who described the importance of sharing feelings also described emotion work to minimize boundaries between partners. Approximately two thirds of women (in lesbian and heterosexual relationships) indicated that they undertook considerable work to minimize boundaries between partners (compared with two heterosexual men and seven gay men), but this emotion work played out quite differently for women in heterosexual and lesbian relationships. In particular, women in lesbian relationships described extensive reading and responding to each other's emotional needs, and both partners typically shared this emotion work. Ann credited her relationship success to constant communication, particularly when under stress:

> We do real well at recognizing when one of us needs something. Or I can tell sometimes with the change in her voice that something's happened, and I'll go, “What's wrong?” And so I think we both feed off of each other pretty well.

We found a very different dynamic for heterosexual couples with regard to the division of emotion work. Approximately two thirds of women (compared to only one of the men) in heterosexual relationships described bearing most of the emotion work burden of minimizing boundaries in their relationship. Angie talked about her long-term and somewhat successful work to reduce boundaries by urging Nick to share his feelings with her:

> I would say in the past couple of years, he has become much more emotionally intimate with me. . . . He has gotten to where he is comfortable talking to me about anything, even real painful experiences. . . . So we've become very intimate in some respects because he has let down some walls to me that he has never let down before.

Yet Angie went on to say that Nick continues to fall short of her expectations “because we're of opposite sexes.”

Most men in heterosexual relationships reported that they recognized the results of their partner's emotion work efforts. Aubrey indicated that Tonya pressured him to express his emotions more fully, “And so she constantly tells me . . . ‘if there is a problem, you need to talk about it now.’” He continued by stating that, through the years, “I have probably softened some and, you know, will try to talk more immediately instead of letting it fester a

little bit.” Thus, because of women's emotion work, some men in heterosexual relationships eventually shared more with their partner, leading to a somewhat more balanced division of emotional disclosure in the course of the relationship. Although women in lesbian and heterosexual partnerships described emotion work to minimize boundaries more than men did, a few men reported undertaking this kind of emotion work. For men in heterosexual relationships, emotion work often took the form of attempting to share more of their feelings in response to their partner's efforts to encourage more emotional openness and sharing.

For three gay couples, both partners agreed that minimizing boundaries was important and shared work toward that end. In three other gay couples, minimizing boundaries involved more extensive work by one partner than the other, usually in response to one partner being less expressive and valuing boundaries more than the other (similar to many heterosexual couples). For example, Kirk said that, early in their relationship, “Brett's first tendency was to just shut down.” Kirk saw this as damaging for their relationship and told Brett, “We are in this relationship. We want to share things. If you will share whatever is on your mind, this will be good for both of us.” Brett believed sharing was beneficial for their relationship and their intimacy, although he was resistant at first: “I wouldn't do it for anybody else. I really didn't enjoy a lot of it. It was good for me. It was good for us.”

Emotion work and stress—Many respondents described emotion work directed toward reducing boundaries as stressful, although women were more likely than men to describe this kind of stress. Women in lesbian relationships described emotion work as stressful because of its continual nature and constant sharing of emotions. Julie said that as she and Amanda worked collaboratively to understand and bolster each other's feelings, “It can be kind of draining.” Both Amanda and Julie said that other stressors in their lives, including being the primary caregiver for Amanda's grandmother, imposed more pressure on each partner to provide for the other's emotional needs. Carol then described how high levels of empathy with Angela added to her workload and to stress:

> Her happiness is the most important thing in my life and when she is not happy, or when she is down or depressed or upset, I get right there with her [but] . . . it makes me feel like I am doing a lot of work. It is tiring.

Unsuccessful emotion work can be particularly draining, as Olivia indicated when discussing her relationship with Karla:

> She's been much more effective at calming me down and being sort of a voice of reason with me. I have not been as successful doing that for her because . . . her emotions are so raw and so needy that, you know, I feel like no matter what I do or say, it's not the right thing.

Women in heterosexual relationships reported stress in providing intensive emotion work, similar to lesbian women, but also because their partner did not value reciprocal sharing of feelings or the work involved in reducing boundaries (a theme absent in lesbian relationships). Irene said that she encouraged Brian to share his emotions with her, and these efforts were often successful: “He will tell me later, ‘I feel so much better.’” Yet Irene said her emotion work was not reciprocated, and she described this inequality as stressful:

> He doesn't purposely withhold emotional intimacy from me. He's just not good at it. He wasn't raised to be good at it. Lord knows I've tried to beat it into him over the years, but he just is not really good with it.

Approximately two thirds of women in heterosexual relationships reported that their emotion work efforts failed because their partner worked to maintain boundaries, despite the women pushing to minimize those boundaries (an experience rarely described by men and women in other relational contexts). For example, Brian described how he resisted Irene's efforts:

> She has always looked for a little more emotional intimacy than I have provided throughout our entire marriage. It never has been that important to me. Irene is always trying to draw me out. . . . I would just as soon stay in my own head, and leave me alone and let me deal with it.

Partner discordance in the desire to minimize boundaries led to greater inequity in emotion work exchanges and more conflict about boundaries for heterosexual couples than for lesbian and gay couples, even when the purpose of emotion work was to promote intimacy.

Maintaining Boundaries Between Partners

Meanings and experiences—More men than women in same-sex and different-sex relationships discussed the creation of boundaries and emotional space between partners as potentially positive for relationship intimacy. Men in gay relationships (similar to women in lesbian relationships) were more likely than men and women in heterosexual relationships to be in agreement with their partner about boundaries and intimacy. Unlike most lesbian couples who worked to minimize boundaries, approximately one third of men in gay relationships emphasized the importance of providing each other with sufficient emotional space and respecting boundaries. Aidan described how he felt close to Max because he takes care of his own emotional needs:

> Max is truly a comfort. Because he is so self-sufficient . . . sometimes [I] don't feel as though I am giving him the support that I think he needs. . . . But he assures me that he is getting everything he needs. But he doesn't ask for it.

Similarly, Donald explained that, with time, he and Tim had become more likely to leave each other alone to handle their own emotional needs, which Donald viewed positively: “I think eventually we learned how to accept each other's emotions and maybe for what they are, good or bad.” Donald noted that he felt particularly close to Tim when Tim did not “impinge” by asking Donald to talk about his feelings. This had become increasingly important to Donald since he was diagnosed with jaw and prostate cancer a few years before the interview.

More than one third of men in heterosexual relationships also emphasized the desire to respect boundaries between partners, but this was a more contentious area for their relationships (in contrast to men in gay relationships, who rarely described such discordance). Anthony said, “I learned from my first marriage that, you know, I am not responsible for a person's feelings and you have got to take ownership of that yourself.” He reported that expressing emotions and feelings differently than his wife, Chantelle, was

sometimes helpful, particularly when dealing with his daughter's attempted suicide: “I handle things differently than my wife, and you know it was a combination that got us through that.” Yet Chantelle reported that she wanted more communication and sharing during that period.

Nearly one third of men in heterosexual relationships talked about sustaining boundaries between partners because they felt they could not help their partner (a theme rarely described by men and women in other relational contexts). Frank said:

> Well, when she gets into a real low mood she tends to go into isolation. And the best thing that I can do in many of those cases is just leave her alone and let her go through it. Because usually the things that she's depressed about are nothing I can do anything about anyhow.

Frank described why he chose to give his partner, Tracy, space after her mother died: “‘Yes, it's a sad thing but, after all, it's part of life. You have to get over it and move on. Because there's nothing else you can do.’” In her interview, Tracy expressed great disappointment that Frank was not more supportive when she needed him. For many men in heterosexual relationships, boundaries were constructed not to enhance their partner's emotions (i.e., as a form of emotion work to enhance intimacy), but because they said they did not value or were not skilled at providing emotional support. Tracy also noted that Frank was inept at emotion work, explaining that he was “more hands off, ignoring, kind of not knowing what to do. He can understand equipment, he can understand cause and effect with things that are not me, but with me he seems totally clueless.”

Emotion work to maintain boundaries—Boundary maintenance did not mean the absence of emotion work. Men in gay relationships and women in heterosexual relationships were more likely than heterosexual men or lesbian partners to report emotion work directed toward maintaining boundaries, usually to promote partner or relationship well-being. For approximately one fourth of men in gay relationships, emotion work was largely mutual and took the form of working to avoid discussion of personal or sensitive matters—sometimes repressing one's own emotions for the sake of a partner's emotions and preferences. Michael described how he avoided expressing negative emotions because Tim valued his personal space: “I might be the kind of person that would tend to say what is on my mind; Tim would give me pause to stop and think before I opened my mouth.” Donald emphasized that knowing when and how to give Tim the space he needed and knowing when to disrupt that space required knowing his partner well—an awareness that required emotion work and, at times, went against his own desire to express emotion. Donald described how Tim provided needed emotional space after Donald's mother died:

> I was quite distraught. . . . At first, I kind of contained my emotions quite a bit. . . . And he stayed close by but [was] not interfering. So, that was a very wonderful, intimate experience with him, where he knew not to impinge at the moment. But later on, he came up and held [me].

Approximately one fifth of women in heterosexual couples also discussed emotion work to maintain boundaries, saying that they repressed their own feelings or desires in response to their partner's need for more emotional space (compared with only one man in a

heterosexual relationship and two women in lesbian relationships). Chantelle constructed boundaries in response to Anthony's desire for emotional space:

> I think you know the things that you can say [and] the things that you really can't. And I have had to learn that because initially I started out just saying everything, and then I learned . . . there are some things that you need to hold back.

Sex and Emotional Intimacy

Meanings and experiences—Many study participants in all relational contexts described sex as a way to minimize boundaries between partners and increase intimacy. Moreover, sexual frequency was often described as a barometer of intimacy and relationship quality. As a result, study participants described periods of diminished sexual frequency as a cause for concern, but this belief varied across relational contexts. A decline in sexual frequency was less fraught with meaning and significance for gay couples than for other groups for which sexual frequency more strongly symbolized emotional intimacy. With time, several men in same-sex relationships accepted nonexistent sex lives with little concern. For example, Jeffery and Michael no longer had sex with each other but did not see this as a problem. Jeffery said, “There just came a point where sexuality just stopped. . . . I don't think that was, you know, a big problem.” Men in gay relationships rarely saw sex as a way to minimize boundaries between partners, and in the majority of cases where gay partners no longer had sex the absence of sex did not diminish a sense of intimacy and closeness between partners.

In contrast to gay couples, lesbian and heterosexual couples described more concern about any decline in sexual frequency because sexual frequency symbolized intimacy. Furthermore, lack of sex suggested growing boundaries between partners. Sexual frequency had symbolic importance for lesbian couples as well, who sometimes expressed concern about the stereotype of asexual lesbians. Clarissa, partnered with Megan, said, “[Sex] is pretty important. Otherwise we would just be friends. . . . I think that is kind of what makes us partners and spouses, being able to share that part of our lives with each other.” At least half of the lesbian interviewees emphasized the importance of sex for intimacy. Janice, partnered with Marissa, said, “Sex is a vehicle that I think gets you to emotional places very quickly, but it is a means to an end, rather than in itself.”

Emotion work to connect sex and intimacy—Although couples across contexts saw a connection between sex and intimacy, thematic differences characterized how men and women talked about the link between sex and intimacy, as well as emotion work. Women devoted much more discussion than men to the importance of linking emotional intimacy to sex and described more emotion work to achieve this goal. Approximately two thirds of women in heterosexual relationships, and all but three women in lesbian relationships, described how they worked to connect sex with emotional intimacy. Eight heterosexual women described emotion work efforts to increase their sexual desire when their partner desired sex more often than they did. These women talked about feeling guilty when they did not want to have sex—because they believed they should have sex if they loved their partner, thus highlighting the connection between emotional intimacy and sex for women. Angie described undertaking emotion work to have sex with Nick:

> A sexual relationship is important to our marriage. I have had to find ways to overlook his obesity in order for us to have a sexual relationship. And I've been able to do that . . . I just don't think about his body.

Ten women in lesbian relationships also described emotion work directed toward discussing their sex life when their partner's desire for sex was not the same as their own, or when sex was infrequent. This emotion work was often described as necessary to distinguish their relationship from a friendship. Paige, partnered with Karen, explained that if sexual frequency declined, “We have to work on it.” Six women in lesbian relationships (similar to women in heterosexual relationships) described how they made an effort to desire sex. For example, Megan said that Clarissa attempted to be more desiring of sex for the sake of the relationship and emotional intimacy: “So there are times when I am amorous and she is not. And it is again, kind of a team thing and she is like, ‘Well, okay . . . let's take it for the team.’” Although women in lesbian and heterosexual relationships described working to maintain sex in their relationships to reduce boundaries between partners, lesbian partners tended to describe more of a collaborative approach to this work, whereas heterosexual women tended to describe this work in terms of a one-sided personal effort to please their partner.

Separating Sex From Emotional Intimacy

Meanings and experiences—A recurring theme in our analysis was that men (approximately one fifth of men in heterosexual relationships and half of the men in gay relationships) were more likely than women (four women across relationships) to describe emotional intimacy and sex as separable. This trend was more common for men in gay relationships than for men in heterosexual relationships, likely because partners in gay relationships tended to share this view. In contrast, women partnered with men were more likely to challenge this view. Approximately half of the men in gay relationships emphasized that although sex with their partner had the power to enhance emotional intimacy, sex was neither critical to the long-term success of their relationship nor an indicator of how emotionally connected and committed the partners were to each other. Michael said that he rarely had sex with his partner but noted that this did not affect their relationship: “The relationship was never really based on sex. . . . Our relationship was based more on friendship and [sex is] obviously not that important or we wouldn't still be here.”

The separation of sex and emotional intimacy also helped explain why sexual exclusivity was less important to men in same-sex relationships than it was to men and women in other relational contexts. Nearly half of the men in gay relationships said they would be okay with their partner having a sexual affair (none of the study participants in other relational contexts reported this). Men partnered with men were more likely than those in other relational contexts to report sexual encounters outside their primary relationship and to indicate that such sexual encounters posed minimal threat to their long-term relationship, as long as emotional intimacy was absent. Adam described a strong sense of emotional intimacy with Paul: “I never considered having an affair with an individual. That is completely different from having sex. . . . There is a complete and total difference. An affair involves emotions and sex doesn't.” Similarly, Andrew stated of his relationship with Gus, “We decided that

we were both having desires, you know, being attracted to other guys. And were able to kind of separate out that stuff from the love we felt for each other." Gus added that sex is not that important to their relationship, and he felt emotionally close to Andrew even in the absence of sex. Four men in heterosexual relationships also described a separation between sex and emotional connection in their relationship. Robert, partnered with Kinsey, said, "[Sex] is a focus for me, but it is not . . . I don't think about it as the relationship so much as one of my needs." Jason, partnered with Maria, drew on a discourse of gender difference:

> I think for guys, generally speaking, you know [sex] is always a priority. . . . Everybody knows guys are just no hassles that way. Women want more compassion and they want more emotion, whereas men are more . . . instant gratification, I guess.

Emotion work to separate sex from intimacy—Although gay men were more likely than other respondents to discuss sex as separable from emotional intimacy, approximately one third of gay respondents said that they diverged from their partner on the importance they placed on separating sex and intimacy. In these situations, one partner generally devoted emotion work to repressing his own feelings to better mirror those of his partner. For example, Adam, partnered with Paul, who earlier commented that, "an affair involves emotions and sex doesn't," noted:

> That is something that took me about, let's see, eleven and a half years to come to grips with. . . . My belief system was completely different when I met him. I couldn't separate sex from emotion. And he taught me how to do that.

Sexual nonexclusivity often involved some degree of negotiation and emotion work wherein the partner who desired exclusivity worked to accept the situation. Albert, partnered with Larry, explained, "I was the one that wanted . . . [us to] be monogamous . . . and it was real difficult. . . . I've learned that even though we are not monogamous, we are not risking losing each other."

Although couples followed different emotion work and intimacy pathways, they typically shared a common direction in that nearly half of respondents in all relational contexts reported declining sexual frequency and increased emotional intimacy with time. In this sense, it seems that for many long-term couples, sex and emotional intimacy became less connected with time. As sexual frequency declined, respondents described emotion work that helped them redefine the symbolic importance of sex in relation to intimacy and to no longer view sex as integral to minimizing boundaries between partners. This emotion work was typically directed toward constructing a clearer distinction between emotional intimacy and sexual frequency. Donald, who was undergoing prostate cancer treatment that diminished his libido, said, "I think probably as we have both gotten older, the intimacy may be more important than the actual physical act of sex." His partner, Tim, undertook emotion work to accept Donald's condition: "I just think it is part of the aging process and it is something that I have to accept or I should accept. And I think that I do." Marissa talked about her relationship with Janice: "The definition of intimacy, I think for me, changed from being a mostly sexual thing to being a companionship, you know, just knowing each other. That to me is intimacy now." Marissa and Janice both reported that they rarely had sex since

having a child (age 2 at the time of the interview) because they lacked the energy for sex. Kyle said he sees sex as more about bonding and as "more meaningful as time goes on," a perspective that Jenn shared. Kyle also noted that sex with Jenn was still important to their relationship, although the relative importance of sex had declined and was no longer "an overgrown kind of thing." For Kyle and other respondents, minimizing the importance of sex, via emotion work, provided an acceptable reason for less sex in a loving relationship. Moreover, emotion work that leads to new meanings and experiences of sex in relation to intimacy helps keep boundaries between partners open over the course of time.

Discussion

With this study, we extended scholarship on long-term committed relationships to include same-sex couples, a population that has been largely neglected in studies of long-term relationships. Prior work has tended to reinforce a bifurcated view of gender and intimacy in relationships and has focused almost exclusively on heterosexual couples, raising questions about whether similar dynamics would emerge in gay and lesbian couples. In contrast, a gender-as-relational perspective views gender as constructed, negotiated, and performed within the context of relationships (Ridgeway, 2009; Springer et al., 2012). This approach took us beyond an essentialist view of gender difference within heterosexual relationships to consider how men and women experience intimacy across gendered relational contexts (Goldberg, 2013; Ridgeway, 2009; Springer et al., 2012).

Our findings suggest that gender sometimes trumps relational context, for example, when women—regardless of gender of partner—do more emotion work than men to reduce boundaries between partners. However, gendered relational context, rather than the gender of the respondent, seems to be more influential when it comes to doing emotion work around intimacy that respects and sustains boundaries between partners, with women with men *and* men with men doing more of this type of emotion work. We add our voices to those of other scholars who argue that the inclusion of same-sex couples is essential for providing new insights and advancing our understanding of gender and relationship dynamics (Joyner, Manning, & Bogle, 2013; T. V. West, Popp, & Kenny, 2008).

Overall, our findings are consistent with research demonstrating that women do more emotion work in their intimate relationships than do men (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993; Erickson, 2005); that women desire fewer boundaries between parters (Elliott & Umberson, 2008; Rubin, 1990); and that men and women in heterosexual relationships experience a great deal of partner discordance in the meanings and experiences of intimacy, sex, and emotion work (Elliott & Umberson, 2008; Erickson, 2005). But our findings go beyond previous research to suggest that partner discordance and inequality in emotion work do not merely reflect gender; instead, this inequality reflects the performance of gender within a different-sex relational context. Several studies have found that, compared with heterosexual relationships, same-sex relationships are characterized by more equality in household work (Kurdek, 2006; Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2005). Our findings add emotion work to the types of unpaid work that are more equally distributed in same-sex than different-sex relationships. This equality likely reflects the fact that partners in same-sex relationships are

more likely to view intimacy, boundaries between partners, and work to achieve intimacy in similar ways.

Psychoanalytic work in the 1970s and 1980s identified the lack of boundaries between lesbian partners as problematic; subsequent work criticized this research, claiming it was pathologizing and lacked empirical evidence (see overview in Rothblum, 2009). We offer a more nuanced and nonessentialist understanding of boundaries in lesbian relationships by emphasizing that minimal boundaries emerge from the performance of gender within a particular gendered relationship context. In contrast to previous psychoanalytic work on this topic, we make no judgment about whether a lack of boundaries is problematic. Indeed, we emphasize that the emotion work devoted to minimizing boundaries between partners may benefit partners' well-being and their relationship, particularly during periods of stress and when such work is reciprocated—an intriguing topic for future research. Moreover, the desire to minimize boundaries between partners may be more stressful for women in different-sex relationships than for women in same-sex relationships because of greater partner resistance and discordance in a different-sex context.

We also found that men in gay and heterosexual relationships were more likely than women in lesbian and heterosexual relationships to value boundaries between partners, but the emotion work men did around intimacy was quite different in same- and different-sex contexts. Men in heterosexual contexts described work to resist their partner's emotion work efforts as well as to lower their own resistance to sharing feelings and emotions over time, efforts that were sometimes stressful. Men in same-sex relationships devoted more work to, and experienced more stress from, the balancing act of providing emotional space to each other and being self-sufficient while also being keenly aware of each other's needs and timing the provision of providing emotional support in response to those needs.

Emotion work devoted to sex in relation to intimacy also varied across gendered relational contexts. Overall, same-sex partners (in gay and lesbian contexts) were more concordant in their levels of sexual desire and views of intimacy. Our finding that lesbian partners emphasized sex as symbolic of emotional intimacy and devoted emotion work toward keeping sex present and satisfying in their relationship challenges stereotypes of long-term lesbian relationships as asexual (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). This, along with the finding that lesbian partners were uniquely concerned about emotionally close relationships with other women, may also be interpreted in light of research suggesting that romantic relationships and friendships are often blurred in lesbian relationships (Diamond, 2008; Rose, 2000). Lesbian partners may emphasize the importance of sex for their relationships and devote emotion work toward keeping sex present partly because they wish to distinguish their committed romantic partnership from friendships.

Consistent with existing research (see the review in Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007), our finding that gay men were more likely than those in other relational contexts, including heterosexual men, to describe a separation between emotional intimacy and sex helps explain why sexual exclusivity is less important to men in gay relationships and why sex outside the relationship is generally not acceptable if the encounter involves emotional intimacy. But we go further to suggest that the separation between sex and emotional intimacy also means that a decline

in or absence of sex over time is much less fraught with emotion and disruptive for long-term gay couples than for heterosexual or lesbian couples. Notably, in our sample of long-term relationships, even when men in gay relationships espoused support for sexual nonexclusivity, casual sexual encounters were rare, and most of the gay men we interviewed had not had such an encounter for many years. Thus, in terms of lived experiences, the vast majority of the long-term couples we interviewed were sexually and emotionally monogamous, regardless of relational context. This finding also adds to evidence that gay couples are both more relationship focused and less likely to have sex outside of their long-term relationships than stereotypes suggest (Gotta et al., 2011).

Scholars have called for more attention to a queer perspective in the study of relationships and families—that is, to move beyond a heteronormative focus based on a gender binary (Goldberg, 2013; Oswald et al., 2005). Our findings suggest a blend of gender conformity and contestation in same-sex relationships. For example, lesbian couples adhered to traditional feminine (gendered) systems of intensive emotion work and a desire for emotional intimacy, yet they contested heteronormative views of partner discordance in the desire for intimacy and specialization in emotion work directed toward intimacy. Gay couples adhered to traditional masculine (gendered) systems of boundaries (e.g., emotional autonomy and independence) in the context of their committed long-term relationships, yet they contested heteronormative expectations when they carefully monitored a partner's need for emotional support and then stepped in to provide that support. Our findings indicate that the gendered relational contexts of lesbian and gay couples create unique intimacy systems that sustain their relationships over time. Furthermore, these systems queer our understanding of intimate relationships by diverging from those of heterosexual couples. In this sense, same-sex couples occupy “creative spaces...where new constructions get crafted and old ones are remade” (Oswald et al., 2005, p. 148). Overall, our analysis of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples in long-term relationships suggests multiple successful pathways to intimacy and relationship longevity.

The data for this study are limited in several ways. First, the heterosexual couples in our sample were all legally married, whereas all of the same-sex couples were cohabiting; however, all the same-sex couples in this sample said they would have married if it were legally possible. Second, we did not have a measure of gender identity (i.e., how individuals identify on a masculine/feminine continuum) that might help explain divergence within and across couples. In addition, we did not know how self-identifying as bisexual or another identity might influence intimacy and emotion work processes. None of our respondents self-identified as transgender, but exploring how emotion work and intimacy processes differ for transgender or other gender-queer individuals would be beneficial for future research by moving further beyond a dichotomous view of gender in relationships (e.g., see Pfeffer, 2010). Third, our sample was primarily a White, middle-class sample; thus, we were unable to address how couples from other cultural and racial backgrounds might differ. Fourth, our data were not able to tell us about younger and older cohorts, or about couples whose relationships do not withstand the test of time. Fifth, given our sample composition, we were not able to analyze how the presence of children shapes experiences of intimacy and emotion work. This is an important issue for future research to consider given that the

presence of children has been shown to influence partner dynamics and division of labor (Farr & Patterson, 2013; Goldberg, Smith, & Perry-Jenkins, 2012).

In addition, future research should explore emotion work and intimacy across relational contexts, with attention to the consequences of emotion work. Emotion work can be burdensome, even when the emotion workload is equally distributed. Prior research has suggested that emotion work to promote relationship closeness and partner well-being can be taxing for the emotion worker (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993; Erickson, 2005), but a substantial literature points to the benefits of emotionally close relationships for the health and well-being of both men and women (Umberson, Chen, House, Hopkins, & Slaten, 1996). Future research should consider whether the strains of emotion work are lessened when emotion work is reciprocated, whether the benefits of receiving emotional support counterbalance the strains of emotion work, and whether these dynamics vary across relational contexts. A comparison of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples in successful long-term relationships provides myriad opportunities for social scientists to broaden their understanding of gender and diversity in intimate relationships.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by Grant R01-AG17455, awarded to Debra Umberson in the Population Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin by the National Institute on Aging, and Grant 5 T32 HD007081, Training Program in Population Studies, awarded to the Population Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. We wish to acknowledge the helpful insights offered by Christine Williams and Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez. We extend special thanks to the men and women who shared their time and experiences for the relationships and health project.

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