

HOW PARTNERED GAY MEN DO RELATIONSHIPS:  
NEGOTIATING THE TENSIONS BETWEEN HETERO- AND HOMONORMATIVITY

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**Title**

How Partnered Gay Men Do Relationships:  
Negotiating the Tensions between Hetero- and Homonormativity

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The Supervisory Committee certifies that this *disquisition* complies with North Dakota State University's regulations and meets the accepted standards for the degree of

**MASTER OF SCIENCE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study explored partnered gay men's experiences of negotiating heteronormativity and homonormativity in their relationships. Twenty-six men involved in a current or past, gay intimate partner relationships participated in individual or focus group interviews. Findings suggest that gay men are constantly negotiating comparisons to and expectations of heteronormative standards, while also encountering expectations within the gay community and queering their relationships. Emergent themes embodied participants' experiences of navigating heteronormative stereotypes, pursuing legitimacy through language and/or ceremony, constructing their own relationship ideals and rituals, and participants' acknowledgement that the personal is political. Relationship therapists are encouraged to explore their heteronormative assumptions and how these biases may influence the therapy process, as this project helps to understand how those same constructs are experienced within the relationships of gay men, a population who is more likely to seek therapy. Further implications for therapy as well as suggestions for future research are also provided.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the legalization of same-sex marriages in Massachusetts in 2004, the visibility of gay couples in the United States has increased dramatically. Specifically, the U.S. census now recognizes same-sex households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), and gay couples are now often represented in the media, whether through factual reporting or in fictional stories that portray lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) protagonists (Dhaenens, 2012; Papacharissi & Fernback, 2008; Yep & Elia, 2012). Research has also seen a vast increase in the inclusion of LGB participants; however, this research tends to focus on individuals rather than on couple relationships. For example, LGB research has tended to concentrate on topics such as coming out (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008), gay-related stress (Meyer, 1995, 2003), and the prevalence of fictive kin, or families of choice (Baptist & Allen, 2008; Blumer & Murphy, 2011), in the lives of LGB individuals. Additionally, this literature has been comparative in nature in that it has sought to compare LGB relationships to straight relationships (van Eeden-Moorfield, Martell, Williams, & Preston, 2011). Furthermore, within the body of couple research that does exist, the vast majority focuses on lesbian couple relationships (e.g., Kennedy, 2014; Suter & Daas, 2007). It seems that when gay men are included in the literature, research has centered more on their sexual activity rather than their couple relationships and dynamics (e.g., Bonello, 2009). As a result, gay men's couple relationships represent an understudied area and thus, a gap in the literature. This study seeks to address this gap by delving into the unique and underrepresented nature of gay men's couple relationships.

Specifically, it is important to understand couple experiences over time and periods of vast social change. Given that the data for this study were collected over 10 years ago, the social landscape for gay couples has been altered drastically, and along with these changes has come

the birth of new knowledge regarding gay couple experiences. However, as this knowledge was unavailable 10 years ago, it could not be applied to the study of same-sex relationships. Thus, the opportunity now exists to look back on couple relationships that existed during a time when only one state granted couples the right to civil unions, while observing the influence of constructs we now have the language for.

The discourse surrounding same-sex couple relationships has most currently focused on the obtainment of legal rights and recognition through a “same as” comparison. For example, in 2012, hip hop duo Macklemore and Ryan Lewis released their debut album featuring the single, *Same Love*, which quickly became unofficially known as something of a gay rights anthem. Nearly two years later, as the song’s popularity increased, Macklemore performed the song at the 2014 Grammy Awards amidst a group of same-sex and different-sex couples who were married during the televised performance. The release of this song and its impending popularity demonstrates the current state of the pop cultural representation of gay couples in the media. In the song, Macklemore proclaims that while he is not gay, love between couples of the same sex is “the same” as that between straight (i.e., different-sex) couples. This discourse of sameness is reflected in the literature on same-sex relationships in that these partnerships have historically been pathologized or overly simplified as being “just like” opposite sex relationships, reinforcing a relational standard that same-sex couple are expected to conform to (van Eeden-Moorfield et al., 2011). However, they are not the same; same-sex couples face oppression and subordination on a daily basis, a marginalization that different-sex couples do not experience.

Furthermore, recent attention to LGB individuals and couples in pop culture through television shows such as Ryan Murphy’s *Glee*, portray gay characters as chic, materialistic, victims who play out relationships through domesticated roles and aspire to heteronormative



values (Dhaenens, 2012), which reifies the notion that same-sex relationships are just like their different-sex counterparts and serves to uphold heteronorms as the gold standard. On one hand, this increasing attention is positive and certainly warranted (Baptist & Allen, 2008; Bond, Hefner, & Drogos, 2009); on the other, it serves to perpetuate stereotypes that are harmful, totalizing, and, above all, hetero- and homonormative. Heteronormativity represents the notion that all persons are straight-identified and heterosexual relationships are the ideal, most stable relationship formation (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002), while homonormativity represents a system of regulation within the gay community where heteronormative ideals are upheld and perpetuated (Tilsen, 2013). Specifically, same-sex couples may be expected, by society, to look or act like the couples seen on television, an expectation that may be perpetuated from outside as well as inside gay relationships. For example, the assumption may exist that gay couples negotiate gender roles a certain way or expected that they are out in all areas of their life, without taking safety into account. It is important to understand that same-sex relationships are distinctive and have their own successes and struggles that demand recognition.

Given that research suggests an increasing awareness of the vast number of same-sex couple headed households both in the United States and worldwide (Allen & Demo, 1995; Demo, Aquilino, & Fine, 2005), as well as the recent inclusion of same-sex households in the U.S. census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), it is crucial that researchers and clinicians continue to further their understanding of this population through a lens that clarifies their unique experience and diversity, rather than one perpetuates heteronormative assumptions. While earlier definitions for couples and families tended to reflect idealized notions of the nuclear, opposite-sex headed household (i.e. the Standard North American Family (SNAF); Smith, 1993), more recent definitions of the family are moving toward a more inclusive and realistic ideal (Allen & Demo,

1995; Demo et al., 2005). Despite this shift, SNAF standards continue to be upheld as the relationship ideal for all couples, and gay couples in particular who may be searching for legitimacy (Green, 2010). This expectation, however, fails to acknowledge that the LGB population faces a distinctly different experience with regard to positionality (i.e., one's position within dominant social struggles that privilege some while oppressing others; McGeorge & Carlson, 2011) and the way society views these couples and families (i.e., alike does not equal identical). As such, the SNAF model often does not fit for gay couples, nor should it; however, SNAF values are maintained and perpetuated in gay relationships through heteronormativity and its counterpart, homonormativity.

Heteronormativity and homonormativity work to maintain assumptions and expectation in a number of ways. For example, gay couples are often viewed through heteronormative (e.g., the supposition of heterosexual domesticated gender roles such as “the man” and “the woman” in the relationship and the assumption that these roles are inherent and “natural” (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002) and homonormative (e.g., the assumption that there is a “right way” to be gay; Tilsen, 2013) lenses that tend to place essentialist (e.g., fixed, gender binary) values and assumptions on them. Therefore, these couples are often caught in a space of negotiation between expectations that dictate the “ideal” relationship pattern of dating, then cohabitating, getting engaged, and finally, having a wedding ceremony, etc. (i.e., heteronormativity) while at the same time navigating the renunciation of these heteronormative ideals to uphold the non-conformative stance that being queer means “doing it differently.” Given this continued negotiation process, this study will explore the influence of and tensions between heteronormativity and homonormativity on the couple relationships of partnered gay men using a queer feminist lens.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **A History of Comparison**

For decades, gay couples have been compared to straight couples on myriad constructs (Gotta et al., 2011; Roisman, Clausell, Holland, Fortuna, & Elieff, 2008). In decades past, this comparison may have served to aid gay couples in the achievement of visibility and recognition and is currently used as a means to garner political and legal rights by demonstrating that gay-headed families are not different than straight-headed families (e.g., Roisman et al., 2008). However, this reinforces the ideal that straight couples are the proverbial “gold standard” from which to compare same sex relationships. In this way, the history of comparison has contributed to the continued subordination of gay individuals and relationships based on a heteronormative paradigm. Furthermore, the comparison paradigm has contributed to the development of homonormativity, as it has ensured that “heteronorms are reiterated by the very same people these norms aim to oppress” through the lens of expectation that homonormativity places on gay persons from within the gay community (de Oliveira, Costa, & Nogueira, 2013, p. 1478).

### **Heteronormativity**

While heterosexism and heteronormativity influence the lives and interactions of all people regardless of sexual orientation, these constructs may tend to be more salient for those who experience marginalization (e.g., gay men). Much like racism, sexism, and other –isms, “heterosexism refers to a systemic process that simultaneously grants privileges to heterosexuals and oppresses LGB persons” (McGeorge & Carlson, 2011). The term was coined as a means of representing the similarities in oppression between heterosexism and other –isms (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002), while still acknowledging the uniqueness of sexual identity-based oppression. As heterosexism has come to be considered a worldview and has been institutionalized

throughout history, its effects invade the couple relationships and dynamics of LGB individuals (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002). For this reason, LGB persons are increasingly more likely to seek therapy to deal with the psychological distress and anxiety/depression that arise from living in a heterosexist society (McGeorge & Carlson, 2011; Ritter & Terndrup, 2002). Similarly, homophobia, a related construct, is the irrational fear of gay identified persons (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002). Homophobia and heterosexism are part of a system of privilege and oppression held up by the overarching construct of heteronormativity.

Heteronormativity is a method of thought and an institutionalized assumption that preferences conventional gender norms, heterosexuality, and opposite sex models of couples and the family (Ingraham, 1996; Oswald, Kuvallanka, Blume, & Berkowitz, 2009). It suggests that “everyone is (or should be) heterosexual and that heterosexuality is inherently superior and preferable to any orientations outside of heterosexuality” (Tilsen, 2013, p. xxv). Ingraham (1996) coined the term “heterosexual imaginary” which is defined as “that way of thinking which conceals the operation of heterosexuality in structuring gender and closes off any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an organizing institution” (p. 169). Specifically, the effect of the heterosexual imaginary is that heterosexuality continues to be reproduced and circulated throughout society due to the notion that it [heterosexuality] is understood as “naturally occurring” (Ingraham, 1996, p. 169).

Heteronormativity is a pervasive ideal employed by the dominant society that leads to false assumptions and expectations about and of LGB persons and relationships. The heterosexist assumptions and expectations stemming from heteronormativity influence the development of LGB persons and couples in the psychosocial, career, and spiritual realms, and nearly all other domains of life (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002). Heteronormativity affects same-sex couple

relationships by placing unrealistic standards on gay couples that may become internalized. Gay couples may feel the need to live up to these standards and expectations, often perpetuating feelings of being less-than. These added stressors may cause relationship difficulties for partnered gay men and lead to arguments and increased relationship dissatisfaction (Lewis, Derlega, Berndt, Morris, & Rose, 2002).

### **Homonormativity**

Homonormativity is the instillation of heterosexual ideals into queer culture (de Oliveira et al., 2013; Tilsen, 2013). Tilsen (2013) explains that homonormativity reifies many of the same assumptions and values of heterosexual institutions such as domestic ideals and consumerism. For example, a same-sex couple could be considered fitting a homonormative mold based on the extent to which they aspire to reproduce heteronormative notions of the “traditional nuclear family” (van Eeden-Moorefield et al, 2011, p. 565). Other heteronormative values upheld by homonormativity include the privileging of fixed sexual orientations and gender identities, the domestication of sex, and the push toward middle-class lifestyles and capitalism (Tilsen, 2013).

Same sex relationships face societal stigma and oppression on multiple levels and from varied environments (e.g., family, workplace, geographical location, cultural expectations, political sphere). Moreover, same sex relationships are evaluated on the homonormative expectation that both partners are out despite the many dangers of this, both physical and emotional/psychological (Bernal & Coolhart, 2005). In their chapter regarding LGBTQ couple and family therapy, Giammattei and Green (2013) posit that living in a relationship where one partner is out and one is not can add further stress to same-sex couple relationships. Specifically, Giammattei and Green (2013) suggest that the out partner is likely to feel “hidden” and “unloved” while the not-out partner is likely to feel pressured, even forced to come out. These

couples are likely to feel the homonormative tension of doing their relationship a certain way (e.g., being out), even if it is unsafe to do so. Specifically, these couples must negotiate the tensions between heteronormativity (e.g., “your relationship is not legitimate) and homonormativity (e.g., “you need to be out and proud”).

It is important to note that homonormativity is both a relatively new concept, as well as one that has been shifting in its meaning and representation alongside the many societal and legal changes that have been taking place for gay couples in this county (Santos, 2013), especially in the last decade. Specifically, as the data for this study were collected over 10 years ago, the meaning of homonormativity at the time of data collection may be considered to be distinct from today’s meaning and representations of homonormativity, a phenomenon that Duggan (2002) calls “the new homonormativity” (p. 175). Thus, the expectation of marriage from within the queer community, as a homonormative concept, is one that has evolved along with the debate on marriage equality and policy changes, for example, and was unlikely to be a homonormative focus in years past. However, notions of non-conformity regarding relationship rituals as expectation from within the gay community (Green, 2010), as well as gender performance dynamics such the femme/butch dynamic may be considered “older” examples of homonormativity. Given the development of this concept, as well as new found understanding regarding the pervasive influences of heteronormativity on gay couples, we can now consider how these constructs work separately and together and impact relationship experiences within a changing social landscape, one that has witnessed great policy change and purports acceptance, however continues to be deeply affected by hetero- and homonormativity.

## **Research on Gay Male Couples**

The majority of the research that has been conducted on gay couples has tended to focus on outness (e.g., Heatherington & Lavner, 2008), the prevalence of families of choice for same-sex partnerships (e.g., Blumer & Murphy, 2011), and on general comparisons to different-sex couples (van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2011), including discourses surrounding monogamy.

Outness and the coming out process can play a significant role in the relationship stressors of gay couples, especially if partners have discrepant hopes and/or expectations for this process.

Although potentially harmful when viewed through a homonormative lens of expectation, coming out has also been well documented as an area of growth for queer identified individuals (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Vaughan & Waehler, 2010). Baptist and Allen (2008) note the strong influence that families of choice may have in same-sex couple relationships, as families of choice may tend to be more understanding and less influenced by heterosexism. Other research suggests that same-sex partnerships are increasingly more likely to dissolve than heterosexual partnerships due to the lack of social support these couples receive (Kurdek, 1998; van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2011). However, it is imperative that gay-related stress (Lewis, Derlega, Berndt, Morris, Rose, 2002), intersectionality, and systems of oppression, along with the tensions between heteronormativity and homonormativity be considered when reporting on the early dissolution of same sex-relationships. While the research that has been done begins to aid in the understanding of how same-sex couples navigate their relationships, there remain gaps that must be filled in order to better support gay relationships.

## **Queer Feminist Theoretical Framework**

Living in a heterosexist, heteronormative society poses challenges for gay men and all members of the LGB community (McGeorge & Carlson, 2011). Queer and feminist informed

models of identity development posit that the notion and perceived “normality” of straight orientations is a social construction that has been reified through dominant discourse and practices (e.g., Butler, 1990). Therefore, queer and feminist models can be utilized to understand the complicated sociocultural contexts that sexual orientation and identity development exist in. Specifically, sexual orientation does not typically develop independently; rather, it intersects with other identities such as race and ethnicity (Groves, Bimbi, Nanín, & Parsons, 2006), religion (Dahl & Galliher, 2012), gender identity, ability, and class status. It is important to note that this is not an exhaustive list of identities and that all persons have a unique and personal experience within which they create varied and multiple identities and relationships.

Tilsen (2013) discussed the performance of gender and sexual orientation and deconstructs the dominant discourse of a “true self” through the constructionist lens that persons have multiple identities that are acted out and performed in varied ways in different environments. For example, it may not be safe to perform a gay sexual orientation by holding hands in public in certain places; this does not mean that the gay identified individual is not being true to himself, but rather, that he is making a choice to only perform some of his identities in that public sphere. This identity debate has come to fruition with the homonormative assumption that there is a “right way” to be gay, and that way is being out.

It is important to embrace, through a queer feminist lens, a both/and paradigm that takes into account individual experience and realities (Tilsen, 2013). This gets at the necessity of varied frames of couple identity construction when navigating diverse sectors of social and political spheres. For example, while a biological paradigm of identity and coupling might be useful in understanding development in some cases, it also serves to reify the heteronormative



discourse that LGB persons would choose to be straight if given the choice (Tilsen, 2013), and discounts the varied ways in which people construct and live their identities.

### **Theoretical Framework of the Current Study**

The larger mixed-methods study that the current study is based on was conducted using a queer feminist lens (van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2012). The use of queer and feminist theories as conceptual frameworks for this investigation acknowledges the unique struggles of partnered gay men, while simultaneously seeking to render transparent the socially constructed systems that marginalize members of this population through dismantling the “same as” paradigm. A queer feminist perspective represents alternative ways of viewing couples and families that challenge the norms and biases inherent in many more traditional theories (Demo et al., 2005).

**Queer Theory.** Queer theory conceptualizes the world as an intricately woven web of false dichotomies, specifically surrounding sexuality, that give the impression of those things natural and permanent (i.e., heterosexuality) where they do not actually exist (Oswald et al., 2009; Marinucci, 2010). Therefore, queer theorists examine the “linguistic binaries” (e.g., heterosexual/homosexual; Oswald et al., 2005; Oswald et al., 2009) surrounding sexuality and the manner in which these socially constructed binaries impact the accessibility to “economic resources, cultural power, and social control” (Ingraham, 1996, pp. 203-204). Viewing the world solely through one lens of this linguistic binary is one way in which heteronormativity is reified in dominant culture.

As previously discussed, heteronormativity has tended to be implicit in the historical study of couples and the family. Oswald and colleagues (2005) use queer theory to model a dialectical family construction that deconstructs binaries of gender, sexuality, and family. They critique the heteronormative processes reproduced by dominant culture that, through a system of

rewards and privileges, “impel people to reproduce heterosexuality and to marginalize those who do not [follow heteronormative expectations]” (Oswald et al., 2005, p. 147). Through queering processes, their model challenges heteronormative expectations and constructions and notes that families and partnerships are not static concepts; rather, they are created through the *doing* of these relationships, indicating that relationships are a performance or choice, rather than something that just *is*. Ingraham (1996) would further illustrate the queering process as searching for the “unsaid” assumptions and reflecting on how they reify dominant constructions of what is supposedly “normal” or “natural”; in other words, an individual should not assume that gender, sexuality, or family are inherently static details (pp. 207, 214). In the case of researching gay couples, searching for the unsaid requires the researcher to be aware of how subjects experience their gender, sexuality, and family (i.e., not as a fixed experience, but something that is actively done by each person; Oswald et al., 2005).

**Feminist Theory.** Feminist theory and feminist-based research seeks to document the lives of marginalized groups, along with their unique lived experiences and concerns, as a means of illuminating their subjugated knowledge and realities (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). In the context of this study, the dominant structures and ideologies that suppress and subjugate gay men’s voices are called into question, while their realities and experiences are unearthed and celebrated (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). According to Carolyn Zerbe Enns (2004), feminist theory can be broken down into four distinct yet overlapping categories, description, analysis, vision and strategy, in which: 1) the interlocking influences of racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism, colonialism, and other ‘isms’ that influence personal experience are defined; 2) there is careful consideration of why these systems exist, how they vary across experiences, who benefits from them and who is oppressed; 3) the values, principles, and goals that support

feminist practice are internalized by the theorist or researcher; and 4) the methods for overcoming oppression are conceived of and implemented. Each of these categories will be explored and utilized in this present study.

As further discussed by Enns (2004), feminism holds that gender is rarely the most significant marker of identity; rather, gender is filtered and intersection by myriad other social identities such as sexuality, race, ethnicity, or class. The intersection of these identities is particularly salient when researching gay men, as these men are likely to experience privilege based on gender, while at the same time experiencing subordination based on other identities they hold (e.g., queer, gay). Broadly defined, feminist theory is dedicated to dismantling the systems of ableism, heterosexism, racism, classism, and sexism that pervade our society. A major implication of feminist theory for couples, families and society at large, is that people no longer need to be defined by a system that marginalizes them. Feminist theory calls for a careful analysis of the areas of power, privilege, and oppression that are perpetuated as a precursor to effecting change.

### **Queer Feminist Inquiry**

Queer theory contributes the deconstruction of binaries as an imperative; however, both theories reject the essentialist notions of gender and sexuality that suggest innate characteristics of categories such as female and male, straight or gay (Marinucci, 2010). Together, therefore, queer and feminist theories provide a lens for research that deconstructs binaries and honors the unique experience of all individuals, particularly those who experience subordination (Marinucci, 2010).

A queer feminist lens guided all aspects of this project. Same-sex couples are much more likely to be of mixed race, and to have less education and income compared to their married

heterosexual counterparts (van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2011). This places partnered gay males in a unique positionality with regard to the multiple layers of oppression they may experience (Lewis et al., 2002; van Eeden-Moorefield, et al., 2011). While studies have tended to focus on the similarities of same-sex and heterosexual couples more than the differences (Allen & Demo, 2005; van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2011), it is important to research the diverse experiences of groups who live in a society that privilege some while oppressing others (McGeorge & Carlson, 2011). While this population continues to be the focus of more and more research investigations, many of the experiences of same-sex couples continue to be viewed through heteronormative and homonormative lenses and stereotypes. It is crucial that the research gap on gay men's relationships be filled to help better support gay relationships. Therefore, the following research question guided this study: How do gay men negotiate the tensions between heteronormativity and homonormativity in their partnered relationships?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This section outlines the historical context of the data used for this study, as well as the participant recruitment process and description, and the interview protocol and other data collection processes of the larger study that this project is based on. The queer-feminist framework of this study guided all aspects of data collection and analysis. The mode of qualitative data analysis and the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness within the current study are also presented here.

### **Historical Context of the Data**

The past decade has witnessed an incredible change in rights granted to same-sex couples living in the United States, among other contexts that influence and shape relationships such as social support and legitimacy. As such, the historical context in which these data were gathered is of particular importance. Specifically, data collection took place in 2003 before the first U.S. state legalized same-sex marriage (i.e., Massachusetts in 2004), whereas, currently 19 U.S. states now recognize marriage equality (Freedom to Marry, 2014). According to a Gallup poll at the time when the data were collected, less than 42% of U.S. citizens believed that same-sex marriage should be legal, compared to over 53% in 2014. While the legalization of same-sex marriage is not the only sociocultural factor that affects same-sex relationships, this trend certainly speaks to a larger cultural discourse that impacts all couples in multiple and varied ways.

The historical context of the data is important to note as participant responses were provided at a time when marriage and recognized unions were not a reality. As such, the marriage discourse now used when considering heteronormativity and homonormativity did not exist for the couples in this sample. Therefore, it is likely that participants' responses will heavily reflect their historical context and the discourses of that time (2003), rather than the current

discourses surrounding gay couples that tend to focus largely on marital unions and equality. Additionally, as discussed previously, the concept of homonormativity as it is now understood, was not fully developed at this time period. Therefore, we can now use this framework to look back and gain a greater understanding of gay couple experiences.

### **Design and Procedures**

Using a queer feminist lens as a guiding theoretical framework, this study was designed to elicit the meaning gay men assign to their relationships and how they negotiate tensions, or perceived tensions, of living in both a heteronormative society as well as a homonormative context or culture. The central characteristic of qualitative method used is the notion that persons construct their reality as they live and experience it and that there is no one, objective reality (Merriam, 2009). The present study is a secondary analysis of a larger data set collected by the third author.

Data were collected through in-depth online chat interviews, focus groups, and in-person interviews in an effort to explore how partnered gay men do and define their relationships. While critiques have been made of internet-based collection methods, it has also been suggested that internet-based methods allow for increased access to and participation of marginalized populations and in this case, members of the LGBT community (Davis, Bolding, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2004; van Eeden-Moorefield, Proulx, & Pasley, 2008). Additionally, internet-based methods have also been known to be more efficient and cost-effective than traditional data collection methods. van Eeden-Moorefield et al., (2008) suggest that not only are online data collection methods trustworthy, but they also enhance sample recruitment methods by allowing access to more representative samples. A final benefit to this type of research is that it allows for increased confidentiality of participants; therefore, it was hoped that this may have increased the

participant pool in that those who may have feared social stigma or being outed may have been more likely to participate than they may have with more traditional methods (Davis et al., 2004; van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2008).

The original study used convenience sampling methods through which the researcher created a list of 43 nationally and regionally based organizations in the Southeastern United States which gay men and/or gay couples were likely to participate or be members. The organizations were then asked to relay the study information to their members. Potential participants were asked to contact the author of the larger study regarding their interest in the study and to obtain further information. As an incentive to increase participation rates, participants were offered an anonymous donation to be made on their behalf to a selection of three national charities, of which they were asked to choose one.

### **Sample**

Forty-three individuals agreed to participate in the study, which was comprised of 17 interviews and six focus groups taking place both online and in person. More specifically, 26 participants took part in online interviews (13) or focus groups (13), while 17 participants took part in face-to-face interviews (3) or focus groups (14). The overall qualitative sample represented seven states, with the majority being from North Carolina (70.6%), where all of the face-to-face interviews took place. The majority of the participants were White (85.3%) and well educated; specifically 79.5% held at least a bachelor's degree and 47.1% had obtained an advanced degree (e.g., master's or doctorate). Additionally, half (50.0%) of the participants earned an annual income of \$50,000 or more. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 59, with a mean age of 41.1 years. Finally, the average length of current partnership was 7.2 years.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

In order to participate, study participants needed to identify as gay, in addition to being involved in a gay intimate partner relationship (past or present) for a minimum of three months. Qualified participants were then provided with a detailed description of the study including an informed consent that could be signed electronically and returned via email. All communication was sent using a secure server. The date and time of the interviews were then scheduled when the informed consent was returned, and reminder emails were sent the day prior to the interview. All online interviews were conducted using Yahoo messenger, and a private, secure chat room was created for the purposes of the study, and for online focus groups in particular. Specifically, Yahoo was chosen as the mode of communication due to the fact that participants were able to create multiple screen names, and were not required to divulge any verifying personal information in order to sign up (van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2008).

### **Interview protocol**

Both interviews and focus groups were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide; that is, questions were planned out ahead of time with leeway to alter questions or ask clarifying questions based on participant responses as well as to add inquiries based on new information that may have been obtained during the interview process (Merriam, 2005). Questions were based on the literature and formulated within a queer-feminist framework that sought to understand the meaning participants assign to their lived experiences. Interviews were structured within an open-ended format to avoid leading the participants to responses or in any particular direction (van Eeden-Moorefield et al, 2008). Although the interview protocol did have some structure to account for trustworthiness and continuity, questions were designed to



encourage participants to use their own language and experience (van Eeden-Moorefield et al, 2008).

### **Data Analysis**

Feminist thematic analysis was used as the primary mode of data analysis for this study. Thematic analysis is a method of analysis that attempts to get at shared lived experience by breaking data into themes or categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, it is designed for “identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within a data set in (rich) detail” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The first step of the process as outlined by Braun and Clark (2006) is familiarizing oneself with the data. In particular, Braun and Clark (2006) recommend reading through the interview transcripts three full times before beginning analysis to develop a “knowing of the data” (Braun & Clark, 2006). After reading through the transcripts to gain a knowing of the data, I began the process of open coding, during which time I noted relevant topics that appear by making notes in the margin. I also noted differences between the focus groups and the individual interviews during the open coding, given that there appeared to be differences in how participants chose to respond when they were amongst a group of others conversing versus being interviewed alone. Once relevant codes were identified, I highlighted data sections that appeared to fit those codes and began to group them together into similar themes. Using a queer-feminist lens, I strove to remain attentive to how heteronormativity may be influencing participants’ stories within the data, as well as how I understood those stories. As I searched for meaningful patterns, I began to identify codes or salient ideas that represented meanings throughout the data or that seemed particularly important to understand an idea shared. After initially coding the data, I met with my supervisor for peer debriefings to add more credibility to the coding process and to ensure the queer-feminist framework was indeed guiding

the analysis (Daly, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During these peer debriefings, the codes and the segments of the data linked to each code were reviewed and re-analyzed.

Following the debriefing sessions, I re-read the data and began sort codes consisting of related context into categories that may represent participants' experiences of navigating the tensions of heteronormativity and homonormativity. Categories are larger patterns or ideas, which identify relevant features of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, categories that emerged included heteronormative assumptions from society regarding gender roles and participants' responses to homonormative ideas surrounding marriage. At this point I met with my supervisor to compare categories, at which point categories were then collapsed into themes, followed by sub-themes. Themes are patterns across the data set, while sub-themes can be described as "themes-within-a-theme," which help to elucidate the meaning behind particularly complex themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once themes and sub-themes were agreed upon, verbatim quotes were selected to illustrate themes and sub-themes. Specifically, I cut out verbatim quotes from the data and arranged them on a large poster board beneath their relative themes and sub-themes. When quotes appeared to better represent a different theme or sub-theme, they were moved to better support the stories within the data.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is the collective measure of validity and reliability in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). To ensure trustworthiness and in keeping with queer feminist practices that call for transparency in researcher biases, codes and themes were independently identified by another researcher, and the independent analyses were compared before continuing with data analysis in a process known as researcher triangulation (Merriam, 2009). Trustworthiness was previously accounted for in the data collection through multiple contacts with participants as van Eeden-

Moorefield and colleagues (2008) suggest that false participants would be unlikely to engage in multiple participant-researcher communications. Data were additionally triangulated through the mode of the larger mixed-methods study. Specifically, data were collected through means of questionnaires as well as through in-depth online chat interviews, face-to-face interviews, and focus groups (van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2008).

### **Researcher Bias and Assumptions**

Basic qualitative research practice contends that all research houses the biases and assumptions of the researcher conducting the investigation. This assertion is particularly relevant to qualitative research in that the researcher is the instrument of both data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009). As a researcher who believes that neutrality does not exist, it is imperative that I am aware of the biases and assumptions that I bring to this project (Harding, 1992), as they undoubtedly affected what I deemed salient and relevant in the data. My personal bias is that all relationships are “created” equally, but are rarely deemed as such in our culture and society. I also come to this project with the assumption that all lived experience constitutes reality and that there is no one, objective reality to find and share (i.e., constructionism). This assumption led me to deem all participant responses as reality, which likely broadened the range of relevant responses and findings. Additionally, I hold a strong commitment to social justice and sought to situate participant responses within their larger socio-cultural context (by means of demographic information) while trying to understand their relationship experiences. Finally, I hold that as a white, woman of upper-middle class status, I benefit from myriad unearned privileges and also harbor unconscious biases that restrict my ability to view experiences “objectively;” through the process of researcher triangulation, it was my intent that these biases be minimized, but I believe they can by no means be erased. I make no claims to *understand* the experiences of the persons

interviewed for this study, and do not speak for them on any account. It is my hope to partner with the stories of these persons and to bring attention to them, a voice alongside and behind.

## **RESULTS**

Results suggested that the tensions study participants encountered were less between heteronormativity and homonormativity and more between these two constructs working together to cause tensions between heteronormative and homonormative expectations and participants' own desire to construct their own non-normative relationship constructions. The ways in which study participants navigated these tensions on and in their relationships can be organized into the following five themes: (1) Heteronormative expectations and heteronormative influences, (2) Legitimizing/validating our relationship, (3) Queering relationships, (4) Beyond marriage/Relationship rituals, and (5) The relational is political. Personal quotations from the data have been selected to support themes and sub-themes, and a complete list of themes and sub-themes can be found in appendix A.

### **Heteronormative Expectations and Heteronormative Influences**

The first theme encompassed participants' experiences of living in a heteronormative society that places heteronormative expectations and heteronormative assumptions on them. Specifically, participants spoke about encountering heteronormative expectations and heteronormative assumptions in public, from friends and family, as well as from themselves and in their own, partnered relationships. These expectations from within the gay community are examples of how heteronorms are upheld and perpetuated through homonormativity. Participants shared examples of these heteronormative expectations and assumptions, as well as discussed the effects of these expectations on their relationships. The following four sub-themes emerged within this theme: heteronormative assumptions about partnerships, assumptions about gender role performance, living in a homophobic society can lead to relationship stress (and internalized homophobia), and media poses unrealistic standards for gay relationships.

## **Heteronormative Assumptions about Partnerships**

This first sub-theme in the theme “heteronormative expectations and heteronormative influences” suggested that societal expectations presume that all partnered relationships include one man and one woman. Specifically, participants spoke about their experiences in public and the responses they received from strangers while fulfilling their roles as fathers. One participant explained, “I choose to stay at home – so when I’m out with the kids shopping, and asked if I am babysitting for the day – and immediately I get this wow a man doing that!” This quotation demonstrates the heteronormative assumption that first, there exists a woman in every partnered relationship, and second, that said woman would be in charge of the caretaking role. Another participant described a similar experience that often took place in public spaces while performing his role as a father: “I hate when my child is crying and some woman says ‘do you need some help, I bet he misses his mom.’” This quotation demonstrates the heteronormative expectations as listed above, as well as the expectation that all children require a mother and that fathers are incapable of caring for and calming down their children.

## **Assumptions about Gender Role Performance**

The second sub-theme within the theme “heteronormative expectations and heteronormative influences” emerged from participants’ stories regarding assumptions made about how they perform gender roles within their relationship. For example, one participant described his experience with questions from strangers as well as acquaintances regarding how he and his partner have chosen to perform gender roles, with the assumption that they perform them in a traditional, heteronormative way: “It is almost forcing you to define your role...Are you the bottom or the top? Yes. But, who is the wife and who is the groom, who is the pretty one and who is the big burly guy?” This quotation demonstrates the heteronormative expectation that

same-sex relationships perform gender roles in much the same, heteronormative way as straight couples have traditionally been expected to do. Another participant described his experience with trying to explain to others that he and his partner strive for equality within their relationship: “Some people assume we split roles just like a husband and wife and have trouble understanding we don’t split them that way.” Finally, one participant explained how his negotiated role within his partnered relationship has led to others’ placing language on him that doesn’t fit his experience. He shared, “I stay at home – so everyone perceives me as the female.” This participant’s experience depicts the heteronormative expectation that the man is the breadwinner, and the woman is the homemaker. These expectations are overly simplistic and ultimately harmful ways of attempting to explain and understand same-sex relationships.

### **Living in a Homophobic Society Can Lead to Relationship Stress (and Internalized Homophobia)**

The third sub-theme that emerged within the theme “heteronormative expectations and heteronormative influences” included participants’ reports that living in a heteronormative society that places value on straight relationships and de-values gay relationships causes stress on their relationships. One participant explained:

Gay men seem to have so much interest – and sometimes energy – that is focused on this notion of ‘being included’ and not being left out...That sometimes could also get in the way of gay relationships. I don’t know if that makes sense or not...but it’s sort of like that gay men spend so much of their life trying to not be excluded from language, from social settings, from everyday experiences, that somehow...when we do find ourselves in a situation where we have a place to be ‘included to and/or with,’ it’s sometimes difficult to ‘handle’ the connection, the ability to actually connect with another.

This participant seemed to be saying that gay men often come to expect that they will not be included in society, so when they are expected to exhibit closeness and connection in relationships, they have not quite learned how. Another participant succinctly stated, “I do think that because we live in an oppressive society that that added pressure can cause problems in a relationship.” Finally, one participant described how living in a homophobic society leads to internalized homophobia for gay men and often makes them feel “less than” the majority group. He also laments the lack of understanding from the majority culture that being gay is not a choice and that gay persons are just as human as anyone else:

It is how society treats us and views our world as seen through the fog of religion. And this is a problem. It taints our view of ourselves as we grow up and discover our feelings. And because of this we probably are not the complete human beings that we could be until we get on even ground...are perceived and treated like any other person, this will remain. It is not a choice to be gay; I with the rest of the world understood that. Or at least a lot of it.

### **Media Poses Unrealistic Standards for Gay Relationships**

The fourth and final sub-theme that emerged within the theme “heteronormative expectations and heteronormative influences” detailed participants’ experiences with unrealistic standards from the media. Older participants appeared to feel that technology and the Internet are changing what it means to be gay for the younger generation. Specifically, these participants spoke about technology making it possible for young gay men and boys to have role models and people to talk to. The overall message seemed to be that the Internet is leading to less isolation for members of the gay community. While generational differences seemed to be a topic discussed by older participants, all generations seemed to agree that the media poses unrealistic



standards for gay relationships. These participants spoke about the media representing gay couples as chic, materialistic, avid gym-goers, which is not representative of the overall (or even most of the) population. One participant stated:

Of course there is the media version of the perfect relationship where the men are both absolutely gorgeous, flawless, work out at the gym five times a week, have high level six figure jobs, have a co-op in Manhattan and a place in Long Island, and very popular.

And, we [gay people] all know these people are fictional and if they are alive somewhere they're a very small representation of what gay people are like.

When these stereotypes become not just assumptions from society, but are also perpetuated and pursued within the gay community, they become homonormative expectations that can be harmful and minimizing.

### **Legitimizing/Validating Our Relationship**

The second theme that emerged from the data appeared to be a result of the first theme (i.e., heteronormative culture), and encompassed participants' experiences of wanting and needing to legitimize and validate their relationships. For participants, validating their relationships meant finding symbolic ways of proving that their relationships are just as valid as straight relationships. Participants engaged in the validation of their relationships in a number of ways, which have been organized into the following sub-themes: ceremony equals legitimization, comparisons to straight couples serve to legitimize, and embracing language for legitimacy.

#### **Ceremony Equals Legitimization**

The first sub-theme within the theme "legitimizing/validating our relationship" focused on participants' experiences and opinions surrounding commitment or ring ceremonies. While

some participants felt that having a commitment ceremony was not the right choice for them, others felt that having a ceremony helped send the message that they were serious and committed to their relationships. For some, this message was a personal one that felt important to send, while for others, this was a message that made sense for others to send but was not necessarily important for their own relationship. For example, after explaining that he and his partner opted out of having a public ceremony, one participant explained that having a ceremony may be a better choice for others: “Well, if that makes them feel good about it and that they feel like they have to have a ceremony to make it ‘real’ then I’m all for it.” Some participants felt that not having a ceremony was a way to take a stand against normativity, while others felt that having a ceremony was just the way to make a statement:

They might not feel the need for a commitment ceremony. However, I think some of that is homophobia. To make such a commitment publicly is certainly ‘out-there’ given society today. However, not having a ceremony might just not be needed for them. It would be a judgment to say otherwise.

One participant rejected the notion that he wanted his relationship to look anything like a heterosexual relationship; however, he made it clear that he would like to be given the right to a legal marriage and all the benefits and responsibilities that come with it: “I want all the benefits and responsibilities of marriage, not to mimic heterosexuals, but to be given full respect by society.” Finally, some participants felt that having a ceremony was a good way to help others understand the level of commitment and longevity of gay relationships: “It [having a ceremony] makes it easier for others in the straight world to support your relationship.”

## **Comparisons to Straight Couples Serve to Legitimize**

The second sub-theme within the theme “legitimizing/validating our relationship” included participants’ experiences with receiving and making comparisons to straight couples in such a way that their relationship felt more ‘real.’ This sub-theme also included participants’ experiences with being directly validated as same as from the majority, or straight, population. Although equating gay couples to straight couples can be harmful and over-simplifying at times, some participants felt that these comparisons helped to legitimize and validate their relationships. For example, one participant stated, “When people see us being a couple and doing couple things, it causes people to realize we are just like them, only we are the same sex.” Another participant described how validating it was to have recognition from the majority culture. Specifically, he spoke about the validation of having his straight friends treat him and his partner as equals. He shared:

I think having straight friends who recognize your relationship as being equal to theirs...I mean, everything is equal and to me that validates us in the eyes of at least this group [of friends]...It is when you gain acceptance from individuals who may be in the majority, simply because they recognize you are no different than they are.

It is important to note that when making comparisons to straight couples, participants appeared to focus on a sense of shared humanness, rather than on over-simplified notions of gay couples being just like straight couples.

## **Embracing Language for Legitimacy**

The third sub-theme within the theme “legitimizing/validating our relationship” encompassed participants discussions of embracing current language schemes (e.g., husband) for legitimacy, as well as participants’ experiences with language and terms not being tied to their

identify as a couple, but rather, using language as a tool to help non-gay persons understand their relationship. Some study participants felt that the language they used to describe their partnered relationships was important and served to help define the seriousness of the relationship. Others, however, felt that language and terms did not carry identity messages for them, but that these were merely a tool for helping the straight community make sense of gay relationships. One participant frankly stated, “Whatever terminology others wish to coin my relationship is their business, if that makes them understand it better, so be it.” Another participant shared, “We were driving home from a party and we decided that it [language] is more for them than us. We knew who we were and operated in that.” Another participant described that despite having a personal language preference when talking about his relationship, he used other terms around straight persons who may need some help understanding:

I would rather use the word husband all the time, but some people would not understand that. To most gay men, I would use the word husband. But for straight people, some just don't understand that, and it's easier to use partner or life partner.

Despite their personal preference for language, participants seemed to agree that publically, it was more important to help others understand their relationships as much as possible than to use the terms that spoke to their partnership identities.

### **Queering Relationships**

The third theme that emerged from the data represented participants' experiences with creating non-normative relationships and their disdain for being compared to straight persons and couples. For some, this meant identifying the positive differences that gay couples experience and the confines that may exist within heteronormative, straight relationships. For others, it meant voicing their dislike for comparison statements, and for still others this meant taking the

time to “pull back and just experience us [gay people], instead of experiencing comparison,” as one participant put it.

In identifying the positives within being able to construct his own relationships, one participant shared:

Sometimes I am sitting back and looking at sort of the rest of the straight world and some of the rules, and I am not so sure that they could experience and have some of the sorts of the relationships that we have...they are burdened to a certain extent, by the rules, and that doesn't perhaps allow them to get the same sense of who they are. Very different, I am still [me], but I am still a very different person as a gay [me] versus a straight [me].

Much more liberated.

For this participant, being in a same-sex relationship meant liberation and a change to live outside the confines of a heteronormative relationship structure. Another participant spoke about his relationship being intentionally different than straight relationships and the harm in making comparisons or “same as” statements: “I don't like our relationships to be compared to straight relationships. I made a choice to be with this person, and I have no intention of trying to make it look or sound like a straight relationship.” Yet another stated, “I think it's a misnomer that we are trying to be like the hets [heterosexuals]; we are trying to be like most of society and most of society happens to be hets [heterosexuals]. It's a fine distinction.”

For some participants, the very notion of being “different” was exciting and purposeful, and offered a sense of freedom and liberation. One participant who had previously been married to a woman shared:

There is a difference [between gay and straight]. I am finding as I am gradually becoming more and more aware. Taking away the hetero mask that I have been putting on since I

was a kid, just taking those fifty years and dealing with that.” Every time I peel away a layer I become more free, and as I become more free I see a very vast difference between a way of looking at life now compared to four years ago. Our experience from how we view life is different, how we view relationships is different, how we look at the whole issue of love and monogamy is different. I guess that is why when we brought up this whole issue of doing this research, this is quite a story I somehow wanted to get at.

This theme encompasses the varied ways in which study participants chose to create unique and non-normative relationships. The sub-themes within this theme are as follows: doing role definition differently (i.e., shared roles); monogamy as a decision, not assumed; we create our own relationship ideal, connection through shared experiences of marginalization; negotiating family support; and creating language for relationship.

#### **Doing Role Definition (i.e., Shared Roles)**

The first sub-theme that emerged within the theme “constructing relationships” included participant’s active creation and implementation of equality and shared roles within their relationship. Participants explained that heteronormative society often assumes that all couples carry out traditional gender roles where the man is the breadwinner and the woman is the homemaker. In fact, participants felt that being in a same-sex relationship offered them freedom from these expectations. One participant explained, “I think we are freer to divide those [household tasks] up though than our hetero counterparts.” Another participant had similar thoughts: “We’ve often talked about the freedom of not having role definitions pre-defined...in fact my mom thinks that’s a key reason our relationship works so well.” Some participants responded to discussions about assumptions of gender roles and masculinity (as outlined in theme one) by sharing their value of equity in their relationship: “Neither of us does all the ‘husband’ or the

‘wife’ stuff. We are both very cognizant of (and enjoy) our maleness.” Another stated, “There were things he was good at doing...outdoors stuff – lawn, gardening, taking care of the cars and there were things I am good at...cooking, cleaning. And no, it wasn’t a female/male thing either.” Similarly, a third participant shared:

We both bring strengths to the relationship, likes and dislikes. He compliments my weak areas and visa versa. I think this is a key to success. Remember you gotta have a little ‘ying and a little yang’. There are no ‘wife’ or ‘husband roles per se.

In general, the vast majority of participants agreed that sharing household tasks and pursuing equality within the relationship was of utmost importance. Most participants also seemed to feel that they have managed to obtain this ideal: “One of the things that amazes me about our relationship is how well we work together in getting things done, handoffs and compromises throughout the day. It is like a well tuned machine...”

### **Monogamy is a Decision, not Assumed**

The second sub-theme within the theme “constructing relationships” detailed participants’ experiences with negotiating monogamy or non-monogamy in their relationships. Whether participants decided to be monogamous or not appeared irrelevant; rather, this sub-theme encompassed participants’ overarching agreement that monogamy or non-monogamy, this was a decision, never to be assumed. For example, one participant shared, “For me, it [monogamy] is only important that they both agree it is or isn’t.” Another participant shared, “Gay couples can choose to have open relationships, play together with others, play separately with others, and yes, even not playing outside of the relationship.” Some participants negotiated non-monogamy in their relationships as represented by the following quote:

We have an [a sexual] arrangement that satisfies what we want and it works well. Many of our other gay couple friends do the same it seems to really be a strong area of support in the relationship plus it is fun and exciting.

Yet others negotiated monogamy within their relationships but still agreed that it was a negotiation process. One participant explained, “Monogamy would be very important unless otherwise agreed upon.” Another shared, “I believe in monogamy, although my last relationship was open.” Finally, despite some participants feeling that monogamy was the best choice for their relationships, they were open to the possibility of non-monogamy for others: “For me, I cannot have a serious relationship unless there is monogamy – but I think that for others, they need to be able to have open relationships which are healthy.”

### **We Create Our Own Relationship Ideal**

The third sub-theme within the theme “constructing relationships” emerged from participants’ discussions of their own relationships as being ideal. Specifically, these participants chose to queer their relationship and resist both hetero- and homonorms. Various participants shared: “I truly believe we do have the perfect relationship;” and “My ideal relationship would look an awful lot like what I have.” Another participant shared why he believes his relationship to be ideal:

I feel like I have the ideal relationship... To me the ideal relationship is one where, I’m going to use something very simple, even though we have been together this long, if I go to some event or some function and then he shows up after I do and he walks into the room, I just light up and smile because I am happy to see him. To me that tells me it is an ideal relationship that after 20 years, you still feel that intense about someone.



Within discussions surrounding ideal relationships, participants seemed to agree that open communication and honesty, as well as trust, make up the backbone of their constructed ideal relationships. In explaining the importance of open communication, one participant explained:

You communicate openly and don't let things fester so long that it causes resentment. I have/had a rule, never go to bed mad at each other. You simply don't, you resolve it before you go to bed, that's the way it should work.

Another spoke about the importance of pairing open communication with compromise:

I think that if you have very open communications, never shutting the other person out, letting him share his views with you without any negative repercussions then you won't have to worry about many of those issues. Communicating effectively with your partner could save you a lot of trouble and heartache. If the other person listens, then you can work out a happy medium. Relationships are all about compromise. Both parties need to be open-minded. Compromise can't only go one way. There are two of you.

While some participants spoke about open communication and honesty and some spoke about trust, others spoke about the equal importance of both: "An ideal relationship for me is first about honesty- being able to trust the person you're with. You also have to feel comfortable and open with the other person and have good communication." Trust seemed to be crucial to these participants' relationships as it came up in discussions of varied topics including safety, friendship, and, of course, ideal relationships. When asked about the elements of their ideal relationships, participants shared: "Trust, deep trust, the kind of trust that you feel like you can trust the other person with your life;" and "The ones [relationships] that are successful have one element. They really love and trust each other. They are open. They have found what I am looking for." Finally, one participant spoke about his physical way of knowing a relationship is

ideal when he shared, “It’s just a gut feeling that you can tell this person really is the person for me. The relationship is right. I trust them implicitly.”

### **Connection through Shared Experiences of Marginalization**

The fourth sub-theme within the theme “constructing relationships” encompassed participants experiences of connection within their relationships and with other gay men based on their shared experiences of marginalization or “being on the outside” as one participant put it. He stated, “I think it’s the shared experiences of being on the ‘outside’ that provides a commonality that is helpful to bind gay relationships together.” Participants shared their experiences of marginalization that set them apart from their heterosexual counterparts. While some described this experience as having negative effects on their relationship health, others felt that it brought them closer to their partners through shared understanding.

### **Negotiating Family Support**

The fifth sub-theme within the theme “constructing relationships” included participants experiences of having family support, not having family support, and creating families of their own (i.e., families of choice). Participants appeared to agree that “having family acceptance is nice, but we don’t rely on family acceptance for relationship legitimacy.” This idea is supported in the following quotation:

Well, in some sense, it allows us to share fully who we are with our families. This creates greater comfort with all who are important to us. I would be fair to say that it gives us a stronger sense of family. However, if we were not welcome at my parents’ home, for example, it would be sad but I don’t need their approval to validate my relationship.

Another participant spoke more broadly about gay couples in general as well as his personal experience and shared:

I think family plays a role in it all [relationship satisfaction], but sometimes gay people are alienated by their families. So then that mean that you can't share your family with your partner because your family doesn't want to even associate with you. I have this philosophy: If someone doesn't want me to be around, then I won't try to force myself on them. That includes family.

Regardless of the support received from their families of origin, participants shared their experiences with creating their own families, or families of choice and being involved in the community. Specifically, one participant shared:

I do not feel that we are anything like straight folks. We do not have a nuclear focus. Our 'nuclear family' includes all the men and women who are friends, 'adopted' single men, and our families. I feel that we are very community oriented.

Overall, participants appeared to feel that having family support is important and something to strive for; however, there appeared to be a general consensus that family support and involvement did not constitute relationship validation and was not necessary to keep them together, as illustrated by the following quotation: "We are both people for whom family and relationships are important, but if they weren't around I think we'd still be a couple."

### **Creating Language for Relationship**

The sixth sub-theme within the theme "constructing relationships" included participants' thoughts about not having adequate language or terms to describe their relationships, a consequence of heteronormative society that attempts to fit all couples into a straight-oriented, binary system. This system forces gay couples to choose from very few options to describe their relationships, thereby reifying heteronorms and contributing to homonormativity. Many participants agreed that current language is not sufficient to describe the level of commitment

and longevity of their partnerships. This notion is demonstrated in quotations such as: “There isn’t a single word that I can think of [to describe gay relationships] that really gives continuity unless we use a word from Latin or something to describe a committed lifelong relationship;” and “We need our own word. A new word – one that doesn’t have any other meaning.” Upon explaining his and his partner’s quest to find a term that fits their relationship, one participant shared:

But outside we have tried to come up with a name, so if you do come up with one you know that explains that this is the person I am committed to for the rest of my life, and he happens to be male...So, we just haven’t come up with anything better than that.

Other participants appeared to have found language that fits for them and described how they came to use those terms, as demonstrated in this participant’s description:

For me, I use the word lover because I guess the full extent of the word. It is just not a physical relationship. It entails a whole, you know I am there for my partner or love and vice versa in all those realms. In the good times and bad times.

Along similar lines, another participant shared that he and his partner use the term “other-half.” He described the meaning behind this word when he said:

I don’t know what to tell you as far as saying the other half, except you know I depend on him and I expect him, we expect each other to be there for each other and I look forward to him coming home at the end of the day or whatever. We cook dinner, we don’t know, it’s just life...a family.

Overall, participants appeared to have a sense that language is “another place the world hasn’t constructed for us,” as one participant put it. Another participant hopefully stated, “I don’t really like the terms that are out there, and maybe somewhere in all of this something will evolve that

will give us a sense that is ‘us’ rather than allowing others to dictate it,” which represents the struggle some gay couples have had in attempting to find current language to identify the complexity of their relationships. Participants appeared to agree that they are still holding out for something new and emergent.

### **Beyond Marriage – Relationship Rituals**

The fourth theme that emerged from the data embodied participants’ discussions of relationships rituals. For some participants, the idea of marriage was extremely important, while many others searched for rituals beyond marriage, rituals they could make their own. While some participants appeared to be influenced by heteronormative ideals of marriage as the gold standard, most participants appeared to resist these influences by making the idea of marriage and ceremony their own. Some participants found the lack of role models for gay relationships as well as the lack of legal structure to be inhibiting of their relationships. However, others felt that not being afforded legal structure offered them freedom to create their own rituals and shared meaning making. Two sub-themes emerged within this theme as follows: marriage as a stabilizing rite of passage and freedom to create shared meaning.

#### **Marriage as a Stabilizing Rite of Passage**

The first sub-theme within the theme of “beyond marriage – relationship rituals” emerged from participants’ thoughts and experiences with the lack of structure and set rituals for their relationships (e.g., marriage, etc.) inhibiting their relationship progression and/or stability. In discussion early relationship states, one participant explained, “I do think the lack of ‘events’ is a reason why it’s hard for some gay relationships to take off.” While this participant spoke about a lack of structure making it difficult for gay relationships to become serious and move forward, other participants spoke about the lack of legal structures for gay relationships making it difficult

for same-sex couples to stay together in difficult times. For example, one participant explained, “There are not many in society out there telling gay guys how to maintain a relationship without marriage/events, etc. There’s no cost to just walking away when the first bump in the road appears.” Another shared, “It [a ceremony] makes it feel more real, like something you should try to work on in difficult times as opposed to just splitting the household and moving on.” Participants appeared to believe that marriage and legal relationship rituals encourage stability in relationships, gay or straight, as evidenced by the following quotation: “My straight friends get to publically announce their commitments and I think that that is good and keeps people together.”

### **Freedom to Create Shared Meaning**

The second sub-theme within the theme of “beyond marriage – relationship rituals” embodied participants’ sense of freedom in being able to construct their own relationship rituals and identities. One participant explained, “One of the benefits of gay relationships is that we can make it whatever we want. If you want monogamy, you can have it. If you want an open relationship, you can have it.” The idea of relationship freedom was represented across the experiences of many participants. In discussion relationship rituals and stages specifically, the following participants shared: “It’s a really fluid thing for me. Because we have nothing to delineate when we are truly ‘married’, we have to form our own opinions as to when the relationship is on that serious level;” and “I think in general gay folks have to create our own transitions. We mark our own lives.” Overall, participants seemed to feel that being in a same-sex relationship offered them liberation from the “confines” of straight relationships, as demonstrated by the following quote: “We like not having the traditional confines of heterosexual relationships...we’re quite happy with what we’ve carved out.”

Participants seemed to agree that while traditional relationship structures and rituals were not necessary for them, they did like having a means of demarcating the seriousness of their relationships. The notion of “sharing” as a relationship transition emerged from the data as a way participants marked the seriousness and planned longevity of their relationships. When asked how he knows when his relationship is “serious,” one participant explained: “‘SHARE’ is the word that comes to mind. Sharing a home, experiences, vacations, holidays, etc. All of that stuff that life is made of.” Another spoke about using the words partner or husband to mark the seriousness of his relationship and explained, “To me, partner or husband means someone that I am sharing my life with. By sharing I mean everything, a home, expenses, joint accounts, none of this is mind and that’s yours, it’s always OURS.”

Another way participants celebrated the freedom from structure was by honoring their choice to stay together and recognizing that no legal bounds were necessary to bind them, nor were these legal structures desired. One participant shared, “And the nice thing about it is that there is nothing legal that keeps us together. We are bound together because we choose to be bound together.” Another spoke about what marriage means to him and his partner when he stated:

I feel that these ties, money, house, cars, etc. are what really kept us together last year during our struggle. This is, as [partner’s name] has said, what marriage is. Not the piece of paper. I agree. Our history is what shows we are married.

When participants did talk about wanting the legal structure of marriage, it seemed to be about having the legal rights they deserve, but they made it clear that marriage was not needed to validate their relationship or as a proof of commitment; this they were doing without the institution of marriage, as explained by the following quotation:

I like the idea from the standpoint of making a public expression, but I probably would not have one until which time the legal aspects that come along with marriage are there also. Because, I mean, I've listened to people argue that marriage is for a man and a woman. Well, I don't care what you call it, as long as you give me the rights that go along with it. Call it shacking up for all I care, and I'll say 'I'm going to get shacked up' if it means I get all the legal rights.

### **The Relational is Political**

The fifth and final theme that emerged from the data represented participants' use of their lives and stories as a means of advocacy. These participants were willing to make their commitment ceremonies and relationships public, not because they needed the relationship validation, but because they knew their stories could make a statement and help others understand. Participants shared stories of advocacy work in a variety of ways, which are represented in the following sub-themes: marriage as activism and outness as advocacy/education.

#### **Marriage as Activism**

One of the study participants described his experience of having a relatively public ceremony that caused big waves and garnered much publicity. The participant explained how the ceremony was moving and "another stage of growth" for his relationship, and that it was also a step forward for a cause he so greatly believed in; it was relational, yet political. He shared his experience with having their private ceremony turn into national news, and how important it felt to both him and his partner to share their story to further the cause to help make marriage legal for same-sex couples. He also explained that their faith leader risked his position to officiate their



wedding ceremony and shared, “He was putting his career on the line for something he felt to be important and we could not do less.”

### **Outness as Advocacy/Education**

Other participants chose to speak about their relationships both privately and publically to help non-gay persons further their understanding of same-sex relationships as well as to engage in advocacy work. These participants refused to be silenced and used their stories to advocate for their relationships and all gay relationships. One participant spoke about others’ discomfort as stemming from lack of exposure and what he was doing to change that:

I talk about my life. My philosophy is that they are uncomfortable because they don’t hear about it. It is like seeing men kiss...in Russia it’s not a big deal because men do it all the time and people see it. Here it’s totally uncomfortable because no one does it.

Another participant spoke about a positive experience he had in being out to a past partner’s family: “When we broke up one of his sisters thanked me for bringing ‘gay’ out into the open with their family.” Other participants spoke about outness and a means of role modeling for younger gay individuals, couples, and families. One participant shared:

It is very important for us to be out. We like to think of ourselves as role models. We have been [publicly] profiled...We have spoken at parenting groups...[Our children] have spoken with us too.

Overall, these participants appeared to feel that outness was an imperative if a heteronormative society was going to change, as detailed in the following quotation: “Despite the risks [of coming out], society will not change unless we continue to challenge and refuse to stay in the closet.”

## DISCUSSION

### Main Finding of the Study

Findings from this study supported previous research findings in that gay couples are in a constant process of negotiation, navigating both heteronormative and homonormative expectations, as well as their own, non-normative relationship ideals (Goodwin & Butler, 2009; Green, 2010; Santos, 2013). Specifically, heteronormativity influenced these couples by holding weddings, monogamy, and traditional gender roles as the gold standard, while homonormativity influenced these couples by expectations within the gay community to participate in these constructions to be seen as legitimate. On the other hand, there also existed the tension between these constructions and the desire for participants to construct and perform their own relationship ideals, which also led to homonormativity in some instances when this became the expectation within the gay community (i.e., when non-normativity was held up as the gold standard for relationships). Similarly, Green (2010) observed the experience of gay couples who are “dually socialized in a society that valorizes [heterosexual] marriage and kinship on one hand, and a ‘queer-meaning constitutive’ tradition that promotes sexual freedom and non-traditional gender on the other” (p. 399). This finding was replicated in the current study, as study participants were influenced by both heteronormativity and homonormativity to pursue wedding, or commitment ceremonies and monogamy, for example, while also pursuing the desire to create their own meaning and relationship rituals (i.e., “queer-constitutive meaning making”; Green, 2010, p. 399). Results of the current study will be discussed as well as situated within past literature on the subject. This section will be organized by themes and patterns within and across those themes.

## **Heteronormative Expectations and Heteronormative Influences**

As is consistent with previous research (e.g., Nico & Rodrigues, 2013; Vinjamuri, 2015), this study confirmed that gay men experience heteronormative assumptions (e.g., assumptions about their gender role performance and the assumption that all partnered men have a woman partner) on a daily basis. Specifically, study participants encountered comments about their children missing or needing a mother, as was found by Vinjamuri (2015), as well as assumptions that they split household tasks in a traditional, man/woman way, as discussed by Nico & Rodrigues (2013). It seems that participants' encounters with non-gay persons demonstrated the common misunderstanding that sexual orientation is directly tied, intertwined even, with gender identity. While the majority of participants found these assumption-filled interactions to be off-putting and unwanted, some also shared that these encounters were really opportunities to dispel pervasive assumptions, a knowing that brought them pride; this was a similar finding to Vinjamuri (2015) whose participants also noted that while unwanted, the vocalization of heteronormative assumptions allowed them the chance to prove them wrong.

**Masculinity culture.** Although not directly asked about masculinity, many participants spoke both directly and indirectly about the influence of masculinity culture on them as individuals as well as its effects on their partnership. Despite the word "masculinity" rarely being used by participants, the social structure of masculinity appeared quite boldly throughout the majority of participant responses on many topics (i.e., the influence of heteronormativity, homophobia, gender roles, etc.). For example, participants shared their experiences of being considered less masculine as a result of their sexual orientation, a heteronormative assumption and experience previously discussed in other studies (i.e., Fields, Bogart, Smith, Malebranche, Ellen, & Schuster, 2015; Merritt, Cook, Wang, Schnarrs, & Jack, 2013). Kimmel (1994)

discusses how, through heteronorms, sexual orientation has become mistakenly equated with gender; specifically, that gay equals feminine. Kimmel (1994) further explains how this idea has translated to a very narrow view of masculinity itself, as well as to homophobia. This finding was presented in the data through participants' discussions of being considered "the female" of the partnership, or having assumptions made about them as gay men, such as that they do not understand sports, which is typically considered to be a masculine quality.

Based on participant responses, it seemed that the idea of masculinity is itself a heteronormative construction perpetuated through social power structures such as patriarchy. Heteronormativity may have led participants to believe that the traits traditionally associated with masculinity were more desirable, such as being the primary bread-winner or the family or being physically and emotionally strong. On the other hand, notions of masculinity may have been homonormative in the expectation from the gay community that gay men should completely reject traditionally masculine traits. For example, some participants spoke about gay couples needing to perform their relationships in a way that is very different from that of straight couples. These participants felt that it was the duty of gay men to be out and public about being emotional or to embrace being more effeminate to make a statement. The majority of participants, however, appeared to idealize masculinity in its heteronormative form of being the ideal standard for all men (i.e., that traditionally masculine qualities such as being analytical and outspoken are better than traditionally feminine qualities such as being caring and emotional).

Other participants spoke about the idea that being a man means being more promiscuous. Some participants spoke about promiscuity as being a stereotype of gay men, while other spoke about promiscuity being equated with men in general (as a component of masculinity). Yet others shared that masculinity culture has lead them and others to believe that men are not

emotional and do not understand how to communicate effectively. Many participants shared their belief that the socialization of boys does not prepare them to be effective partners or parents in that men are often not taught to be emotionally expressive, nor are they taught to be nurturing. Again, despite participants not being directly asked about masculinity, it was clear that masculinity culture affected them in many ways.

**Gay parents.** It appeared that heteronormative expectations and assumptions were particularly present for gay parents. Specifically, study participants who were parents were more likely to share stories regarding assumptions of having a woman partner or harmful comments surrounding the need for children to have a mother figure. Based on participant findings, it appears that heteronormative and homonormative expectations and influences may be stronger for parents versus non-parents, and for gay parents in particular. Specifically, parenthood tends to bring with it strong ideas of gender roles, and all couples may be more likely to perform essentialized roles more strongly after becoming parents. Participants shared their experiences of society making assumptions about them, as men, being able to adequately rear a child based on their presumed inability to be nurturing. This finding has been replicated in other studies (e.g., Vinjamuri 2013), and may suggest that heteronormative ideals surrounding parenting and who is fit to parent may be stronger than heteronormative ideals surrounding partnering. An alternate explanation may be that the idea of gay parents is more novel to non-gay persons than is the idea of gay intimate relationships, which have gained more recognition in recent years.

Another finding surrounding gay parents included the experience expressed by multiple parents that the identity of being a parent was stronger than the identity of being gay. These participants shared that they feel they have more in common with parents in general, gay or straight, than they do with other gay individuals or couples. This finding has not been replicated

in previous studies but likely represents that vast array of life changes that parenting brings. It appeared that the parents in this sample felt that non-parents (i.e., many of their gay friends) were not able to adequately understand them and their newfound commitments and responsibilities.

### **Legitimizing/Validating Our Relationship**

Despite comparisons to different-sex couples being viewed as harmful and minimizing (Leckey, 2014; van Eeden-Moorefield, 2011), many study participants shared that in some instances, comparisons to straight couples serve to legitimize and validate their relationship, thus contributing to homonormative ideals. Some participants also found having a ceremony and participating in other traditionally straight relationship rituals helped to validate their relationship (Green, 2010) as well as help others to understand the seriousness of their relationship. While the desire to participate in heteronormative culture for the sake of legitimization was present for participants in this study, no participants spoke about being pressured from the inside of the gay community to do so (i.e., homonormative expectations) as was found and discussed in previous studies (e.g., Goodwin & Butler, 2009; Green, 2010; Santos, 2013). This is likely due to the historical context of the data in that these data were collected before even the first U.S. state granted same-sex couples the right to marry. As such, homonormativity and its influences were not as present for study participants as was heteronormativity; however, it can be expected that homonormativity is more present for gay couples living in present-day society.

An interesting finding regarding the legitimization for gay couples was that many participants spoke about terms to describe their relationship as having little meaning for them personally; rather, participants explained that terms are for others' understanding and serve to help non-gay persons to understand and relate to gay relationships. In this way, many

participants stated that they may use words that they do not identify with or do not fit for them in an effort to create education and understanding. This was a finding that has not been explored in previous literature.

### **Queering Relationships**

Perhaps the most salient and agreed-upon theme that emerged from the data was that of participants' desire to create their own relationship rituals, ideals, and roles. This finding fits with previous studies that have explored the idea of queer-constitutive meaning making in that many gay couples have constructed their own relationship patterns and ideals (e.g., Goodwin & Butler, 2009; Green, 2010; Santos, 2013). This is a particularly poignant finding, as these participants spoke of this idea and experience long before the phrase "queer-constitutive meaning making" was coined. Among this theme of relationship construction, many participants spoke about negotiating their own roles within the relationship in a non-heteronormative way, which is a finding replicated in previous studies (e.g., Nico & Rodrigues, 2013). Additionally, study participants explained that for them, monogamy was a decision that was continuously being negotiated and re-negotiated. The notion of monogamy being a choice for gay couples was a finding also replicated in previous literature (e.g., Hosking, 2014; Weitbrecht & Kuryluk, 2015).

Like previous literature has suggested, some couples in the current study relied heavily on families of choice; however, families of choice did not appear to be as salient for study participants as past research has suggested (e.g., Allen & Demo, 1995; Baptist & Allen, 2008). This could perhaps be due to the fact that study participants were not directly asked about biological family and families of choice; however, family did come up often in participant responses. Finally, while many study participants found that marginalization from the dominant culture negatively impacted their relationships, others found that their shared experiences of

marginalization was a commonality they could connect over. Specifically, participants found that after having experienced similar oppressions, their partners understood them better than others possibly could.

**Homonormative influences.** Given the historical context of the data and the timing in which the study data were collected, participants' strong desire to create and perform non-normative relationship rituals and ways of being appeared at times homonormative in nature. Specifically, some participants spoke about expectations within the gay community that they would not engage in a commitment ceremony or would not pursue monogamy in their relationships. This appeared to be more so the case for older participants, a finding which has been paralleled in previous studies (e.g., Rosenfeld, 2009).

Participants also shared their experiences of homonormative assumptions from the gay community surrounding gender role performance. Specifically, the study data were collected during a time when the femme/butch dynamic was a common assumption and expectation for gay couples. Study participants experienced this homonorm in the way of other gay couples expecting one of them to be more masculine (i.e., butch) and the other more feminine (i.e., femme) with the assumption that this dictated their interests and roles within the home. This finding can be explained within the context of the data, as relationship dynamic and expectations within the gay community have tended to shift over time (Rosenfeld, 2009).

### **Beyond Marriage – Relationship Rituals**

In a similar manner to participants' reflections on oppression and marginalization, participants appeared to have mixed feelings regarding the lack of legal and social structures constructed for gay relationships. On one hand, some participants felt that the lack of structure and rituals was hindering of their relationship in that there were no legal bounds keeping partners



together during hard times. The positive influences of the ability to marry have been explored in previous literature (e.g., Goodwin & Butler, 2009; Santos, 2013). On the other hand, however, some participants spoke of the freedom that a lack of constructed rituals creates for their relationship. In this way, participants rejected both heteronormative and homonormative ideals surrounding relationship rituals. Even for those that did choose to mark their relationship with some type of ceremony, they explained that this was more about personal significance to them, or a means of making a statement, rather than a desire to be recognized as being the same as straight relationships. Specifically, participants shared that they felt allowed to create their own relationship transitions and meaning. This finding fits with the previously discussed idea of queer-constitutive meaning making and has been replicated by Green (2010).

### **The Relational is Political**

Although little research has been done on the topics of outness as advocacy and marriage as activism, there are many well-known figures who have participated in this type of activism by making their commitment to one another public (e.g., Thea Clara Spyer and Edith Windsor). For many study participants, being out as a means of educating others was of critical importance to their relationship. As outlined in the results sections, one participant's commitment ceremony received national media attention. This finding suggests that members of marginalized populations may use their marginalized status to educate those from the dominant population. For some participants, this type of advocacy and activism was woven into the fabric of their personal and relationship identity. At times this type of activism may be seen as heteronormative in its contribution to the same as paradigm surrounding gay relationships in comparison to straight relationships. This has then led to homonormative expectations and pressures that all gay couples must use their relationships as activism to further the cause.

Specifically, gay couples may have to negotiate between the homonormative pressure to be out and public, while also making personal decisions for safety and in what feels best for their own relationship ideals. However, it is important to remember the time in which the data for this study were collected, as this homonormative expectation was not as present a decade ago when there were far fewer legal rights on the line.

Given the historical context of data, participants' use of their outness or commitment ceremonies as advocacy appeared quite differently than it would appear today. Specifically, at the time of data collection, Vermont was the only U.S. state to recognize civil unions between partners of the same sex. Additionally, many states were amending their constitutions to specifically state that they would not recognize civil unions from other states or countries (e.g., Canada). Therefore, the decision for participants to go public with their stories and ceremonies relatively unprecedented during the time of data collection.

### **Generational Differences**

There appeared to be significant distinctions between participants of varying age groups. For example, for the older men who participated in the study, monogamy was an essential piece of their relationship contract for safety reasons. Many of these men had seen friends pass away from AIDS or knew someone who had contracted the virus. For these men, monogamy was about keeping themselves and their partners safe, rather than a heteronormative ideal they had adopted. Additionally, older participants spoke about how the internet and technology have worked together to create a safer, more inclusive culture for queer-identified persons. Older participants were also less likely than younger participants to have or desire a commitment ceremony. Rosenfeld (2009) found similar ideas in her study of elder gay and lesbian adults who grew up during a time where it was not safe to be gay.

## **Methodological Differences**

Finally, there appeared to be distinctions between the two methods of data collection, focus groups and individual interviews, in the way that participants responded, as well as what they felt safe to share. For example, it appeared that participants who were currently, or had previously been married to a woman were more likely to choose an individual interview. This finding is likely explained by the perceived safety and confidentiality of participating in an individual rather than a group interview. Additionally, while the focus group interviews were more conversational in nature and allowed for participants to expand on each other's ideas and experiences, individual interviewees appeared to feel that they could go into more depth with their responses. This may have been due to focus group participants feeling cognizant of the shared space and not wanting to "dominate" the group discussion with long or in-depth responses. It appeared that the inclusion of both individual interviews and focus groups in this study allowed for more diversity and shared experiences among participant responses.

## **Implications**

The findings from this study suggest several implications for therapists and family life educators as this study presents a new perspective of constant negotiation for gay couples. Specifically, findings from this study expand on previous clinical literature regarding the importance of therapists' self-exploration of their own heteronormativity to better understand the impact of heterosexism and heteronorms on gay relationships, as well as to understand how their own unconscious biases may be affecting their clients and the therapy they offer (McGeorge & Carlson, 2011). Similarly, it would also be important for gay identified therapists to consider how their own internalized homonegativity could play out in the therapy room and influence their work with gay male couples.

Based on participant reflections, we caution therapists and family life educators to not assume that a SNAF model fits for all families and relationships and can simply be applied to gay couples. Rather, we encourage professionals to honor the uniqueness of gay relationships, which are often based on their social positioning, as well as experiences of marginalization and comparison to straight couples as the ideal standard. It is our hope that family therapists can use study findings to help inform the types of questions they ask their clients, while not assuming that all gay couples choose to construct their relationships a certain way. For example, it is important for therapists to understand that while marriage is important to some, it is not necessarily the primary ritual to mark commitment, which is implicated from a heteronormative as well as homonormative standpoint (i.e., the belief that gay couples should want to recognize their commitment through marriage rituals). For gay couples, marriage may have unique meanings that do not reflect heteronormative standards; some gay men may see marriage as activism rather than a romantic life transition, while others may have no interest in formal marriage.

Additionally, study findings suggest that gay couples negotiate gender roles in varied ways; as such, it is important that therapists and family life educators not assume traditional, essentialized roles for gay couples. To address this important finding, family therapists could use intake questionnaires to assess the distribution of household tasks in gay relationships. During an intake session, therapists could also ask their clients how they decided on the role distribution in their relationship. For family life educators, it would be important that the diversity among the *doing* (i.e., construction) of gender roles (Oswald et al., 2005) be of primary focus rather than broad stereotypes and assumptions. Similarly, as masculinity appeared to play a large role in participant experiences, therapists and family life educators should have an understanding of the

ways in which masculinity affects gay partners, who were both likely socialized in a culture of masculinity (e.g., the notion that men are tough, unemotional beings, etc.). As study participants shared, ideas around masculinity can be both hindering to gay relationships, as well as a source of connection between two (or more) men. Again, it would be important that therapists ask clients about their experiences with masculinity rather than assuming that masculine culture has affected them in a certain way.

Assumptions about gender roles and heteronormative ideas about parenting also appeared to affect participants' experiences of parenting. As such, therapists may want to explore with gay parents how societal messages have affected their sense of themselves as fathers (e.g., Gorman-Murray, 2007; Vinjamuri, 2015). Furthermore, as study participants noted, gay men are likely to experience unwanted comments from onlookers regarding the assumption that their child has or needs a mother (e.g., Vinjamuri, 2015). Therapists working with couples on relationship difficulties will need to gather a broader picture of the heteronormative influences on gay men that may be bringing added stress into the relationship.

An interesting study finding suggested vast generational differences in the experiences of gay individuals and partners. Specifically, older study participants spoke about their experiences of coming out and being in a relationship when it was even less safe to do so, as well as during a time when AIDS was on the rise. Previous literature has suggested that homonormativity may also be distinct for older gay men who came of age during a different time (Rosenfeld, 2009). For this reason, therapists and family life educators must not assume that the experience of being in a same-sex relationship is equal across generations and other variables (e.g., race, class, disability status, etc.).

Finally, as the data for this study were collected via the internet and participants spoke about the influence of technology and the internet on gay relationships being seen as more legitimate, therapists and family life educators could offer their clients and students internet resources that may include access to support groups – for gay parents, of example. Older participants remarked that the internet is changing gay culture for younger generations. As such, it would be important for professionals to relate to clients and students on this level.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study include self-selection bias as participants of this study were recruited from community LGBT organizations and were willing to be interviewed. This might suggest that these participants may have had more contact with supportive resources than the general gay population and felt safe enough to be interviewed about their current and previous relationships. Additionally, as the study was conducted over the internet, only gay men who had private internet access were able to participate in the study, which may have been more salient over a decade ago when the data were collected. Another limitation includes the homogeneity of the sample in that the majority of the participants were White, upper-middle class, and highly educated. The queer feminist lens guiding this study suggests that these study participants live with more privilege than the overall population which has likely shaped their experiences of being in a same-sex relationship. Previous studies exploring intersectionality (e.g., Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004) suggest that multiple marginalized identities intersect and compound to create more stress on same-sex relationships. Finally, the data for this study were collected over a decade ago, which is a limitation given the many changes in legislation and overall climate that have occurred since. Therefore, the experiences of study participants may not accurately reflect the current experience of same-sex couples.

## **Suggestions for Future Research**

Based on the study finding that gay couples are in a continuous state of negotiation between seeking legitimacy for their relationship and creating their own shared meaning, future research could further explore how gay couples integrate these specific areas of their couple identity. Specifically, future studies could explore how gay couples from different races and/or ethnicities integrate these conflicting forces into their relationships. As participants for this study were recruited mainly from medium-to-large cities, with many being from the South, future studies could explore the impact of Southern culture on gay relationships and on hetero- and homonormativity. It is possible that the experiences of heteronormativity and homonormativity are distinct for gay men living in the South, given that marginalization and bias that has been strong in this region toward minority populations in general, and certainly toward gay men. It would also be important for future research to strive for a more diverse sample in recruiting participants from more rural areas. The sample for this study also tended to be well educated and of an economically advantaged social class; therefore, it would be important for future studies to recruit a more diverse class sample and/or explore differences in hetero- and homonormativity based on class status.

Additionally, future studies could further explore the generational differences in how gay couples perform their relationships. Given the limitation of the historical context of the data for this study, future studies could add to the current study's findings by exploring the effects of heteronormativity and homonormativity on gay couples in present day, as same-sex couples are likely to have a different experience of these constructs due to increased legal recognition and visibility. Finally, as homonormativity is a relatively new construct, and was not overly present

in the current study due to historical context, future studies could further explore the presence and impact of homonormativity on gay couples, families, and individuals.

### **Discussion of Researcher Bias and Assumptions**

Given the queer feminist lens of this study, it was imperative that I, as the researcher, observe my own biases and assumptions throughout the analysis process. I found that I was surprised by the extent to which trust played a role in the majority of participant experiences. Specifically, participants spoke about trust as being a crucial component of their open or non-monogamous relationships and that having an open relationship actually led to growth and a higher level of trust than they had obtained before opening the relationship. I found that I learned many things about myself and about relationships in general as a result of becoming immersed in participants' narratives and experiences. I was also given the opportunity to broaden my knowledge and ideas surrounding relationships and was left with many questions I will continue to ask myself for years to come.

### **Conclusion**

Findings suggest that gay men are constantly negotiating comparisons to and expectations of heteronormative standards, while also attempting to fit into and create a culture of queer-constitutive meaning making that has come to be associated with a queer identity. Due to a history of marginalization and lack of legal rights, gay couples honor their relationships by creating meaning through their intentional decisions to cohabitate, in declaring their commitment to one another, and in negotiating decisions around monogamy. Thus, some gay couples may challenge socially sanctioned expectations by constructing relationships that uniquely reflect their own beliefs and ideals. Family therapists should draw on the strengths and unique relationship constructions of gay partners in order to best support this population.



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