The Qualities of Dating, Cohabiting, and Married Relationships:

Are Same-Sex Couples Any Different from Opposite-Sex Couples?

The relationship landscape of young adults in the United States has been considerably transformed in recent decades and there are several indicators of this transformation. The average at marriage is at a historic highpoint, 28.2 for men and 26.1 for women (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2010), resulting in and expanded period of singlehood to form and dissolve romantic partnerships. The U.S. has also reached its all time peak in terms of cohabitation. The vast majority (66%) of recent first marriages have been preceded by cohabitation and 63% of women ages 25-29 have spent some time cohabiting (National Center for Family and Marriage Research 2010). In addition, there has been growth in the number of premarital sexual relationships that men and women accumulate and in their tendency to practice serial cohabitation (Cohen and Manning 2010; Lichter et al., 2010). Limitations in survey and census data make it difficult to track changes in same-sex relationships for young adults over time, but cross-sectional comparisons suggest that involvement with same-sex partners in young adulthood is also at an all time high (Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor 2000). Consequently, young adulthood is now not only characterized by marriage, but also by an ongoing "relationship go round" (Cohen and Manning 2010), with more options to choose from than previously (i.e., gender of partner and type of relationship). In spite of the fact that men and women have more opportunity to spend time in romantic relationships than ever before, population-based studies have paid limited attention to the qualities these relationships, focusing instead mainly on the progression of romantic and sexual relationships in early adulthood with (e.g., Meier and Allen 2009; Sassler and Joyner 2011).

Studies concerning the characteristics of adult relationships using nationally representative data typically compare opposite-sex cohabiting and married individuals. These studies continue to document a greater tendency for cohabiting partners to differ in terms of age, education, and race (e.g., Blackwell & Lichter, 2000; Brown, 2004; Hohmann-Marriott, 2006; Qian, 1998). In comparison to married individuals, cohabiting individuals are also found to be less committed to their relationships and less satisfied with them (Brown and Booth 1996; Nock 1995) Analyses of more recent data (Add Health wave 3) indicates a slightly different pattern of findings with similar levels of relationship satisfaction for men and women and love for women, but greater love among married than cohabiting men (Brown and Bulanda 2008). Cohabiting couples do appear to experience higher levels of sexual activity than their married counterparts (Brown and Booth 1996; Waite 1995). Cohabiting couples do experience more negative dynamics in that they are more likely to report violence in their relationships (Brown and Bulanda 2008; Hsueh, Morrison, and Doss 2009; Kenney and McLanahan 2006).

A small but growing number of studies are adding opposite-sex "dating" individuals to these comparisons. These studies suggest that relationships fall on a continuum with respect to various indicators of relationships quality, with cohabiting individuals falling between their married and single counterparts. Specifically, individuals in ongoing sexual relationships are less likely to report that they are sexually exclusive or emotionally satisfied with their relationships and have lower levels of sexual activity than cohabiting couples (Waite and Joyner 2001). Brown and Bulanda (2008) reported that cohabiting and dating men and women share similar levels of relationship satisfaction. Cohabiting young adults report similar levels of emotional rewards, love, and perceived power and actual influence as dating young adults (Giordano et al. 2011). Young adults cohabiters score higher on partner influence attempts and instrumental

support than young men and women who were dating (Giordano et al. 2011). For indicators of relationship volatility, however, a different pattern holds. Cohabiting couples are more likely than dating couples to report violence in their relationship, problems with arguments, and an inability to solve conflicts (Brown and Bulanda 2008; Hsueh, Morrison, and Doss 2009).

A handful of large-scale studies have compared the qualities of same-sex and opposite-sex couples, dating back to the American Couples Study begun by Blumstein and Schwartz in 1975. Survey data from this study has enabled some rich comparisons between large groups of same-sex cohabiting partners, opposite-sex cohabiting partners, and opposite-sex married partners. Findings based on these data suggest that same-sex cohabiting couples are less stable and less sexually exclusive than opposite-sex cohabiting couples. In spite of these differences, same-sex couples appear to be similar to their opposite-sex counterparts in their reports of love and satisfaction (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Kurdek 2004). Results from the American Couples Survey also suggests it may be problematic to combine gay and lesbian couples. For instance, lesbian cohabiting couples have sex less frequently than heterosexual cohabiting couples, and heterosexual cohabiting couples have sex less frequently than gay cohabiting couples. More recently researchers have had the opportunity to make analogous comparisons using data from the U.S. Census, European population registers, and survey data. Their comparisons demonstrate that same-sex cohabiting relationships are less stable than opposite-sex cohabiting relationships (Kalmijn; Loeve, & Manting, 2007; Strohm 2010) and they are less homogamous with respect to age, race, and education (Schwartz and Graf 2009; Jepsen and Jepsen 2002). As in studies of opposite-sex couples, dating couples (who do not share a residence) are typically left out of studies concerning same-sex couples or combined with same-sex cohabiting couples. Same-sex

marriages are also excluded from these comparisons, reflecting the few states with legal same-sex marriage.

Due to their focus on opposite-sex co-residential relationships, studies have yet to compare the full spectrum of relationships that men and women now experience in young adulthood. There are a variety of reasons to broaden the spectrum. First, men and women move away from parents and friends and towards their romantic partners as a source of support and identity during the transition to adulthood (Giordano, Manning, Longmore & Flanigan et al. 2011). Consequently, romantic relationships are a major source of influence for young adults (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Giordano et al. 2010; Manning et al. 2010; Meeus, Branje, van der Valk, & de Wied, 2007). In spite of this influence, studies concerning the implications of relationships for health and well-being continue to focus on opposite-sex co-residential relationships, especially marriage (e.g., Duncan, Wilkerson, and England 2006; Waite and Gallagher 2000; Williams, Sassler, and Nicholson 2008; Williams and Umberson 2004). Second, comparisons of dating, cohabiting, and married relationships potentially reveal the meaning of young adult dating relationships and help address where cohabiting relationships fit in the American courtship system. Third, comparisons between same-sex and opposite-sex couples enable an understanding of how gender influences the qualities of close relationships (Peplau and Fingerhut (2007). As Carpenter and Gates (2008) argue, these comparisons provide an important counterfactual in studying different-sex couples because they reveal relationship dynamics in the absence of gender differences and social norms.

The most recent data from Add Health offers researchers an unprecedented opportunity to examine and contrast the characteristics of opposite-sex dating, cohabiting, and marital relationships and compare them to those of same-sex dating and cohabiting relationships.

Importantly, Add Health used state of the art survey methods to target individuals in these relationships (i.e., computer-assisted self interviews and romantic/sexual relationship rosters). Add Health also benefits from its large sample and its recent fielding; there are sizeable numbers of all relationship types. In this extended abstract, we present preliminary findings based on comparisons of respondents who are opposite-sex single, opposite-sex cohabiting, opposite-sex married, same-sex single, and same-sex cohabiting. We compare these respondents in terms of several relationship qualities, including indicators of stability, quality, and sexuality. We examine zero-order differences in these indicators and in the controls (e.g., demographic characteristics and homogamy). We conclude with a discussion of for the next steps for this paper to be completed prior to the PAA 2012 meetings.

DATA, SAMPLE, AND MEASURES

Add Health is a longitudinal school-based study (Bearman, Jones, and Udry 1998). To select the schools in its sample, Add Health used a database provided by Quality Education Data for its primary sampling frame. Between September 1994 and April 1995, Add Health administered in-school questionnaires to more than 90,000 students in grades seven through twelve attending 132 schools. Each school administered the questionnaire on a single day within one class period (ranging from 45 to 60 minutes). Over 95% of the participating schools administered the questionnaire, and over 80% of all the enrolled students completed the questionnaire. Students absent on the day of administration were not given another chance to fill out an in-school questionnaire. Using rosters from each school, Add Health then selected a nationally representative (core) sample of 12,105 adolescents in grades seven to twelve to participate in the first in-home interview. Add Health additionally selected oversamples of four racial groups: 1,038 black adolescents from well-educated families, 334 Chinese adolescents, 450 Cuban

adolescents, and 437 Puerto Rican adolescents. The first in-home interview was conducted between April and December of 1995.The response rate for the in-home sample was 79%.

In 2007 and 2008, the project conducted a fourth wave of in-home interviews for 15,701 of the original 20,745 respondents (a retention rate of over 75%). By the time of the fourth in-home interview, respondents were between the ages of 24 and 32. Respondents were asked in a computer-assisted self-interview (ACASI) to enumerate all of the partners with whom they had ever had a "romantic or sexual relationship" and to distinguish relationships that involved marriage or cohabitation. Respondents were the asked to provide basic demographic information on these partners, including their gender, age, and race\ethnicity. They were also asked detailed questions about the characteristics of relationships that involving a focal partner. For respondents with more than one partner, the current partner was designated as the focal partner. For respondents with more than one current partner, Add Health administered a set of rules for choosing the focal partner. For instance, married partners were chosen over cohabiting partners and cohabiting partners were chosen over romantic/sexual partners. If respondents did not have a current partner the most recent partner was chosen. Our analyses are restricted to respondents whose focal relationships are current. We exclude respondents whose focal partner was a same-sex spouse because there are too few in the sample to analyze as a separate group. In our paper we will report the percent of all respondents interviewed at wave four who failed to enumerate a current relationship and the percent who reported more than one current relationship.

Among the respondents with current focal relationships, 12,102 provided complete information on their gender and the gender of their partner. This information, and information on the type of relationship (i.e. marriage, cohabitation, or dating), was used to create five different relationship types; opposite-sex romantic/sexual, opposite-sex cohabiting, opposite-sex married,

same-sex romantic/sexual, and same-sex cohabiting. After deletion of respondents missing on several key variables of interests (duration of the relationship, stability, commitment, enjoyment of interaction, happiness, love, trust, disclosure, satisfaction with conflict resolution, intimate partner violence, and satisfaction with sex life), our analytic sample is composed of 11,591 respondents; 2,261 (19.5%) opposite-sex romantic/sexual partners, 2,780 (24.0%) opposite-sex cohabiting partners, 6,341 (54.7%) opposite-sex married partners, 74 (0.6%) same-sex romantic/sexual partners, and 135 (1.2%) same-sex cohabiting partners.

Duration of relationship is created using three items that asked respondents "the total amount of time that you have been involved in a romantic or sexual relationship with" current partner, in days, months, and years. Responses to total months were added to days (divided by 31) and years (divided by 12) to construct the overall duration in months. If no response was provided on the day item, then duration was calculated using only months and years. If respondents provided information for days only, then duration was coded as 0.5 months. Due to the rather high levels of duration found in the sample, duration was top coded at the 90th percentile for each respondent according to relationship type. We also note this is not the duration of the cohabiting or marital relationship but the total time spent together. We plan to investigate this indicator further and compare to other estimates.

Stability of the relationship is assessed with an item that asked respondents "how likely is it that your relationship will be permanent." Responses of "almost certain" were coded as 1, and all other responses were coded as 0. *Commitment* is created from an item which asked the respondent "how committed are you to" the partner. Responses of "completely committed" were coded as 1, and all other responses were coded as 0. *Enjoyment of interaction* is based on a question that asked respondents how much they agreed with the following statement, "we enjoy

doing even ordinary, day-to-day things together. Responses of "strongly agree" (i.e. high enjoyment) were coded as 1, and all other responses were coded as 0. *Happiness* asked "how happy" the respondent was in their current relationship. Responses of "very happy" were coded as 1, and all other responses were coded as 0. *Trust* was determined from an item that asked respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statement, "I trust my partner to be faithful to me". Responses of "strongly agree" (i.e. strongly trusts partner to be faithful) were coded as 1, and all other responses were coded as 0. *Disclosure* is based on an item that asked respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statement, "my partner listens to me when I need someone to talk to." Responses of "strongly agree" (i.e. high disclosure) were coded as 1, and all other responses were coded as 0. *Satisfaction with conflict resolution* asked respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statement, "I am satisfied with the way we handle our problems and disagreements". Responses of "strongly agree" (i.e. high satisfaction) were coded as 1, and all other responses were coded as 0.

Intimate partner violence was constructed from six different measures. Three measures concern violence committed by the romantic partner; "how often has the partner threatened, pushed, shoved, or thrown something at the respondent", "how often has the partner slapped, hit, or kicked the respondent", and "how often has the partner insisted or made the respondent have sexual relations when they didn't want to". The next three measures are analogous to these, but ask about violence committed against the partner by the respondent. Any positive responses to these six items are coded as 1, and only those with no instances of intimate partner violence receive a code of 0.

Frequency of sex per month was constructed from two questions that asked the respondent to report the average frequency of sexual activity (vaginal intercourse, oral sex, anal

sex, or other types of sexual activity) per week, month, or year. Due to extraordinary high values, frequency was top coded at the 90th percentile for each respondent according to relationship type. Within group (for each relationship type) mean substitution was used for those with missing values. *Satisfaction with sex life* asked respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statement, "I am satisfied with our sex life". Responses of "strongly agree" (i.e. high satisfaction) were coded as 1, and all other responses were coded as 0. *Non-exclusivity* was created from two items concerning infidelity within the relationship. Respondents were asked if the partner "had any other sexual partners" outside of the relationship, and if they "had any other sexual partners" outside of the relationship. Any positive response was coded as 1 (i.e. any infidelity reported in relationship); only completely sexually exclusive respondents were coded as 0. Any respondents who did not reply to either item were assumed to be exclusive, resulting in a value of 0 for those with missing information.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for control variables for respondents in five different groups of currently involved respondents (men and women combined): opposite-sex dating, opposite-sex cohabiting, opposite-sex married, same-sex dating, and same-sex cohabiting. Comparisons involving respondents in opposite-sex single, cohabiting, and married relationships reveal the typical patterns found in previous studies. Reflecting gender differences in the timing of union formation, the average age, percent female, and percent white in sample increase as we move from single to cohabiting to married relationships. Patterns for education suggest that less educated respondents gravitate towards cohabitating relationships. As in many previous studies, marriages are most likely to be homogamous in terms of race and age, while romantic relationships are least likely. Holding type of relationship constant, individuals in same-

sex couples fail to differ from their counterparts in opposite-sex relationships with respect to gender and age. In spite of being like their opposite-sex counterparts in terms of demographic profile, same-sex couples exhibit much less homogamy.

Table 2 shows statistics for various qualities of relationships for these very same relationship types. As these qualities likely differ by duration, we focus first on this variable. Note that respondents were asked the duration of the entire relationship. The median duration of opposite-sex single, cohabiting, and married relationships is 11, 43, and 89 months, respectively. To provide a check we estimated the mean duration of marriages in years for respondents ages 25-34 using the 2008 SIPP. While the average duration of current marriages for SIPP respondents is somewhat shorter (i.e., 73 months) than in our sample, the SIPP does not count the time respondents spent with their spouse prior to marriage. Duration does not appear to differ across same-sex and opposite-sex single couples, not does it differ across the two types of cohabiting couples. This suggests that duration does not drive differences we find between same-sex and opposite-sex couples (holding type of relationship constant).

We first focus on how qualities differ across opposite-sex relationships to reflect the emphasis in previous studies. As suggested in previous studies, several indicators reveal that opposite-sex dating, cohabiting, and married relationships fall on a continuum. Duration, stability, commitment, enjoyment of time spent together, happiness, love, trust, and sexual exclusivity are highest among married couples and lowest among dating couples. Differences across these relationships are by no means trivial. For instance, 24% of dating respondents are almost certain their relationship will be permanent, in comparison to 53% and 73% of cohabiting and married couples, respectively. However, there are some important exceptions to this pattern. Cohabiting respondents appear to have less success resolving conflicts and less disclosure in

combination with greater violence and more frequent sex. These patterns for cohabitation are not surprising given the findings of previous studies. Also in line with previous studies, satisfaction with sex fails to differ considerably across these relationships (e.g., Waite and Joyner 2001).

Turning to the same-sex couples, we once again see that quality is generally lower in dating relationships, as evidenced in almost all of the indicators (stability, commitment, enjoyment, happiness, love, trust, and disclosure). As in the case of opposite-sex couples, same-sex cohabiting relationships witness more intimate partner violence than do same-sex single respondents. Differences in sexual activity across single and cohabiting respondents are less pronounced among same-sex couples than among opposite-sex couples. Of course, more refined analyses based on gender will enable us to examine whether the patterns differ for gay and lesbian couples.

Comparisons between same-sex and opposite-sex couples in similar types of relationships (i.e., romantic and cohabiting) reveal some fundamental similarities between homosexual and heterosexual relationships. Holding relationship type constant, same-sex and opposite-sex couples appear roughly similar in terms duration, commitment, and stability. Same-sex couples report greater enjoyment, happiness, love, trust, disclosure, and satisfaction with conflict resolution than do opposite-sex couples. At the same time, they are also more likely to reveal that one of the partners had an overlapping sexual relationship. Same-sex cohabiting couples have less and gratifying frequent sex than same-sex cohabiting couples, but same-sex and opposite-sex cohabiting couples fail to differ in this respect. Analyses broken down by gender will potentially be more illuminating.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

To our knowledge, this is the first study to compare the full spectrum of relationships

young adults encounter. The patterns are consistent with those of previous studies but break new ground because they permit comparisons across different types of opposite-sex and same-sex relationships. They also allow a consideration of how same-sex and opposite sex individuals in seemingly similar types of relationships (i.e., romantic and cohabiting) differ with respect to the qualities of relationships. The preliminary results corroborate the findings of previous studies comparing opposite-sex individuals in different types of relationships. Most notably, married and single men and women are at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of relationship satisfaction, commitment and exclusivity, with cohabitating relationships falling in the middle. Consistent with previous studies, cohabiting relationships appear to be more physical than single or married relationships, as evidenced in greater sexual activity and intimate violence; however, same-sex cohabiting couples appear to have less sexual activity and violence than opposite-sex cohabiting relationships. Across both dating and cohabiting relationships, same-sex couples are less exclusive sexually than opposite-sex couples. For most indicators, differences across dating, cohabiting, and married relationships overwhelm differences across same-sex and opposite-sex couples.

We have several analyses planned for this paper. First, we plan to restrict the sample to respondents with valid weights and adjust for survey design effects. While this may reduce the sizes of same-sex cohabiting and single groups, some other changes could offset these declines. For instance, we will add respondents with a current romantic relationship that involves a pregnancy; these were inadvertently excluded from the analyses. We also have plans to present results in tables separately for males and females. Further, some of the indicators we examined may comprise scales. Thus, we will run factor analyses for many of the indicators we highlighted, examining whether dimensionality differs across various groups (e.g., same-sex

cohabiting women). We also plan to estimate models that regress some of the relationship qualities on demographic characteristics, homogamy, duration, and key a set of dummies indicating the relationships contrasted above (using opposite-sex cohabiting couples as the comparison group). Chow tests will be conducted to determine whether processes differ by gender. Taken together, these results will move forward our understanding of a wide range of early adult relationships.

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TABLE 1. Demographic Characteristics: Sample Frequencies and Means, by Type of Current Relationship

	Type of Current Relationship				
	Opposite-Sex Romantic/Sexual	Opposite-Sex Cohabiting	Opposite-Sex Marriage	Same-Sex Romantic/Sexual	Same-Sex Cohabiting
Gender of Respondent					
Female	47.85%	52.77%	57.09%	47.30%	54.07%
Male	52.15%	47.23%	42.91%	52.70%	45.93%
Age of Respondent					
Mean age	28.87	28.83	29.41	28.96	28.91
Age of Partner					
Mean age	28.63	28.99	30.05	29.20	30.49
Missing	0.13%	0.04%	0.03%	0.00%	0.00%
Age Homogamy					
Respondent is over two years older than partner	36.27%	30.54%	17.28%	35.14%	25.19%
Respondent is between two years older and two years younger than partner	39.85%	44.50%	59.23%	32.43%	38.52%
Respondent is over two years younger than partner	23.75%	24.93%	23.45%	32.43%	36.30%
Missing	0.13%	0.04%	0.03%	0.00%	0.00%

Race/Ethnicity of Respondent					
Non-Hispanic white	46.09%	55.11%	63.76%	41.89%	49.63%
Non-Hispanic black	27.95%	24.60%	12.99%	28.38%	19.26%
Hispanic	17.12%	13.85%	16.53%	18.92%	22.22%
Non-Hispanic Asian	7.08%	4.68%	5.36%	6.76%	5.93%
Non-Hispanic other	1.68%	1.76%	1.29%	4.05%	2.22%
Missing	0.09%	0.00%	0.06%	0.00%	0.74%
Racial/Ethnic Homogamy					
Respondent and partner are of different race/ethnicity	23.84%	22.59%	16.95%	44.59%	34.07%
Missing	0.09%	0.04%	0.08%	0.00%	0.74%
Education of Respondent					
Some high school	6.02%	10.83%	5.85%	6.76%	5.93%
High school degree or equivalent	21.36%	29.28%	25.94%	14.86%	22.96%
Some college	33.61%	34.96%	34.76%	35.14%	41.48%
College degree or post-college	39.01%	24.93%	33.45%	43.24%	29.63%
Relationship History					
Respondent was previously married	12.03%	14.28%	8.11%	1.35%	8.15%
N	*2,261*	*2,780*	*6,341*	*74*	*135*

TABLE 2. Relationship Characteristics: Sample Frequencies and Means, by Type of Current Relationship

	Type of Current Relationship				
	Opposite-Sex Romantic/Sexual	Opposite-Sex Cohabiting	Opposite-Sex Marriage	Same-Sex Romantic/Sexual	Same-Sex Cohabiting
Duration of Relationship					
Median duration in months	11.00	43.00	89.00	11.00	42.00
Stability					
Almost certain relationship will be permanent	23.75% ***	53.13%	72.69% ***	24.32% ***	52.59%
Commitment					
Completely committed	37.42% ***	65.83%	79.37% ***	40.54% ***	66.67%
Enjoyment of Interaction					
High enjoyment	48.83% ***	55.25%	64.15% ***	56.76%	64.44% *
Happiness					
Very happy	50.95% ***	65.94%	76.34% ***	59.46%	72.59%
Love					
Loves partner a lot	53.52% ***	86.40%	90.73% ***	58.11% ***	86.67%
Trust					
Strongly trusts partner to be faithful	43.43% ***	55.36%	66.76% ***	47.30%	56.30%
Disclosure					
High disclosure	48.83%	45.65%	51.22% ***	50.00%	54.07% †
Satisfaction with Conflict Resolution					
High satisfaction	33.57%	31.62%	41.43% ***	41.89% †	42.96% **
Intimate Partner Violence					
Any violence reported in relationship	17.12% ***	38.20%	29.54% ***	18.92% ***	32.59%
Frequency of Sex					
Average frequency of sex per month	10.50 ***	15.31	11.21 ***	9.92 ***	11.39 ***

Satisfaction with Sex Life									
High satisfaction	44.71%		42.81%		42.75%		45.95%		37.78%
Non-Exclusivity									
Any infidelity reported in relationship	34.59%	***	29.57%		22.95%	***	50.00%	***	35.56%
N	*2,261*		*2,780*		*6,341*		*74*		*135*

Note: Significant results indicate differences between opposite-sex cohabitation and other relationship types

*p≤.05. **p≤.01. ***p≤.001. †p≤.10.