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# SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

Research on sexual-minority individuals and families has increased rapidly in the last decade. This rise has coincided with greater acceptance of sexual minority families in the United States. Unfortunately, the greater acceptance in the United States and elsewhere has been countered with terrible repression in other countries, including in Uganda where the repression appears to have been fomented by American expatriates. A broad discussion of the historical, political, and cultural dynamics of sexual minorities and same-sex relationships is beyond the scope of this book and my expertise. However, I raise the issue because it's with this backdrop that I review three myths about same-sex relationships.

Let me begin by noting my use of the terms “same-sex relationship” and “sexual-minority” to describe gay/lesbian/bisexual individuals. In doing so, I am intending to use the terms most often used in the research literature. More importantly, I am trying to avoid terms that the majority of individuals with some same-sex attractions use, such as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Mosher, Chandra, & Jones, 2005; Wichstrøm & Hegna, 2003). As Rith and Diamond (2013) put it, the use of the term “sexual minority” reflects the universal experience of those who are sexually attracted to people of the same sex in “that their same-sex relationships place them squarely outside conventional norms prescribing uniform heterosexuality” and “that these ties are pursued in a society that posits only other-sex romantic ties as healthy, normative, and desirable” (p. 123).

It's also worth acknowledging the strong feelings that research on sexual minorities and same-sex relationships can engender. When I speak about the issues that I will describe here – whether in large venues or small groups – there are often strong feelings. People share beliefs and feelings that are highly variable, but quite often strongly felt. The responses I've heard range from simple-minded to metaphysical. I have encountered people who described sexual relations outside of the context of a man and woman as a sin. As well as people who have questioned the very premise of sexuality, describing it as a social construct and nothing more. Finally, I have known psychologists who focus on the differences between same- and other-sex relationships and psychologists who focus on the similarities. In my experience, most of these folks are well meaning (I don't hang out with people who are filled with hate). The point is that in all likelihood I will describe research findings that may be described or manipulated in ways that embolden those who seek to repress sexual minorities and that may challenge the beliefs of some who work hard to support their friends and family who are in same-sex relationships.

As with the rest of this book, I have endeavored to write about the research as I have read it, with the assumption that those with extreme points of view may not find the data convincing. Any finding as it relates to sexual minorities is observed through the looking-glass of our social and political context; thus it's important to read the following myths within the historical

context of the repression of sexual minorities that continues today. Neither I, as your guide through the data, nor you, as the consumer of research, are able to avoid the distortions of our cultural perspectives.

With these caveats in mind, I will discuss the following three myths about same-sex relationships. The first myth of this chapter is really two myths. If you believe that the gender to which people are attracted is stable, you are wrong. If you believe that the gender to which people are attracted is fluid, you are also wrong. In this myth, I explain how this can be. The second myth discusses the differences (and similarities) between same- and other-sex relationships. Finally, the third myth covers some of the faulty science that was presented as evidence in the media and in U.S. courts that children raised by other-sex couples are better off than children raised by same-sex couples. Although courts and public opinion to date haven't been swayed by those peddling this bad science, calling out those who would usurp relationship science to support their social and religious convictions is part of myth-busting.

## **Myth #11 The gender to which people are attracted is stable (or: the gender to which people are attracted is fluid)**

You'll notice that this is the only myth in this book that I describe in two opposing ways. Some people believe that the gender to which people are attracted is stable. Others believe it can vary. This divide is found among cultural commentators, including among those who strongly advocate for sexual minorities, with some (e.g., Urquhart, 2014) arguing for stability and others (e.g., Ambrosino, 2014) arguing for fluidity. In fact, the division among those who have considered the issue professionally reflects the split among Americans who are evenly divided on the issue of whether sexual orientation is malleable (Pew Research Center, 2003, 2013).

I have heard and read both perspectives. You may be wondering, well if one is a myth, in the sense that it's widely believed but not true, then why not list that one as the myth? The answer, of course, is that life is complicated. Nowhere is this heuristic more true than when it comes to sexuality. Nevertheless, I will not be taking a middle of the road approach, like "well it really is something between fluidity and stability," or "everyone has times when they are more fluid and more stable." It's not that I will describe research that suggests both are true for everyone. As it turns out, I list both sexual stability and sexual fluidity as myths because one appears to be true for one sex and the other true for the other sex. There are multiple studies that suggest that the gender to which men are attracted is mostly stable and the gender to which women are attracted is more fluid.

### **Definitions and cultural context**

Before going any further, it makes sense to talk about the language and vocabulary I will be using. Specifically, I'll define and distinguish the following concepts: sexual orientation, sexual identity, sexual fluidity, and sexual arousal. Note that these definitions reflect how I will be using these terms; however, there are more sophisticated definitions available elsewhere.

*Sexual orientation.* This is the predisposition for same-sex or other-sex intimate relationships. The key feature of sexual orientation is the desire for a same- or other-sex relationship, as opposed to attraction or behavior. As I will discuss, relationship scientists are mostly in agreement that there are people with homosexual orientations who have never been in a same-sex relationship, and there are – albeit fewer – people with a heterosexual orientation who have mostly engaged in same-sex relationships. I didn't use the term "sexual orientation" in the title of this myth because I am not suggesting that the research supports the idea that sexual orientation is fluid for men or women, rather this myth deals with whether sexual attraction is fluid or stable. Indeed, most scientists consider sexual orientation to be consistent across the lifespan (Diamond, 2008b).

*Sexual identity* is related to sexual orientation, but specifically refers to the label someone uses to describe his or her sexuality. For example, people may describe themselves as "gay," "lesbian," "straight," or "bisexual." These labels tend to have social, political, and cultural meaning. In addition, the label may or may not reflect the person's behavior. For example, the late Rev. Peter Gomes, the Plummer Professor of Christian morals at the Harvard School of Divinity and the Pusey Minister of Memorial Church at Harvard University, described himself as "gay" but also noted that he had remained celibate (McFadden, 2011). Sexual identity labels may express more than orientation – for example, "questioning" or "queer." Finally, it should be noted that some would prefer to not use labels at all. No matter what identity – if any – people use to describe themselves, it should be considered a self-description.

*Sexual fluidity.* Having described sexual orientation and sexual identity, I will turn to the main point of this myth. Sexual fluidity is the ability to find people of both genders sexually arousing, which has also been referred to as *erotic plasticity* (Baumeister, 2000). Of course, being sexually aroused by someone doesn't mean that the person is necessarily open to a having an intimate relationship with the person who is arousing him or her, or even with others of that person's gender.

*Sexual arousal.* As I described in Myth 1, by and large there are two ways that scientists measure, or *operationally define*, sexual arousal. The first way is self-reports of sexual arousal. For example, a participant in a study may be given a dial that is turned to reflect the participant's feelings of arousal at any given point during the study; perhaps, while watching an erotic video. The second method is through the use of a plethysmograph, which is a medical device that measures the volume of blood flow. The two types of plethysmography used in this research are penile and vaginal, depending on the anatomy of the participant. A penile plethysmograph measures the blood flow and the resulting swelling of the penis as an indication of arousal. A vaginal plethysmograph measures blood flowing to the vaginal walls, which is a precursor to increases in secretions of moisture in the vaginal canal and an indicator of sexual arousal.

In most of the studies I will discuss, the most interesting findings come from either plethysmography or the difference between self-report ratings and plethysmography readings. As with any behavioral research, it's best to use multiple methods to assess the variables of interest (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). Happily, quite a few studies have used both self-report

ratings and plethysmography readings to assess sexual arousal, so we can examine the degree to which these two methods correspond. In a meta-analysis of 132 studies, the correlation between self-report and genital measures of sexual arousal was strong for men ( $r = .66$ ) and small to medium for women ( $r = .26$ ). This means that men's self-report was quite similar to their penile plethysmography readings, whereas, women's self-reports were substantially different from their vaginal plethysmography readings (Chivers et al., 2010). I discussed some of the implications of this research in Myth 1, in which I compare women's and men's libidos. Nevertheless, for now, you should know that I focus most of my discussion on the plethysmography results, with the assumption that these are more reflective of arousal than self-reports (see the Chivers et al. article mentioned above for an analysis of this assumption and the moderators of the gender difference).

### ***Cultural and political considerations***

As I mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, it's important to note that data related to sexuality is viewed through our own cultural lens. So, let me qualify some of the results we will discuss at the outset. Lisa Diamond's book on sexual fluidity (2008b) outlines a number of questions that are *not* addressed by the data on sexual fluidity. Sexual fluidity is not a proxy for sexual orientation (i.e., sexual fluidity is not an indicator of being "bisexual"). In addition, the presence of sexual fluidity in women means neither that sexual orientation is an artificial construct nor that sexual orientation can be changed. Finally, there are a number of theories about same-sex sexuality that range from reasonable to ridiculous. As I will discuss, some of the research on sexual fluidity provides marginal insight into some of these, but there's a long and unfortunate tradition of overinterpreting the findings on sexual fluidity in an effort to support or refute certain theories. For interesting perspectives on the linking of biological, psychological, sociological, and political treatments of desire, see the work of Anne Fausto-Sterling (2007), Sarah Radtke (2013), and Lisa Diamond (2006a).

### **The studies of Meredith Chivers and colleagues**

As I described in Myth 1, Meredith Chivers, Gerulf Rieger, Elizabeth Latty, and J. Michael Bailey (2004) set out to determine whether men and women had similar levels of sexual fluidity. To do this, they recruited men and women who were attracted to either men or women nearly exclusively. In other words, they excluded people who reported sexually fantasizing about both men and women. They gave the participants a dial that they turned to indicate how sexually aroused they were feeling at any given moment and they asked the participants to fit themselves with a plethysmograph to measure blood flow to their genitalia. With the participants all hooked up and seated in a recliner in a dimly lit room, they showed the participants an 11-minute film depicting sexually neutral scenes, like landscapes, and playing relaxing music. This allowed the participants to get used to their setting and to being hooked up to the plethysmography equipment. This also allowed the researchers to determine the baseline levels of blood flow and self-reported arousal. Then, the participants watched a series of six 2-minute erotic videos. Three of the six video clips depicted oral sex. The oral sex was between two men in one clip, between two women in another, and between a man and a

woman (cunnilingus) in the third. The other three clips depicted penetrative sex, again between two men (anal penetration), between two women (vaginal penetration with a strap-on sex toy/dildo), and between a man and a woman (vaginal penetration). The order of the clips was randomized across participants and there was an interval between clips that allowed for a return to baseline arousal. As with other studies, the correlation between self-report ratings and genital readings of arousal were much (5 standard deviations) lower for women compared to men, so I will focus on genital blood flow readings.

What did men find sexually arousing? Men who indicated a preference for women found erotic videos depicting two women the most arousing, followed by videos depicting a man and a woman, followed by videos depicting two men. Men who preferred men found the videos with two men the most arousing followed by the videos with a man and a woman, followed by the videos with two women. All of the differences for men were statistically substantial differences. In other words, men were aroused by what they said would arouse them and not aroused by what they didn't think would arouse them.

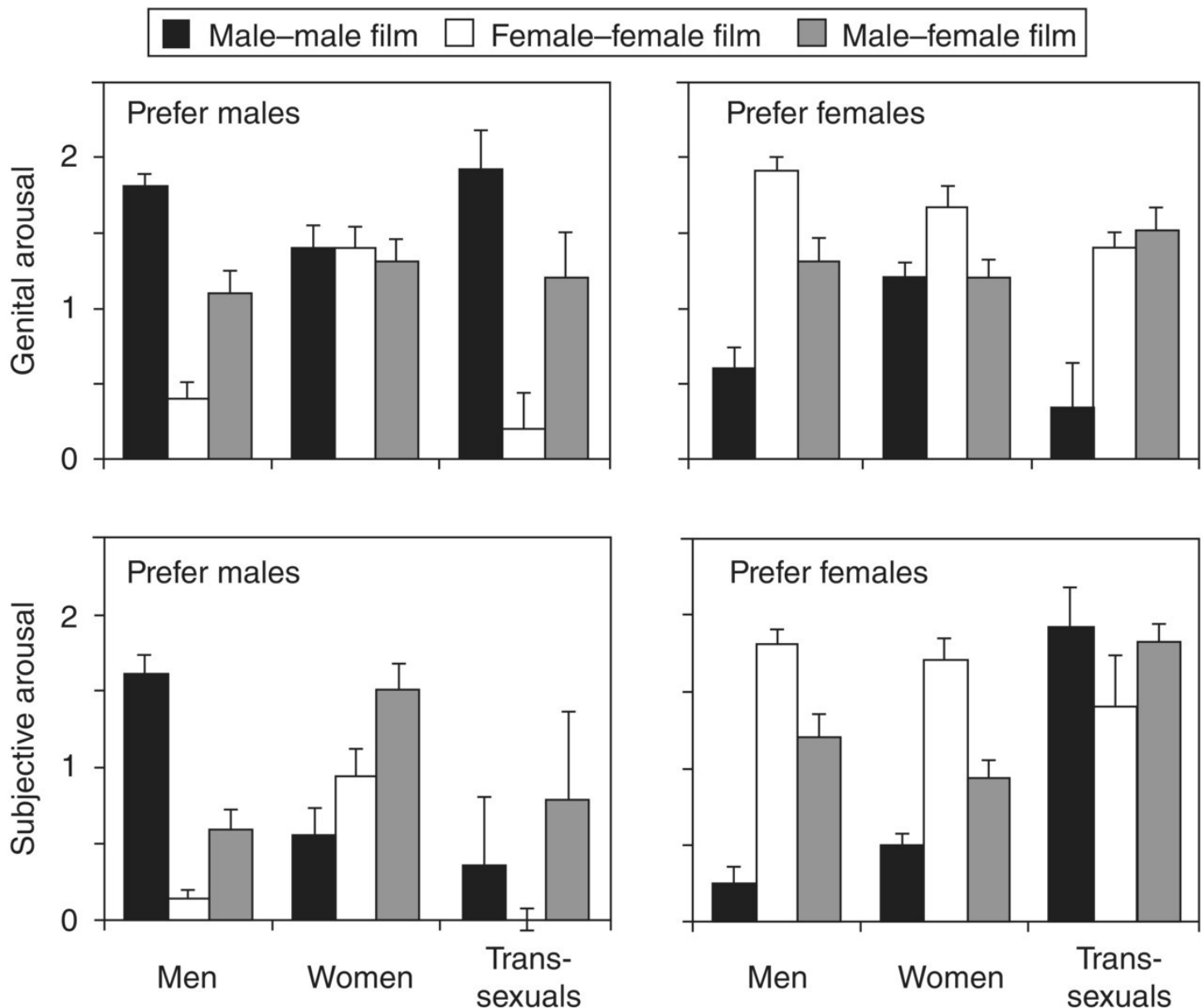
What did women find sexually arousing? Women who preferred men found all of the erotic videos similarly arousing (as measured by blood flow to the vaginal walls) and at rates that were comparable to the heterosexual men who were watching heterosexual sex (see Myth 1 for a discussion of gender similarities and differences in libidos). Women who preferred women found the video clips depicting two women the most arousing followed closely by the other two types, which yielded similar levels of arousal. Therefore, it seems that women are much more fluid than men when it comes to what is sexually arousing.

At this point, you may be wondering whether sexual fluidity is something that is learned or whether it's innate. Could it be that men are conditioned to only find one gender attractive, whereas women are conditioned to be more open to both genders? After all, there are gender differences in what is acceptable and appropriate when it comes to affection and other matters related to sexuality. In an effort to address this question, Chivers and colleagues (2004) included a group of participants who were male-to-female transsexuals (participants who were born with male genitalia and transitioned to the female gender, including hormonally and surgically). This is an important group to include because they are genetically male but their gender is female. Their inclusion goes some distance in addressing the question of whether the difference in sexual fluidity is a result of "nature or nurture." If the male-to-female transsexuals were to respond like the other women in the study, this would support (but not prove) that arousal specificity (or lack thereof) is learned (i.e., nurture). If the male-to-female transsexuals were to respond like the men in the study, this would support (but again not prove) that arousal specificity is innate (i.e., nature).

Before I tell you what happened, you may be wondering about whether plethysmography works in people with surgically constructed vaginas. The answer is yes. Although there are different ways of constructing what is referred to as a neovagina, the lining is highly sensitive and vascular (Schroder & Carroll, 1999). Therefore, barring complications, the vaginal plethysmograph would work similarly well in a vagina and a neovagina.

So, what did male-to-female transsexual participants find arousing? Transsexual women who

preferred men responded with the same pattern of arousal as men who prefer men, with male–male sex being most arousing followed by male–female sex, followed by female–female. Transsexual women who preferred women were more similar to men who prefer women than to the other women in the study. Like men who prefer women, transsexuals who prefer women found the video clips with two men the least arousing, but they found the clips of two women and a woman and man similarly arousing (see [Figure 6](#), which is the graph from Chivers et al., 2004, p. 740). Therefore, it seems that transsexual women demonstrate sexual arousal specificity that is similar to men. This supports the possibility that the sex difference in sexual fluidity is genetically determined rather than learned (Chivers et al., 2004; A. A. Lawrence, Latty, Chivers, & Bailey, 2005).



**Figure 6** Mean plethysmograph readings from genitals (upper graphs) and subjective ratings (lower graphs) of arousal while watching male-male, female-female, and male-female sexual stimuli (relative to arousal while watching neutral videos), for men, women, and male-to-female transsexuals, as a function of self-reported preferred sexual attraction. Units are within-subjects standard deviations. Error bars show standard errors of the mean.

(Reproduced from Chivers et al., 2004, p. 740).

The results in Chivers and colleagues' 2004 study have been further developed and replicated in subsequent studies (e.g., Chivers, 2005, 2006, 2010; Chivers et al., 2007; Chivers & Timmers, 2012). For example, it appears that men who identify as bisexual have genital arousal patterns similar to gay men (although a few were similar to straight men) as opposed to patterns that would reflect sexual fluidity (Rieger, Chivers, & Bailey, 2005). In addition, Lisa Diamond conducted a 10-year study of women that describes in great detail the sexual fluidity of women (Diamond, 2008a). Therefore, it seems that the data on sexual fluidity are reasonably consistent and suggest that women are more sexually fluid than men.



Given the consistent findings that women are more sexually fluid than men, what might explain this? Barry Kuhle and Sarah Radtke (2013) argue that there's an evolutionary advantage for women to have sexual attraction to other women because of the advantages of having another woman to assist in raising their children. Specifically, they note that mothers may find themselves in a situation in which the fathers of their children are unable or unwilling to assist in parenting. However, if mothers get assistance from other non-parental adults (this is called alloparenting; for a discussion of this phenomenon, see Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, 2008), their offspring are more likely to grow up and procreate.

Others have proposed alternate explanations for female sexual fluidity, including that it's a byproduct of the decoupling of female arousal and proceptivity (Diamond, 2006b) or that women have a reduced, thus more malleable, sexual drive that allows them to engage in this behavior as a reaction to misogyny and male power (Baumeister, 2000). Whether or not any of these theories are valid, the data seem clear: women are more sexually fluid than men.

Finally, there's the conundrum that if men's sexual attraction is not fluid and apparently not tied to cultural influences, is the gender to which they are attracted genetically determined? And, if so, how can these genes replicate over generations? It appears that the answer to the first question is yes. There's evidence that there's a genetic component to men's sexual orientation and that it comes from the mother's genetic contribution, which would explain the way in which such a characteristic can be transmitted across generations when such genes would appear to have a disadvantage in terms of procreation. Although there are several caveats to these results, there's a growing consensus among scientists regarding the genetic component to sexual attraction in men (e.g., Camperio-Ciani, Corna, & Capiluppi, 2004; Hamer, Hu, Magnuson, Hu, & Pattatucci, 1993).

## Conclusion

To summarize, I quote directly from Chivers and colleagues (2004, p. 741):

A self-identified heterosexual woman would be mistaken to question her sexual identity because she became aroused watching female–female erotica; most heterosexual women experience such arousal. A self-identified heterosexual man who experienced substantial arousal to male–male erotica, however, would be statistically justified in reconsidering his sexual identity.

## Myth #12 There are no differences between same-sex relationships and heterosexual relationships

When the conversation among relationship scientists or people who are simply interested in relationships turns to comparisons of same-sex relationships and other-sex relationships there's often a sense that – at their heart – the two types of relationships are essentially similar. After all, two people in love experience many of the same highs and lows whether they are in love with someone of the same gender or a different gender. Indeed, this attitude has been



reflected in polling data (Pew Research Center, 2013) and in media coverage of the same-sex marriage debate (Hitlin, Jurkowitz, & Mitchell, 2013). It has also been my experience in working with couples in my private practice. Over the years, I have worked with both same- and other-sex couples. By and large, the issues were quite similar whether the couples were two women, two men, or a man and a woman. So, my anecdotal sense was that the similarities outweighed the differences.

It turns out that my clinical impressions were consistent with the research literature: other-sex couples and same-sex couples are clearly more similar than they are different. In fact, the data are strong enough that I considered wording this myth in the other direction; however, changing attitudes and increasing rates of acceptance of sexual minorities (Lipka, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2013) led me to focus on the differences instead of the similarities because the differences are also worthy of consideration.

## **Similarities between same-sex and other-sex couples**

Before getting into the differences, let's review some of the many ways in which couples are similar regardless of gender composition. The similarities begin even before people enter into a relationship. The qualities that people find attractive in a potential mate are similar regardless of their sexual orientation. Most people agree that they are seeking partners who are affectionate, dependable, and compatible. To the extent that there are gender differences in mate preferences (see Myths 7 and 21), the differences remain the same despite the gender to which people are attracted. In other words, men are slightly more likely to emphasize the physical attractiveness in a potential partner regardless of whether that partner is a man or woman. Women, on the other hand, are slightly more likely to emphasize the personality of a potential partner regardless of whether that partner is a man or woman (e.g., Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, & Gladue, 1994). Finally, sexual minority and majority individuals report meeting potential partners in the same ways, through mutual friends, at work, in bars, at social events, and on the Internet (e.g., Bryant & Demian, 1994; Elze, 2002).

Lawrence Kurdek conducted extensive research on the similarities and differences in the relationship quality and the predictors of relationship quality across different types of couples. In terms of relationship satisfaction, same- and other-sex couples are fairly similar (Kurdek, 1994, 1998b, 2008). In addition, the predictors of changes in relationship satisfaction are also very similar across same- and other-sex couples (e.g., Kurdek, 2004). For example, all three types of couples (i.e., male–male, female–female, and female–male) argue about similar matters, such as money (e.g., Kurdek, 2006), and have similar levels of problem-solving skills (e.g., Schreurs & Buunk, 1996). Finally, when it comes to the end of a relationship, there are no differences in the reason for or the impact of relationship dissolution across relationships between two men, two women, or a man and a woman (Kurdek, 1997). Therefore, in the end, there are more similarities than there are differences (for reviews, see Kurdek, 2005; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007; Rith & Diamond, 2013). Still, there are some differences.

## **Differences between same-sex and other-sex couples**

To the extent that there are differences between same-sex and other-sex couples, there are two broad explanations for such differences. The first explanation is based on what scientists refer to as either *stigmatization* (e.g., Diamond, 2006c) or *context* (Bradbury & Karney, 2014), and it focuses on the stressors that are typically faced by people in same-sex couples due to their sexual-minority status. The second explanation is often called *gender-related dynamics* or *gender-role theory* (e.g., Rith & Diamond, 2013), which focuses on the differences that may result in combinations of two men versus two women versus a man and a woman. In describing some of the differences between same- and other-sex couples, both of these perspectives may offer explanations.

## ***Stress and support***

In the United States there's a clear trend toward greater acceptance of sexual minorities (Gallup, 2014; Savin-Williams, 2008). For example, the rapidly shifting laws on same-sex marriage have given legal legitimacy to many families that didn't enjoy the same legal benefits and protections of marriage (see Myth 13) as other-sex couples. Perhaps more importantly, U.S. politicians and voters have shifted from repeatedly voting to ban same-sex marriage to repeatedly voting to allow it. These changes have led to improved well-being for many people considered sexual minorities (e.g., Savin-Williams, 2005). Despite these advances, 38% of Americans still consider same-sex relationships to be morally wrong (Newport & Himelfarb, 2013). Thus, the burden of social stigmatization and homophobia is still present in the lives of sexual minorities and still presents challenges for same-sex couples that aren't faced by other-sex couples. Approximately 20% of sexual minorities in a national probability sample indicated that they experienced a crime based on their perceived sexual orientation (Herek, 2009). In another study, around a third of the sample reported being a victim of violence (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001). The stress of prejudice and discrimination is well documented and associated with mental and physical problems (e.g., Balsam, Beauchaine, Mickey, & Rothblum, 2005; Cochran & Mays, 2009; Feinstein, Goldfried, & Davila, 2012). Beyond the direct effects of discrimination, sexual minorities often experience diminished support from their families of origin (Oswald, 2002). This stressor is in addition to perceived discrimination from businesses (e.g., Walters & Curran, 1996), such as when renting a hotel room (D. A. Jones, 1996), and governments (United States v. Windsor, 2012). The net effect of the stigma endured by sexual minorities is to create more stress and fewer sources of social support that enhance relationships.

## ***Sexual activity and satisfaction***

As discussed in Myth 1, the difference in the sex drive of men and women is not as great as most people assume, especially when measuring physiological responses instead of stated preference or behavior. That said, it's still the case that some differences in the sexual beliefs and behavior of men and women appear to lead to differences in the sexual activity and satisfaction of couples with two women, two men, and a man and a woman. As for sexual activity, same-sex couples with two men report greater sexual activity than other-sex couples (cf. Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983), and same-sex couples with two women report less sexual

activity than other-sex couples (for review see, Peplau, Fingerhut, & Beals, 2004).

The latter difference is persistent enough that it has led to a debate among scholars regarding the reasons for the lower frequency of sexual activity among lesbian couples. Some have argued that women have a broader conceptualization of what is considered “sexual” (e.g., cuddling, fondling, and hugging; Frye, 1990). This would be consistent with evidence that there are widespread differences in what people think it means “to have sex” (e.g., S. A. Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). Others have speculated that this difference in frequency of activity could be the result of women being socialized not to initiate sex or be seen as particularly sexual (see also Myth 1; Nichols, 1987, 1988). It’s also notable that women in same-sex relationships report greater frequency of orgasms than women in other-sex relationships (e.g., Kinsey, 1953; Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978), which helps explain why, despite the differences in sexual frequency, lesbians don’t report being less happy with their sex lives than others (Kurdek, 1991). A final difference is that men in same-sex relationships are more likely to be accepting of and to engage in sexual activity outside of their primary relationship. Although this finding has been documented in multiple surveys, before and during the AIDS epidemic (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Bryant & Demian, 1994; Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2005), it’s also clear that non-monogamy is less threatening to men in same-sex relationships than to lesbians and other-sex couples (Bringle, 1995).

In summary, sexual activity and satisfaction are ways in which male and female same-sex couples differ from each other and from other-sex couples. Yet there’s still much to be learned about whether these differences are social constructions and whether they will persist as more same-sex couples get married and as other generational changes take hold (for reviews, see Diamond, 2006c; Peplau et al., 2004; Rith & Diamond, 2013).

### ***Relationship dissolution***

The third broad way in which other- and same-sex couples differ is in their rates of relationship dissolution. Despite having similar rates and patterns of relationship satisfaction (Kurdek, 1998b, 2001; Roisman, Clausell, Holland, Fortuna, & Elieff, 2008), some researchers have found that same-sex couples have higher rates of dissolution compared with married couples, especially married couples with children (Kurdek, 2004). This may be accounted for in part by the stigmatization and lack of support offered by the government and society more generally, as described above. However, even in countries in which there have been long-standing laws protecting the legal and parental rights of same-sex couples, the differences in relationship dissolution rates persist. Specifically, in a study of couples in one such country (Sweden), researchers found that 13% of other-sex couples dissolved their relationship within five years, compared to 20% of male same-sex couples and 30% of female same-sex couples. This finding held even after controlling for other variables known to be associated with relationship dissolution (Andersson, Noack, Seierstad, & Weedon-Fekjær, 2006).

So, what is going on to explain these results? Tom Bradbury and Ben Karney (2014) think it may be one of three possibilities. First, even though same-sex couples in Sweden enjoy more

rights and greater acceptance than in other countries, like the United States, there's still less societal pressure for same-sex couples to maintain their relationships than for other-sex couples (e.g., Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001). Second, women may be more likely to make a clean break from relationships that are unfulfilling because they tend to value exclusivity more than gay men (Bringle, 1995). Third, same-sex couples may have higher standards, especially with regard to equality within the relationship (e.g., Kurdek, 2004), than other-sex couples and, if these standards aren't met, same- and other-sex couples often consider ending the relationship (see Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2006).

## Similarities revisited

It's important to return to where I started this chapter. Despite a focus on the differences between same- and other-sex couples, it's worth reminding ourselves that there are more similarities than there are differences. One especially noteworthy way in which there's similarity across couples is in the potential for violence within the couple. A review of the research literature on interpersonal violence in female and male same-sex couples by Leslie Burke and Diane Follingstad (1999) found no reliable indications of differences in the rates of interpersonal violence across the types of couples. This finding surprises many people (see Myth 22) and seems inconsistent with what we know about men being more violent than women (Moffitt, 2001). I've highlighted the similarity of the problem of interpersonal violence because it warrants more attention (e.g., Tesch, Bekerian, English, & Harrington, 2010) and because it demonstrates that same- and other-sex couples are similar even in ways that are counterintuitive.

## Conclusion

To summarize, the research provides more evidence of similarities than differences between same-sex and other-sex relationships. I am cognizant that the differences (and similarities) I've described are considered in the context of societal and political influences, after all homosexuality itself was once considered a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association (for current thinking on the mental health of sexual minorities, see Kitzinger, 1987; Savin-Williams, 2008). Nevertheless, I think it's safe to conclude that although same- and other-sex couples are more similar than different, there are reliable differences.

## Myth #13 Children raised by other-sex couples are better off than children raised by same-sex couples

In the United States, the issue of same-sex marriage is changing rapidly. In the span of a few short years, there have been large swings in public opinion and in the legal status of such unions. Michael J. Klarman (2013) presents the history of the push for and against same-sex marriage, so I will retell neither the history nor the current status of the same-sex marriage debate. Rather, I will focus on one particular myth that has come out of this debate.

The idea that children raised by other-sex married couples are better off than children raised

by same-sex married couples has been discussed around kitchen tables, in academic journals, and in courtrooms. Where did this myth come from? According to *The New York Times*, it came from “opponents of same-sex marriage” who used the argument “to play one of their most emotional and, they hoped, potent cards: the claim that having parents of the same sex is bad for children” (Eckholm, 2014b, p. A16). They played this card in a trial in federal court challenging Michigan’s ban on same-sex marriages (DeBoer v. Snyder, 2014). The trial came about because, in 2012, April DeBoer and Jayne Rowse sued to overturn a Michigan law that prevented them from co-adopting their three children. The two women are nurses who separately adopted children born with special needs. They wanted to protect each other’s parenting rights and the rights of their children in the event that one of them was to die. The trial judge suggested expanding their suit to challenge Michigan’s ban on same-sex marriage. During the two-week trial in federal court, sociologist Mark Regnerus testified that the Michigan ban on same-sex marriage should be upheld because allowing same-sex marriage puts children in these families at a disadvantage (Eckholm, 2014a).

## A flawed study (Regnerus, 2012a)

The basis for his testimony stemmed from a study that that was initially designed and funded by the Witherspoon Institute, a conservative organization that describes itself as supporting “scholarly research and teaching that enhance understanding of the crucial function that marriage and family serve in fostering a society capable of democratic self-governance” (Witherspoon Institute, 2012), as well as the Bradley Foundation, which describes its programs as supporting “limited, competent government; a dynamic marketplace for economic, intellectual, and cultural activity; and a vigorous defense, at home and abroad, of American ideas and institutions” (Bradley Foundation, 2006). Their efforts to design and fund this study were spearheaded by W. Bradford Wilcox, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Virginia with ties to several socially conservative foundations and organizations. It appears that Wilcox and the head of the Witherspoon Institute set out to find a reputable academic institution to conduct the study they had envisioned. They found the study director and institution they were looking for in Mark Regnerus, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin and a research associate of the university’s Population Research Center. Such recruitment of a researcher is an unusual process because usually social scientists design their own studies and bring proposals of such studies to funding agencies. It appears that process was reversed in this case, despite claims to the contrary (Regnerus, 2012b). Shortly after data collection began, it appears that Regnerus, Wilcox, Scott Stanley (see Myths 14, 15, & 18), and a staff member from Focus on the Family (a conservative Christian organization founded by James Dobson) met to discuss how to publicize the results in time for the court cases on same-sex marriage that were widely expected (P. N. Cohen, 2013).

In addition to misrepresenting the origin of the study and the author’s relationship with the funders, there are other irregularities about the study that should cause concern even before examining the data. For example, the timeline of this study as outlined in Philip Cohen’s blog, *Family Inequality* (P. N. Cohen, 2012), shows the following impossibilities:

- Paper received by *Social Science Research* (the journal that published the article):

February 1, 2012

- Data collection ended: February 21, 2012
- File “containing the collected data” delivered to University of Texas: February 24, 2012
- Revised paper received by *Social Science Research*: February 29, 2012

So, of course this means that the manuscript was submitted to the journal prior to the end of data collection, after which the author would need to clean the data, conduct the statistical analyses, and write up the results. Speculation of collusion between the editorial staff of the journal and the author of the study led to a full review of the process. With regard to timeline, it seems that Regnerus submitted his manuscript prior to the completion of data collection without mentioning this in the manuscript or to the editor (Sherkat, 2012).

In addition to the timeline irregularities, it turns out that two of the paid consultants on the study were also reviewers of the manuscript on behalf of *Social Science Research* (Bartlett, 2012), including – apparently – Wilcox (Rose, 2012) who seems to have been involved since the inception of the study. This is problematic and irregular. It’s kind of like asking the coach of a football team to be one of the referees during a big game. It should be noted that the editor of *Social Science Research*, James D. Wright, has indicated that he knew that two of the reviewers were involved with the study, but that he trusted them to “check their ideological guns at the referee’s door” (Wright, 2012, p. 1342). Yet, it seems they didn’t. An independent inquiry into the review process of this and a review paper appearing in the same issue (Marks, 2012) found that there were multiple problems with the review procedure. The author of the inquiry concludes that the failure of the review process led to the publishing of two articles that have “serious flaws and distortions that were not simply ignored, but lauded in the reviews” (Sherkat, 2012, p. 1347).

## The methodological problems with the study

There are enough problems with the Regnerus (2012a) study that a complete recounting of the issues is beyond the scope of this myth, but let’s begin with the question that he set out to answer: “Do the children of gay and lesbian parents look comparable to those of their heterosexual counterparts?” (p. 755). To answer this question he classified the types of families in which children were raised into eight types of household settings. The following are the verbatim descriptions of the groups (with acronyms spelled out and followed by number of participants in each group:

1. Intact biological family: Lived in intact biological family (with mother and father) from 0 to 18, and parents are still married at present ( $N = 919$ ).
2. Lesbian mother: Participant reported participant’s mother had a same-sex romantic (lesbian) relationship with a woman, regardless of any other household transitions ( $N = 163$ ).
3. Gay father: Participant reported participant’s father had a same-sex romantic (gay) relationship with a man, regardless of any other household transitions ( $N = 73$ ).

4. Adopted: Participant was adopted by one or two strangers at birth or before age 2 ( $N = 101$ ).
5. Divorced later or had joint custody: Participant reported living with biological mother and father from birth to age 18, but parents are not married at present ( $N = 116$ ).
6. Stepfamily: Biological parents were either never married or else divorced, and participant's primary custodial parent was married to someone else before participant turned 18 ( $N = 394$ ).
7. Single parent: Biological parents were either never married or else divorced, and participant's primary custodial parent did not marry (or remarry) before participant turned 18 ( $N = 816$ ).
8. All others: Includes all other family structure/event combinations, such as participants with a deceased parent ( $N = 406$ ).

Did you catch that? Reread categories 2 and 3 and notice how they don't match what Regnerus set out to study. Given that his conclusions were used in lawsuits about same-sex couples getting married and adopting children, one would think that those two groups would have been children raised in same-sex headed families. In fact, most of the children in those two groups were raised in families in which their parents had an other-sex relationship that ended. In other words, Regnerus was essentially comparing children raised in families that experienced divorce or other types of disruption (possibly due to one parent coming out as a sexual minority) to families in which two biological parents raised the child and remained married. It's not surprising then that he found effects. It's well known that family stability is associated with the well-being of children (see Myth 25). At no point did he report the outcomes of children who were raised in same-sex headed households.

As I mentioned before, there are other problems with this study. These include sampling issues (Sherkat, 2012); the fact that he used the adult child's report of whether one of their parents engaged in same-sex relationships without any further substantiation, which is considered an invalid method of assessing sexual orientation (Gates et al., 2012); and fact that he conflated the rejection of the hypothesis that there are no group differences with support for the hypothesis that same-sex headed households are "uniquely problematic for child development" (p. 766; although his study lacks evidence to support either hypothesis; Perrin, Cohen, & Caren, 2013). In summary, Regnerus (2012a) claims that his study demonstrated that children raised in same-sex headed households have different outcomes than other children, when in fact the major flaws in the design and insufficient numbers of the very couples he claims to be studying render his conclusions unsupportable.

## The consensus of the social scientists

Not only are the claims regarding the Regnerus study out of line with the data from the same study, but claims that children of same-sex parents fare worse than children of other-sex parents are at odds with the scholarly consensus. Indeed, the 13,000-member American Sociological Association (ASA) presented the consensus research findings of sociologists on



this issue to the federal courts in an *amicus* (i.e., a friend of the court) brief (American Sociological Association, 2012). In the brief, the ASA wrote that “when the social science evidence is exhaustively examined – which the ASA has done – the facts demonstrate that children fare just as well when raised by same-sex parents. Unsubstantiated fears regarding same-sex child rearing do not overcome these facts and do not justify upholding” bans on same-sex marriage (p. 5). They go on to cite convincing research that there are no differences between same- and other-sex parents in terms of children’s academic achievement (e.g., Potter, 2012), even when the children of same-sex parents have higher levels of biological and environmental risk factors prior to adoptive placement (e.g., Lavner, Waterman, & Peplau, 2012). There are also no differences when it comes to social development (e.g., Wainright & Patterson, 2008), mental health (e.g., Gartrell & Bos, 2010), sexual behavior (e.g., Patterson & Wainright, 2012), or substance abuse (e.g., Wainright & Patterson, 2006). In other words, there is essentially no evidence that same-sex couples are worse parents than other-sex couples.

## Why it matters

As of this writing, the federal judge in Detroit who heard the case challenging Michigan’s ban on same-sex marriages (*Deboer v. Snyder*, 2014) ruled that the law was unconstitutional. However, Regnerus testified that the ban should be upheld and pointed to his flawed study as evidence that same-sex marriage may be harmful to children. Despite the obvious problems with this study, it continues to be cited as valid (e.g., Johnson et al., 2012) and supportive of legal efforts to ban same-sex marriage and to ostracize families headed by same-sex couples (e.g., Ablow, 2012). In the Michigan case, Federal Judge Bernard A. Friedman dismissed the study and those who supported it, concluding “the Court finds Regnerus’s testimony entirely unbelievable and not worthy of serious consideration” (*Deboer v. Snyder*, 2014, p. 13). Indeed, the judge went further in his decision, noting that taking the position of Regnerus, Wilcox, and others arguing against same-sex marriage “to its logical conclusion, the empirical evidence at hand should require that only rich, educated, suburban-dwelling, married Asians may marry, to the exclusion of all other heterosexual couples” (p. 22). Thus, while this judge noticed that this study was flawed and that Regnerus and those testifying in a similar manner were part of a dubious element of social science, others may not notice. More importantly, continuing to cite profoundly flawed studies like this gives a cloak of scientific integrity to what is essentially discrimination.

## Conclusion

Regnerus (2012a) purported to test whether children raised by sexual-minority parents were dissimilar in their adult well-being to other children. The fallout from the publication of his flawed study was swift and loud. It received a great deal of press and shook up politicians, activists, and academics. In the end, the fallout was not as great as it might have been because the judge in the trial at which it was discussed unequivocally dismissed the study and its author. Nevertheless, those who are against same-sex marriage continue to cite this study, despite it being essentially uninformative in terms of addressing the parenting qualities of same-sex couples, while ignoring the overwhelming research indicating that same-sex couples

are as good as other-sex parents. In conclusion, the Regnerus study doesn't demonstrate any problems with children raised in same-sex headed households because he didn't have "children raised in same-sex headed households" as a group in his study. Therefore, the scientific literature is where it was before his study: without any evidence that children from same-sex families are at a disadvantage compared to children from other types of families (Perrin et al., 2013).