Journey To Success: Lessons From Successful Same-Sex Couples

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JOURNEY TO SUCCESS:
LESSONS FROM SUCCESSFUL SAME-SEX COUPLES

A Dissertation Presented to
The Faculty of the Applied Psychology Department
Antioch University New England

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements of the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy in Marriage and Family Therapy

Jeni L. Wahlig, M.S., LMFT
January, 2017
Abstract

Therapists are often called upon to support same-sex couples along their journey to success. Yet, only limited information is available for understanding what success means for same-sex couples, what the journey to success might look like, and how we might support them in navigating that journey. In this dissertation, I seek to begin to fill this gap in knowledge by conducting an extensive literature review of factors that affect same-sex couple relationship success and a qualitative research study. In the study, I use narrative inquiry to explore the challenges and life-events important to couples’ journeys toward success; the resources and qualities that support these journeys, and how same-sex couples understand and narrate their experiences of relationship success. In the first chapter, I provide an introduction to the dissertation that follows. The second chapter presents a critical review of the literature, in which success is defined as a measure of quality, satisfaction, and longevity and factors affecting each of these constructs are identified and considered. Limitations and are explored, and the need for the present study is identified. In the third chapter, I discuss my research methods. Results, explored in Chapter Four, are organized into three sections which explore common “chapters” along the relationship journey, factors that contribute to relationship success, and how stories were told. Finally, in Chapter Five, I discuss the results, their implications, limitations, and directions for future research. The electronic version of this dissertation is available in open-access OhioLink ETD Center, www.ohiolink.edu/etd.

Keywords: same-sex couples, gay, lesbian, bisexual, relationship quality, satisfaction, longevity, relationship success, resilience
WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE DISSERTATION BY

Jeni L. Wahlig

Entitled

JOURNEY TO SUCCESS:

LESSONS FROM SUCCESSFUL SAME-SEX COUPLES

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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR

OF PHILOSOPHY

IN MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY

APPROVED BY:

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DEPARTMENT OF APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY REPRESENTATIVE

Catherine Lounsbury, Ed. D.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my beloved partners in relationship, Stephanie and Calvin. Your love and support has kept me going in so many ways. Thank you for sharing this journey, and our journeys, toward success.
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I would like to express my utmost gratitude to the ten couples who shared their time, energy, and wisdom with me and with the world. You have given such a gift, and I hope it returns to you many times over. Thank you, as well, to all of the people who reached out to those they knew in order for me to get connected with the generous couples who participated in this study.

I would also like to thank my dissertation chair, Dr. Kevin Lyness, for all of his endless and ever-available support, encouragement, and input. My gratitude also goes to my other committee members, Dr. Megan Murphy and Dr. Justine D’Arrigo-Patrick, for their support, feedback, and availability.

Thank you, deeply and profoundly, to my family and my family of choice. Stephanie, I don’t know how I could have gotten through my long days without you. Calvin, thank you for being the motivation I needed to push through some of the hardest parts. Simon, I’m so grateful for your quiet company, your practical assistance, and all of the nourishing breaks. Jessi, thanks for understanding this journey so completely and reminding me that I’m not alone and that I can do it. Teri, thank you for your love, for your willingness, and for all the growth and beauty you brought to my life.
# Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction ................................................................................................................... 1

Overview ......................................................................................................................................... 1

Definitions. ......................................................................................................................................... 3

Success ............................................................................................................................................... 3

Longevity .......................................................................................................................................... 4

Quality .............................................................................................................................................. 4

Commitment ...................................................................................................................................... 4

Description of chapters ..................................................................................................................... 4

Chapter Two: Critical Review of the Literature ............................................................................. 5

Factors that Affect Same-Sex Couple Relationship Success .......................................................... 5

Defining Relationship Success ....................................................................................................... 6

Relationship Quality ....................................................................................................................... 7

Measuring quality ............................................................................................................................ 7

Factors that affect quality ............................................................................................................... 9

Minority stress ................................................................................................................................ 10

Outness ......................................................................................................................................... 12

Social support .............................................................................................................................. 14

Partner Homogamy ...................................................................................................................... 15
Perceived Equality ............................................................................................................ 16
Non-Monogamy ................................................................................................................ 18
Mental health .................................................................................................................... 19
Relationship Formalization ............................................................................................... 20
Other factors that affect quality ........................................................................................ 21
Satisfaction .................................................................................................................................... 22
Measuring satisfaction ........................................................................................................... 22
Factors that affect satisfaction ............................................................................................... 23
Conflict ..................................................................................................................................... 24
Resources .......................................................................................................................... 24
Perceived costs versus benefits ......................................................................................... 25
Correlates supporting themes in quality ........................................................................... 27
Longevity ...................................................................................................................................... 27
Measuring longevity .............................................................................................................. 27
Factors that affect longevity .................................................................................................. 28
Barriers to leaving ............................................................................................................. 28
Attractions to staying ........................................................................................................ 29
Support and community .................................................................................................... 30
Couple integration ............................................................................................................. 31
Maturity ..................................................................................................................................... 32
Running head: JOURNEY TO SUCCESS

Other factors........................................................................................................................................ 33

Limitations/Critical Considerations .................................................................................................... 34

Conclusion .......................................................................................................................................... 36

Chapter Three: Methods .................................................................................................................... 40

Purpose of the Present Study ............................................................................................................. 40

Learning through Stories................................................................................................................... 40

Participants......................................................................................................................................... 42

Participant selection........................................................................................................................... 42

Measures ........................................................................................................................................... 44

Longevity.......................................................................................................................................... 44

Quality ............................................................................................................................................. 44

Commitment ..................................................................................................................................... 45

Data Collection and Management ..................................................................................................... 45

Data Analysis and Interpretation ......................................................................................................... 47

Trustworthiness................................................................................................................................. 49

Researcher Reflexivity......................................................................................................................... 52

Chapter Four: Results ....................................................................................................................... 55

Introducing the Couples..................................................................................................................... 55

Buzz and Moo.................................................................................................................................. 55

John and Bert..................................................................................................................................... 56
Alice and Dorothy ................................................................................................................. 56
Sheila and Diana .................................................................................................................... 58
Thelma and Louise ................................................................................................................ 58
Sam and Lacey ....................................................................................................................... 59
Alejandro and Joseph ............................................................................................................. 60
Mark and MJ .......................................................................................................................... 61
Callie and Crystal .................................................................................................................. 62
Frances and Savannah ........................................................................................................... 62

Results of the Analysis ........................................................................................................ 63

The Journey Toward Success ................................................................................................. 64

Life before we met ................................................................................................................. 65

Coupling ................................................................................................................................ 65

Taking big first steps ............................................................................................................. 68

Adjusting ............................................................................................................................... 70

Challenges and turning points ............................................................................................. 71

Moving .............................................................................................................................. 72

Stress pile-up ..................................................................................................................... 72

Illness and death of a parent .............................................................................................. 73

Early conflict ....................................................................................................................... 75

Financial stress .................................................................................................................... 75
A hundred little things ................................................................. 99
Couple time ............................................................................. 102
Shared property ....................................................................... 104
Perspective ............................................................................. 105
Know what you’ve got ............................................................. 105
Opposites attract ..................................................................... 106
“Be a duck.” ............................................................................ 107
Resources ............................................................................. 108
Social support ......................................................................... 108
Professional support ............................................................... 110
Gay/lesbian-friendly environments ........................................... 110
How the Story is Told .................................................................. 111
Storytelling process .................................................................. 111
Storytelling content .................................................................. 112
Chapter Five: Discussion .......................................................... 114
Discussion of Results ................................................................. 114
Significant challenges and turning point experiences .......... 114
Resources for resiliency .......................................................... 120
Couple-identified factors for success ....................................... 124
Understanding and narrating success ....................................... 125
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consideration of findings in relation to success literature</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinical Implications</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directions for Further Research</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 1</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Recruitment Email</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Informed Consent</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Demographic Questionnaire</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D: Sample Items from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale© (Spanier, 1976)</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E: Sternberg’s (1988) Commitment Questions</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F: Before We Meet!</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix G: Semi-Structured Interview Questions</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix H: Relationship Lifeline</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix I: IRB Approval</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables

Chapter 4

1. Table 1: Summary of Results
Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

The climate of our times has been one of both concern for lasting relationships and a fight for acceptance and recognition of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people and their couple relationships. Together, these trends have resulted in important shifts in the public visibility of same-sex couple relationships, including the freedom to marry. Yet homophobia and heterosexism remain, and same-sex couples have few models or roadmaps to turn to as they navigate their couple relationship.

Same-sex couples are likely to turn to the support of therapists for help when their relationships become strained (Blumer & Murphy, 2011; Degges-White & Marszalek, 2006; Porche & Purvin, 2008). As couple and family therapists, we are tasked with finding ways to support these couples in overcoming their challenges, using their strengths, and co-creating an affirmative self and relationship narrative. However, we therapists are also limited in our knowledge of what a successful same-sex couple relationship might look like or how to help couples get there.

Current research legitimizes same-sex relationships as being similar to heterosexual relationships in many of their couple challenges as well as their level of satisfaction and quality (e.g., Gottman et al., 2003). Research has also shown, however, that same-sex couples face unique challenges to the quality and longevity of their relationship, particularly experiences of minority stress (e.g., Green, 2004; Porche & Purvin, 2008). That same-sex couples are experiencing similar levels of satisfaction in the face of additional stressors suggests that these couples may possess important strengths and resiliencies. Indeed, there is growing evidence that same-sex couples may have unique strengths or advantages within their couple relationship (e.g.,
Gottman et al., 2003; Winkelpleck & Westfeld, 1982), which may be key in supporting their success. Still, very few studies have examined long-term successful same-sex couples in order to explore the challenges and experiences that have most affected them or the strengths and resiliencies that have contributed to their longevity.

Most of the research to date that attempts to understand success in same-sex couple relationships has approached the question one of three ways: by studying factors that affect relationship quality, factors that affect relationship satisfaction, and factors that affect longevity. The vast majority of such studies are quantitative and correlative. They ask the question “What effect does this variable have on this aspect of same-sex couple relationship?” While the results of these studies are informative and have helped us to identify many of the risks to same-sex couple relationships, they offer little in the way of understanding sources of strength and resiliency. They explore same-sex couple relationships from a perspective of anticipated struggle, rather than strength.

Only a very small number of studies have examined strengths and resiliency in same-sex couple relationships. These studies begin to shed some light on the resources, qualities, and skills that same-sex couples can turn to in order to successfully cope with the typical and unique challenges of their couple-hood. What none of these studies offer, however, is a complete roadmap for how same-sex couples might achieve relationship success. What are the lived experiences of successful couples, those who have achieved longevity, quality, and commitment? How do they understand and narrate their own stories of success from the beginning of the relationship onward? Which challenges have these couples experienced as particularly important to the course of their relationship, and what sources of strength and resiliency do they believe have been crucial in navigating these events?
By exploring the relationship stories of successful same-sex couples, I sought to answer these questions and begin to build a roadmap for success. Using narrative inquiry, I explored the types of challenges and life-events that same-sex couples experience as important to their relationship stories, the resources they access in order to navigate those events, and how same-sex couples understand and narrate their experience of success. There were four goals of this study: the first was to gain a better understanding of the kinds of challenges or life-events that may create critical turning points toward success or dissolution of same-sex couple relationships; the second was to learn more about the internal, external, and relational resources that contribute to same-sex couple resiliency; the third was to identify common factors that successful same-sex couples attribute to the success of their relationship, and the fourth was to explore the ways that successful same-sex couples narrate their stories of relationship success. With this information, therapists and other queer-affirmative support systems will be better prepared to provide and even create services more specifically suited to supporting same-sex couples in co-creating healthy, satisfying, long-term relationships.

Definitions. This study explored the narratives of successful same-sex couples—those who have achieved success in their relationship. What does it mean to achieve success, however? How does one define success? The following definitions and measures were used to guide this study.

Success. Achieving success within one’s couple relationship was self-defined by participants, and their definitions of success were explored in the interview process. However, to guide the selection of participants and to be able to assess their experiences of success as compared to a more standardized definition, three measures of success were assessed: longevity, quality, and commitment in the relationship.
**Longevity.** Longevity was defined as having been in a committed relationship with one another for 10 years or longer. Couples were required to meet this condition in order to participate in the study.

**Quality.** Relationship quality was measured using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976). The recommended cutoff score to distinguish between distressed and non-distressed couples is 107 (Crane, Allgood, Larson, & Griffin, 1990).

**Commitment.** Commitment was measured using eight items from Sternberg’s (1988) measure of commitment. As there was no established cutoff score for this measure, cutoff scores were set at 56, of a possible 72. This score was chosen because it represented an average score of 7 on a scale of 1-9, where 9 is the highest expression of commitment.

**Description of chapters.** Following this introduction, four chapters will explore the question of how same-sex couples achieve success in their relationship. Chapter two explores this question by offering a critical review of the literature regarding factors that affect same-sex couple quality, satisfaction, and longevity. Themes, limitations, and implications are explored. In chapter three, I present the current study’s methodology, including rationale for narrative methodology, the method of analysis used, and the ways that trustworthiness and credibility were addressed. Chapter four presents the results of the study. Finally, Chapter five provides a discussion of the results in light of extant literature, limitations, and directions for future research.
Chapter Two: Critical Review of the Literature

Factors that Affect Same-Sex Couple Relationship Success

Over the past two decades, the climate has been one of both concern for the welfare of lasting couple relationships, including marriage overall (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004), and a fight for acceptance and recognition of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people, including the legitimacy of their couple relationships. Together, these trends have resulted in important shifts in both the public visibility of same-sex couple relationships and a greater freedom to marry. In May 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to extend the right to marry to same-sex couples (“Freedom to Marry,” 2014). After more than 10 years, on June 26th, 2015, the Supreme Court ruled that the U.S. constitution’s 14th amendment guaranteed the right to marry (Liptak, 2015), which legalized same-sex marriage in all 50 states. Clearly, in today’s cultural context, same-sex couple relationships are in the private, public, and political spotlight.

In the past twenty years, the divorce rate for heterosexual couples over 35 in the United States has doubled (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014), and by their mid-fifties, nearly half of all couples ever-married have divorced or separated. Same-sex couple relationships face all of the same kinds of challenges that heterosexual couples face, with the addition of several others unique to their relationships (Otis, Rostosky, Riggle, & Hamrin, 2006). If the trends in heterosexual marriages are any indication of the challenge of maintaining a long-term marriage within the current cultural climate and discourses, it is reasonable to expect that same-sex couple marriages could follow a similar pattern.

As couple and family therapists, service providers, allies, and advocates, we are in a position to help support same-sex couples in achieving relationship success. In order for us to effectively support success in same-sex couple relationships, however, we need to first
understand what success is and also be able to anticipate the factors that may affect these experiences. Previous research provides a helpful place to start in deepening our understanding of what contributes to success in same sex-couple relationships. Although *success* could be understood in many ways, most of the research literature taps into this construct by measuring one of three relationship characteristics: quality, satisfaction, and longevity. The purpose of the present chapter is to explore the definition of success, according to extant literature, and to provide an overview of those factors that may affect same-sex couple relationship success.

**Defining Relationship Success**

What does it mean to have a successful relationship? Before we can understand the factors that affect success in same-sex couple relationships and how we can support that success, one must first clarify what success means. Traditionally, relationship success might be understood as staying together: a successful relationship or marriage is one that does not end in dissolution or divorce. Still, staying together does not necessarily mean that partners are happy in or satisfied with their relationship. Relationship satisfaction, then, may be another important indication of relationship success, but is it enough? Seligman (2011) argues that measuring well-being in life by a single measurable element—satisfaction or “happiness” is not enough. Satisfaction “essentially measures cheerful mood” (p. 14), whereas genuine flourishing—well-being in life—is a construct that incorporates a number of different elements. In research, well-being might be understood as the equivalent of “quality” in relationship. Thus, we might define relationship “success” as achieving quality, satisfaction, and longevity. With this definition in mind, I now turn to the literature on same-sex couple quality, satisfaction, and longevity in order to identify our current understanding of factors that may affect relationship success.
Relationship Quality

Measuring quality. As a multi-dimensional construct, researchers have defined and measured relationship quality in a number of different ways and typically through more than one dimension. The most common measure used in research around same-sex couple relationship quality has been Spanier’s (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Balsam & Szymanski, 2005; Balsam, Beauchaine, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2008; Kurdek, 1985, 1988b, 2008b; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Ramirez & Brown, 2010; Tornello, Kruczkowski, & Patterson, 2015). The DAS includes four subscales assumed to be dimensions of quality: dyadic consensus, dyadic satisfaction, dyadic cohesion, and affectional expression. A number of the authors who used the DAS described it as a measure of relationship satisfaction, rather than quality (Clausell & Roisman, 2009; Dispenza, 2015; Jordan & Deluty, 2000; Kurdek, 1988a; MacIntosh, Reissing, & Andruff, 2010; Rosenzweig & Lebow, 1992; Todosijevic, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2005). In evaluating the DAS, Kurdek (1992) argues that the satisfaction subscale of the DAS is the most “psychometrically solid” (p. 34) and that the DAS may be more accurately described as a measure of both relationship satisfaction and factors that determine relationship satisfaction, rather than a multi-dimensional measure of quality. However, because it is most commonly used as a measure of relationship quality, and because many other studies of relationship quality include a measure of satisfaction along with other measures that, like the DAS, could arguably be correlates of satisfaction or quality rather than a measure of quality itself, those studies that use the DAS as a measure of satisfaction are included here.

As mentioned, many researchers have used a combination of measures to examine aspects of same-sex couple relationships that they argued were indicative of relationship quality. While most of these researchers used the language of relationship quality to describe their
constructs, studies that used the term *relational health* (Bricker & Horne, 2007), relationship *well-being* (Fingerhut & Maisel, 2010), or that explored the effects of a variable on multiple aspects of a same-sex couple’s relationship (e.g., Shulman, Gotta, & Green, 2012) are included in this analysis of quality. Additionally, studies that claim to examine relationship *satisfaction* are also included if satisfaction was only one of several relational dimensions being explored (e.g., Peplau, Padesky, & Hamilton, 1982; Quam, Whitford, Dziengel, & Knochel, 2010). If we are to understand relationship quality as a multi-dimensional construct, of which satisfaction is a part, then these studies are better understood as explorations into same-sex relationship quality rather than satisfaction. Indeed based on those studies included in this review, and not including the DAS, relationship satisfaction was the second most common variable measured in studies of relationship quality (Berger, 1990; Beals & Peplau, 2001; Blasband & Peplau, 1985; Bricker & Horne, 2007; Elizur & Mintzer, 2003; Fingerhut & Maisel, 2010; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985; Mohr & Daly, 2008; Mohr, Selterman, & Fassinger, 2013; Peplau et al., 1982; Shulman et al., 2012; Quam et al., 2010). Research studies that attempted to measure only relationship satisfaction will be discussed separately.

In research studies that combined several measures in order to assess quality, the *most* commonly assessed variable was relationship commitment/ambivalence (Blasband & Peplau, 1985; Caron & Ulin, 1997; Ducharme & Kollar, 2012; Goldberg, Smith, & Kashy, 2010; Mohr & Daly, 2008; Mohr & Fassinger, 2006; Mohr et al., 2013; Otis, Riggle, & Rostosky, 2006; Szymanski & Hilton, 2013; Whitton, Weitbrecht, & Kuryłuk, 2015). Other dimensions of relationship quality that have been assessed in same-sex couple research include love or intimacy (Berger, 1990; Blasband & Peplau, 1985; Caron & Ulin, 1997; Goldberg et al., 2010; Kurdek, 1988a, 1988b, 1998; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985; Otis & Riggle et al., 2006; Peplau et al., 1982),
levels of conflict (Beals & Peplau, 2001; Caron & Ulin, 1997; Goldberg et al., 2010; Otis & Riggle et al., 2006), trust (Kurdek, 1988; Mohr & Fassinger, 2006; Mohr et al., 2013), communication and conflict resolution (Kurdek, 1998; Mohr & Fassinger, 2006; Whitton et al., 2015; Quam et al., 2010); aspects of the couple’s sexual relationship (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Parsons, Starks, Gamarel, & Grov, 2012), perceptions of stability (Elizur & Mintzer, 2003; Whitton et al., 2015), experiences of strain or stress (Fingerhut & Maisel, 2010; Frost & Meyer, 2009), positive relations with others (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Shulman et al., 2012); relationship maintenance (Caron & Ulin, 1997; Goldberg et al., 2010), relationship investments (Fingerhut & Maisel, 2010), interdependence (Whitton et al., 2015), intensity (Mohr et al., 2013), autonomy and equality (Kurdek, 2008b), respect/perceived similarity (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985), idealistic distortion (Quam et al., 2010), barriers to leaving (Mohr & Daly, 2008; Kurdek, 1998), dyadic attachment (Bricker & Horne, 2007), attachment style (Bricker & Horne, 2007), and single measures of global relationship quality (Mohr & Fassinger, 2006; Otis & Rostosky et al., 2006; Weisshaar, 2014). To this author’s knowledge, only one research study used a single dimension—a self-report Likert-type scale assessment of relationship quality (Weisshaar, 2014). Two studies are also included in this review that used qualitative methodology to capture aspects of same-sex couples’ relationships best described as quality (Antonelli & Dèttore, 2014; Murphy, 1989).

Factors that affect quality. Given the many ways in which quality is measured, it is hard to definitively identify which variables affect relationship quality and how. As Kurdek (1992) argued about the DAS, one might also argue that many of the measures used to define quality are themselves factors that affect it. Although the summaries below present common themes in the literature, it is important to keep in mind that quality is likely measured differently
in many of the studies. Furthermore, in some of the research, only certain dimensions of relationship quality that were measured were affected by the independent variables. For example, in Koepke, Hare, and Moran’s (1992) study comparing same-sex couples with and without children, they found that the presence of children only affected two of the 10 subscales of relationship quality that they were using (the subscales of relationship satisfaction and sexual relationship). As a multi-dimensional construct, understanding the factors that affect relationship quality is necessarily complex and nuanced. However, this review attempts to organize and consolidate our best understanding of these relationships to date.

Minority stress. Much research has explored the effect of variables of minority stress on relationship quality (Balsam & Szymanski, 2005; Dispenza, 2015; Fingerhut & Maisel, 2010; Frost & Meyer, 2009; Mohr & Daly, 2008; LeBlanc, Frost, & Wight, 2015; Mohr & Fassinger, 2006; Otis & Riggle et al., 2006, Otis & Rostosky et al., 2006). Meyer (1995) identified three types of minority stressors that sexual minorities face: internalized homophobia, stigma, and actual experiences of violence and aggression. LeBlanc et al. (2015) posit that same-sex couples experience an additional level of minority stress that derives from the stigmatized status of their couple relationship itself. Thus, same-sex couples may experience Meyer’s (1995) minority stressors on both individual and couple levels. The literature regarding the effect of minority stress on the quality of same-sex couple relationships is in agreement—minority stressors have a negative effect on relationship quality.

That said, it may be that the different kinds of stressors have more or less of an effect. Although sensitivity to stigma has been shown to predict relationship quality (Mohr & Fassinger, 2006), perceived experiences of stigma may not affect quality the same way (Dispenza, 2015). Likewise, there is evidence to suggest that perceived discrimination does not significantly predict
relationship quality (Otis & Rostosky et al., 2006). In contrast, internalized homophobia (sometimes referred to as internalized homonegativity) does seem to have a significant effect on same-sex couples’ relationship quality.

Of three different kinds of minority stressors that Meyer (1995) identified, internalized homophobia has received particular attention in the literature as an important factor in same-sex relationship quality (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Mohr & Daly, 2008; Mohr & Fassinger, 2006; Otis & Riggle et al., 2006, Otis & Rostosky et al., 2006; Szymanski & Hilton, 2013). Internalized homophobia has been shown to be associated with more relationship problems and decreased satisfaction, attraction, and intimacy. Furthermore, evidence suggests that one’s own experience of internalized homophobia not only affects one’s own perception of relationship quality, but that it is also significantly and negatively associated with one’s partners’ perception of relationship quality (LeBlanc et al., 2015; Mohr & Fassinger, 2006; Otis & Riggle et al., 2006, Otis & Rostosky et al., 2006), at least on some measures.

While the general conclusion is that internalized homophobia is negatively associated with relationship quality, there is some evidence that this effect may be mediated by other factors. For example, Frost and Meyer (2009) found that depressive symptoms completely mediated the effect of internalized homophobia on relationship quality. In other studies, perceived stress (Otis & Rostosky et al., 2006) and fear of intimacy (Szymanski & Hilton, 2013) were found to partially mediate this effect. These studies suggest that the effect of internalized homophobia on relationship quality may not be a direct one; instead, internalized homophobia may affect other aspects of a partner’s experience, such as depressive symptoms or discomfort with intimacy, and these, in turn, affect relationship quality. Although internalized homophobia seems to be the more significant minority stressor, very little research has actually focused on the
effects of perceived stigma and experiences of actual violence or aggression on same-sex couple relationships. More research is needed to explore the causal pathways of internalized homophobia as well as to more thoroughly explore the potential effects of other minority stressors.

Additionally, how same-sex couples make meaning of their experiences of minority stress likely changes the effect of these experiences on relationship quality. In a qualitative study, Frost (2011) identified six distinct strategies for making meaning of experiences of stigma. Four of these strategies portrayed stigma as having a negative effect on intimacy in the relationship. The other two, however, suggested a positive re-framing of the effect of stigma on their relationship, such that stigma resulted in positive outcomes and increased connection. In his 2014 mixed-methods study of redemptive framings of minority stress, Frost found that only about 1/4th of participants used redemptive framings of their experiences of minority stress; however, those who did reported significantly more closeness in their relationship than those who did not. Thus, using a redemptive framework likely diminishes the effect of minority stress on relationship quality.

Outness. A number of studies have considered the effect of LGB identity disclosure, or outness, on same-sex couple relationship quality (Balsam & Szymanski, 2005; Beals & Peplau, 2001; Berger, 1990; Caron & Ulin, 1997; Clausell & Roisman, 2009; Frost & Meyer, 2009; Jordan & Deluty, 2000; Koepke et al., 1992; Mohr & Daly, 2008; Peplau et al., 1982;Todosijevic et al., 2005). Results from these studies are mixed, but there seems to be a trend toward outness mattering less in terms of relationship quality in more recent years. That is, most, but not all (see Koepke et al., 1992; Peplau et al., 1982), of the research conducted between 1990 and 2000 found outness to be a significant predictor of relationship quality. However, the more
recent research, conducted between 2001 and 2009, has not found the same relationship. The exception in recent research is a study by Clausell and Roisman (2009) of 60 gay and lesbian couples that used both survey and observational methods to examine the relationship between self-disclosure and relationship quality. These authors found those partners who were more out to the world rated their relationship quality higher, as did their partners, and these couple were observed to have more positive emotional tones when interacting. In their observational analysis, however, most of these effects did not hold after controlling for personality traits.

The mixed results surrounding the effect of outness on relationship quality suggest the need for a consideration of a more complex relationship. For example, there is evidence that suggests that being out to those in more intimate relationship, such as friends and family, may have a more important effect on relationship quality than being out to more distal relationships, such as work associates (Berger, 1990; Caron & Ulin, 1997). There may also be mediating factors affecting the influence of outness on quality. Jordan and Deluty (2000) suggest that outness may affect the amount of social support that same-sex couples are able to receive, and it may be a lack of social support, more than the level of outness, that has an effect on relationship quality.

Disclosure may be critical to obtaining social support for the relationship as, without disclosure, the individual loses the ability to discuss both good and bad aspects of the relationship and the ability to find support in the event of a crisis. Disclosure enables the couple to build a broader social network, as well as allowing individuals to maintain individual outside relationships. (Jordan & Deluty, 2000, p. 160)

Clearly, more research is needed to explore the role that outness may have on same-sex couples’ relationship quality.
Social support. The literature addressing the challenges faced by same-sex couples agrees that many of these couples experience a lack of social support (e.g., Connolly, 2004a; Degges-White & Marszalek, 2006). In fact, for some couples, rejection or lack of acceptance by one’s family-of-origin may be perceived as a threat to their relationship and thus have a negative impact on relationship quality (Antonelli & Dèttore, 2014; Degges-White & Marszalek, 2006; Murphy, 1989; Quam et al., 2010). In one study, however, large discrepancies between partners’ ratings of support from family members was related to higher relationship quality, suggesting that high levels of family of origin support by one partner may be enough to compensate for the negative effects of the other partners’ family’s lack of support (Kurdek, 1988a).

Still, much of the research around social support and relationship quality suggests that support from friends or family of choice may be more important to increasing quality than support from family of origin (Antonelli & Dèttore, 2014; Elizur & Mintzer, 2003; Kurdek, 1988; Quam et al., 2010). Interestingly, in a diverse study of nearly 400 lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, Frost and Meyer (2009) found that, for coupled participants, a higher degree of community connectedness was associated with an increase in relationship strain. The authors hypothesized that individuals who were highly connected to the LGB community may be less invested in their couple relationship, thereby creating strain, or that perhaps those individuals most connected to the community were those who were turning to the community because they were experiencing problems in their couple relationship. Another study of Israeli gay men found evidence that the positive effect of perceived friend social support on relationship quality was mediated by attachment, and the positive effect of perceived friend acceptance was mediated by self-acceptance (Elizur & Mintzer, 2003), suggesting that support from friends alone may not be as directly associated with quality as initially suggested.
Findings from another study add to the complexity of our understanding of the relationship between social support and relationship quality. In a study that involved only lesbian couples, Beals and Peplau (2001) found that social involvement had a curvilinear relationship to quality, whereby moderately involved couples reported the highest level of quality. Additionally, couples whose ratings of social involvement were more similar between partners rated higher on the satisfaction scale used in this study. Kurdek (1998; 2004) found similar results (although only for lesbian couples in his first study); those couples with greater similarities in their satisfaction with amount of social support scored higher on measures of relationship quality. These studies suggest that it may be important not only that they have just the right amount of social involvement, but also that both partners are equally involved. Overall, social support from all sources (Jordan & Deluty, 2000; Shulman et al., 2012) and satisfaction with that support (Kurdek, 1988b) is likely to be important to the quality of same-sex couple relationships, yet we still have much work to do in order to clarify the kind and amount of support that will benefit the most.

**Partner Homogamy.** Partner homogamy (i.e., agreeing, sharing the same views, having similar experiences or backgrounds) on experiences of social support, as discussed above, is one of several factors that seems to be related to relationship quality for same-sex couples. There is also evidence that perceived similarities in LGB identity is positively related to relationship quality, even if the actor’s identity scores reflect a negative LGB self-identification (Mohr & Fassinger, 2006). Perceived similarity in LGB identity also moderated1 some of the effects of LGB identity on relationship quality, suggesting that it may be a protective factor even in the

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1 Mohr and Fassinger (2006) used the term “mediated” rather than moderated, as I have used here. However, moderated is the correct term for their results. Refer to Baron and Kenny (1986) for a detailed explanation of the difference and appropriate use of these terms in research.
face of internalized homophobia. Rosenzweig and Lebow (1992) found support for the role of consensus around matters important to the couple and sexual satisfaction in the experience of relationship quality for lesbians. Finally, partner homogamy of dyadic attachment has also been positively correlated with relationship quality (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987).

Although these studies suggest a common theme of homogamy between partners as important to quality, this relationship may not be so generalizable. Partner homogamy on most demographic variables does not seem to be related to relationship quality (Kurdek & Schmitt; 1987; Peplau et al., 1982; Todosijevic et al., 2005). There is some evidence to suggest that homogamy on age could be related to relationship quality, but this seems to be different for male and female couples. Age similarity predicted higher quality for gay men, but greater difference in age predicted quality for lesbian couples (Todosijevic et al., 2005). Kurdek and Schmitt (1987) also examined eight predictors of relationship quality, including social support and shared decision-making. Of these eight, only differences of dyadic attachment had any correlation (negative) with quality. At this point, we cannot safely conclude that partner homogamy in general is related to relationship quality, but must continue to examine for which particular variables similarity of experience might be important.

**Perceived Equality.** In addition to perceived similarity of experience, research has found evidence that perceived equality—sharing power and responsibility equally—is important to relational quality (Kurdek, 1988b, 1998, 2004; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985; Peplau et al., 1982; Tornello et al., 2015). In a sample of 127 lesbians, Peplau et al. (1982) found that 97% agreed that “both partners should have ‘exactly equal say’ in the relationship” (p. 29), and that the significant relationship between quality and equality of power seemed to be related more to the discrepancy than to which person (self or partner) had the most power. These authors also found
that relationship quality was positively associated with perceiving one’s partner as equally involved in and committed to the relationship.

In another study, Tornello et al. (2015) found that gay men who became fathers through surrogacy tended to divide both household tasks and childcare equally, and reported preferring it that way. Overall, the fathers in their study reported high levels of relationship quality, but those who reported discrepancies between ideal and the actual divisions of labor reported lower quality. Weisshaar (2014) found that equality in income earnings was positively related to relationship quality. Shared decision-making has also been found to be related to relationship quality (Kurdek, 1988b; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985, 1987), perhaps especially for lesbian couples (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987).

Two other studies lend suggestive, rather than statistical evidence, to the relationship between equality and quality in same-sex couple relationships. First, using a sizeable sample of older same-sex couples in long-term relationships, an exploratory study found that participants reported both higher levels of relationship quality on several measures than a comparison of heterosexual couples, and they also reported high levels of equality in decision making and shared responsibility, although the authors did not test to see if the two variables were correlated in the study (Quam et al., 2010). Second, in a qualitative study where most of the 60 gay couples in the study reported high levels of quality and 43 of them agreed exactly on the level of quality, Antonelli and Dèttore (2014) found that 49 of the 60 also reported high levels of equality in the relationship. In light of other research that points to the positive relationship between equality and quality in same-sex couple relationships, these findings suggest that these variables are likely correlated.
**Non-Monogamy.** Several research studies have examined the relationship between non-monogamy in same-sex relationships and relationship quality, but only with male couples. There is more research to be done in exploring the nuanced relationship between non-monogamous relationship agreements and relationship quality, including the inclusion of female couples and bisexual/queer couples, but initial findings suggest that male couples in non-monogamous relationships experience relationship quality similar to those in monogamous relationships (Blasband & Peplau, 1985; Bricker & Horne, 2007; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985, 1988; Parsons et al., 2012; Ramirez & Brown, 2010; Whitton et al., 2015). Parsons et al. (2012) examined the more specific variable of sexual relationship quality but again found no significant difference between couples with monogamous versus a variety of non-monogamous relationship agreements. In an earlier study, however, Kurdek (1985) found that, after controlling for length of time living together, gay couples in closed relationships reported higher global relationship quality than those in open relationships. Still, Kurdek concludes that these couples are more similar than different in their experience of relationship quality.

As a multi-dimensional construct, however, some aspects of relationship quality may be more affected by non-monogamy than others (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985). In Kurdek and Schmitt’s (1985) study, the difference in global relationship quality resulted from non-monogamous couples reporting higher scores on some, but not all of the scales used to assess quality. Non-monogamous couples reported higher scores on scales for affiliation/dependency, favorable attitudes toward the relationship, and tension but not for scales measuring respect/perceived similarity, agreement, satisfaction with affection and sex, or shared activities. Similarly, Bricker and Horne (2007) found that non-monogamous couples reported lower levels of dyadic attachment, as measured by a subscale of Kurdek’s (1995) compiled items for
commitment and “current and ideal ratings of attachment, autonomy, and equality” (p. 88). These couples did not, however, differ significantly from monogamous couples in the study on the other measures of relationship quality, including attachment style, relationship satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction (Bricker & Horne, 2007).

Notably, there is evidence that developing clear rules around non-monogamous relationship agreements may be important to keeping relationship quality high (Ramirez & Brown, 2010). Additionally, couples in which one partner desires monogamy and the other desires non-monogamy may be more likely to experience lower levels of relationship quality (Antonelli & Dèttore, 2014).

Mental health. Measures of mental or psychological health have been considered in several studies as they related to relationship quality for same-sex couples. The overall conclusion is that psychological health is positively related to relationship quality (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985; Kollar, 2012; Otis & Riggle et al., 2006). Furthermore, there is evidence that one’s partner’s mental health is also positively related to one’s own perception of relationship quality (Otis & Riggle et al., 2006). One of the more frequently considered variables of mental health is depressive symptoms, which research has also found is associated with decreases in relationship quality (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Goldberg et al., 2010; Whitton & Kuryluk, 2014). Interestingly, Whitton and Kuryluk (2014) found that the relationship between depression and quality was moderated by level of commitment and interdependence, such that depression had a stronger negative association with quality when commitment and interdependence in the relationship where higher. Relatedly, Ducharme and Kollar (2012) found a positive relationship between marital quality and psychological health for married lesbians.
**Relationship Formalization.** There is some evidence that formalizing one’s relationship, through a legal or social commitment, may have a positive effect on same-sex relationship quality. During the time of Proposition 8 legislation in California, which effectively overturned the previously granted right for same-sex couples to get married in that state, Shulman et al. (2012) conducted a mixed-methods study to explore the benefits that same-sex couples anticipated marriage would have on their relationship. Their qualitative results showed that most participants anticipated that marriage would benefit their lives and relationships in a number of ways, including experiencing greater happiness and health, more security, legitimacy as a couple, and the ability to let go of anger around inequality. This positive anticipation was stronger for older and more long-term couples. Another mixed-methods research study of the first cohort of same-sex couples to marry in Canada provided additional qualitative evidence that being able to marry had a positive effect on participants’ relationship quality, and their quantitative measure revealed higher levels of relationship quality compared to normative data for married heterosexual couples (MacIntosh et al., 2010).

Fingerhut and Maisel (2010) compared both social and legal recognition of same-sex relationships to two aspects of relationship well-being: satisfaction and investment. The authors found evidence that social recognition of same-sex relationships was related to relationship satisfaction, but not to relationship investments. Legal recognition had the opposite relationships; it was significantly associated with investments, but not with relationship satisfaction. The authors also found that having a social ceremony moderated the effect of minority stressors on relationship satisfaction.

It is possible that the effect of relationship formalization on relationship quality may be mediated by other variables. For example, Riggle, Rostosky, and Horne (2010) found that LGB
individuals in a legally recognized relationship reported less psychological distress, as assessed by measures of internalized homophobia, depressive symptoms, and stress, and more well-being than those in committed relationships. Given the evidence that mental health and minority stress seem to affect relationship quality, it is possible that these variables may be linked to the relationship between formalization and quality. Now that marriage is legal in all 50 states, many more research avenues are available for better understanding the effect of formalization on same-sex couples’ relationship quality.

**Other factors that affect quality.** A number of other variables have been studied in one or two studies as they are related to relationship quality for same-sex couples. There is evidence that self-acceptance of LGB identity is associated with relationship quality. Elizur and Mintzer (2003) found evidence that self-acceptance of gay identity predicts relationship quality. Similarly, using the subscales of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Identity Scale, Mohr and Fassinger (2006) found all four variables of LGB identity—homonegativity, stigma sensitivity, identity confusion, and identity superiority were negatively associated with relationship quality. In this study, the authors also found that one’s partner’s scores on the identity confusion subscale were negatively related to one’s own perception of relationship quality.

Relationship quality seems to decrease after children are introduced to the relationship (Ducharme & Kollar, 2012; Goldberg et al., 2010; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986); however, there is some evidence of a curvilinear relationship between relationship stage and quality, such that quality starts high, is lowest during the nesting stage, and rises again in the maintenance stage and beyond (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Kurdek, 1988b). Furthermore, one study found evidence that relationship quality was higher for lesbian couples with children than lesbian couples without (Koepke et al., 1992).
Kurdek and Schmitt (1985) and Kurdek (1988b) examined a number of correlates of relationship quality for cohabiting same-sex couples, many of which other authors have not examined. Those which have not yet been mentioned include longer time in the relationship (Kurdek, 1988b), low autonomy (Kurdek, 1988b), strong motivation for being in the relationship (Kurdek, 1988b), high trust (Kurdek, 1988b), few beliefs that disagreement is destructive (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985; Kurdek, 1988b), relationship benefits and costs as measured by a high number of attractions to and barriers from leaving the relationship plus few alternatives to the relationship (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985), few beliefs that one’s partner cannot change (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985), high dyadic attachment (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985). Other variables that have been found to be positively associated with relationship quality include financial well-being, or income (Ducharme & Kollar, 2012; Elizur & Mintzer, 2003), high affectivity (Todosijevic et al., 2005), physical well-being (Ducharme & Kollar, 2012), attachment security, at least for gay male couples (Elizur & Mintzer, 2003), and both androgynous and feminine global sexual sex-role self-perception for lesbians (Rosenzweig & Lebow, 1992).

Finally, several studies have noted gender differences between ratings of relationship quality (Clausell & Roisman, 2009; Kurdek, 1988b; Mohr & Fassinger, 2006; Shulman et al., 2012; Quam et al., 2010), with lesbian couples tending to report higher levels of quality or satisfaction.

**Satisfaction**

**Measuring satisfaction.** As mentioned above, the majority of studies that examine factors affecting same-sex relationship quality, including those that use the DAS, include a measure of relationship satisfaction within the construct of quality. It is important to note, then, that other summaries of the literature on correlates of relationship satisfaction (e.g., Peplau &
Fingerhut, 2007) are likely to include studies that more accurately captured the construct of relationship quality. Still, several research studies have been conducted that attempt examine factors that affect solely the construct of satisfaction within the same-sex couple relationship.

As in studies of quality, researchers have used a number of different assessments to capture the construct of relationship satisfaction. The most commonly used assessments identified in this review were the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm et al., 1986) found in studies by Kamen, Burns, and Beach (2011) and Kurdek (1991; 1994) and the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959), found in studies by Gottman et al. (2003), Horne and Biss (2009), and Houts and Horne (2008). Other assessments of satisfaction include the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988), found in Pope, Murray, and Mobley (2010) and Rostosky, Otis, Riggle, Kelly, and Brodnicki (2008), a slightly modified Marital Relationship Inventory (MRI; Burgess & Locke, 1968) found in Jones and Bates (1978), and the 10-item satisfaction subscale of the DAS, found in Eldridge and Gilbert (1990). Cardell, Finn, and Merecek (1981) presumably also used the DAS satisfaction subscale, although they specified only that they had used 6 questions from the DAS to measure satisfaction, and not which questions they used.

Other authors created their own measures for assessing satisfaction. Duffy and Rusbult (1985) developed and assessed their own set of questions to measure global satisfaction. In their mixed-method study, Mackey, Diemer, and O’Brien, (2004), measured satisfaction using a coding system of either positive or negative based on the way participants responded to open-ended questions about what was satisfying to them in their relationship.

Factors that affect satisfaction. Like quality, predicting same-sex couple relationship satisfaction involves many, often interconnected, variables. A number of studies therefore took
an exploratory approach to examine a wide variety of correlates at once (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Gottman et al., 2003; Jones & Bates, 1978; Mackey et al., 2004). Others involved a more focused examination of specific variables. Due to the relatively small number of studies that examine factors that affect satisfaction specifically, however, few strong themes emerge.

**Conflict.** One of the few variables examined in more than one study was conflict (Jones & Bates, 1978; Kurdek, 1994; Mackey et al., 2004). Results from these studies support the conclusion that lower conflict in same-sex couple relationships is predictive of higher relationship satisfaction. There is evidence, however, that the content of conflict may matter, as it relates to relationship satisfaction. Kurdek (1994) examined specific areas of conflict and found that conflict over areas regarding power and intimacy were the only significant predictors of satisfaction, and more frequent conflict around power was predictive of a decrease in satisfaction after one year. These results are supported by another study, which found that higher individual ratings of power and intimacy in the relationship were related to higher reports of satisfaction (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990).

**Resources.** Pope et al. (2010) examined the relationship between personal, relational, and contextual resources and their effect on same-sex couple relationship satisfaction. The authors describe personal resources as “those that are internal and unique to the individual (e.g., self-esteem and coping skills)” (p. 164), relationship resources as “resources that are shared between partners in an intimate relationship (e.g., relationship skills and knowledge about ones partner)” (p. 164), and contextual resources as “resources that exist within the larger social context surrounding the couple (e.g., family members and friends)” (p. 164). This framework provides a useful way of conceptualizing the variables that a number of studies have examined and found correlated with relationship satisfaction.
In their study, Pope et al. (2010) found that only relationship resources were predictive of satisfaction. Although these authors used a single measurement for the construct of relationship resources, other studies examined specific examples of relationship resources and found support for their importance to couple satisfaction. These variables include a positive expectancy of interactions, higher empathy, and higher levels of physiological arousal during couple interactions (Gottman et al., 2003), greater flexibility in sex role behaviors (Cardell et al., 1981), individual ratings of dyadic attachment, and psychologically intimate communication between partners (Mackey et al., 2004). Murray (2006) suggests that a couple’s ability to manage conflict is another example of relationship resources, lending more support to the importance of relationship resources to couple satisfaction.

Although Pope et al. (2010) did not find personal resources to be significantly related to couple satisfaction, other studies have found evidence to the contrary. Higher reports of satisfaction have been found to be related to lower individual ratings of role conflict and personal autonomy, and higher individual ratings of self-esteem, and life-satisfaction (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990), more feelings indicative of desiring relationship longevity, greater appreciation (Jones & Bates, 1978), more masculine sex role behaviors (Cardell et al., 1981), and negative affectivity (Houts & Horne, 2008). In fact, negative affectivity seems to completely moderate the effects of negative attribution on relationship satisfaction for same-sex couples, which is not the case for heterosexual couples.

**Perceived costs versus benefits.** Several studies examined cost-benefit aspects of the relationship, such as those proposed by Rusbult’s (1980) investment model of relationships (Duffy & Rusbult, 1985; Gottman et al., 2003; Kurdek, 1991). Overall, research supports the conclusion that same-sex couple relationship satisfaction is related to higher perceived benefits.
and lower perceived costs in the relationship (Duffy & Rusbult, 1985; Gottman et al., 2003; Kurdek, 1991). There may be gender differences, however, in how costs and benefits are experienced and related to satisfaction. One study of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples found that relationship costs were more strongly related to satisfaction for women than men in the study, regardless of sexual orientation (Duffy & Rusbult, 1985). Another study of gay and lesbian couples found that lesbian couples reported more rewards in their relationships than gay couples, although the relationship of costs and rewards to satisfaction were not significantly different (Kurdek, 1991).

Greater benefits and fewer costs may only be one part of the picture, however. In Kurdek’s (1991) study, the investment model was examined alongside two other models known to be predictive of satisfaction in heterosexual relationships—the problem-solving and contextual models—and was shown to better predict satisfaction when combined in a mediational model with variables from the other models of relationship. Additionally, of the variables examined in Kurdek’s (1991) study, nearly all of the variables from each model were significantly correlated with greater relationship satisfaction. These included: from the contextual model—high satisfaction with social support, high expressiveness, low endorsement of general dysfunctional beliefs about the relationships, and low self-consciousness; for the investment model— more rewards from the relationship, lower degree of conflict (costs), and low discrepancy between current and ideal relationship; and for the problem-solving model— more positive problem solving, less withdrawal, and less frequent negative problem-solving strategies. Many of these variables also lend support to the importance of relational, personal, and even contextual resources to the couple.
Correlates supporting themes in quality. Many of the other correlates of satisfaction lend support to themes found in studies of same-sex couple relationship quality. Minority stress has been examined and found to be indirectly related to relationship satisfaction; the effect of internalized homophobia varied depending on the level of commitment in the relationship, and the effect of discrimination varied depending on the level of trust in the relationship (Kamen et al., 2011). Houts and Horne’s (2008) findings on negative affectivity, which was measured in part by assessing perceived stress and internalized homonegativity, add further support to the complex role of minority stress on relationship satisfaction.

Higher ratings of couple satisfaction have been found to be significantly correlated with greater similarity between partners’ levels of career commitment (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990) and intrinsic religiosity (Rostosky, et al., 2008), lending support to the importance of partner homogamy. Like quality, satisfaction is also affected by perceptions of inequality in the relationship (Horne & Biss, 2009). An attachment framework, however, may mediate this relationship, such that partners whose perceptions of inequality elicit an anxious or avoidant attachment response are more likely to report lower relationship satisfaction.

Longevity

Measuring longevity. In its most basic sense, longevity can be understood as simply staying together, but how long must a couple remain in their relationship in order to achieve longevity varies from one research study to the next. Measuring longevity, therefore, is uniquely challenging. Researchers attempting to study the experiences of same-sex couples in long-term relationships have defined long-term as anywhere from 2 or more years (Degges-White & Marszalek, 2006) to 20 years or longer (Porche & Purvin, 2008). The most common length of time to identify long-term couples was 10 years or more (Connolly, 2004; Dziengel, 2012; Quam
et al., 2010). Other researchers tackled the study of longevity by examining its opposite—relationship dissolution. They do this in several ways: by examining a history of dissolution (Lau, 2012), attempting to measure perceptions of current stability (Khaddouma, Norona, & Whitton, 2015; Schneider, 1986), or through longitudinal studies examining rates of dissolution (Balsam et al., 2008; Gottman et al., 2003; Kurdek, 1998, 2004; Weisshaar, 2014). Another related approach to exploring the likely longevity of same-sex couple relationships has been to assess couples’ level of commitment (Duffy & Rusbult, 1985; Kurdek, 1995, 2000, 2006, 2008a). Interestingly, a good number of researchers used qualitative or mixed methods approaches in their studies of longevity (Connolly, 2004; Degges-White & Marszalek, 2006; Dziengel, 2012; Kurdek, 2006; Porche & Purvin, 2008; Quam et al., 2010).

Factors that affect longevity.

Barriers to leaving. Kurdek (1998) asserts that “barriers to leaving a relationship are of distinct importance for understanding the process of relationship dissolution” (p. 567). The more barriers one experiences to leaving the relationship, the less likely one is to do so (Kurdek, 1998, 2000, 2006). Research suggests that many long-term couples have found ways to demonstrate commitment to one another in ways that create a constraint or barrier to leaving. These include social or legal formalization (Lau, 2012; Porche & Purvin, 2008; Rosenfeld, 2014), purchasing a home (Porche & Purvin, 2008) or material possessions (Kurdek, 2006), or having children and becoming a family (Kurdek, 2006; Porche & Purvin, 2008). Other significant barriers to leaving as reported by participants include unattractive alternatives, fear, and family members or friends (Kurdek, 2006). What’s more, there is evidence that the more constraints experienced by one’s partner, the higher one’s own commitment to the relationship is (Kurdek, 2000).
Until recently, same-sex couples have not had the same opportunities to create legal barriers to leaving (e.g., by getting married), which has lead several researchers to conclude that the increased rates of relationship dissolution they found for same-sex couples could be explained, at least in part, by this inability to create legal barriers (Balsam et al., 2008; Kurdek, 1998; Lau, 2012; Rosenfeld, 2014; Schneider, 1986). Indeed, Kurdek (2004) found that same-sex couples were no more likely to dissolve than heterosexual couples, and Rosenfeld (2014) found that when marriage and marriage-like unions were controlled, for, same-sex couples actually had a lower rate of dissolution.

**Attractions to staying.** Kurdek (1998; 2000; 2006) found evidence that longevity is best predicted by examining not only outside forces (barriers to leaving the relationship), but also forces within the relationship (intimacy, equality, attractions to the relationship, etc.). Considering both forces that draw one to the relationship (attractions) and those that prevent one from leaving (constraints) best predicted global commitment over time, even after controlling for relationship satisfaction (Kurdek, 2000). Like constraints, a change in one’s partner’s level of attractions was also related to a change in one’s own commitment over time. Attractions to the relationship may play a moderating role on the effect of constraints on commitment. Kurdek (2000) found that high averaged levels of constraints were more strongly linked to high averaged levels of commitment at low averaged levels of attraction, even after controlling for relationship satisfaction. This relationship suggests that attractions may become less important to commitment as the couple experiences greater barriers to leaving.

Attractions to stay in the relationship can also act as deterrents from leaving the relationship (Kurdek, 2006). Kurdek (2006) found that intimacy had the strongest relationship with level of commitment as both an attraction to the relationship and a deterrent from leaving.
Companionship, support, family/children, commitment, and material possessions were also found to be significant as both attractions and deterrents in this study.

**Support and community.** Lacking an affirmative support network has been identified as a significant challenge to same-sex couple relationship longevity (Green, 2004; Degges-White & Marszalek, 2006; Dziengel, 2012; Khaddouma et al., 2015; Kurdek, 2008a; Porche & Purvin, 2008; Quam, et al., 2010). As mentioned previously, having support and family/children were reported by same-sex couples to be significant attractions to and deterrents from leaving the relationship (Kurdek, 2006). Interestingly, Kurdek’s model of commitment (2008a) found evidence that social support had an indirect effect on commitment through its connection to effective arguing, which he suggests may be a result of well-developed interpersonal skills.

Role models for how to be a successful same-sex couple may be especially important (Green, 2004; Porche & Purvin, 2008). Most sexual minorities do not grow up in families or cultural environments that provide models for how to be in a relationship with someone of the same sex, and following the heterosexual norm can create challenges (Green, 2004). In Porche and Purvin’s (2008) study,

…role models for lasting relationships were rare and yet so critical to success in relationships that they had to become their own role models as well as models for the community... By being visible, they are able to ‘pave the way’ for gay and lesbian youth to engage in lasting relationships. (p. 154)

These couples needed role models to succeed in their relationships, and succeeding was thus tied to a sense of responsibility for being role models to their community.

Still, while family of origin, friends, and religious and other community organizations can be helpful to longevity, they can also be a barrier (Dziengel, 2012, Quam et al., 2010). Thus,
many same-sex couples create a family-of-choice for support (Green, 2004). Individual and
couple therapy may also be a significant source of support to same-sex couple relationship
longevity (Dziengel, 2012; Porche & Purvin, 2008).

**Couple integration.** In her secondary data analysis of a mixed-method study on same-sex
couple longevity, Dziengel (2012) identified the theme, *couple integration*, which is “an
underlying sense of commitment and loyalty to the relationship, grounded in trust and with an
agreed understanding of their status as a couple” (p. 81). This theme included commitment,
sexuality, creating a couple identity, and being out. Although Dziengel’s (2012) research
included only older-age same-sex couples, the importance of couple integration is supported by
findings from other studies. There is evidence that the more important attachment is relative to
autonomy, the higher one’s commitment to the relationship is (Kurdek, 1995), suggesting that
loyalty to the couple identity over one’s own identity supports longevity. Couple integration is
also supported by the finding that the size of one’s investment in the relationship helps predict
the level of commitment (Duffy & Rusbult, 1985).

Several research studies found support for the importance of commitment to relationship
stability (Kurdek, 2006; Khaddouma et al., 2015; Porche & Purvin, 2008). As mentioned
previously, long term couples often demonstrate commitment by getting married, buying
property, having children, or becoming role models in the community, all of which require a high
level of being out (Porche & Purvin, 2008). Porche and Purvin (2008) also found that having a
first serious relationship at a formative age of sexual identity development was connected to
couples’ understanding of their relationship’s longevity. That is, falling in love with one’s
partner while coming to terms with one’s own sexual identity seemed to “set a strong foundation
for commitment” (p. 150) and likely contributed to experiencing a strong couple identity.
Dziengel (2012) identified monogamy as an important part of the sexuality component of couple integration, and evidence from other studies lends support to this. Couples in Porche and Purvin’s (2008) study named monogamy as important to their relationship success as well as to their responsibility as role models in the sexual minority community. In a qualitative study of gay males, however, the concept of monogamy was largely equated with emotional fidelity, and engaging in casual sex therefore did not constitute cheating (Bonello & Cross, 2010). Most couples in this study reported positive effects of non-monogamy on their relationship and had strategies in place to protect their primary relationship. In another study, although they did not differ from monogamous couple in most ways, non-monogamous couples reported a higher perceived quality of alternatives and lower dedication commitment (Whitton et al., 2015). Evidence from additional studies shows that higher quality of alternatives is related to decreased commitment to stay in the relationship (Duffy & Rusbult, 1985; Khaddouma et al., 2015; Kurdek, 2006).

**Maturity.** Couple maturity, which includes such qualities as healthy communication, conflict management, and minority stress management, was another theme identified by Dziengel (2012), and several other research studies lend support to its importance to longevity. Regarding communication, Gottman et al. (2003) found that couples with lower empathy and lower expectations for how positive their conversation would be were the most likely to break up, and Khaddouma et al. (2015) found that destructive conflict was associated with dissolution. Kurdek’s (2008a) model of commitment found a significant correlation between effective arguing had an indirect effect on relationship commitment through its positive correlations with measures of dependence on the relationship.
Minority stress management has been identified as important to longevity in several studies (Green, 2004; Porche & Purvin, 2008; Quam et al., 2010). Additionally, Khaddouma et al. (2015) found that, for females, personal sexual identity distress was related to relationship instability. Developing lasting bonds with one’s partner is made difficult when also managing fear of being exposed as a homosexual or struggling with accepting one’s own sexual identity (Green, 2004).

Other factors. Several other factors have been identified by one or two studies as important to longevity. Some of these include couple compatibility in shared interests, values, and life path (Dziengel, 2012), relationship quality (Kurdek, 2004), and low levels of depression (Khaddouma et al., 2015). Kurdek’s (2008a) model of commitment suggests that the personality traits of expressiveness and neuroticism may have an indirect effect on relationship commitment through their relationship to social support, effective arguing, and satisfaction. While Duffy and Rusbult (1985) found evidence that measurements of rewards/costs and quality of alternatives were predictive of relationship commitment, Gottman et al. (2003) did not find evidence that rewards/costs was predictive of relationship dissolution. Equality in the relationship may be a better predictor of longevity than an analysis of costs and benefits. Kurdek (1995) found that commitment level was negatively associated with a discrepancy between perceived levels of equality and ideal levels, and Weisshaar (2014) found that same-sex couples who made equal income were less likely to break up.

Kurdek (2008a) validated a model of relationship commitment for same-sex couples that included a number of variables on a continuum from distal to proximal influences. His model attempted to integrate influences from intrapersonal (neuroticism and expressiveness), contextual (support for the relationship), and interpersonal (effective arguing, satisfaction, attractiveness of
alternatives, and investment) factors. While many of the findings from this study have been mentioned already, the overall implication that longevity might best be predicted through an integrative model that considers multiple variables is worth emphasizing.

**Limitations/Critical Considerations**

While it is helpful to be able to clarify what we have learned thus far about the factors that affect relationship success for same-sex couples, this review also highlights many of the limitations in this knowledge. Perhaps the most prominent limitation is in measurement. In order to measure any variable, there needs to be an operationalized agreed-upon definition of what is being measured and how to measure it. The constructs of relationship success, quality, satisfaction, and longevity, however, are far from this ideal. Perhaps the greatest consensus one might draw from this review is that relationship quality is a multi-dimensional construct, which includes some measure of satisfaction. Meeting these criteria, Spanier’s (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) seems to be the most widely used measure of this construct. However, as Kurdek (1992) points out, only the Dyadic Satisfaction subscale of the DAS shared significant variance with other measures of relationship quality, suggesting that the DAS may be confounding the assessment of relationship satisfaction and some of the factors that affect relationship satisfaction. Indeed, many of the measures of relationship quality could arguably be determinants of quality as well. Perhaps satisfaction is the more measurable variable, and relationship success should be studied in terms of those factors that affect satisfaction and longevity alone.

The validity of the measurements used in these research studies should also be considered. Most of the assessments that are available and used in these research studies have been normed on heterosexual couples, and not all of them have been scientifically validated for
use with same-sex couples. Additionally, many researchers used assessments that were subscales from larger assessments or scales created specifically for that study without validation. Those studies that compared variables between same-sex and heterosexual couples use the same measures for both couples, which again assumes that these dimensions are the same for both types of couples. It seems clear that quality should be understood as a multi-dimensional construct that can be assessed through a wide number of variables, and that the results of any study of quality, satisfaction, or longevity, should be considered with the critical question of how these variables are being measured.

As is typical for research on the queer population (Addison & Coolhart, 2015), a major limitation of the studies examined in this review is their samples. Very few (Balsam & Syzmanski, 2005; Frost, 2011, 2014; Frost & Meyer, 2009; Mohr & Daly, 2008; Riggle et al., 2010) of the studies included or took into consideration bisexually-identified participants. None of them included trans-identified individuals. Most of the participants in the research studies were white, well-educated, and middle-class. Unless it was a study conducted outside of the United States, none of the studies reviewed here specifically targeted racial minority groups. Only one study specifically examined older same-sex couples (Dziengel, 2012). Additionally, some of the studies included in this review only sampled gay couples, and others only sampled lesbian couples.

Finally, in trying to answer the question of what affects relationship success for same-sex couples, it is important to keep in mind that many of the variables identified were mediated or moderated by other factors. It is likely that all of the variables identified in this review exist in more complex and dynamic relationship with quality, satisfaction, and longevity. That is, to say conclusively that one factor predicts longevity, for example, is too simplified. As researchers,
academics, and clinicians, it is critical for us to remember that research results only shed light on a small piece of the puzzle, only under certain conditions, and only with a certain population. All research should be held loosely with this in mind.

**Conclusion**

Researchers have attempted to understand aspects of relationship success for same-sex couples by studying the constructs of quality, satisfaction, and longevity. Although each of these constructs tended to be measured in a variety of different ways, reoccurring themes did emerge. Common factors that affect relationship quality include minority stress, outness, social support, partner homogamy, perceived equality, non-monogamy, mental health, and relationship formalization. Minority stress, partner homogamy, and equality have also been identified in studies of satisfaction alone. Conflict, resources, and perceived costs versus benefits were other factors most commonly identified in studies of satisfaction, and factors that affected longevity included barriers to leaving, attractions to staying, support and community, couple integration, and maturity. Further and more complex research is warranted on each of these factors, however, particularly as they relate to one another, mediating and moderating variables, and the construct of *success* as a whole. Future research should also include a more diverse sample, including mixed-orientation, transgender, and other queer identity locations.

The literature thus far suggests that the factors that predict relationship success (quality, satisfaction, and longevity) for same-sex couples are more similar than different to those for heterosexual couples (Balsam et al., 2008; Kurdek, 1998, 2004; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). In fact, Greene (2004) proposes that

The overarching difference in the lives of same-sex versus heterosexual couples is that the former must continually cope with the special challenges of claiming a socially
stigmatized identity…This is not to say that same-sex couples encounter intolerance or hatred at every turn but rather that they experience enough of it… to remain vigilant of its occurrence. It is almost impossible for a person to grow up in this society without internalizing some negative attitudes and fears about her or his own homosexual feelings and about the dangers of discrimination against lesbian and gay individuals. (p. 290)

It is likely that aspects of minority stress play a role in the influence of many of the variables affecting relationship success identified in this review, including outness, social support, mental health, relationship formalization, non-monogamy, perceived cost versus benefit, partner integration, and barriers to leaving. Future multi-level research on the relationships between minority stress and other factors affecting relationship quality is certainly warranted.

Despite the challenge of minority stress, a number of studies found evidence to suggest that same-sex couple relationships may fare even better than heterosexual ones. For example, in one study, both gay and lesbian same-sex couples reported greater relationship quality, compatibility, and intimacy and lower levels of conflict than heterosexual participants (Balsam et al., 2008). In another study, gay and lesbian participants scored the same as heterosexual couples on half of the factors that were compared, but of those factors where they differed, same-sex couples fared better than the heterosexual couples on 78% of them (Kurdek, 2004). Quam et al. (2010) found that the gay and lesbian participants in their study scored higher than heterosexual couples in three out of four areas on the ENRICH scale: couple satisfaction, couple communication and conflict resolution. Finally, in a study comparing gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples involved in a conflictual conversation, Gottman et al. (2003) found that same-sex couples showed less negative affect, belligerence, whining, and fear/tension and showed more affection, humor, and joy/excitement than the heterosexual married couples.
What we have so far is a number of correlates that relate to one part or another of the larger construct of success. That is, on the journey toward same-sex couple relationship success, we know some of the potential resources and roadblocks that couples may encounter along the way. With that information, we can help them to better prepare for their journey. What we are missing, however, is a coherent picture of how all of these factors may be connected and experienced by same-sex couples. One of the major obstacles that both same-sex couples and helping professionals face is the absence of any kind of roadmap for how same-sex couples might navigate the landscape of their relationship in order to reach the destination of success (Addison & Coolhart, 2015). We know that many same-sex couples have reached that destination—they have achieved success—but very little research has examined how they have gotten there.

That studies are finding many same-sex couples are able to succeed at least as well as, if not better than heterosexual couples, even in a cultural climate that often stigmatizes, marginalizes, and is sometimes dangerous for their relationships, implies that these couples have been able to find a way to overcome their unique challenges; they are resilient. Connolly (2005) defines resilience as a couple’s ability to protect their relationship against stressors and rebound from adversity. She writes that “Resilience is a central factor in couples’ ability to maximize relational strengths, mitigate external challenges, and maneuver successfully in the relationship” (p. 267). In learning how best to support success in same-sex couple relationships, turning our attention next to understanding resilience in same-sex couples is key. Future research should also seek to explore and understand the journey that successful same-sex couples have taken in terms of their relationship. Questions such as “When, in the course of the relationship, is resiliency most needed?”, “Which factors do same-sex couples experience as most important to their own
success?”, and “What are the common experiences that successful same-sex couples encounter along their relationship journey?” should be considered. The present study is an attempt to answer some of these questions and fill some of these important gaps in the literature.
Chapter Three: Methods

Purpose of the Present Study

In this study, I explored the types of challenges and life-events that same-sex couples experienced as important to their relationship story, the sources of resiliency they accessed in order to navigate those events, and how same-sex couples understood and narrated their experiences of success. There were four goals of this study: the first was to gain a better understanding of the kinds of challenges or life-events that created critical turning points toward success or dissolution of same-sex couple relationships; the second was to learn more about the internal, external, and relational resources that contributed to same-sex couple resiliency; the third was to identify common factors that successful same-sex couples believe contributed to the success of their relationships; and the fourth was to explore the ways that successful same-sex couples narrated their stories of relationship success. With this information, therapists and other queer-affirmative support systems will be better prepared to provide and even create services more specifically suited to supporting same-sex couples in co-creating healthy, satisfying, long-term relationships.

Learning through Stories

In this study, I sought to understand and learn from the lived journeys of couples in same-sex relationships. I wanted to go beyond learning about what happens in same-sex couples’ relationships to understanding the meanings that couples attribute to what happens in their relationship and how those meanings are co-constructed in storytelling success. The human mind seeks to make sense of all things—its self, one’s experience, one’s emotions, and other minds—by means of storytelling (Siegel, 2012). It is through couples’ relationship stories, therefore, that I
sought to answer my questions. To do so, I employed narrative inquiry as the theoretical framework guiding my methodology.

Narrative methodology privileges the lived and told experiences of participants’ lives (Creswell, 2013); it gives voice to people who may not otherwise be heard and is particularly useful for understanding people’s struggles, successes, and construction of meaning within cultural and political contexts (Frost, 2011; Frost & Ouellette, 2011). Narrative methodology gives voice to participants in a way that may influence other people’s understanding of reality, therefore having the power to facilitate social change (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) and public policy (Frost & Ouellette, 2011).

A narrative research methodology was thus particularly well-suited for my intentions in this study. As stated previously, I wanted not only to understand the journey of same-sex couples who have achieved success, but also to learn about the types of challenges they face along that journey and what it takes to get through those challenges so that others may benefit or be better supported in their own journeys. As Frost (2011) points out, “the kind of idiographic and person-centered perspectives that relationship stories afford may be useful in informing clinical and counseling interventions designed to improve the lives of couples struggling with stigma and intimacy” (p. 9). The experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, then, are well-served by narrative approaches. In this study, the narrative approach allowed participants to be co-researchers, honors them as the experts of their own lives, invites a strengths-based lens, and it enabled me to analyze and present the findings in a way that has the potential to create positive and supportive change on behalf of other same-sex couples.
Participants

Ten same sex couples, seven female and three male, between the ages of 33 and 69 (average age of 47), were interviewed for this study. In order to be included, participants needed to be together for a minimum of 10 years and identify as either male or female. Couples wherein one or both members identify as transgender, transsexual, or intersex, were unfortunately excluded, as the unique experiences of individuals and couples from the trans* and intersex communities were beyond the scope of this study. Individuals within the couple system appeared to expressed gender in non-normative ways, however, and two individuals identified with a sexual orientation label other than gay or lesbian (bisexual and pansexual). The majority of the partners identified as white, with one identifying as Asian/Pacific Islander. Income ranged from less than $25,000 to greater than $200,000 but averaged around $75-$100,000 for the couple. There was a variety in the types of education partners had achieved, but a majority (14) had education higher than high school, and 6 had multiple degrees. Geographic location ranged across the country—couples were from the West Coast, South, Midwest, and East Coast. Only two couples had children, both from previous heterosexual relationships. Couples were together for between 11 and 30 years, with an average of 19.4 years, and scored an average of 68 on the commitment scale and 123 on the DAS. I chose not to use scores on the assessments as inclusion criteria, so that I could honor couples’ self-identification as “successful.”

Participant selection. After gaining IRB approval, participants were recruited using snowball sampling. I used in-person contact, email, and Facebook to reach out to members and allies of the queer community known to me with the request that the study information be passed along to couples who may meet the criteria and be interested in the study. Recognizing that snowball sampling that originates from my circle of contacts is likely to generate a participant
pool of folks in social locations similar to my own, I also reached out to queer-supportive
organizations that interface or work with the lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) community, such
as Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), with the request that the study
information be passed along through their networks to any potential participants. My hope was
that these potential participants reached through these organizations might represent a more
diverse sample of social and cultural locations (race, socioeconomic status, level of education)
than my own. Unfortunately, none of the participants in this study were identified through those
organizations. The study information that was passed along included a brief description of the
study, the inclusion criteria, a link to the assessments and demographic form, and the research
contact information (see Appendix A). The informed consent (Appendix B) was also made
available during the recruitment process as an attachment to emails, a link on Facebook, or in
hard copy form.

Participants were interested in participating followed the link provided in the study
recruitment information in order to review and electronically sign the consent form (Appendix
B) and complete demographic information (Appendix C) and the assessments of relationship
commitment and quality. Both partners of each couple were asked to complete their
demographics and assessments individually. Two couples who were interested in participating
did not qualify for the study, one because they had not been together for 10 years, and the other
because they were internationally raised and located. Although US citizenship was not intended
to be an inclusionary criteria, I decided that the cultural differences may have been significant
enough to effect the results of the study and so chose, at that point, to exclude international
participants. I communicated with each of the two couples via the email addresses they had
provided on their demographics form to thank them for their willingness and explain why they
would not be included in the study.

Measures

Three measures were used in this study in order to gain more information about the
participants’ experiences of success and to allow for a comparison with other research studies on
same-sex couple relationships. These include measures for longevity, quality, and commitment.
Only the measure of longevity was used as inclusion criteria for participation in the study.

Longevity. Longevity was defined as having been in a committed relationship with one
another for 10 years or longer. Research on heterosexual couples suggests that the majority of
divorces occur within the first 10 years of marriage (Carroll & Doherty, 2003), and that length of
time in a relationship is a key predictor of couple longevity (Rosenfeld, 2014). This suggests that
if a same-sex couple remains together at the 10-year mark, they seem to have “made it” and are
likely to remain together. Furthermore, several other authors have identified long-term same-sex
couples as those who have been together for 10 years or more (Connolly, 2004; Dziengel, 2012;
Quam, Whitford, & Dziengel, 2010).

Quality. Relationship quality was measured using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS;
Spanier, 1976). Sample items for the DAS can be found in Appendix D. The DAS has been
widely used as a measure for relationship quality in studies with same-sex couples (e.g., Balsam,
Beauchaine, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2008; Balsam & Szymanski, 2005; Kurdek, 1988b, 2008b;
Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985, 1986; Ramirez & Brown, 2010; Tornello, Kruczkowski, & Patterson,
2015). The DAS includes scales for consensus, satisfaction, cohesion, and affectional expression
(Spanier, 1976). As a total measure, the DAS reports an internal consistency reliability of .96
(Spanier, 1976). As a point of comparison, the recommended cutoff score to distinguish between distressed and non-distressed couples is 107 (Crane, Allgood, Larson, & Griffin, 1990).

**Commitment.** Commitment was measured using eight items from Sternberg’s (1988) measure of commitment. (See Appendix E for items). In an exploratory factor analysis, Whitley (1993) found that, of the 15 original items in Sternberg’s (1988) original commitment sub-scale, only these 8 loaded both singly (only on the commitment subscale) and high (with item factor loadings above .67). Additionally, these eight items have been used in previous research as a measure of commitment in same-sex couples (e.g., Kurdek, 2000; 2008a). There is no established cutoff score for this measure to help one understand the difference between distressed or at-risk couples, and non-distressed couples. However, for the sake of my own comparisons, I considered a score of 56 or higher, which would mean an average commitment rating of 7 or more on the 9-point scale, to be suggestive of an overall high level of commitment.

**Data Collection and Management**

Once both partners of a couple completed the consent, demographics, and assessments, I scheduled an in-depth interview for at least one week later and sent “Before we meet” instructions to prepare for the interview (see Appendix F). As part of these instructions, participants were given the basic outline of interview questions and were asked to collaborate ahead of time with their partner about which stories they would like to tell to answer the interview questions (Appendix G). Although in-depth interviews were my primary source of data, I also collected several other sources of data to strengthen this study. First, I asked participants to complete a *lifeline* worksheet, indicating the significant events in their couple journey (See Appendix H). Fewer than half of the participants completed this lifeline, however, so it was not included in the final analysis. I also asked participants to gather photographs or
other documents that would help illustrate their journey, and all couples submitted at least one photograph. Three others submitted documents, including commitment certificates, newspaper articles, and letters to one another. I also took observational field notes during the interview and used these in my analysis. Finally, after I placed a couple’s stories into a chronology and identified major initial themes, I sent this information to the couple and requested their feedback. Six of the couples provided feedback, and this feedback was also included in my data analysis.

Interviews took place online via Doxy.me, a HIPAA-compliant secure video conferencing platform, or by phone if online access was not possible. Interviews were conducted with the couple together, took an average of 1.5 hours, and were audio recorded. Interviews were semi-structured and used a general interview guide approach, so as to offer both structure and flexibility (Turner III, 2010; Wells, 2011). Although I had initially planned, during the interview, to prompt the couple to expand on the context surrounding their stories (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009), to expand on parts of their stories that may seem significant, and to theorize about the meaning within their stories, I found that I did much less of this than expected. Couples spontaneously provided a great deal of context and meaning-making, and I ultimately chose to try to honor the parts of the story that they believed were significant by not following up on the details that stood out to me. It was my hope, therefore, that the results I obtained would more accurately reflect couples’ beliefs and experiences regarding their journeys of success. Still, through occasional follow-up questions, clarifications, requests for stories, and even reflections and validations of couples’ content, I recognize that the interviews nevertheless became something of a collaborative conversation in which meanings and responses were co-created (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Interview questions can be found in Appendix G.
All original photographs, documents, and paperwork, were scanned and returned. Digital copies that were sent to me by electronically were deleted after being saved to a secure external hard drive. Hard copies and the digital recorder were stored in a locked box until they were converted to digital form by download or scanning and, in the case of hard copies, returned to participants. Digital copies of all research data were securely stored on an external hard-drive in password-protected folders, and this hard-drive was stored in the lock box. Once downloaded to the external hard-drive, digital recordings were deleted from the audio recorder. Transcriptions and any other documents used during data collection and analysis were stored in the same secure locations. All data was labeled using pseudonyms chosen by participants, and no data from this study will be kept for longer than five years.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Once completed, each interview was transcribed by TranscribMe transcription service, and reviewed and verified by me. I used NVivo qualitative analysis software to support data analysis (QSR International, 2016) by using it to manually code the transcripts. In my analysis, I used a combination of chronological, thematic, and visual analysis (Creswell, 2013). I began by organizing couples’ stories into chronologies. A chronological analysis places couple’s stories into a temporal journey, with a beginning, a middle, and an end place of success. In compiling chronologies, I looked for similarities in the unfolding journeys—chapters of their stories, so to speak—that informed me about the factors, events, and processes that have influenced participants’ lives (Creswell, 2013). These became my initial chronological categories (Creswell, 2013). Photos and other documents were included alongside the chronology to supplement my analysis.
During this process, I also paid attention to both how the stories were told as well as to what was being said, which was the beginning of my thematic analysis. I took field notes regarding any thoughts, themes, meaning linkages, and contrasts that occurred to me. After each chronology was complete, I reviewed all of the data related to that particular couple and again took notes about my impression of the story as a whole, noting any major organizing ideas, and I created a running list of potential themes around what led to success and which resources the couple used in achieving success. After completing this process for each interview, I emailed the chronology with initial chronological categories, the list of potential themes for how success is achieved and resources the couple used, and a narrative description of the couples to participants for their review and feedback. Participants’ responses were included in the data analysis.

After incorporating participant responses into my initial chronologies and codes, I began a more targeted thematic analysis, using smaller units of the data—ideas, experiences, themes, interactions, etc. as found within and between stories. Using my field notes from the chronological analysis to inform my initial themes, I attended to the content of what was said and began generating a final list of codes and themes emerging both within and between the interviews. Visual analysis of the photographs, documents, as well as my observations, field notes, and feedback from participants supplemented this more detailed coding process.

Some of my initial codes were theory-generated (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This study explored same-sex couples’ relationships through a theoretical lens of a narrative journey toward a destination of success, the experience of resiliency, and participants as experts/teachers on successful same-sex couple relationships. I therefore looked for themes connected to aspects of a couple’s narrative journey, such as pivotal moments and chapters of the relationship. I also looked for themes around the meaning of success, resources for resiliency, and advice or lessons
that may benefit other same-sex couples. Importantly, I also intentionally looked for in vivo codes—codes that emerged from the real-life experiences of participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). While I recognized that codes that I identified initially would influence the way that I interpreted subsequent transcripts, I nevertheless attempted to remain conscientious about staying open to new codes with each new transcript. I also sought external feedback about my coding, as discussed in the next session.

Once I coded each interview, I re-evaluated each transcript using the complete set of initial codes that was developed. I then organized and consolidated the list of codes into more succinct themes and sub-themes. My last step, then, was to review all of the data that had been coded under each theme and sub-theme to verify whether the coding made sense or whether the data might better fit with another code. In my analysis, I examined significant events, challenges, and contexts that helped to shape same-sex couples’ relationships, the unfolding process of these couples’ journeys, the theories and meaning that couples attribute to their experiences, the qualities of their couple relationship (Creswell, 2013), and the ways in which these couple stories were narrated. Throughout this process, I attempted to bring critical awareness to my own bias and to search for alternative interpretations (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Trustworthiness

As alternatives to the more quantitatively appropriate standards of validity and reliability, Lincoln and Guba (1986) propose an evaluation of a study’s “trustworthiness” (p. 18) by examining its credibility (similar to internal validity), transferability (similar to external validity), dependability (similar to reliability), and confirmability (similar to objectivity). They offer a
number of techniques for increasing a study’s trustworthiness, several of which were used in this study.

Triangulation, or using multiple sources of information to cross-check and illuminate themes (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1986) supports credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) and was accomplished in this study through the use of photos and documents from each couple as well as observations and field notes. It was also accomplished by interviewing couples together, by interviewing more than one couple, and by interviewing lesbian, gay, and bisexual or mixed-orientation couples.

Peer debriefing, or consulting with an unbiased colleague or professional, is another way of adding credibility to a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Throughout this study’s design and implementation I consulted with my dissertation chair, Dr. Kevin Lyness, through scheduled debriefing sessions (Creswell, 2013). As part of this process, I asked him to review my initial set of codes in order to look for alternative explanations, researcher bias, and simply to ensure that they made sense.

This study also used the process of member checking in order to ensure further credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Member checking involves soliciting feedback from participants about the credibility and accuracy of one’s analysis and interpretation (Creswell, 2013). As discussed previously, I sent my initial chronology, organized into chapters, a running list of ideas around what led to the couple’s success and the resources they used to get there, and a narrative description of the couple (which included my observations of them) to participants with the request for written feedback around accuracy and any additional information that would illuminate the analysis. Eight of the ten couples responded. All of them confirmed the accuracy of stories and themes, and a few sent back brief clarifications around the points I had suggested,
updates on their life, or corrections in chronology. Responses that included more than just a confirmation of accuracy were loaded into NVivo as “documents” and included in the thematic analysis using the final listed of codes.

In writing the results of this study for dissemination, I use what is referred to as rich, thick description (Creswell, 2013). This means that I include details about the context, the participants, and the theme so that readers have enough information to decide for themselves how well the data fits (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Including direct quotes from participants in the discussion of my themes is one way that I will add to the “thickness” of my data.

Dependability and confirmability were enhanced in this study by keeping detailed field notes and memos, using high-quality digital recordings during the interview, and engaging in researcher reflexivity, as discussed previously (Creswell, 2013). Participants were asked to consider their stories on three occasions—during the preparation, interview, and member check—which also supported the dependability of their stories. Finally, my peer debriefing with Dr. Kevin Lyness further enhanced the dependability and confirmability of my findings.

Finally, in order to further reduce potential bias in this study, I engaged in a process of researcher reflexivity before collecting any data, during the study, and after completing my results, as discussed below. This allowed me to locate myself as a researcher within the study and gain awareness of how my position, beliefs, and assumptions might influence the study. I used this awareness both to try to intentionally set these potential biases aside and approach data collection and analysis more objectively and to make this information available to others as they consider the dependability and confirmability of my methods and results.
Researcher Reflexivity

Qualitative research, and narrative inquiry in particular, involves an "interplay" between the researcher and the participants (Creswell, 2003). Stories and their meanings are co-created through the interactions of participants and researchers as they perceive, interpret, and respond to one another (Wells, 2001). Whether intentional or not, a narrative research process is nevertheless a collaborative one (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Wells, 2011), and the researcher’s cultural, historical, and personal background, as well as the sociopolitical climate of the times influence her actions, reactions, and interpretations along the way (Creswell, 2003). Thus, the researcher becomes an integral part of the entire process and product. However, in this study, I wanted to learn from the experts, the couples who participated, about what they understand success to be and how they got there.

With this in mind, I acknowledge that my position had the potential to bias the study by shaping the interview process or the interpretation of the data in such a way that confirmed what I thought I would discover (Johnson, 1997). In hopes to minimize this bias, I wanted to set my preconceptions aside, as much as possible. For this reason, I will briefly discuss my position in this study and how it may have affected the research. This reflexivity was largely done before I collected any data, but it continued throughout the research process.

I am a 34 year old white, middle class, spiritual (but not religious), able-bodied, queer-identified, female sexed, cisgendered, polyamorous doctoral student in an 8-year same-sex relationship with my wife and a 2-year trans* relationship with my partner. In my personal and professional life, I have always been fascinated by couple relationships and how people navigate them. I feel called to the purpose of finding ways to help couples experience health, satisfaction, growth, and longevity in their relationships. Since coming out, now over 12 years ago, my
interest and passion for supporting relationships has become more focused on queer relationships. One of my career goals is to create a pre-union and/or couple enrichment program for queer couples.

I am aware that my interest in conducting this research study was very closely connected to my professional interests and my personal life. I have an investment in advocating for the success of same-sex relationships. I am further invested in the power of my research to influence policy and services that support same-sex relationships, because I am personally and professionally affected by these policies and services. As a Couple and Family Therapist, I desire to be knowledgeable, informed, and effective in my work with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and otherwise queer-identified clients. Thus, I want to be both a consumer and a producer of the knowledge that will inform my work.

It is likely that my position influenced the process and product of this study. My education and experience in the field positioned me as an expert in my own way, and I expect that participants may have responded to me as such. I am also aware that this positioned me in a place of some power, and so I attempted to be mindful both of how I came across to my couples and of how my own prior knowledge and experience may have informed the meaning I gave to their stories. In part, I attempted to accomplish this by minimizing the follow-up questions I asked about couples’ stories, thus privileging the context and content that they believed was important. I also acknowledge that I went into this study with pre-conceived ideas of what it means to be successful and even what it takes to achieve success. For example, I initially proposed to exclude couples who did not reach certain scores on the DAS and commitment scale. It was not until I was in communication with a potential participant who did not meet those cutoff scores that I realized that I was privileging my own ideas about what it meant to be
successful (to achieve certain scores on measures of success). In favor of privileging client’s ideas about success, I decided to remove the assessments as inclusion criteria.

Additionally, I recognize that the language that I used in my interview questions spoke to my biases around what I expected to find along the journey toward to success. For example, the use of the words “turning points” came from my own theory that relationship journeys would have important turning points and that how couples navigated those turning points would hold a special significance in couples’ journeys toward success. While doing the interviews, however, I quickly learned that this concept did not seem to resonate with couples’ narratives the way I thought I would, thus alerting me to the influence of this bias in my study.

It is also important for me to name the theoretical framework from which I conducted this study, as this influenced my perception of the information that I was given, the meaning I made from it, the questions I asked, how data was coded, and the results and conclusions I drew. My theoretical framework is largely grounded in social constructivism, which understands realities to be co-constructed and multiple (Creswell, 2013). I believe my framework is also highly influenced by postmodern and queer theories, which add a more critical and social-justice focused lens to the consideration of information, it’s context, implications for conclusions, and my position in the research.
Chapter Four: Results

Introducing the Couples

The following introductions attempt not only to convey information about each of these couples, but also to capture a sense of their story and their relationship dynamics. All but one of the pseudonyms used below were chosen by the couples themselves, and the couple’s story, not including their demographic information, was sent to each couple for their review during the member-check process. The quotations used below are direct quotes taken from the participant’s interviews.

Buzz and Moo. Buzz and Moo, both white women in their thirties, have been together for 11 years, and are legally married. They both scored a 72 on their commitment, and were above the clinical cutoffs on the DAS (121 and 129, respectively). During the interview, they sat close to one another, with Moo’s arm wrapped around her wife, as it was in most of the pictures they’ve sent me. Although Buzz did most of the talking during the interview, I noticed that they made a lot of eye contact, repeated one another’s words in validation, and that Moo was not afraid to jump in and add to the story. Buzz and Moo started their relationship after meeting at an LGBT dance club. Buzz took the risk of approaching Moo, and the couple exchanged information by completing cards provided by the club, which asked for name, number, and whether one was top, bottom, or versatile (Moo checked versatile). It was Moo who took the next step in reaching out to Buzz for their first date. It turns out that Moo was the first woman that Buzz had dated, and although Moo was “playing the field” (as she put it) at first, she knew she was going to be more invested in this relationship than the others after their first time having sex, when she realized that Buzz would be different, and “was better than all the others.” For Buzz, there was no defining moment of knowing it would be forever; there were, instead,
“moments of choosing… some more profound than others” until at some point she just couldn’t see her future without Moo.

**John and Bert.** John, an Asian/Pacific Island man in his forties, is several years younger than Bert, who is a white man in his fifties, but the couple named their age difference as a source of attraction for them both. They have been together for 17 years and are legally married. On the commitment scale, they both scored 72, and scored very closely on the DAS (128 and 133, respectively). John and Bert described themselves as having an “opposites attract” quality to their relationship story, but “we balance each other well.” Indeed, although Bert took the lead in telling most of the stories during the interview, there was still plenty of space for John to share his side. There was an ease between them. Unlike most of the couples I had interviewed, I noticed that John and Bert talked not only to me, but also to one another. This couple met at a GLB-specific tennis event, where they wound up playing on the same court. They hit it off right away, and Bert made the first move in asking for John’s contact information. At that point in his life, Bert was ready to settle down, and he saw in John all of the things he wanted in a partner. John was at a different place in his life, however; he was dating around, living with an ex, and was also not nearly as comfortable with his identity as a gay man as Bert was. Yet these differences and Bert’s stability held a great appeal for John. Shortly into dating, when Bert asked John to make some changes and commit to him alone, John was ready. Many of their differences have created challenges for this couple throughout their relationship, but none have been insurmountable. Seventeen years later, this couple continues to inspire growth in one another while enjoying an “exorbitant amount of time together.”

**Alice and Dorothy.** Alice and Dorothy, both white women in their thirties, are married, and have been together for 14 years. Their DAS scores were 116 and 109 respectively, and they
both scored high on the commitment scale (70 and 72 respectively). After hearing the stories of the challenges they have overcome, several rather recently, both their DAS score and their commitment score make a lot of sense. This couple has really hung in there, with high commitment, to create the quality they find in their relationship today.

Serendipity seems to have played a hand in bringing Alice and Dorothy together. They first knew one another from the bookstore at which Alice worked. Having caught Dorothy’s attention, Dorothy would “stalk” her there. That’s as far as it went until, coincidentally, they met again under a different context; Alice became Dorothy’s trainer at a GLBT volunteer crisis line. Yet the relationship did not start here. After denying Dorothy’s request to go out for coffee, Alice disappeared from Dorothy’s life for several months. Then, one day Alice showed up at the bar where Dorothy and her new partner were. The next day, Alice called, but of course, Dorothy was with someone by then. Their story continued with a few more stops and serendipitous re-starts. As they told their story of beginning, the couple laughed and noted that they playfully argue about whether Dorothy had “stalked” Alice the entire time. “The bookstore was intentional, but everything else just worked in my favor” Dorothy explained. Throughout their relationship, this couple has encountered many moments where they weren’t sure they were going to make it, yet they hung in there, sometimes week-by-week. In their interview, as well is in the many photographs they’ve shared with me, there was a playfulness, ease, and affection between the couple which belies the struggles that they describe in their stories. While they both reflect surprise to find that they have made it to where they are today, they have nevertheless made it, to a place of greater health, more connection, and being able to genuinely enjoy their life together.
Sheila and Diana. Sheila and Diana are white women in their fifties, married, who have been together for over 25 years. They both scored 72 on the commitment scale and were within a point of one another on the DAS (123 and 122 respectively). Sheila and Diana met at a professional conference, but got to know one another while attending graduate school a few months later. Neither were expecting to fall in love, nor for the relationship to unfold so quickly, but it was only a few months of dating before they were living together. Something was different about this relationship for both women—they felt loved and accepted for who they were. Sheila and Diana described a rather magical story of marriage; they were the first same-sex couple to get married in their state, and they did so under a blue moon, on New Year’s Eve, at the stroke of midnight. This was their legal marriage, however, and for this couple, the more important date is that of their commitment ceremony, 12 years earlier. The stories of their decision-making around whether, when, and how to formalize their relationship are indicative of the many strengths this couple brings to the challenges they face. It was evident throughout the interview, in the way they talked, laughed, and shared, that these two are still very much in love.

Thelma and Louise. Thelma and Louise are both white women in their fifties, but Thelma is six years older, a difference which, in the beginning, made a difference for Thelma. They are in a domestic partnership, have been together for 30 years, and have just made plans to get legally married in 2017. Thelma and Louise have significantly different scores on their commitment scales (43 and 72, respectively), but this may be due to a misreading of some of the items, as Thelma’s lower score was not supported by any of the other data from this couple. Both women scored well above the clinical cutoff on the DAS, at 121 and 124. Thelma and Louise were all smiles and laughter as they gathered around the web-cam, although the connection wasn’t strong enough for us to stay on video chat for the entire interview. This couple has been
together longer than any of the other couples, and their stories of challenges and successes span two generations. They met through a mutual friend, and enjoyed deep conversations on the telephone before ever meeting in person. When they did first meet in person, it was love at first sight for Louise. Thelma, on the other hand, was more cautious. She was older and had two kids from a previous heterosexual marriage, whereas Louise was young and unattached. Thelma knew “the games” and didn’t want to play them, so the couple took their time dating and continuing their deep conversations. After six months, however, Thelma knew—from what she saw in Louise’s eyes and what she knew in Louise’s personality. In the 30 years they’ve been together, Thelma and Louise have made it through some of the toughest challenges that couples can face. Today, they boast of pride—in their relationship, in their life, and in their children and grandchildren. They have shared photos and letters from past and present, which tell a story of connection, love, respect, and the rewards of a life and love worth hanging on to. Thelma and Louise encourage me to listen to Shania Twain’s song, “Looks like we made it” (You’re still the one, Twain & Lange, 1997, track 3), because, Louise explains, “yes, we did.”

**Sam and Lacey.** Sam and Lacey, both white women in their forties, have been together for 12 years, and had gotten legally married just weeks before our interview. They both scored 64 on their commitment scale, solidly above the cutoff score, and scored 124 and 123, respectively, on the DAS. Sam and Lacey met through mutual friends on Halloween weekend. They felt a connection right away, but because they were in other relationships, it would be more than four years before they could realize anything beyond friendship. When Sam was finally available, she knew right away that she wanted to connect more closely with Lacey, so she stepped out of her usual role of being the one pursued, and organized a group date, followed by their first solo date. In one another, Sam and Lacey explained that they have found the “whole
“package”—someone who has all the qualities they wanted and who accepts and adores who the other person is. They both agreed that they feel as if they were made for one another. In our interview, the connection between these two appeared vibrant and alive. Lacy had her arm around Sam’s shoulder, and both partners participated in telling their stories. The two were playful together, laughed often, and they looked at one another with clear adoration. Perhaps this was, in part, because they were still glowing from the honeymoon they’d just returned from. Still, after hearing their stories of challenge and success over the 12 years of their relationship, I am persuaded that these qualities of connection, love, and laughter are just a part of who this couple is.

**Alejandro and Joseph.** Alejandro, a white man in his late forties, and Joseph, a white man in his late fifties, are eight years apart, and the couple remarked on this age difference when telling their stories. They are in a domestic partnership, have been together for 21 years, and reported both high commitment (72 and 68 respectively on the commitment scale) and relationship quality (127 and 131 on the DAS). Alejandro and Joseph described themselves as best friends, and their commitment to staying together through tough times is a testament to what they have found in one another. Joseph and Alejandro have navigated liver transplants, debilitating blood diseases, a traumatic car accident, and consequent coma, brain injury, and memory loss, and broken backs, plus all of the emotional, financial, and relational consequences that come with these challenges. As they told their stories, I noticed that Alejandro was more outgoing and talkative, while Joseph was more quiet and reserved, yet they still work together to complete the story. This couple’s relationship began on the very first day the two of them spent time together, and they have been practically inseparable ever since. Alejandro knew of Joseph from the bank at which he worked, and although he did not know whether Joseph was gay, he
suggested hanging out sometime. Joseph initially declined the invitation, but he changed his mind, and by the end of their evening together, he was giving a very nervous Alejandro permission to kiss him. Alejandro was the first man that Joseph had dated, yet they connected and complimented one another right away, and the rest, as Alejandro put it, “just evolved.”

**Mark and MJ.** Mark and MJ are both white men in their forties, are married, and have been together for 16 years. MJ scored a 68 on the commitment scale, but Mark scored below my proposed cutoff of 56 with a score of 48. Both scored below the recommended cutoff on the DAS (101 and 91 respectively), suggesting that the couple was in distress at the time of completing these assessments. A month later, however, when we were conducting the interviews, Mark explained that their scores were particularly low at that time because he and MJ were experiencing quite a bit of stress in their relationship. Since then, he reported, the couple had experienced a turning point that had put their relationship back on track toward greater commitment and quality.

Neither Mark nor MJ were necessarily looking for a relationship when they first met. In fact, both had just gone through some pretty tough things—Mark had just gotten out of a serious relationship, and MJ had just lost his father. When Mark noticed MJ at the gym, however, which MJ had just happened to join, Mark was struck enough that he brought up the experience with his friends that night at a bar. At the very moment that Mark was telling his friends about the new cutie at the gym, however, MJ walked through the door! When Mark saw him, he began laughing at the coincidence, and upon seeing this group of people looking at him and laughing, MJ boldly approached to ask, “So what’s funny?” They went on their first date four days later, and have hardly spent time apart since then. During our interview, this couple shared openly and equally about the struggles they have had, some rather recent, and it was evident from the way
that they shared that these two have invested time and energy to learn “how to be together better.” Both Mark and MJ agreed that, no matter what has happened, neither have ever been able to imagine life without the other.

Callie and Crystal. Callie and Crystal are in a domestic partnership, and they have been together for 25 years. Callie is a white woman in her late sixties, and Crystal is a white woman in her mid-fifties, but this age difference didn’t seem to make a difference to this couple, neither when they met nor throughout their many years together, at least so far as they report in their stories. They both scored 72 on their commitment scale and shared the same score of 127 on the DAS. I conducted Callie and Crystal’s interview over the phone, and Callie told most of the stories. The pictures they had sent me seem to capture this couple well; in the photos, Callie had an enthusiastic and outgoing smile, while Crystal’s smile seems more reserved. From the photos, it was also clear that this couple truly enjoys spending time together and in many activities, a point that is emphasized and demonstrated throughout the stories they share. When Callie and Crystal met, they learned not only that “there was something there that clicked,” but also that their lives were already tied together through other relationships and shared interests. Despite quickly recognizing that they would “end up being a couple,” it took some time for the relationship to officially begin, as Callie was involved with someone else at the time. Yet once things started, they really took off, and it was clear that this couple enjoys one another’s company as much today as they did when they first met. Their stories of struggle and success speak not only to their enjoyment of one another, but also to how well Callie and Crystal work together and support one another.

Frances and Savannah. Frances and Savannah, both white women in their forties, have been together for 23 years and are legally married. They both scored 72 on the commitment scale
and scored high on the DAS at 141 and 131, respectively. Frances and Savannah were both married to another person when they met 27 years ago at a summer program in which they were both involved. Frances knew right away, however, that Savannah was someone she wanted in her life. They developed a close friendship, and when Savannah joined the National Guard and moved to Texas, Frances, who was already in the Guard, changed her classification so that she could follow Savannah across the country. The two saw each other nearly every day, and they enjoyed an ease and connection with one another that is evident to me in our interview. Their friendship continued this way for about three years before Frances finally shared, for the first time, how she really felt about Savannah. It was a big risk, given that they had never acknowledged having feelings for one another, but clearly, it paid off. Savannah said, “I’m in,” and, in what I soon learned was true Savannah fashion, she trusted from that point that they would figure out the rest, complicated as it might be in the beginning. Frances shared that she felt she had won the lottery that day, “And I got to be honest, it's still the same today. Its 24 years later, and I'm not reading the numbers anymore, because I know that I won.”

**Results of the Analysis**

In this study, I used a narrative inquiry framework to explore the journeys of success as told by the long-term same-sex couples who participated. I sought to accomplish four goals in this analysis: a) To better understand the kinds of challenges or life events that may create critical turning points toward success or dissolution; b) to learn more about the resources that contribute to same-sex couple resiliency; c) to identify common factors that same-sex couples believe contribute to success, and d) to explore ways that same-sex couples narrate their stories of success. I used two different styles of narrative analysis—chronological and thematic—to accomplish these goals, and I included relationship stories, direct responses to interview
questions, photographs, documents, field notes, and feedback from the member-check in my analysis.

As a result of my analysis, three organizing themes emerged: the journey to success, what contributes to success, and how the story is told. The first section, the journey to success, emerged as something of a storied roadmap from meeting to arriving at success for same-sex couples. In this section, I explore the major chapters of relationship experiences that couples went through, and in doing so, I identify the important landmarks, turning points, and challenges along the path toward success, and I also gain a better understanding of what success means to these couples. In the second section, what contributes to success, I identify the factors that couples attribute to their own success, as well as other common resources that emerged as significant to their journey. In the final section, how the story is told, I reflect on common aspects of the process and content of storytelling that emerged in this study. To help provide an overview of the results of this study, Table 1, below, summarizes the major thematic findings within each organizing theme. Sub-themes were also identified within several of the primary themes, but are not summarized in Table 1.

**The Journey Toward Success**

In my chronological analysis, stories were compared for similarities in couples’ relationship journeys, highlighting some of the important events, challenges, and turning points that the couples experienced. Results suggest that these journeys unfold through several common “chapters.” I have titled these chapters: *life before we met, coupling, taking big first steps, adjusting, challenges and turning points, commitment stories, and success is*. The content of these chapters was identified when four or more of the couples described similar experiences.
Life before we met. In telling the story of how they met, all the couples included stories of their lives prior. Doing so served the purpose of setting the stage for the context and timing of the partner’s experience of meeting one another. Nearly all of these stories described a previous relationship that at least one partner had been in. Interestingly, for more than half of the couples, at least one partner was already in a relationship with another person when the couple met, and several more partners described having just gotten out of a relationship. Sheila, for example, tells a story of working with her therapist to end a relationship with someone she knew she did not want to spend the rest of her life with, when she met Diana. “I think I was looking for a friend and I don't think I realized that the connection was going to be that strong. I just fell pretty hard early on.” Like Sheila, many of the partners who were in or just out of a relationship mentioned that they were not necessarily looking for another relationship when they met their life-partner.

It is interesting to note, however, that at least one of the partners in each of the male couples told stories that positioned them as quite ready for a long-term relationship. For example, Bert tells a story of having been married to a woman, gotten divorced, and taken the time to live the “gay lifestyle” for a while.

So, the timing for me was good. I was open to it. I was ready for it, I think, at that point.

So, when John came along, I think I kind of already—when we first met—was very interested.

In each of these cases, the partner who described readiness also happened to be a couple of years older, which may have been a contributing factor.

Coupling. In this chapter of the couples’ relationship journeys, they describe how they met, how they became a couple, and when and how they knew that this person was the one they wanted to spend their lives with.
As part of the interview process, I asked couples to tell the story of how they met. As these stories unfolded, it became clear the stories of “meeting” would more accurately be described as stories of “coupling.” Couples described not only how they met one another, but also how and when they became couples. Couples met in a variety of ways—through mutual friends, gay/lesbian activities or safe spaces, work, and shared activities. Couples frequently described an initial attraction and connection upon having met. A majority of the couples described getting to know one another or being friends before starting a committed relationship, and another couple spoke of the importance of being friends first. Given that the majority of couples were in or just out of other relationships, being friends first seems to make sense.

Another commonality that emerged in these stories was a sense of taking a risk in approaching one another to begin the relationship. About finally expressing her true feelings to Savannah, Frances stated “I was scared. I was absolutely—terrified.” Like for Frances and Savannah, some of the other couples who had a friendship first also express fears about moving to the next level. For several of the other couples describing risk, it seemed to be more about stepping out of character. “For some reason, he said, ‘It’s okay, you can kiss me.’ I had no idea that he was gay. I don't think he knew I was gay. But that was the first time that we met, and we have been together ever since” (Alejandro). In these stories of coupling, something about the other person was worth taking a chance on in order to initiate the relationship.

Perhaps what was so worth taking a risk on was the sense that there was something different, special, better than all the rest in the person the risk-taking partner had met. Indeed, all but one of the couples described finding an ease, enjoyment, and connection unlike any they had ever found before. Couples talked about not having to settle or change who they were. As Lacey describes,
It was just—you know you think of this that you have this idea who you might spend—type of person you want to spend your life with and it comes down from looks to personality to everything and then whenever I met Sam it all seemed to really all come together like, wow, there's actually somebody that's like that. I thought I would have to settle on certain aspects of things and I didn't have to and I felt that so early. We connected, we would laugh all the time, we would have such a good time. We had such a dynamic chemistry that just hasn't faded.

In her direct and casual way, Savannah captured this often-described experience succinctly: “It was good. It was all good.” Importantly, the one couple whose stories did not include these sentiments directly also did not imply that their experience was otherwise. It is possible that they, too, shared this experience of things being “all good” but simply did not talk about it during the interview.

In the interview, I also asked couples to describe when and how they “knew” that this person was the one they wanted to spend their lives with. I expected that there may be an important moment or turning point here. However, only two of the couples identified any kind of specific turning point during which they gained the sense that this relationship was going to be “it” for them. At least one partner in most (seven) of the couples identified having a sense of knowing right away. Surprisingly, despite most couples’ agreement that their relationship with one another was better than anything they had experienced before, one partner in half of the couples described beginning the relationship with some caution and uncertainty.

Like in the beginning, oh, yeah. I was like scared by it because I'm like, "I'm independent. I don't need anyone and I'm fine." And I started to feel like I needed him,
but it was more of that I've come to realize that I just really enjoyed being around him and I was just in love with him. (MJ)

Like MJ, most of the caution expressed by these partners had to do with their own fears about being in a committed relationship, perhaps because they were aware of how special this one was.

One other common response emerged to the question of how and when they “knew”—it evolved. “There really isn't a defining moment that we said, ‘Oh, it's going to last.’ There were, I think, lots of little moments of we're choosing to stay together, or choosing to make a decision together” (Buzz). Dorothy echoed a similar sentiment in explaining,

I didn't know it was going to be like forever, forever. When we made love [laughter]. For me I'm very much when I commit to something, I'm pretty committed. And I'm very much in the moment, so I doesn't have to be like, "Oh my god we're going to be together for 30 years." It's like, "I want to be with you." It's just like, it's very much about being just present.

In these stories, we begin to hear the importance of commitment to the relationship and the implication that, perhaps, there are many potential turning points along the journey.

**Taking big first steps.** In the process of interviewing, it seemed as if the first big step, or major turning point, for couples would be deciding to move in together. When organizing stories chronologically, however, it became evident that there was often an important turning point that happened before the decision to move in—having planning conversations.

Seven of the ten couples told stories of having had important conversations about what one or both partner wanted in the future of the relationship, what I call planning conversations. These conversations included things like whether the couple would try to have kids, career directions and possible moves, expectations around finances, commitment, and the kind of
relationship that each partner wants to have. Some of the couples described these conversations as being potential “deal-breakers” and even giving your partner an “ultimatum.” “I don’t want to continue to spend my romantic energy on that person if they don’t want to have kids,” Buzz explained. These conversations seemed to help to clarify expectations, increase a sense of security in the relationship, and pave the way for trusting that moving to the next stage in their relationship by living together would be a good decision. Thelma explained,

We got to know each other's goals and just the type of relationship you want to be at. Are you wanting like family? How do you feel about children? Because she never had any, and like I said, she was younger than I was. And she was in a few relationships that were, you know, not long lasting, but they were still significant. And I didn't want to start a relationship that was going to end up being like that. It's all or nothing for me [laughs].

If these conversations had gone differently, the results could have taken the couples’ relationship in a different direction—possibly toward dissolution. Instead, these planning conversations seemed to pave the way for the next major turning point: deciding to move in together.

Although they were not directly asked about it, all but two of the couples told stories about first moving in together, suggesting that this decision and event is an important moment or turning point in the couples’ relationship journeys. The timing of this decision, when it was noted, varied from “right away,” to a couple of months, to an entire year into the relationship. Perhaps the decision to move in together was important as it marked an evolution of the relationship into a new level of commitment. Now partners’ lives were more intricately connected. Living together was a testament to both partners’ desire and commitment to build a life together.
Adjusting. Most of the couples told stories about what their relationship was like in the early stages. In analyzing these early relationship stories, couples seemed to be describing a process of adjusting to life with one another. The most common things that couples described adjusting to were one another’s personalities, sharing space, and learning to express themselves, rather than just saying what their partner may want to hear. For some couples, this process of adjustment was fairly easy. For others, it created challenges in their relationship, which the couple had to overcome. All of the couples, however, reflected on having learned or accomplished something important to their relationship. “We figured out how to be gay together,” MJ explains, “Looking back now, I realize how naïve we were to everything. It was fascinating.”

Included in the early relationship stories, for nine of the ten couples, were stories and descriptions of how partners’ family of origin responded and eventually adjusted to the relationship. Occasionally, these stories were about a family member expressing uncertainty about their loved-one’s partner, not necessarily because of their sexual orientation. For seven of the ten couples, however, at least one partner told stories about their family of origin reacting to their same-sex relationship in a negative or unsupportive way. “They thought I was brainwashed or on drugs or something, because I was gay” (Joseph). For many of these couples, the lack of support from family of origin was highlighted in stories about their weddings or commitment ceremonies. Sheila and Diana, for example, tell the story of having waited eight years before having a commitment ceremony, so that Sheila’s family might be in a more accepting and supportive place and thus be included in the ceremony. John and Bert told a story of Bert feeling loved and accepted by John’s family, but not being acknowledged as his spouse; their wedding was not attended nor talked about by John’s family. Although not all family members have come
around for these couples, each story concluded with a statement about how things had improved with at least some of their loved ones; family members adjusted and became more accepting and supportive of these couples’ relationships. It is interesting to note that, of the nine couples who told stories of their family of origin struggling initially with the couple’s relationship, only three of these couples’ stories suggested that it created a conflict or challenge for the couple.

**Challenges and turning points.** During the interview, couples were asked to consider some of the most significant challenges and turning points during their relationship thus far. Some of these I have described already—planning conversations, moving in, adjusting to life together, and a lack of support from family of origin. Several other common storylines also emerged for couples, as they considered the significant challenges they have faced thus far. The most frequently told challenge stories were of moving and of stress pile-up. Half of the participants told challenge stories about coping with the illness and death of a parent, early conflict, and financial stress, and four of the ten couples reported facing challenges around both substance abuse issues and being or becoming parents. Other notable challenges, reported by only three of the ten couples, include: job stress; coping with an illness, injury, or accident of one of the partners; and “so-called” friends.

It might be argued that many of the challenges described by couples could have been turning points in their relationship. However, in this study, turning points were identified only if the couple mentioned experiencing uncertainty about whether their relationship would continue or a sense that this was a thing that needed to change or be resolved. Common turning points were identified as occurring in stories of stress pile-up, financial stress, substance abuse, and early conflict. Couples named other turning points as well, but these seemed to be unique to that
particular couple. Interestingly, a common storyline of “Either you make a change, or…” emerged across several of the turning point stories.

**Moving.** The most common story theme of a challenging time that the couples went through during their relationship was related to moving. These stories were separate from the story of choosing to move in together, and included plots around the couple’s need to move in the first place, finding a house that met both of their needs, and challenges associated with buying, selling, and remodeling a home. Frances and Savannah tell the story of navigating an unforeseen challenge in trying to move closer to the lake that they loved. Frances explained,

So, we found a house on the lake to rent just until the short sale went through. Well, it didn't go through. And I think that was a tough part because she said, "All right, we're moving South. That's it. We're out of here." And I said, "Well, what about that house that we always looked at?" And I was like, "It's not even for sale. There's no way we can even afford this house."

Savannah continues the story:

So, you never know unless you ask. So, I called the guy, and he said he would sell it, gave us a price, and it was doable. So, we did it. So, we went through, and we're actually sitting in that house right now [chuckles].

Like Frances and Savannah’s story, most of the stories about moving challenges were told with a tone of pride and triumph as well as an implied intention of demonstrating the way that the couple navigates challenges together.

**Stress pile-up.** Another common storyline described by couples as particularly challenging during their relationship was of a time during which several challenges or stressors were happening at once. Stressors included job loss and financial strain, illnesses, care of sick
parents, moving, and significant losses. This kind of stress pile-up seemed to put the greatest amount of pressure on the couple relationship, as it was often described as one of the hardest things the couple went through, and, for some couples, was described as a time during which they were unsure that they would make it.

Three of the couples who shared stories of stress pile-up indicated that there were times during these experiences when one or both partners were unsure whether their relationship would survive. One couple shared two of these stories. Joseph and Alejandro, for example, shared a story of navigating a series of life-threatening and relationship-changing experiences in a short period of time.

Back in 2000 I had liver failure, and I was admitted to a hospital for a transplant. And then after that—we were there for about three months. After that, we were involved in a car accident. Alejandro pulled out in front of a Ford F-350 truck, and we had a 250 Sidekick, and we got hit. The guy was going about 60 or 65 miles an hour, hit us, rolled our vehicle three times, and I was dead and in a coma for six weeks… Then after that, after I was better from that, I was just ready to start going back to work, and then I developed a blood disease… So, I was off work for another—all in all, I was off work almost two years. (Joseph)

As one might imagine, the consequences of these stressors for Joseph and Alejandro were physical, emotional, relational, and financial, and they put a tremendous strain on the couple’s relationship. However, Joseph and Alejandro, like all the couples who have experienced the intense challenge of stress pile-up, found a way to make it through and stay together.

**Illness and death of a parent.** Half of couples told stories of one or both of their parents being ill and eventually passing away. In each of these stories, this experience was told as one of
the most challenging times that the couple had gone through together. However, there was also a common theme of the couple making adjustments in their own lives and relationships in order to support or help care for the ailing parent. For Callie and Crystal, for example, this meant inviting Callie’s mother to live with the couple for the last few years of her life.

She was not doing real well that last whole year. Working, both of us working sometimes seven days a week. It was really trying, and I just retired. So, I had to take care of her during the day and stuff.

There was also a sense of shared responsibility in the caretaking that many of these couples described; both partners shared the responsibility, and sometimes it was the unrelated partner who took on most of the care. Lacey and Sam moved in with Sam’s mom, when Sam’s mom got sick, and Lacey quit her job to help take care of Sam’s mother. When MJ’s mom was diagnosed with cancer, for example, it was Mark who, because he was more able to, took the primary responsibility for supporting MJ’s mom.

I oftentimes was going down and spending about four days a week down with his mother, spending two nights a week down there, not even coming home, and just getting her to and from appointments and chemo. The days she had chemo, I would stay overnight because she needed that extra assistance. Then the weekends would come, and he would go down there and either spend Saturday night or Friday night. And so there was three nights a week we weren't home together, and more often than not, we weren't seeing each other all week long. (Mark)

As these couples reflected on the way the way that they navigated this challenge together, many of them remarked on how getting through it together, as they did, strengthened their sense of knowing that this relationship would last.
**Early conflict.** Five early conflict stories were shared by four of the couples. Early conflict within the relationship seems to be a particularly important challenge for couples, as three of the five who shared such stories identified them as turning points. For example, John and Bert often fought while playing tennis together. John described coming to a point early in his relationship with Bert where he found himself thinking “Oh my God, this is the—I can't handle this,” or, ”We can't be together. It's just too much.” Furthermore, two of the five stories concluded with a lesson that the couple had learned, which made an important difference to the rest of their relationship. For example, Diana shared a story of a major fight with Sheila in which certain conflict patterns were repeating, but that on this occasion, they found a resolution to by establishing two important “rules” that they have stuck with throughout the rest of their relationship: no kissing other people, and if you leave during a conversation, you have to be the one to come back and restart it.

**Financial stress.** Financial stress was another frequently-reported challenge identified by couples in this study. Financial stress was most commonly reported because of unanticipated job loss, but sometimes came about due to life circumstances that stretched the couple beyond their means, such as overspending or living in a place that the couple couldn’t afford. Unlike many of the other challenges that couples discussed, financial stress was one that more frequently caused tension or conflict between the couple. Such was the case for two couples, who identified frustration with their partner’s responsibility in their financial stress as resulting in a turning point for the couple. These turning points also carried the storyline of “Either you make a change, or…” as is discussed below.

**Substance abuse.** Four of the couples in this study told stories describing the challenges they faced in coping with substance abuse. For two of these couples—Sam and Lacey, and Alice
and Dorothy, the story involved one of the partners struggling with alcoholism, hitting their bottom, and entering recovery. Sam shares,

I was an [chuckles] alcoholic and after taking care of her mom, it got completely out of control to the point where I was hospitalized. And then I actually went to rehab, and I moved away from here, so we were apart for almost four months while I was getting better and she saw me all the time. And it didn't faze her—I’m sure it did, but it didn't seem to faze her one bit.

Thelma and Louise both struggled with drugs and alcohol until reaching a point where they both realized they needed to stop. For this couple, as well as Callie and Crystal, a story of challenge was shared about a family member in the household who struggled with substance abuse. In the relationship journeys of Dorothy and Allison and Thelma and Louise, the challenge of substance abuse was experienced as a turning point in the relationship and also carried the theme of “Either you make a change, or…”

_Either you make a change, or... “If you want this to work, you need to get your act together,”_” Buzz once told Moo. Like this couple, half of the couples in this study told at least one turning-point story of a time in their relationship where one of the partners had to confront the other about making a serious change. One couple told a story about both partners recognizing the need for change by both becoming sober. Another couple described a turning point during which one partner recognized their own need to make a change in getting healthy and losing weight. Two of the turning points in this theme occurred prior to moving in together, and were mentioned briefly earlier. Their content covered expectations around finances and commitment. The remaining stories covered a variety of other topics, including confronting family, maintaining employment, getting sober, letting go of jealousy, and infidelity.
In most of these stories, a resolution happened fairly quickly, and the relationship stabilized. However, for two of these couples, the needed change and the recovery of the relationship took more time and inherently involved one or more additional turning points. Alice and Dorothy tell the story of Alice’s worsening alcoholism, which culminated in an ultimatum from Dorothy, Alice’s inpatient treatment, and a tenuous healing process for the couple.

When I got out, it was “So are we going to stay together, at all.” We talked about an open marriage. We talked about maybe not being together. We talked about every option you could imagine. And what we did is, we decided we weren't sure, we decided that we were going to decide on a day whether we would stay together for the next week. So we picked like—Thursday it was. So we literally like sat down and we were like, “How do you feel?”

Each week, then, became another turning point for this couple.

For Thelma and Louise, an incident of infidelity was a turning point that did, in fact, dissolve their relationship—for eight months, at least. They tell a story of avoiding one another out of respect for the other during those eight months, but never letting go of the love they had. That is until they took the risk of having an honest conversation.

I don't know, just one night we got to talking on the phone and we just were really honest. And I said, "You know, I can't stop thinking about you." And she said the same and I said, "Well." Because of the strong feelings we had for each other it was worth a second shot. To me, it was worth putting that second effort into it. It was worth—it broke my heart and I'm sure it broke hers, but it was worth putting the extra effort into it to find true love. Because that's what we had for the first three years. (Thelma)
Thelma and Louise’s infidelity and breakup was followed by another turning point—an honest conversation about their feelings for one another, which led to their relationship picking up and moving forward another 27 years, to where it is today.

**Being or becoming parents.** The kinds of challenges that couples shared in stories related to being or becoming parents varied depending on whether the couple already had children. Two of the stories were about the struggle that the couple had in deciding whether to have children, and one of these stories included the challenges involved with trying. Alice and Dorothy differed in their desire to have children, but decided to give it a go anyways. However, after several failed inseminations, and an anticipated foster-to-adoption experience which didn’t work out, they eventually decided to stop trying. This part of their journey, however, was challenging in many ways for both of them. The other two stories were about challenges that the couple faced as parents. Thelma and Louise tell the stories of Louise’s initial jealousy about the attention and love Thelma gave her biological children, and the way they navigated different parenting styles. Frances and Savannah share the stories of Savannah’s struggle with letting her adult children go off to college and the military, and the way that Thelma supported her partner. Although the content of these stories varies quite a bit, it seems significant that the topic of children was in some way an important challenge to so many of the couples in this study.

**Commitment stories.** Stories about these couples’ expression of commitment to one another through legal or social formalization seem to be particularly important in the journey toward success. All but two of the couples told stories about their wedding or commitment ceremonies, and all but one of these shared photos or documents from this day. Chronologically, the majority of the couples who shared such stories situated them as having occurred later
(between eight and thirty years) in their relationship journeys, although more than half of these couples had a ceremony or an exchange of rings earlier in their relationship.

In half of the commitment stories that were told, couples expressed a belief that there was not necessarily any benefit to getting a legal marriage.

I didn't come to the marriage thing for a long time. I really struggled with gay people getting married, and just competing with what straight people were doing, and I didn't really see the point. And then we ended up at a friend's wedding at a table full of strangers talking about the historical purpose of gay people getting married and life and celebrating love in front of family and friends. (Diana)

MJ shared

I remember before it even became legal, I used to always joke saying, "I don't want to get married. I don't want something that has only a 50% success rate." I just want the benefits of marriage, legally and financially, but I'm like call it whatever you want. I'm actually good if you call it something other than marriage because marriage fails half of the time.

Despite the initial conclusions, three of the four couples eventually changed their mind. In fact, after telling the story of why they felt good about not being legally married during our interview, Thelma and Louise, in their feedback about my initial chronology and themes, shared that they had since gotten engaged. They explain,

We have done everything possible to make our relationship a solid one in the eyes of the "law" as we could. "Holy Union" ceremony to "Domestic Partnership" to "Living Wills." It was when the Supreme Court finally ruled that we could finally REALLY get married is what changed everything. We waited because we didn't want to get married and then have it taken away in the eyes of the "law."
Assuming the law stays the same, this couple will finally, after more than thirty years together, be able to claim full equality in marriage.

In most of the stories that were told regarding legal marriage, the marriage ceremony was actually the resolution to a plot, which involved how and why the couple arrived at this decision. For five of the six couples who have gotten legally married, the decision to get married coincided with their legal ability to do so.

We actually technically got married when we were legally—the first time in California… When the California Supreme Court allowed gay marriages to go on for that Summer before Prop 8 voted in. So we got married then. So that's six years ago now, I think, we were married. But then we never did a—because we kind of raced off when the vote was coming up. When things got to go through September toward the November vote, we realized that we were losing the fight and we were not going to be allowed to get married. So we ran and basically got married to protect our interest in us. And then we never told anyone, because they were all expecting this big wedding from us. And so we finally did our reception and wedding a year ago. (John)

Sheila echoed a similar sentiment: “Finally, after all these years. I have the right to get married, and I want to get married. I'm going to get married.” Clearly, the legalization of same-sex marriage was an important contextual turning point in these couples’ relationship stories.

Another common feature across stories of commitment was the discussion of reasons why the couple chose to get married. The most common reason described by couples was for the legal benefits and protections, including tax advantages, recognition of shared property, and in the case of health emergencies. Even Callie and Crystal, who are domestic partners and stated “We’re happy just the way it is,” conclude their story by saying “I guess if I happen to get sick or
something, then I think I would push the issue, because I would want Crystal to get it all.” (Callie). Love and commitment were certainly a part of these couples’ relationship, and were perhaps the reason for the early commitment ceremonies or gestures. However, unlike the dominant heteronormative narrative, these were not the most common reasons for choosing to become legally married.

**Success is.** During the interviews, I asked couples to share what they believe success means to them, and if they had a story that would illustrate that success. It is important to note that none of the couples talked about success as if it were a destination at which they have arrived. Rather, couples talked about success as a quality they were working toward, or had achieved thus far; there is a sense that it is ongoing. Two strong themes emerged among all the couples—quality and longevity, and a third theme emerged for some—influence on others. Alice and Dorothy have opposing views on what success means, and the story that they tell demonstrates the two main themes identified by most of the couples in this study. Alice tells the story of a time when their car broke down:

So we wound having to push our car out of the street [laughs] where it would be safe.

We push the car there, we come up with a plan to both get to work, and everything. And I'm like, "Gosh I feel really good," as if that is such like, we made it. Like that wasn't a fuss, we didn't fight, [laughs] we got the car ready to go, we solved our problem. And you were like, no.

Dorothy explains her perspective on success, as it relates to this story.

Success for me is not pushing the car down the street [laughs]. Yeah, in the rain dealing with the dog needing to go to doggy daycare, we got to get to work, and no. So, success
for me means—it’s a little hard to describe, but essentially, some easiness to it. It shouldn't feel like it's work.

For Alice, success is “walking through fire”; it’s being able to make it through all of the hard things and come out the other end still together. For Dorothy, however, success is having reached a point in their relationship where things are smooth and flow with ease. Like Alice and Dorothy, many of the couples in this study identify success as existing along one of these two lines, what I call longevity and quality.

**Longevity.** “Staying together. You have, like, the good, the bad, and then the reward” (Thelma). All of the couples described success as, at least in part, the fact that they were still together. When couples talked about success in this way, they spoke both of making it through hard times, sticking together no matter what, and of having built a shared life together. “Making it through to the end. Staying together till death do us part. That's success and I don't think that's just based on the length of time you're together. Sticking with it” (Sam). “My success is that I have a man that loves me 17 years later” (MJ). Additionally, when asked to share a story that illustrates their success, many of the couples referred back to their challenge stories and how the couple was able to make it through.

I think it's because for me, you know, if you can get through what we've gone through together, you know, like you know, even with Alejandro having back surgery, quitting his job. I quit my job back in March, and I just started working again this March. You know, to be able to do that and get by, and figure out ways to make things work for each other, and not go completely in the hole or go bankrupt, you know. I mean, it takes a lot.

(Joseph)

Clearly, a big part of what success means for these couples is that, despite the hard things they
have gone through, neither gave up, and so they are still together.

Quality. “I think quality. Not necessarily making it through to the end…You know what I mean? I can’t imagine it never being good and great, but I don’t want to be one of those miserable couples either” (Lacey). Like Lacey, all of the couples in this study also indicated that success for them involved something more than just staying together. In fact, quality for couples seemed to involve two components: happiness and ease. All of the couples spoke to the sense of happiness with and enjoyment of one another that they experience in their relationship. They spoke of things like how much they like and love one another, how much fun they have, how often they laugh, how much they enjoy being together, and how happy they feel.

I’m grateful that I still feel that way. And I tease him because I feel like I still chase after him. I’ll say, "You should be flattered that after 17 years [laughter], most guys still aren't this much in love." But it just was this feeling of not wanting to be without him. It was that simple and I still feel the same way today. (MJ)

In addition to a sense of happiness, over half of the couples spoke to a sense of ease in their relationship. Couples spoke about how well they work together, how little they argue these days, or how much easier their fights are. Couples identified that in a successful relationship, it “shouldn’t be bulldozing every day” (Diana), it should be “somewhat effortless” (Sam), and should have “some easiness to it” (Dorothy). Clearly, for the couples in this study, finding success is about more than just staying together, it’s also about staying happy and achieving some ease in the in the relationship dynamics.

Influence on others. It seems worth mentioning that three of the couples in this study talked about their influence on others as a measure of their own success in the relationship.
For me, I think I like to have other people impacted by us in terms of our relationship. I think that's successful. I think when we go out and become a little bit—not a role model—but a little bit of an example of what you can do with a monogamous long-term gay relationship in a community that doesn't always respect that or value that. (John)

For John and Bert, as well as for Thelma and Louise, modeling to others that their relationship could last and what it could look like was an important indication of their own success. For the two couples with children, Thelma and Louise and Frances and Savannah, the importance of influencing others was primarily talked about in terms of the effect their relationship had on their children. For these couples, having successful and happy children was a sure sign that they have been successful as a couple.

**What Contributes to Success?**

While it is helpful to understand the kinds of challenges and turning points that same-sex couples may face along their relationship journeys, as well as what achieving success might look like for them, it is perhaps even more important to understand how these couples navigated their challenges so that they could achieve success. The ability to successfully protect against and navigate through challenges is an indication of couple resiliency. To explore sources of resiliency in these couples’ relationships, and to learn from the lessons their journeys and stories can offer, I asked couples about how they navigated their challenges, what resources they used in doing so, what they thought contributed to their success, and what advice they would give to other couples seeking to achieve success. In my analysis, I examined not only the commonalities in the lessons and advice offered by couples, but also at the resolutions of the couple’s stories, the interactions between couples, and the photographs and documents they sent me, for clues about the qualities and resources that seemed to contribute to these couples’ successful
navigation of their relationship journey thus far. The results of this analysis revealed six major qualities that couples possessed: determination, unity, differentiation, investment, perspective, and resources. Within these themes, several sub-themes also emerged.

**Determination.** Determination is about making a decision and resolving to stick with it, no matter what it takes. It is a “firmness of purpose” (determination, n.d.), and this quality emerged as the dominant theme for how challenges were overcome and the relationship maintained.

If you put 100% into it and if you believe in that relationship and you want it bad enough, you will work at it and you will achieve. I believe that. During the hard times, you can let them dictate your life, "I'm going to give up. Poor me. I'm just going to crawl under a hole and put a rock over myself." Or you can stand up and say, "Okay. Let's figure this out. Yeah, it's going to be hard, but let's do it this way." and then that becomes extremely rewarding at the end. (Thelma)

As is evidenced in Thelma’s explanation, determination seems to include two important parts: what couples believe and what they do. These two sub-themes, beliefs and behaviors, emerged across couples and add greater understanding to what having the quality of determination means in these successful relationships.

**Beliefs supporting determination.** Couples expressed a number of beliefs about relationships that seemed to support the determination they were able to demonstrate throughout their relationship journeys. One of these beliefs was that commitments were serious. “You just don't—you know what I mean? You're committed to the person, and you do it in front of God with family, your friends, and—I don't know. I took it very seriously because my parents took it very seriously” (Sam). Another belief expressed by most of the couples in this study is that
relationships take work. “Fantasies are fantasies for a reason. Relationships are work. It's not something—you might have met serendipitously, but you're not going to stay together just because” (Buzz). Finally, many of the couples expressed the belief that, although staying together through everything may be hard and take work, it is nevertheless possible and worthwhile.

We just kept coming back to that we felt like it was worth it… What we always come back to is that we just—and it sounds corny and I don't care about it sounding that way—I know he loves me and I love him, and there's just so much more than the words to it to both of us that I don't picture us not together, even when we have crap going on. (MJ)

Like MJ, many of the couples expressed a belief in the power of their love, a sense that they couldn’t imagine a life without the other person, and the trust that their determination would be worth it.

Behaviors supporting determination. Determination for couples in this study was about more than a mindset or belief system; it was also something that they did. There were three main behaviors that couples described or demonstrated in their stories: figuring it out together, patience, and adaptation.

More than anything else, couples described just figuring things out together.

One attribute that I think has really helped during that time, and there wasn't a day that's gone by that we talked about things and said, "You know what? What are we gonna do to figure this out? How do we make our lives whole again?” (Alejandro).

Armed with their commitment, their knowledge that relationships are work, and their belief that sticking it out is possible and worthwhile, couples approached problems and challenges with the determination to “figure this out.”
Throughout the interview, couples stressed the importance of communication to their ability to figuring things out. “Yeah, I mean we talk about everything… We talk about what we need from the grocery store. ‘I saw this is on sale.’ Little things we talk about. Big projects we talk about, day to day, everything” (Frances). Many of the couples directly named communication as one of the key factors in their success and included communication as part of their advice to other couples hoping to achieve success. “I mean, I think the communication is, by far, the biggest thing to making it a success” (Dorothy). Talking about things or talking things through was also a part of the resolution of nearly every challenge story told by couples. For example, Thelma and Louise tell the story of Louise’s struggle with jealousy about the affection and attention Thelma gave to her children.

And—but you know, we got through it. We talked at night. And she told me, "I'm jealous, when I see you with the kids and I never had that.” But then I talk with her, knowing that that's why she felt that way, and it wasn't anything else, we could talk through it. (Thelma)

Sheila and Diana shared the story of one of the hardest things they have endured—having to live apart for an extended period of time. Using a lot of video chat, they talked regularly about their situation. “That was 22 months of checking in, making sure this was what we wanted, this was good.” Communication, then, seems to be both a means of figuring things out for couples as well as the solution to some of the challenges that they face.

Another important behavior to the quality of determination demonstrated by couples was what Mark named “adaptation.”

A successful relationship, over time, is constantly changing. It's embracing that change that occurs. And something that might have worked two years ago may not work now,
because we're always growing, we're always changing, we're always learning something new. You can't stop learning from each other, you can't stop working on each other, and in that process, just that change, that is going to occur. It's like most things in life, you change one thing and it may break another. You learn to change something else. And it may not necessarily mean changing it back because you can't necessarily go backwards either, because in the process of just simply changing something back, it may break something else in the process. So adaptation is probably the best and easiest way of summing it up.

In his explanation of adaptation, Mark hits on several points echoed by many of the other couples. Essentially, couples recognized that life and relationships change, and to be successful, you need to be willing to learn, grow, and change as well. Speaking of the challenges in a relationship journey, Thelma reflects, “You have to learn from them. If you don't learn from the bad things, it's not successful.” In reflecting on a pattern of conflict that he and John used to struggle with more, Bert shared,

Yeah, I guess it's going to be a learning experience. Like most successful couples, I think you kind of grow in areas that make you a better person overall, not just for the relationship but as a person; to learn to listen better and learn to compromise and not be so stubborn. And we're both stubborn, so I mean, sometimes that can get us into a logjam. So I think we've learned to navigate that better.

As these two reflections illustrate, part of adapting throughout the relationship means both learning and growing from life lessons as well as working on growing and improving yourself.

Finally, couples also emphasized the importance of patience in the way that they demonstrated determination in their relationship. Patience was described both directly by couples
“Be patient” (Moo) and as part of the resolution to their challenge stories was patience. Couples often described the need to be patient with their partner by giving their partner the time to figure things out for themselves. “I was hoping over the years I was being patient and saying, ‘Well, okay, at some point it's going to make sense for him to finally make sure that they acknowledge me as who I really am, his wife’” (Bert). Other couples described a practicing of patience with life circumstances, knowing that things outside of their control would eventually change or improve. “It's like knowing that time resolves a lot. You have to work in that time, but time can resolve things and change” (Alice).

**Unity.** The couples in this study demonstrated a strong sense of unity throughout their stories, interviews, and even in their photographs. Couples were observed to share the storytelling role, and even when one partner did most of the talking, there was still a lot of checking in with one another. In the way their stories were told, it was clear that there was a strong sense of “us.” Thematically, couples talked about things like being “one,” merging lives, working together, and being a team. Unity was emphasized by couples as an important quality for navigating challenges, but it also emerged as an unspoken relational resource that seemed to contribute to the couple’s experience of success. Three sub-themes emerged in the demonstration of unity: be on the same team, do what works for you two, and couple identity.

**Be on the same team.** For the couples in this study, being on the same team meant both creating a shared path and supporting one another. Louise expresses this dual sentiment well when she explains,

And one big thing for me is, you know, we walk side-by-side. There's no, "She's a step in front of me," or, "I'm a step behind her." But we're partners 100% plus, and we've been
through some really bad ups and downs, but that's—having the compassion for each other and what her goals are and my goals are, and it's rewarding now.

Like Louise, couples often talked about the importance to the success of their relationship of being on the same path, working toward shared goals, creating a plan together, being on the same page, and making decisions together.

Couples demonstrated the quality of being on the same team even more strongly in their emphasis on the importance of supporting one another. Demonstrating support for their partner when their partner was struggling or had interests or needs that the other didn’t share was one of the most common elements throughout couples’ stories, particularly as a resolution. “What's the problem? My problem is that Moo doesn't have a job. Okay. Be as supportive as I can so that Moo will get a job as quickly as possible" (Buzz). Couples demonstrated support in taking care of one another physically, emotionally, and financially, giving their partner time and space to learn, grow, or figure things out, taking care of the needs of the family when their partner couldn’t, and encouraging their partner to do whatever they needed or wanted to make themselves most happy. Supporting their partner was also something that many of the couples offered as advice to others. As Sheila explained,

I would go back to one thing that Diana said, which is being a cheerleader for each other… I think we really support each other, Diana's in charge of doing national search. I wanted to move up to Hamilton, New York, in the middle of nowhere, Diana wanted to be the assistant to the president. It's just—we didn't look at each other and go, "Why the heck do you want to do that?" There was a cheerleading—and that was that critical thinking, not like you want to go skydive without a parachute, somebody would question
that. But I think sometimes just giving a bit of support, a safety net to say, "Yeah, go ahead and try that," without the critical put down.

Like Sheila and Diana, couples recognized that supporting their partner’s individual journeys and needs helped to keep both partners on the same path and create that sense of unity.

Related to both the creation of a shared path and the support of your partner was couples’ recognition that being in a relationship meant it was not all about one’s self. Being on the same team meant that one needed to also consider their partner’s experience and could not be selfish. “It's to be not selfish. It's not just about you. What you're doing, you're doing together. Because you went from being one to melding two into one and it's, again, it's not about you, that's what makes the difference” (Savannah). In recognizing this, couples talked about the importance of negotiation, compromise, and picking your battles.

But then, you know, you get mad about things and then you think about, "Okay, why are we together, and do we allow this for each other are we enablers—" I think we do because it's give and take. I'll give up something because I know that he wants to do another thing that is mutually important. So you have to forget about being a selfish person, and putting the other person first. (Alejandro)

You're really kind of working to have both those meets met as much as possible, yours and theirs, in as much of a way as you can. To be stubborn when you need to be stubborn, stop when you need to stop [laughs]. I think for the most part I've learned how to communicate, and learned that there are going to be times where you need to be selfish and times where you need to be not selfish and figure out how to best merge those in your relationship. (Alice)

Often, in speaking to the importance of considering their partner’s experience, couples
named or demonstrated compassion for their partner. “You just have to think of where they're coming from. Don't take it personally… just take into account what somebody else's situation is when they are having a bad day” Savannah explains. Couples talked about trying to put themselves in their partner’s shoes or remembering things about their partner’s personal experience that helped them to see their partner’s side. Sheila and Diana even shared the story of swapping chores in order to gain more appreciation of the other person’s role in the household, and recommend that other couples try doing the same thing.

**Do what works for you.** One of the most important things that MJ and Mark identified as contributing to their success is that they do what works for them and their relationship, regardless of what others might say, think, or want.

It's interesting because I feel like if you can get to the point where you don't need someone else's approval of your relationship, I think that that to me is one of the things that has made us been able to be together. (MJ)

Many of the other couples in this study expressed similar sentiment.

We could have walked away we could have lost family and it wasn't what we were going to do, we were going to hang in there and the hanging in there worked for us. It might not work for everybody, but it worked for us. (Sheila)

I think we just got to work through what makes sense for us and do what we feel is best for our relationship and future and do that in a constructive, positive way. But it wasn't easy to get to that point. (Bert)

It was important to these couples’ success that they navigated their journey in a way that felt authentic and right to their unique relationship.

In learning how to prioritize doing what works for their own relationship, several of the
couples shared stories about the pressure they felt from others to do their relationship a different way. This pressure might come from friends, family, or even an internal dialogue, but couples were clear in their own relationship stories and their advice to other same-sex couples that it was important not to be influenced by that pressure.

Don't let anything or anyone outside dictate your relationship. Just because—like my mom is a negative person for the most part, and that's like I finally got to the point now with my relationship with my mother is like, "You know what, oh, you don't like it? tough." You know what I mean? It's like, get over it. This is how it's going to be and you just can't let whether it's family, friends, co-workers, society in general, you can't let them dictate, or have what they say or what they do, bring it into the relationship.

It seems important to note that several of the couples made specific mention of the potential for harmful influence from “so-called” friends, and they advised other couples to be careful about the friends that they choose and keep.

**Couple identity.** Couples did not directly speak to the importance of creating a couple identity. However, this quality emerged throughout their stories and in their pictures and documents as a demonstration of the quality of unity, which the couples all possessed. Many of the couples told stories or offered reflections that seemed to communicate, “This is who we are” or “This is what we do.” For example, Diana and Sheila shared a photograph of the two of them pretending to hold up “Balanced Rock” in Arches National Park. “I think it’s silly, but it’s us,” Sheila explains. Many of the couples shared stories and photographs of the shared activities that they do together. Interestingly, for several of these couples, their couple identity included a community service presence. “We spend a lot of time, I guess, helping people do stuff,” Savannah shares. Additionally, several of the couples spoke to the experience of being known to
others as a couple, as opposed to as individual people. Speaking of their friends, Mark shared,

    I think most of them see us as, "Oh, what's Mark and MJ doing? What's MJ and Mark doing?" They see that value in the couple that we are and it's always let's include them. It is never a let's include one and not the other.

Similarly, Sheila and Diana demonstrated their shared couple identity when they “drew lines in the sand” with Sheila’s parents.

    So, our first Thanksgiving, Diana was not welcome at my parent's house. I went, had dinner, and I left at dessert time. And then Mom's like, "Where are you going?" And I'm like, "Mom, Diana's my family, and she's not welcome, so I'm going to go be at her parent's, her mom's house and have Thanksgiving dessert with them." She was not happy about that, but Diana got invited for Christmas.

Throughout their interviews, couples demonstrated a shared knowing of, protection of, and pride around their identity as a couple unit.

    **Differentiation.** Another quality that emerged as important to the successful navigation of relationship journeys was differentiation, or each partner’s ability to remain separate yet connected. Sheila shares a metaphor to illustrate her understanding of this quality in her and Diana’s relationship:

    Actually, I forget who wrote it but there's a reading that I like that just talks about how there's sort of two dancers. Sometimes you're hugging tightly, one of you is walking backwards and one of you is going forwards, and then sometimes the dance is just the lightest of touch on the dance floor. I think you heard Diana say she doesn't like people that get stuck to her [laughs]. So you got to be able to stand alone and together, if that makes sense.
Alice and Dorothy shared a picture that illustrates this idea. “We just returned from an eleven day trip the Yucatan in Mexico. While at the Coba ruins we came across these trees, holding each other at the base, and growing alongside each other. We both thought, ‘That's like us’” (Alice).

Like Sheila and Alice, many of the couples spoke directly to the importance of being able to be a couple while also acknowledging that you are each separate individuals. In an early relationship letter to Louise, Thelma writes

Loving someone means being able to let that person be their own self, and understanding that, because your love is their own separate person in ideas or thoughts, it does not mean that your hearts are not one.

For couples in this study, differentiation was demonstrated in being able to hold onto themselves while making space for their partner to be their own person and by owning one’s self, expressing how one really feels, and by loving and taking care of one’s self, despite how one’s partner might respond. Both of these qualities emerged as strong sub-themes within the quality of differentiation. Using Louise’s words, I have named these themes “Let you be you” and “Let me be me.”

**Let you be you.** Letting one’s partner be who they are was most commonly expressed as a need to accept one’s partner fully, without trying to change them. Sam and Lacey express this in their advice to newer couples: “Love who that person is, love them for who they are, and don't try to change them. If there's something that you don't care for about them…” Lacey begins. “Realize that that's your problem. You love this person for who they are, this is who you fell in love with”, finishes Sam. Mark shares similar advice: “You got to love each other for everything that you are. That's going back to no one's perfect and you have to accept those imperfections or
love them as much as you love the things that you truly adore about that person.” When Thelma
and Louise are asked how they do it, Thelma shares “It works by not trying to change the person
who you fell in love with.” She goes on to explain,

Now when you try to change somebody, they're going to not like themselves, therefore
they're going to be bitter towards you for changing them. That's going to ruin a
relationship right there… remember who you fell in love with, and don’t try to change
that person. That’s who you’re in love with.

Of course, couples also recognize that there are parts of their partner that they may not
particularly like. Several couples spoke of the way their partner sometimes annoys or even drives
them crazy. “I saw this thing, and I told Thelma, ‘You annoy the hell out of me, but I want to
spend every irritating moment with you’” (Louise). However, as Buzz explains, in talking about
the little things between her and Moo that the couple may not be the fondest of, that’s just the
“price of admission.” Letting one’s partner be who they are does not mean having to like
everything about them, but as these couples explain it, one does have to accept those things
without trying to change them.

This quality also showed up in many of the stories about supporting their partner, as
discussed previously. John shared a story about how important it was for him and Bert to learn
one another’s personalities well enough to make space for each person to have their different
needs and styles of communication.

I know Bert is like, if he gets mad, he'll get mad for five seconds and he's done. Whereas
perhaps, if I get mad, it'll be a while until I get over it. So learning each other's
personalities is really important, I think. For instance, now he knows I'm more sensitive,
so when he says something, he doesn't say it in a loud voice, almost like I'm a little child,
or something like that… I think that [what] really makes a really good, successful relationship, is to understand. Not that I'm asking him to change, it's more of compromising.

While this story is certainly another example of this couple’s unity, it also demonstrates the role of differentiation—of letting one’s partner be who they are—to the successful navigation of relationship challenges.

**Let me be me.** One of the most frequently expressed lessons shared across the couples in this study falls under this sub-theme, and that is the importance of expressing one’s self. “I'm not afraid to say that my feelings hurt or I'm frustrated about something or confused about something, or no, I can't do that” (Buzz). Couples talked about the importance of not only sharing their own thoughts and feelings, but also of doing so in an honest and direct way.

It was something that I think—talking about advice, being able to be totally honest about how I feel about something, I've learned a lot. It's just like, "I'm just going to tell you exactly what I feel," and I'm not going to try to sugar-coat it, and I'm not going to try to pander to what I think you want me to say; I'm just going to say it. (Alice)

Similarly, Louise advises other couples, “If you're unhappy, say you're unhappy about something, you're not going to like what the other person has to say, but you need to hear it, you need to say it.” Several of the couples also emphasized the importance of expressing themselves right away, in the moment. “Don’t wait till later,” Thelma advises. The early planning conversations that so many of these couples had is another example of the way partners demonstrated their ability to own and express themselves and to do it early, before not having done so became a problem.
Indeed, several of the couples shared stories that illustrated the challenges that not having expressed themselves openly, honestly, and immediately caused in their own relationship.

If I get upset, if I don't like something, I never tell Bert. And it festers in myself and it blows up, and it's the worst for our relationship. So Bert's really taught me how to express myself and not assume that you know what I'm thinking [laughs]. You're not a mind reader, so I have to tell you and I think that really helps strengthen our relationship.

(John)

Reflecting on this lesson that he and Mark had learned through struggling with it, MJ shared a story of advice he gave to a friend. “And I said to him, ‘You know, if you cave on things that are important to you, it's going to be harder for you to have your own identity in this relationship. That's my old lady marriage advice to you [laughter].”

Another common lesson that emerged in relation to self-differentiation is that it was important to participants for them to know, love, and be their authentic selves. In reflecting on coming to terms with his own sexual orientation, John shared “I think I have to understand myself, accept myself, and be who I am. If I didn't do that, I don't think our relationship will be as strong or even exist.”

Several of the couples shared stories of how they used external resources, such as individual therapy, Al-Anon/AA, or Weight Watchers, in order to improve their personal health, self-love, and individual identities.

I did individual therapy and Diana was back to Al-anon, and focusing on ourselves, figuring out how to be happy and healthy. I think we could come back as a couple with different tools in the toolbox that allowed us to be able to articulate and figure out what
was going to be good for us… Coming together is good and awesome, but coming together when you're good at helping yourself is that—would be something I would say is important in addition to all of the humor, and talking, and those things. But I think it does help to know who you are. (Sheila)

Finally, several of the couples advised that part of knowing and loving one’s self includes making sure you choose a partner who loves you for who you are, is not cruel or abusive, who doesn’t ask you to change or be someone you are not, and whom you are not settling for. Lacey and Sam share, “Until you know who you are, until you love yourself, period. It ain't going to happen. It's not going to work” (Sam). “That is so true. Oh my gosh. Yes, love yourself, know who you are, and know what you want, and don't be afraid to express that. But you know—don't settle” (Lacey).

Investment. Couples in this study invested in their relationship. They invested time, energy, thought, and money. Although many of these investments weren’t identified directly by couples as important to their success, that this quality emerged across all of the couples suggests that it likely contributed. Three themes emerged as particularly important investments: A hundred little things, couple time, and shared property.

A hundred little things.

So you've got to—if you're happy I'm happy. You know, and they're, spouse's secret—if they're happy they're happy. There are a lot of things—I think it's the little things, you know. Before she goes to work, I'll think, "What do I have to do when I get home" because I'm home before she is. And she'll tell me in the morning, "I cleaned out the dishwasher. I did this," or "I did that," and I'm like, "Oh I could have done that. I don't
want you doing so much before you go to work." It's a hundred little things every day.

(Frances)

Like Frances and Savannah, many of the couples identified the importance of investing in their relationship by doing things to demonstrate love, make their partner happy, and keep the relationship healthy. “I'm always thinking of something just to do for her, and not even purchase something for her, but just something so that she feels better and she feels loved. I think I've always tried to do that” (Lacey).

I open up my lunch or whatever and I got a little note in there, or she'll put a little fruit snack or something in there [laughs]. It's knowing that your partner is thinking about you still. You got to keep it alive. Like you said, it doesn't have to be a bouquet of roses, it can be a Hershey Kiss. You know? (Louise)

Couples invested the little things through thoughtful acts as well as thoughtful words. Buzz advises other couples, “You’ve got to give them good feedback or you do good positive things: ‘Good job getting up and going to work on time,’ or, ‘Thanks for making my favorite dinner,’ or whatever the deal is.” Thelma echoes similar advice:

Let each other know how important you are to one another. Because, you can't just assume. Somebody's having a bad day…I know it's three simple words, but it's, “I'm crazy about you. I think you're awesome.” It's a note on the coffee pot. It's just simple things. “What can I do to make your day easier, make you smile.”

In similar expressions of love, couples were observed to express a lot of affection for one another. Throughout their interviews, couples were seen and heard expressing love and appreciation for their partner, making eye contact, sitting close or touching, speaking in playful and affectionate tones, and even teasing one another. Many of the photographs that couples
shared in this study also suggested a quality of affection between the two partners. Of his and Mark’s photographs, MJ observed,

There's something about the pictures of him and I together, what I noticed, and I never really think I thought about it before. In most of the pictures that we have, and in certainly every one that we sent you, we are physically touching each other in every picture. And I think there's something to be said about that for him and I.

Although couples did not directly identify “affection” as an important investment, it seems to be another one of the hundred little things that these couples do to keep their relationship successful.

Laughter, fun, and play were other avenues through which couples invested in their relationship. While a few of the couples directly named being able to laugh and play as important to their relationship success, this quality emerged primarily through observation of couple interactions. Nearly all of the couples laughed frequently throughout the interviews. Many of them were playful in their interactions, sometimes teasing one another. For example, speaking of an upcoming trip they are taking, Callie and Crystal playfully remark, “It's a good thing you're getting this interview now. We'd probably kill each other on the way back [both laugh]” (Crystal). Callie responds “We'd throw each other out of the airplane, anyway.” Diana teases Sheila in informing me that, “You could make a million dollars if you had a dollar for every time I walked out of a room, and Sheila started talking [both laugh].” Additionally, while not often directly identified as important to success, most of the couples shared that they had a lot of fun together. Being able to, as Buzz describes, “laugh once a day”, is another of the many ways that these couples invest in the well-being of their relationship.

One final way that many of the couples invested in their relationship was through repair. Couples spoke of the importance of things like saying sorry, not going to bed angry, forgiving,
and admitting when you are wrong and your partner is right. Savannah offers this as advice to other couples and shares some examples:

Let go of you pride, admit it when you're wrong and it's ok to say, "I'm sorry." Yeah, it's that easy. "I'm sorry I thought something or I did something, if I upset you." It's really okay to apologize. You were having a bad day, I get it. “Sorry I snapped you, I just had a real crappy day at work and I didn't mean to direct it toward you.”

Doing a hundred little things, then, is about investing in the well-being of your partner and your relationship through attention, affection, and care.

**Couple time.** Another investment that couples directly identified as important to their success, both in stories and as advice, is focused couple time. When Callie and Crystal were living with and taking care of Callie’s mother, finding focused couple time was a challenge for them. Still, they got creative and made it a priority. “That was two years where she—we would try to go down the basement, because we figured she couldn't get down the basement; she came down the basement. She found us [both laugh]” (Callie). Frances and Savannah share,

We've made it a point for 23 years to get up at the same time. We have coffee together. We discuss what's going on for the day. She used to have to be at work at 10 o'clock in the morning. Didn't matter. We used to drink coffee; that’s the way it was. At the end of the day, we'd have coffee together, ask you “How was your day?” (Frances)

Similarly, Joseph and Alejandro expressed,

Part of our favorite times that we like together is when we are laying in bed at night to talk about something that's on our minds. And also riding in the car together, and just having that committed time of where you're going to be automatically forced to be
together. Because you can get so caught up in what you're doing during the day.

(Alejandro)

Sam and Lacey echo this sentiment in their advice to others: “You have to allow time for yourselves. You have to step back, and, even if it's going out, 'Let's go get dinner. Or let's just go for a walk, or something,' you need something to recharge. You need something to reconnect, to bring you back together again” (Lacey).

Several of the couples talked about the importance of taking a couple vacation together as a way of reconnecting in their relationship.

Because it just happened recently, we went on a vacation where we were so stressed out and we felt a little separated from each other because we just both have had so much going on. His job has been crazy. My job has been crazy. It was like we were sort of meeting in the middle, maybe half a day a week. I remember texting my girl friend and I said to her, she's like, "How's vacation going?" And I said, "It's awesome. I feel like we fell in love all over again." Not that we were out of love, but it was like we just stopped making time for each other. (MJ)

Like for MJ and Mark in this story, the reconnection that happened for couples during travel was sometimes a significant turning point for couples. Travel, it seems, may be a highly important investment and resource for successful couples, as every couple in this study shared stories about, and often photographs of, the traveling that they did together.

It is also worth noting that most of the couples in this study expressed a sincere enjoyment of one another’s company and the desire to spend as much time together as possible. Throughout their interview, Callie and Crystal shared many examples of the way their enjoyment of one another’s company has strengthened their relationship. After 25 years together, Callie
remarks, “We still enjoy each other's company. Crystal just retired in April and that was a transition because she was home every day, which I've been really enjoying it because I have someone here.” Joseph and Alejandro share that they have spent just about every day together since they first met. “If there's anybody I'd rather spend time with, it'd be him” (Joseph).

Interestingly, several of the couples remarked on a belief that others might think it is strange or not good for them to spend all of their time together. “Outside of work, we're pretty much always together, at the grocery store, but pretty much always together. And you think about it, it's probably not as common in a lot of couples, but we do everything together” (Frances).

We're one of those unique couples that has a lot of common interest and spend an exorbitant amount of time together. But it works for us. A lot of people say you shouldn't do that, you should have your own separate interests and whatever. But for us we spend lots and lots of time together, and we tend to enjoy it. And I think we're collectively together better than apart. I think our collective result of stuff we do and engage in, I think, is a greater sum of the two of us together because we balance each other well.

(Bert)

Regardless of what the dominant narrative might be around spending a lot of time together, it seems that these couples enjoy and benefit from it.

Shared property. Shared property was another theme that emerged indirectly in my analysis. Most couples did not directly identify this as important resource or investment, but it emerged through enough of these couples’ stories to warrant acknowledgement. For example, nearly all of the couples shared stories about buying a house together. Several of the couples mentioned recognizing the value of legal protections to their shared property should something happen to one of the partners. Reflecting on legal marriage, Callie shares, “We've bought a lot of
things together so I would want her to have it.” For Buzz and Moo, having shared property is a part of how they define success for themselves. “We got married. We're still together. We own a house together, we have pets together, we have car payments and the whole mundane pieces of life” (Buzz).

Interestingly, aside from a shared house, perhaps one of the most important investments in shared property that these couples made was in pets. Nearly all of the couples in this study mentioned the importance of their pets in their lives. Often, pets—cats and dogs, specifically—were spoken of as the couple’s “children,” and many couples shared pictures of their pets. In several interviews, I had the privilege of being introduced to the couple’s pets. While it may be more accurate to identify pets as relationships, rather than property per se, it is clear that this investment is important to couples and is likely a resource that further supports these couples’ success.

**Perspective.** One final quality that seemed to contribute to couples’ success in their relationship is what I would call *perspective*. By perspective, I am referring to the way that couples think about things, how they make sense of their experiences, and the outlook they maintain on life. Overall, couples in this study maintained positive perspectives that emphasized the good in their relationships and life and minimized the bad. Three themes emerged in terms of perspective: know what you’ve got, opposites attract, and “Be a duck.”

**Know what you’ve got.** All of the couples in this story expressed the perspective that they had a partner worth hanging onto, and they stressed the importance of not forgetting that. “Yes, for me, I've never had a real good track record. I guess since I've met Crystal, I don't even look at anything else, nothing. I've got the best here, and I wouldn't want anybody else” (Callie).
There are certain qualities about someone that makes them a good match for you. Moo always makes me laugh. And you can't necessarily—I always thought, "I'm going to end up with somebody who went to the same college that I did, that has a same similar career path, that has the same kind of family that I do or things like that." And what it boiled down to was she didn't need to have a four-year degree, she didn't need to think the same way I did. But the things that were really important to me were fun and laughter and value of the relationship and a family, and that's what I got. (Buzz)

In recognizing how great a partner they have, couples often expressed sentiments of feeling blessed, lucky, and grateful. Many of the couples also emphasized recognizing that the grass isn’t necessarily going to be greener, and offered this as advice to other couples.

And a lot of people think that they're going to find better, when in fact they're losing something that they could have made really good. And I think that's what Joseph and I both thought when we met each other, that we need to take a chance on this and see if it's going to work. (Alejandro)

Sharing a similar sentiment, Buzz adds, “There's no guarantee that you won't have the same problems, if not worse problems.”

Opposites attract. Many of the couples in this study shared that they believed they were very different, even opposite, from one another in many ways. “But it's weird, though, because I think we're completely opposite. She has no patience. I have all the patience in the world” (Savannah). Despite being so different, couples perceived their differences to be complementary and beneficial to the relationship.
And differences—I was attracted to the fact that he was very methodical and was not like I was—impatient—and thought things through, all those qualities that I want and don't have, he has. So, it's that opposites attract thing. (Bert)

In speaking of their differences, couples used language like “it serves us well”, “we fulfill each other’s needs”, “I needed that”, and “the balance helps.” Even Alice, who expressed some initial concern about how different she and Dorothy were, clarified in her feedback that “While worried, I also sensed that the space between us in our differences would be fertile ground for growing over the years together, and in that, there was hope and life, even if terrifying.” For these couple, differences were largely appreciated and perceived as a source of strength in their relationships.

“Be a duck.”

“Be a duck. Did you ever watch a duck? It puts its head underwater and its body floats and it comes up, and all the water just runs right off of its back.” So what are you worried about; it doesn't matter. And she said that like ten years ago, and it took me years, years, and now it's my thing. Savannah told me, "Just be a duck." (Frances)

While it was only Frances and Savannah who used the language of “Be a duck,” many of the couples echoed the perspective that many of the challenges in life could just be let go of or reevaluated as not worth worrying about. Sam and Lacey tell a story about how they handled missing a flight.

Yeah, we've done this a lot, in the airport. You push the little chairs together, and you make like a pallet. But you got to keep touching all of your luggage, so in case somebody tries to snag it, you're still awake and you're aware. But, it's fun. You just [laughs]—What are you going to do? Be mad at each other all night [laughs]? (Sam)
Like Sam and Lacey, several other couples approached problems with the perspective “What are you going to do?” Other couples expressed recognizing that hard stuff is a part of life, that they have gotten through it before, and that they can get through it again. Being a duck seems to be about recognizing that one has a choice about whether to be upset, make a big deal about, or hang onto hard thing and then choosing not.

**Resources.** Couples’ internal and relational resources have been identified throughout the discussion of qualities, themes, and lessons that emerged as important to couples success. For example, patience, the willingness to grow and learn, and many of the perspectives might be considered internal resources. Having the qualities of determination and unity might also be understood as relational resources. In addition to internal and relational resources, however, several external resources emerged as important to couples’ relationship success. These include: social support, professional support, and gay/lesbian-friendly environments.

**Social support.** Couples named support from both family of origin and from friends as important to their successful navigation of the challenges in their lives. Most of the couples in this study shared that family was very important to them, and family support was often identified as a valuable resource. Family support was given both directly and indirectly. Directly, couples shared the ways that family members were there for them with love and acceptance.

One factor, I think, that has helped us over the years is our families. Our families, we have been very fortunate and this is something I don't take for granted. We've been very fortunate of how accepting they have been of both of us, our relationship, and who and what we are to each other. (Mark)

Family members also offered direct emotional support for their relationship. “And then when I got sober, your sister really came in and kind of saved the day, a lot of times, and was invested in
at least giving it a little more time to figure out things” (Alice). Sometimes, family offered
instrumental support, as when Buzz and Moo moved in with Buzz’s parents temporarily, or when
Frances’s family would take the kids to give the couple a break.

Indirectly, couples identified the benefits of lessons that they learned from their family
members, such as patience and commitment. Couples also benefited indirectly from the
motivation that important family members brought to their lives, such as when Savannah and
Frances’s nephew came to visit during a time of stress pile-up. “So we didn't have much of a
choice but to really keep on the happy face and keep moving because we had an 11-year-old with
us… and I give him a lot of credit in helping us through that” Frances.

Most of the couples in this study also shared stories that included interactions with
mutual friends. Friends offered support through things like attending the couple’s wedding,
traveling with couples, sharing common interests, and offering support and encouragement
through hard times. “What I see that helps now is I do have friends, and I'm lucky that I have
very good friends that we're couple friends with, that I can talk to, because honestly, everyone
needs people to talk to” (MJ).

I think also, we have a lot of people in our corner and there are a lot of people who at
those worst of times were committed to helping us sort through things. I had a good
group of friends when I was going through this stuff with not getting pregnant. And I had
to make a choice, I had outside people who asked—who were not just like, "Okay, throw
it away, just walk on." And that made a world of difference.

Notably, friendship support was not often directly identified as a resource to the couple, but it
was certainly a resource that nearly all of these couples mentioned having. Additionally, friends
were referred to as “ours” or as “mutual”, suggesting that friendships with people who connect with both partners may be particularly important.

**Professional support.** Half of the couples in this study mentioned using some kind of outside professional support as a resource to help them through trying times. Sources of professional support included couples therapy, individual counseling, psychiatry, pre-marital therapy, inpatient treatment, outpatient programs, Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, or Weight Watchers.

I think if I didn't have those people to talk to, it might not really work for us because we don't always have all the answers. And sometimes, he's the person that's bothering me, and I can't talk to him about it and vice versa. So I think just having that. Over the years, I have talked to people professionally just because I have my own issues to work out for my family and things like, you know. I always say everyone has their shit, right? (MJ)

When the challenges of life and their relationship exceeded these couples’ internal capacities to manage, they were not afraid to seek out professional support to get through.

**Gay/lesbian-friendly environments.** Although not directly identified as a resource to their relationship, most of the couples in this study mentioned attending, frequenting, or seeking out gay and lesbian-friendly environments. Describing a photograph that he and Mark shared, MJ remarked,

There's one of me in a lighter blue T-shirt and I had my arm around his; that was the first cruise we took. That was an all—it was an all gay cruise, because I refused to go on a vacation that wasn't gay [both laugh]. Because I feel like we have to adapt so much in our regular lives…
John echoed a similar sentiment in describing the tennis organization of which he and Bert were a part. “I think having that type of group where we can be ourselves and be amongst people who have the same interest as well as same sexual orientation makes me feel a little more comfortable.” Gay and lesbian-friendly resources also included things like Pride-fests, gay and lesbian bars or clubs, LGBT-focused activities, and even locating communities or neighborhoods to live in that the couple could trust would be more accepting. For these couples, then, having access to affirming and safe environments seems to be an important resource.

How the Story is Told

**Storytelling process.** One of the goals of this study was to explore the ways that successful same-sex couples narrate their couple stories. Part of what I examined in answering this question was the process by which couples accomplished their storytelling. Although all of the couples were instructed to identify the stories they wanted to share prior to the interview, almost half of them reported that they had not; much of the storytelling was thus done impromptu. In half of the couples, one partner took the lead in telling the stories, but the other partner always contributed by adding to the story, clarifying, or verifying their agreement. Regardless of who was telling the story, nearly all the storytellers would, at some point during the interview, check in with their partners. Partners would check in about the details of the story—“How was it that you said it to me? ‘Did you think I'm funny?’” (Mark)—the accuracy of their conclusions—“Am I not right?” (Thelma)—and even whether the partner wanted to participate in storytelling. “Do you want to tell the story?” Buzz asks Moo. “No,” Moo replies. “Just making sure. Checking in,” Buzz answers. Occasionally, the partner who was not telling a story would offer a correction to the narrative. These corrections were always received with
acceptance and the storytelling resumed. “No, that was before” (Alice). “Oh, that was before?” (Dorothy). “Yeah, that was before.” (Alice)

**Storytelling content.** In my analysis of the content of couple’s stories, I became aware that another one of the ways that couples accomplished the telling of their own stories was to tell stories about other people for comparison, or to directly compare their lives and experiences with previous partners, with dominant narratives, or with stereotypes about being gay. For example, Lacey communicates the easy security she felt with Sam by telling a story of her past experience with a partner.

In my previous relationships, I would have an argument and then I would think, "Oh my gosh, is this going to be it and let me think, okay. I know the couch is mine. She can have the TV and the bed. She can have that [laughs]" Breaking things, always keeping things separate in my mind. But with Sam, it was different. It was like, we had an argument or something; it wasn't going to be the end of it.

Buzz emphasizes the importance of having open and honest conversation to the success of her relationship with Moo by comparing what they do to what they believe other, less successful, couples might do.

They don't have the conversations about, "Are we going to pool our finances when we move in together? Are we going to have kids? If we move in together, are we going to married?" They don't have those conversations because they're going to be uncomfortable and then they move in with the assumption that their partner is going to propose to them and then they're frustrated or confused about why they haven't been proposed to.

Thelma highlights the way that not trying to change one another has helped her and Louise’s success by telling a comparative story about her sister.
My sister just lost a marriage because of that, she decided after 25 years of marriage that she wanted her husband to do more outdoorsy stuff, and he was never that way, he was always a carpenter. When she met him, she loved that about him, all these shelves, and out of the blue she didn't like it no more, and that's who you married, why do you want to change them? They finally got divorced a year later.

And Bert clarifies how important monogamy has been to his and John’s success by comparing it to how the, perhaps, stereotypical gay couple might choose to engage in sex with multiple partners.

Unfortunately, that has been one of the weaknesses, I think, for a lot of gay relationships over here, is there is so much temptation and so much easily available sex or whatever, hookups, and I think gay people think that's the advantage of being a gay couple is you have the ability to be together, but then go sleep with other people, and that's like a special gift you get in being a gay couple. Which we keep explaining to people that's no gift, you miss the whole point of being together.

As these examples illustrate, couples used examples of other people’s struggles or failures as ways of explaining and highlighting their own successes.


**Chapter Five: Discussion**

Throughout history, stories have been used as one of the most powerful and effective ways to communicate wisdom and life lessons to those who may need them. In this study, I wanted to learn more about the achievement of success in same-sex couples’ relationships—what the journey to success might look like, what success is, and what it takes to achieve success. To answer these questions, I turned to experts on success—the same-sex couples who had achieved it—and to the wisdom of their relationship stories. I also examined the ways in which these couples told their stories, in hopes of learning more about the storytelling process of successful same-sex couples. Ten long-term same-sex couples shared their stories, their thoughts, ideas, and advice, their photographs, and, for some, their letters and other documents, to help me learn about what the journey toward success has been for them, and the lessons I might take away from their experiences.

**Discussion of Results**

**Significant challenges and turning point experiences.** One of the goals of this study was to learn more about the kinds of challenges or experiences along couples’ journeys that created critical turning points—crossroads at which their relationship might have taken a turn toward dissolution, but did not. In this analysis, I found that turning points were not always overt challenges or points of crisis, but also positive and encouraging experiences that served to propel couples toward what they experienced as success.” To answer this question, I arranged these couples’ stories into chronologies so that I could more clearly understand the journeys that couples travel. My analysis revealed that these couples’ journeys unfolded through a series of common chapters, and each of these chapters provided information about the important experiences that propelled them forward toward success.
To my knowledge, this is the first study that has attempted to create a roadmap of the journey to success and to seek to understand both the experiences and the resources and qualities that seemed to be important in moving couples forward along that journey. One study (Porche & Purvin, 2008) asked similar questions in a parallel way, and the results of my study validated many of their conclusions. The authors report significant “milestones” along their participants’ journeys (such as meeting, moving in together, buying a house, and navigating a number of struggles), which are reflective of the significant turning points identified in this study (p. 148).

In the first chapter of participants’ relationship journey stories, “Before we met”, couples’ stories of past relationships highlighted the process of becoming ready to enter into the lifelong relationship they were now in. There was a turning point, therefore, sometime before the current relationship started, at which both partners became ready to be with one another. In the second chapter, “Coupling”, meeting one another was, of course, a turning point, but so was the risk-taking moment of initiating the relationship. I had assumed that couples would experience a turning point at which they “knew” that this partner was the one they would be with forever. However, at least one partner in most couples did not have this experience, and so there were few turning point moments at which they knew “this was the one.” However, the experience of how much better this relationship was than others, even when that fact was scary, seemed to be another significant stepping stone in moving the couple forward.

In the third chapter, “Taking big first steps”, couples revealed two more important turning points that happened early in their relationship journeys. The first, I called planning conversations. These were open, honest, and direct conversations about what each partner needed and wanted out of the relationship and along the journey. Conversations covered topics like kids, marriage, finances, commitment, and relationship dynamics. In having these
conversations early, couples began to create a shared vision for what parts of their journey together would look like, and they made sure that both partners would be supportive of the same path. Doing so was critically important to many of the couples in choosing to continue to move forward with their partner. The second big step that couples took in this early chapter of their relationship was choosing to move in together. For many of the couples, this step took some consideration, and it served to more concretely merge their two individual paths, solidifying their intention to create a life together.

In the fourth chapter, “Adjusting”, couples described the experiences of learning how to share their space and their lives with the other person. For some, this process was fairly easy and served as further confirmation that the couple was on the right path. For others, this process was more challenging, but by overcoming that challenge, the couple was also reassured that this relationship was the one they wanted to be in. Couples also shared stories about the process of adjustment that their family of origin went through, particularly in the beginning of the couples’ relationships. Interestingly, most of the couples did not frame the lack of support they got from their families as a challenge to their own relationship. Instead, they demonstrated patience, support of one another, and protection of or boundaries around their relationship, which may have served to further solidify the couple’s determination and sense of unity. All of the couples who shared stories of a lack of family support in the beginning also had support from either the other partner’s family of origin, or some members of both partners’ families. Thus, it may be that the negative effects of the non-supportive family were mitigated by the positive support provided by other members within the couple system (Kurdek, 1988a).

In the fifth chapter, “Challenges and turning points”, couples shared stories of some of the challenging experiences that they encountered and overcame over the course of their many
years together. Common challenges that these couples faced included moving, stress pile-up, illness and death of a parent, early conflict, financial stress, substance abuse, and being or becoming parents. For some of the couples, one or more of these challenges resulted in what they experienced as a turning point for their relationship, or a time during which they were not sure whether the relationship would make it. Most of the time, this uncertainty arose during times of stress-pileup, when multiple stressors were happening all at once or in close succession.

According to McCubbin and Patterson’s (1983) Double ABCX theory of family stress, this experience makes sense. When the demands of stressors exceed the resources and perceptions available to cope with the stressor, a crisis occurs, and the couple must find ways to navigate that crisis. This is likely what happens for most of the challenges couples encounter. However, when the initial crisis is met with additional stressors, stress pileup occurs, and the couple is at risk of “maladaptation” unless they find new resources, perceptions, and coping skills (p. 88). The resolution for most of these couples was to seek additional support through external resources, such as family, friends, or professional help. These findings highlight the importance of both the quality of determination and having access to external resources in getting couples through highly distressed periods of time.

Other notable turning points occurred when one partner’s behavior created a threat to the security of the relationship, as when one partner made choices that put the couple’s financial stability at risk, had an affair, or became seriously ill as a result of substance abuse. Attachment theory informs us of the importance of having a secure base in a relationship (Johnson, 2004). For each of the couples who shared a turning point story like this, the offending partner was able to, albeit not always right away, make the needed change to begin to repair and re-establish that security again. When the change was not immediate, the worried partner relied primarily on
aspects of determination—such as commitment, knowing the relationship was worthwhile, and having patience—to remain in the relationship until the change had been made.

A final notable turning point experience for couples is identified in chapter six, “Commitment stories.” Like moving in together, choosing to formalize their relationship served as a solidifying and strengthening experience along their journey. Commitment ceremonies honored and validated the relationship that couples had, symbolized their commitment to one another, and often provided legal benefits and protections. Most of the couples performed some kind of commitment ceremony in the earlier years of their relationship. In the later years of their relationship, many of the couples chose to get legally married, in part, according to them, because they finally could. Similar experiences of early commitment ceremonies followed by later legal marriages once available have been echoed in other studies as well (e.g., Porche & Purvin, 2008). This suggests that there may be something meaningful and symbolic to asserting their right to the same privileges as heterosexual couples. The fact that most of the legally married couples got married later in their journeys is indicative of their ability to do so, and it seems likely, given the other forms of commitment ceremonies performed earlier in their relationship, that couples may have gotten legally married sooner had they had this option.

Extant literature supports the positive benefits of social and legal formalization to relationship quality (e.g., Fingerhut & Maisel, 2010; Shulman et al., 2012) and longevity (e.g., Rosenfeld, 2014), suggesting that these commitment experiences served a protective function for couples.

The last chapter that emerged in these couple’s journeys, “Success is”, explores the ways that couples understand and experience success. This chapter serves, in part, to answer the fourth goal of this study, which was to learn how couples understand and narrate their success stories. I will review this chapter below, in my discussion of the results of this particular goal.
The general conclusion in extant literature is that same-sex couple relationships are, in many ways, similar to heterosexual relationships in their experiences of challenges and success (e.g., Connolly, 2004a, Kurdek, 1998). Findings from this analysis provide further evidence to support this conclusion. Much of the roadmap that was created throughout the chapters seems to mirror a journey that any couple would take, perhaps except for the adjustment of family due to sexual orientation. Additionally, the significant challenges and turning points identified in this study reflect the types of challenges in life that all people might face, such as financial stress, illness and loss, and substance abuse.

It is interesting to note that, while existing literature has identified a number of common challenges unique to same-sex couple relationships, particularly those of minority stress, (e.g., Connolly, 2004a; Porche & Purvin, 2008), few of these were identified directly by couples as significant challenges in their own relationship journeys. Many of these unique challenges and experiences—such as lack of family support, experiences of discrimination, internalized homophobia, managing outness, family formation, and lack of equality—were mentioned during the interviews. However, because this study prioritized the stories and perceptions offered by the couples, and most couples did not emphasize these unique experiences, they were not highlighted or explored in the interviews or the analysis. It is possible that the reason most couples did not emphasize experiences of stigma, marginalization, or other unique challenges of same-sex couples was because they were using a narrative strategy that minimized or reframed those experiences as beneficial in some way. Frost (2011) identified six strategies that same-sex couples used in their narratives about stigma and intimacy, two of which portrayed stigma as having an ultimately positive outcome. It may be that these couples used such positive narrative strategies as a source of resilience in their navigation of challenges situated in their sexual
minority status, and thus did not commonly identify these stories as significant to their relationship journeys.

**Resources for resiliency.** The second goal of my study was to learn more about the internal, external, and relational resources that contribute to same-sex couple resiliency. These qualities and resources emerged through the organizing theme, *What contributes to success.*

Resiliency is “a central factor in couples’ ability to maximize relational strengths, mitigate external challenges, and maneuver successfully in the relationship” (Connolly, 2005, p. 267). Resilience serves two functions: to protect a couple’s relationship against stressors and to rebound from adversity when it occurs (Connolly, 2005). In order to identify factors that contribute to resilience, I explored common internal and relational qualities that emerged as important to the resolution of challenges and to the protection of the couple relationship. I also identified common external resources that supported or protected the couple relationship. Many of the qualities that I identified could be considered either internal, relational, or both, so I will not attempt to differentiate between these two. Qualities that emerged included determination, unity, differentiation, investment, and perspective. Several of these themes—determination, unity, and perspective—were informed by Connolly’s (2005) research on resilience in long-term lesbian couple relationships. However, Connolly’s lens focused primarily on demonstrations of resilience as *same-sex couples,* which did not include resources that “would be considered common in all successful couplings” (p. 270). In contrast, couples’ own identification of important resources was prioritized, and all potential resources were included in the results, in this study.

Determination emerged as a critical quality of resilience that served primarily to support same-sex couples with rebounding from adversity. Determination was demonstrated through
beliefs—in commitment, that relationships are work, and that getting through is both possible and worthwhile—and through behaviors—figuring it out together, practicing patience, and adapting to changes. Unlike in Connolly’s (2005) study, where unity was identified as primarily acting to support couples in rebounding from adversity, unity in this study also served a protective function. Unity was described by couples through two lessons, be on the same team, and do what works for you, both of which seemed to support couples in protecting their relationship from stressors and in successfully navigating them when they occurred. Unity also emerged as a protective resource through couple identity.

The quality of differentiation was identified directly by couples as important to their success, and more specific lessons were shared in the ways that couples let their partner be themselves while also asserting, affirming, and taking care of your own sovereign self. Bowen (1978) theorized that differentiation was critical to a couples’ success in marriage. Indeed, research supports these couples’ perceived and lived experiences about the importance of differentiation; couples who report higher levels of differentiation are more like to experience higher levels of relationship quality (Lampis, 2016). Much has been written in the field of couple and family therapy regarding the benefits of differentiation to couple success (e.g. Lampis, 2016; Schnarch, 1997), and some literature has expressed concern about the risk of fusion in same-sex couple relationships (e.g., Decker, 1983). However, the couples in this study do not seem to demonstrate a struggle with fusion, and any indications that they may be fused, such as wanting to spend all of their time together, likely serve a protective function to the relationship (Long & Andrews, 2007).

Couples’ investment in the relationship served primarily as a protective function of resilience. That is, investments seemed to decrease the effect of external stressors. Couples
invested in their relationship through “a hundred little things every day,” through prioritized couple time, and through purchasing shared property.

The ways of investing in one another that were identified under the theme of “a hundred little things” resonate with existing research and theory about the creation of effective couple relationships. Investing in the relationship through a hundred little things and through prioritized couple time resonate with Gottman’s (1999) findings of the critical importance of at least five positive interactions for every negative one, cultivating fondness and admiration, and maintain a solid foundation of friendship in successful couple relationships. Interestingly, of directly-identified ways of investing in their relationship, couples described ways of demonstrating love through four of Chapman’s (2015) five love languages—acts of service, gifts of love, quality time, and words of affirmation. Although physical touch was not explicitly mentioned, it was certainly demonstrated during the interviews and in photographs, and thus seems to be another common investment of love and affection. Finally, the direct identification and clear emergence of humor and play as important resources to couple success is supported by Atkinson’s (2005) integrative approach to supporting couples in therapy.

Previous research also validates shared property as an important protective resource to couple relationships (e.g., Kurdek, 2006; Porche & Purvin, 2008). These purchases serve as indications of commitment as well as barriers to leaving.

Three significant perspectives emerged as important to couple resilience. The perspective that opposites attract served as a protective factor in the relationship, allowing partners to make space for and appreciate differences. Combined with their ability to let their partner be their own self, the perception that their partner’s differences were attractive and beneficial likely allowed for more of the ease and enjoyment that couples described in their success and prevented what
might otherwise have been points of tension or conflict. Maintaining the perspective that the partner that they have is a good one, and that they may not find better was both a protective resource and one that supported couples’ resilience during challenging times. Social exchange theory helps us to understand the value of this perspective. High evaluations of the attractiveness to the relationship and low evaluations of the attractiveness of alternatives help to foster marital solidarity and dependence (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008). Kurdek’s (2000, 2006) studies on correlates of relationship dissolution support this as well, suggesting that the more attractions one has to a relationship and the more barriers to leaving, including low attractiveness of alternatives, the less likely a relationship is to dissolve.

Finally, the perspective of “being a duck” supported resiliency in times of challenge or stress, as couples were able to normalize and minimize some of their challenges. They recognized that there was often little they could do, and that they would get through it somehow, and so they were able to let go of some of the emotional distress and make the best out of the hands they were dealt. Evidence from other research supports the finding that this positive reframing of external challenges is an important source of resilience for couple relationships (e.g., Connolly, 2005; Frost, 2011; Pals, 2006).

In addition to the internal and relational resources identified in the qualities that couples possessed, three external resources were also identified. These included social support—from both family and friends—professional support, and gay and lesbian-friendly environments. Numerous research studies confirm the importance of social support to same-sex couple relationship quality, as was discussed in my literature review, and at least two studies provide additional evidence to the value of social support in fostering resilience (Connolly, 2005; Dziengel, 2012). Professional support, particularly through the use of individual and couple
therapy, has also been identified in other studies as an important resource to same-sex couple longevity (Porche & Purvin, 2008). To my knowledge, however, the presence of gay and lesbian-friendly environments has not previously been identified specifically as an important external buffer for same-sex couples. Still, given our knowledge of cultural oppression and minority stressors, it would make sense that safe spaces are an important protective resource in same-sex couple relationships.

Couple-identified factors for success. The third goal of this study was to identify the common factors that same-sex couples attributed to their own success. These factors were identified directly by couples as important to the resolutions of their own challenges and also through their advice to other couples. The qualities, beliefs, and lessons that couples commonly identified as important were integrated into the overall analysis of what contributes to success. However, for the sake of clarity, I will revisit those results here.

Common factors that couples identified as contributing to their success in relationship include the following: Of the quality determination, couples identified not giving up, commitment, figuring things out together, communication, adaptation, and patience as important to their success. Of the quality unity, couples described being on the same team, supporting one another, compromising and picking your battles, compassion, and doing what works for you regardless of what others say or think. Regarding the quality of differentiation, couples identified the quality itself—being both a couple and two individuals—as well as the lessons of accepting your partner fully, not trying to change one another, expressing yourself openly, honestly, and immediately, having hard conversations early, and learning to love and take care of yourself. Of the quality investment, couples identified that intentionally doing a little thing to make your partner feel loved and happy, expressing your appreciation with words, being able to laugh
together, and prioritizing couple time were important factors for their success. Finally, of the quality perspective, couples identified that knowing that other relationships would not be better and being a duck—being able to let things go—were helpful in making it through the more challenging times. Many of the couples identified family and professional resources—particularly individual and couples counseling—as also helpful to their success, and some also named support from friends. Clearly, most of what I learned about what it takes to achieve success, I learned from these couples’ direct awareness and report. Only a few of the results emerged from the indirect content of stories, or from the photographs, documents, and interactions between couples, which were also analyzed.

Understanding and narrating success. As mentioned previously, my fourth goal was to analyze the ways in which successful same-sex couples understand and narrate their stories of success. In part, this was answered in my analysis of how these couples understood what it means to achieve success. Stories of success were primarily told in two different ways—as stories of making it through hard times, of staying together no matter what, and as stories of finding ease and enjoyment in their relationship. These stories are indicative of both longevity, as measured by level of commitment and length of time together, and of quality, as measured by the constructs of enjoyment and ease. Couples’ experiences of success as largely a measure of longevity and quality also mirror the ways previous research has understood and measured couple success.

It is interesting to note that most of the couples in this study scored above the cutoff scores for relationship quality and commitment. The average DAS score was 123, or a T-score of 55, which falls on the high end of average couple responses (Spanier, 2001). Scores of 125 or above, which nine partners scored, are atypically high quality. Additionally, 13 of the 20
partners, which included both partners in half of the couples, scored the highest possible score, 72, on the commitment scale. The average commitment score, 68, was only four points away from the highest score. These scores are congruent not only with couples’ belief that success is a measure of both quality and longevity, but also with researchers’ definitions and measurements of success, adding strong support to these couples’ self-identification as successful.

For several couples, success was a measure of the positive effect the couple had on other people. This finding suggests that the experience of success for same-sex couples may include an existential component where their relationship and lives together accomplish something greater than just the two of them. For some of these couples, this achievement of success was fulfilled through their role as parents. Other couples experience this sense of success in being a role model to other same-sex couples. It is possible that this value was also reflected in couples’ decision to participate in this study in the first place. In their study, Porche and Purvin (2008) found a similar theme—long-term same-sex couples also identified that being a positive role-model to other same-sex couples was indicative of and important to their success.

The beliefs that emerged in the theme determination and the three perspectives that emerged in the theme perspective also help to answer my fourth question; they reveal that these couples narrate their stories with a positive overtone, which identifies the couple as capable, the relationship as worthwhile, and problems as expected and surmountable. Although stories were not analyzed with an eye for narrative strategy (or meaning-making strategy), the emergence of these perspectives and beliefs support the notion that successful same-sex couples may be using positive narrative strategies to help them cope with difficult times (Frost, 2011; Pals, 2006). Research suggests that positive narrative strategies are not only an indication of resiliency, but may also predict optimal development and life-satisfaction (Pals, 2006), which these couples
seem to demonstrate in their experiences of success and the relatively high levels of relationship quality that they report.

In addition to the content of success-narration, I also observed the process of narration. One important find that emerged was that, regardless of talk time, both partners participated in the storytelling process. The storytelling was collaborative, as was further evidenced by the frequent checking in and gentle corrective feedback that was exchanged between partners. Finally, an interesting commonality emerged in the ways that couples used stories of other people—including past relationships, people that they know, and a presumed “other” reflective of dominant discourse and lesbian or gay stereotypes—to illustrate their own success. Part of how they narrate their success stories, then, is through comparisons that situate their stories as importantly different from, perhaps better than, the way many others are doing. I was unable to find any extant literature that supports this finding, which means it may be new information. This narrative strategy is important because it clues us in to another source of resilience for successful same-sex couples. It seems to be another form of positive meaning-making within their storytelling, which therapists could explore and support.

This is not to say that these couples are wrong or biased in their conclusions. They have, after all, achieved success, or at least continuous movement toward it, for over ten or more years. This is no small feat. It is important, when considering the results of this study, to keep in mind the sociocultural context in which participants’ experiences and stories are situated. When the couple who has been together the shortest amount of time, 11 years, first got together, same-sex marriage was only legal in one state, Massachusetts (“Freedom to Marry”, 2014). (And it was not even the state they lived in). Three of the couples began their relationships during a time when the gay and lesbian civil rights movement was only just getting started. Half of the couples were
in the early years of their relationship during the mid or late nineties, when state and federal laws were passed (including Clinton’s Defense of Marriage Act) that actively denied same-sex couples the right to marry and the associated privileges (Wolf, 2015). Additionally, it is only in recent years for all of these couples that Federal law recognized same-sex marriages as equal to heterosexual marriages. Yet even still, our cultural climate is often oppressive, especially in particular geographical regions. Thus, the couples in this study have navigated their journeys to success throughout cultural climates that have, for most of their relationships, largely invalidated or oppressed their identities and relationships. Clearly, what these couples are doing is working, and couples and professionals alike would be wise to heed their lessons.

**Consideration of findings in relation to success literature.** It is interesting to reflect on the findings of this study as compared to what previous research on success has examined and found. As mentioned earlier, researchers and couples seem to understand success similarly, as a measure of quality and longevity. While researchers used a number of different measurements to understand quality, these couples broke it down into ease and enjoyment. It is possible that measures of satisfaction may capture ease and enjoyment, or parts of those experiences, thus bringing into further question how we are to understand relationship quality. As Kurdek (1992) suggests in his critique of the DAS, researchers may be measures of satisfaction and determinants of satisfaction in their attempt to study quality. Satisfaction may, therefore, be the more appropriate construct for consideration in relationship success.

In considering the factors that research has found to contribute to same-sex couple success, few emerged as prominent themes in this study. Of the main themes identified in factors that affect quality, only social support and relationship formalization also emerged as important to the journey to success in this study. Other variables identified by research, such as minority
stress, outness, and non-monogamy received some support anecdotally, but were not discussed frequently enough by couples to emerge as a solid themes. Resources, identified by previous literature as important to satisfaction in same-sex couple relationship success, is supported by the findings in this study. However, I assumed this relationship in my analysis, and thus intentionally looked for resources that seemed to contribute to relationship success. Perceived costs versus benefits was also supported in couples’ perceptions of their partner as the best they could find and alternatives as not appealing.

Interestingly, all of the main factors that affect longevity, as identified by previous research, were supported in this study. The first, barriers to leaving, was supported around the couples’ emphasis on stories of moving in together, commitment ceremonies, and investing in shared property. Attractions to staying was supported by couples’ perceptions of their partners as the best, and in a number of the barriers to leaving, which, as Kurdek (2006) found, were often also seen as attractions to staying. Support and community was another major theme identified in the literature review as an important determinant of couple longevity. Couples identified several sources of support, including friends and family as well as helping professionals. Couple integration was supported by the theme determination, and maturity is supported by the importance of planning conversations and the challenge of early conflict.

Clinical Implications

With thanks to the couples who participated in this study, clinicians can use many of the lessons learned from these couples to be support their work with other same-sex couples. Previous research suggests that same-sex couples are likely to turn to therapists for support (e.g., Degges-White & Marszalek, 2006; Porche & Purvin, 2008), and indeed several of the couples in this study identified individual and/or couple therapy as an important resource for their
relationship success. Current literature on providing affirmative therapy to sexual minority clients offers some helpful suggestions to therapists, many of which this study helps to support (e.g. Butler, 2009; Connolly, 2014). For example, literature stresses the importance of therapists’ knowledge and training around the experiences of same-sex couples (e.g. Butler, 2009). Many same-sex couples begin their relationship journey without a clear roadmap for what a successful relationship might look like, nor how to get there. This study helps to build that knowledge by offering the beginnings of a roadmap to success and clarifying some of the challenges couples may encounter as well as the strengths and resources couples might use to support their relationship. Clinicians can use the chapters identified in this study as illustrations of what a new same-sex couple might expect to experience along the way. In doing so, they can help these couples to anticipate and prepare for potential challenges and turning points.

The current literature also advises therapists to recognize that issues related to a partner’s identity as sexual minority or the couples identity as a same-sex couple may not be the issue in therapy that clients want or need to explore (e.g., Butler, 2009). In the present study, findings around the major challenges and turning points couples encounter during their journey support this advice, as most of these were challenges or turning points that are likely to be faced by any couple. That said, therapists should also have enough awareness of the unique issues faced by same-sex couples to understand, examine, name and challenge the ways that societal oppression (heteronormativity, homophobia, discrimination, etc.) may be playing into couples’ experiences of challenges (Butler, 2009; Connolly, 2012), self-protective and emotional engagement strategies (Zuccarini & Karos, 2011), and their ability to fulfill family functions (Long & Andrews, 2007). Certainly, throughout many of these couples’ stories, couples identified (either directly or indirectly) their sexual minority status. This suggests that, even though couples were
telling stories of experiences common to all couples, there were parts of those experiences that were unique because of the partners’ sexual orientations.

One recommendation from the current literature that was not supported by this study is the consideration of gender roles. Butler (2009) advises therapists to consider deconstructing gender roles with same-sex couples, and Connolly (2012) suggests that it is particularly important for therapists to be mindful of their own language and assumptions around gender socialization and roles (Connolly, 2012). However, gender roles, gender socialization, and related topics, such as division of labor, were not brought up by couples in this study. This may be because couples may have experienced gender similarity as inherent to being part of a same-sex relationship, and thus, therapists might see as challenges related to gender roles, while couples may be narrating these challenges as simply a result of each of their personalities or styles.

Clinical literature also advises that therapists be aware of sources of strength and resiliency when working with same-sex couples (Connolly, 2012; Long & Andrews, 2007). This study adds to our understanding of which internal, external, and relational resources we might help clients develop or strengthen in support of their relationship success. The lessons learned about what it takes to achieve success could be shared with couples as demonstrations of hope and ability to make it through hard times, as illustrations of potential solutions to couples’ current challenges, or as examples of qualities or ideas that couples might foster in order to better ensure their own relationship success.

One strength identified by this study, which might be particularly useful as an intervention for couples struggling with painful experiences related to oppression, is that of positive meaning making. For example, Cohn (2014) recommends a narrative intervention that
reframes same-sex couple’s experiences of struggle with cultural oppression within a strengths-based love story. Couples in this study seem to have done just that, thus suggesting that finding ways to support other couples in narrating their stories similarly may be a powerful intervention.

Indeed, narrative therapy may be a particularly useful approach for same-sex couples seeking to move their relationship toward success. Siegel (2012) suggests that the co-construction of stories allows a dyad to move into highly resonant states, which supports secure attachment and neural integration—the heart of interpersonal health. This study offers many useful considerations for how one might help a couple co-create or re-story their narrative, including, for example, moving through chapters of a couples’ journey, using positive meaning making strategies, and making comparisons to others.

Many of the lessons learned in this study could also be used to inform clinical assessments of same-sex couple relationships. With knowledge of the common turning points, clinicians can more quickly identify potentially high-risk presenting challenges. For example, clinicians can assess for stress-pileup in distressed couples and, in conjunction, can use the lessons learned here to assess the qualities and external resources that couples might currently have available to them. These two pieces of information together would support clinicians in assessing client’s clinical needs and the level of risk that may be present to their relationship’s success. Clinicians can also use the lessons learned about what it takes to achieve success as ways of both evaluating strengths and growth areas within a couple’s relationship and as areas of focus for strengthening resiliency in clinical work. Finally, clinicians might use couple’s ideas about what success means as a way of measuring success for their own couples. This could be used as feedback to couples and as a way of measuring progress in therapy.
All of the lessons learned in this study could be used to create a premarital program for same-sex couples. Previous research has found support for the effectiveness of premarital counseling and education programs to provide sustained relationship satisfaction and stability (Williams, 2007). However, marital preparation and enrichment programs were not created for same-sex couples, and, given some of the unique issues that same sex couples face, it is likely that current premarital programs do not address all of the unique needs that same-sex couples may have for achieving success. To my knowledge, there are not currently any premarital programs available that have been specifically designed to meet the needs of same-sex couples. Given the recent legal changes that allow all same-sex couples to become legally married, there is a clear need and opportunity for clinicians to create and provide this valuable resource to same-sex couples.

Limitations

Several limitations are present within this study, many of which have to do with the sample. Couples in this study were identified through snowball sampling and were self-selected. To a degree, however, the self-selection benefited the study and fits with purposive sampling strategies that are appropriate to qualitative research. Couples were able to self-identify as successful, which was one of the necessary qualities for participating in this study. Another sampling limitation exists in the limited diversity of the sample. Nearly every partner was white and had advanced education, and most couples were from a similar moderate to high middle-class socioeconomic background. It is important to keep in mind when considering the results of this study that they are a reflection of the common sociocultural locations of these couples. That is, the stories that were told and the way those stories were narrative reflect the experiences of primarily white, upper-middle class, well-educated couples. If the sample had included racially
diverse, lower class, less educated couples, it is likely that the kinds of stories that were told and how those stories were told may have been different. Thus, the findings of this study may not be applicable across all sociocultural identity locations. Additionally, only two couples in this study were parents. There was a moderate balance of male and female couples, however the study would have been strengthened had more male-couple voices been included in the sample. Still, some diversity was achieved in geographical location, as couples were located in five different states across the country—from the West Coast, South, Midwest, and East Coast.

Another limitation of this study was that an intended piece of data—the relationship life-line—was not included in the analysis. Because fewer than half of the couples completed their relationship life-line, I decided not to include it in the analysis. However, these life-lines would have added another source of data to the study, and they may have been particularly important for understanding the unfolding journey or for creating an accurate roadmap of successful same-sex couple relationships. Several sources of data were nevertheless included in my analysis, including feedback from couples about the accuracy of my own reflected timeline based on a chronological analysis of their stories. Thus, I believe that the effect of the loss of this particular piece to the validity of the results was minimal.

Finally, knowing that my own questions and responses may have influenced which stories were told and emphasized, I recognize that greater attention or responsiveness on my part may have affected the results. For example, my choice of the words “turning points” and “challenges” may have directed the couples to attend to some stories over others. Had I used the words “significant experiences” or “important moments”, I may have gotten different stories. Or, if I had responded with more attention or follow-up questions to mentioning of the experiences of challenges unique to same-sex couples, couples’ responses may have revealed in a more clear
understanding of how those challenges were experienced, navigated, and narrated. Aside from the initial phrasing of the research questions, however, I believe I was able to keep my own responses and follow-up questions to a minimum throughout the interviews, which helped to minimize the effect of my own biases on the stories and answers that couples shared.

**Directions for Further Research**

Future research should consider exploring the experiences of success for more diverse cohorts of sexual minority couples, including diversity in race, socio-economic status, parenting status, sexual orientation (e.g., bisexual, pansexual, etc.) and relationship paradigm (e.g., open, polyamorous). Additionally, there is a dearth of research available on the lived experiences of transgender couples, and none, to this researcher’s knowledge, that explores experiences of success for these couples. Transgender individuals and their partners (whether trans or cis gender) share some common experiences with sexual minority couples. However, many of their experiences, not only within their relationships, but also within themselves, their families, and the world around them, are importantly different from same-sex couples. It would be interesting to better understand what those similarities and differences are, and such information would be critically useful to providing effective, conscious, and affirming services to trans couples.

Additional research should also be conducted to validate the results of this study. It might be interesting to use the lessons learned from these couples’ stories and conduct a larger scale quantitative study, such as a modified Delphi study, to validate agreement from other same-sex or sexual minority couples. Such a study could also support an increase awareness of the relative importance of the challenges/turning points and lessons for success that emerged in this study. Future studies exploring the construct of success should consider using the couples’ definitions of quality—measured by ease and enjoyment—longevity, and influence on others. Further
validation of the quality of positive influence as a measure of success for same-sex couples is also warranted, and researchers might consider creating and validating an assessment of success specific to same-sex couple relationships that is based on the findings of this study. Furthermore, the challenges, turning points, and factors contributing to success that have been identified in this study could be used as the dependent variables in future studies that explore factors contributing to same-sex couple relationship success.

Further research is also needed on experiences of resiliency for same-sex couples. In this study, many internal beliefs, values, and perspectives emerged as important to relationship success. Future research might explore this avenue further, to better understand the internal and narrative resources that support resiliency in successful same-sex couples. For example, another narrative study might be conducted to specifically explore the narrative strategies that same-sex couples who have “made it” use to effectively navigate the challenges that they encounter, which could lend further insight into why stories of minority stress or other challenges unique to same-sex couple relationships were not emphasized by the couples in this study.

As mentioned previously, previous research suggests that same-sex couples fare at least as well as, if not better than heterosexual couples (e.g., Gottman et al., 2003). This study highlights some of the important internal and relational resources that successful same-sex couples rely upon to protect themselves and rebound from adversity. It would be interesting to explore how the qualities, behaviors, and perspectives support resiliency in same sex couples might compare to those used by heterosexual couples and trans couples.

Conclusion

As couple and family therapists, we are often called upon to support same-sex couples in navigating relationship distress and strengthening their relationship so that they can “make it.”
However, there has been little information available to us about what the journey toward success might look like for couples, which challenges might be most significant to that journey, and what kinds of qualities and resources might be most effective in achieving success for these couples. The results of this study begin to answer these questions by adding to our knowledge of what the journey toward success may look like and what it takes to get there.

This study offers a unique contribution to the field by seeking to learn about same-sex couple relationship success from the couples who have achieved it and are living it. A narrative approach allowed for the delivery of wisdom and life-lessons through one of the most powerful mediums we have available—stories—and the inclusion of reported experiences, beliefs, photographs, documents, and interactions provided a more rich and meaningful database from which to draw further conclusions about the journey toward and achievement of success in same-sex couple relationships. Rather than identifying challenges and significant experiences from couples who are struggling, this study took a strength’s based approach that affirmed couples’ successes rather than assumed their struggles. This study sought to learn from these experts on success about which challenges and experiences they believed, in hindsight, were significant to their relationship journeys, and it sought to learn what they believed was most important to the successful navigation of those experiences. In all, this study offers many important lessons about how to achieve success and offers the beginnings of a much-needed roadmap to success. These lessons and this roadmap can offer invaluable information to clinicians and same-sex couples, such that more same-sex couples may be better able to navigate their own courageous journeys and achieve success in a way that fits their own hopes and dreams.
References


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http://doi.org/10.1177/0146167206288281


https://doi.org/10.1080/01926180701647264


http://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X11406228


### Table 1

**Summary of Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizing theme</th>
<th>Primary Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Journey to Success</td>
<td>Life before we met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coupling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Taking first big steps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adjusting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenges and turning points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commitment stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Success is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Contributes to Success</td>
<td>Determination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Differentiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Investment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How the Story is Told</td>
<td>Storytelling process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Storytelling content</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Journey to success:
Lessons from successful same-sex couples

- Are you in a long-term same-sex relationship that you feel good about?
- Would you be willing to share your story about how you and your partner have made it so far, so that others may benefit and learn from you?

If **YES**, then please consider participating in my research study entitled, *Journey to success: Lessons from successful same-sex couples*.

Hello! My name is Jeni Wahlig. I am a doctoral student of Marriage and Family Therapy at Antioch University New England. I am currently conducting a qualitative study that will **explore the stories, strengths, experiences of growth, and factors of success for same-sex couples in long-term relationships**.

**Who can participate?**
I am looking for same-sex couples who have been together for at least 10 years and who perceive their relationship to have high quality and commitment. Both members of the couple will need to participate. To see if you qualify and to begin participation, follow this link: (insert link)

**What would I need to do?**
1. Qualify for the study by completing a brief demographic questionnaire and two short assessments for relationship quality and commitment. (15 minutes) (insert link)
2. Plan for the interview by reviewing the questions, gathering some photos and documents, and completing a short activity about your relationship journey. (1 hour)
3. Complete one interview with you and your partner together. (2 hours)
4. Provide some written follow-up feedback about my results later on (30 minutes)

**How can I learn more?**
I have attached the Informed Consent document, which has a lot more detailed information about what this study entails. Please take a moment to review that document.

If you are interested in participating or have any further questions, please contact me by phone or email. Note that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed by email. The expected deadline for choosing to participate is 6/1/16.

Thank you so very much! Your stories of success are important, and can make a real difference.

Sincerely,
Jeni Wahlig
Xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
This study has been reviewed and approved by Antioch University New England’s Institutional Review Board.
Appendix B: Informed Consent

Title of Study: Journey to success: Lessons from successful same-sex couples.

Investigators: Jeni Wahlig, MS, LMFT
Antioch University, New England
Doctoral Candidate, Marriage and Family Therapy

Research Advisor: Kevin Lyness, PhD, LMFT
klynness@antioch.edu
Antioch University, New England
Program Director for PhD in Marriage and Family Therapy

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to understand and learn from the story of your relationship success. Essentially, I am seeking to answer the question, “How have you made it so far?”

Participation in this study requires that both you and your partner meet certain criteria and will include three phases—the collection of pictures, documents, and stories with your partner, an initial interview, and a follow-up request for feedback—for an expected total time commitment of no more than four hours. These will be explained in more detail below.

CRITERIA TO PARTICIPATE

1. Both partners must agree to participate.
2. Both identify as members of the same sex (male or female)
3. Be in a committed relationship with one another for at least 10 years.
4. Report high relationship quality and commitment

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

Screening: To participate, you and your partner will need to complete a brief demographic questionnaire and two brief surveys to measure quality and commitment in your relationship. Once scored, I will contact you regarding further participation
a. Time commitment: About 20 minutes

Phase one- Preparation for interview: In preparing for the interview, you and your partner will be asked to do three things: first, review the interview questions and decide which stories you want to tell during our interview; second, gather photographs and/or documents that might help to illustrate your journey or that could help me understand who you are as a couple. These will be scanned and the originals returned to you. Third, you will be asked to complete a relationship timeline activity, for which you will identify the significant events of your relationship journey.
   a. Time commitment: About 1 hour
Phase two - The interview: The interview will be conducted with both you and your partner either in person or via an online video chat forum (such as Skype). It will be audio taped and will later be transcribed by me (Jeni Wahlig) or by a hired transcriber or transcription agency.
   a. Time commitment: About 2 hours
   b. Note: The transcriber will sign a confidentiality agreement prior to transcription. Once the transcriber has been hired or agency chosen, their identity will be disclosed to you during the third phase, described below.

Phase Three - Follow-up: In this phases, I will send you my initial analysis and ask for your written feedback. This is also when you will receive information about the transcriber. If necessary, we may choose to do a follow-up interview to discuss your thoughts and ideas. This, too, would be audio taped and subsequently analyzed.
   a. Time commitment: About 30 minutes

RISKS

There are a few risks inherent in this study, including emotional discomfort, relational tension, and the possibility of being identified by one’s story.

BENEFITS

There may be direct benefits to you and your partner, including an opportunity to reflect on your strengths and increased closeness.

There may be a benefit to society by supporting the awareness that same-sex couple relationships are valid, healthy, and can achieve longevity.

The study will also benefit clinicians and researchers who work with same-sex couples by informing them of the strengths, skills, and sources of resiliency that may be available to same-sex couples in distress.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION

There is no cost nor compensation for participating in this study.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

Participation is voluntary, and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. There are no consequences for doing so. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality will be respect to the best of my ability and to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Antioch University New England, and the
Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information. All of your documentation and data collected for this study will be recorded under a false name and will be stored in secure location. No photographs will be used in any publication or presentation of this study unless both you and your partner have given written permission to do so. All data will be deleted no more than five years after data analysis. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed for online video interviews; however, every effort will be made to protect confidentiality.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

- You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.
- For further information about the study contact Jeni Wahlig at (phone number) or her advisor, Kevin Lyness at (phone number)
- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Chair, Kevin Lyness at klynness@antioch.edu
- You may also contact Melinda Treadwell, vice president of Academic Affairs at mtreadwell@antioch.edu
- Should you experience any personal or relational distress during the course of participation in this study, a list of individual, couple, and family therapists can be provided to you.

****************************************************************************

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE

By answering “Yes”, below, you are indicating that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, that your questions have been satisfactorily answered, and that you have been given a copy of this informed consent document.

Do you consent to participating in this study, entitled Journey to success: Lessons from successful same-sex couples.
Appendix C: Demographic Questionnaire

(This will be completed online prior to completing assessments)

1. Your Name ____________________________________

2. Phone # __________________________________

3. Email: ___________________________________

4. Best way and time to contact you? _________________________________

5. Partner’s name ____________________________________________

6. Please choose a false name to be associated with your data/interviews in this study: ____________________________________________

7. How old are you (in years)? ______

8. Please circle your assigned sex: Male Female Intersex

9. Please circle your preferred gender identity: Male Female Queer Other
   If you chose “Other”, please name your preferred gender identity __________________

10. Which term best describes your sexual orientation?
    Gay Lesbian Bisexual Queer Pansexual Other _________________

11. How would you describe your relationship exclusivity? Monogamous, non-monogamous, open, polyamorous, other

12. How many years ago did you and your partner begin your relationship? ________

13. Since beginning your relationship, have you and your partner ever broken up? Yes No
    If so, how many times? ___________________
    What was the longest amount of time you two were not a couple? ___________________

14. How many children do you and your partner parent? _______

15. Please check all of the ways in which children have come into your lives:
    _____ Biological child from previous relationship with a member of the opposite sex
    _____ Unknown donor insemination
    _____ Known donor insemination
    _____ Possibility of being known donor insemination
16. Place an (X) next to the highest level of education you have attained. If a higher level of education is currently being pursued, place a “P” for “pursuing” next to that degree in addition to the X:
   __ Less than high school education
   __ High School Graduate/GED
   __ Associates Degree
   __ Bachelor’s Degree
   __ Master’s Degree
   __ Doctoral Degree

17. Which income bracket best describes you and your partner’s combined yearly income level:
   __ Less than 25,000
   __ 25,000 – 49,999
   __ 50,000 – 74,999
   __ 75,000 – 99,999
   __ 100,000 – 124,999
   __ 125,000 – 149,999
   __ 150,000 – 174,999
   __ 175,000 – 199,999
   __ Greater than 200,000

18. Which descriptor best fits your relationship?
   __ Our relationship is not legally recognized
   __ Domestic Partnership
   __ Civil Union
   __ Married
   __ Other (Describe) __________________________

16. What state do you and your partner reside in? ______________________

17. Which racial category best describes you? (Please check all that apply)
   __ Caucasian/white
   __ Black/African American
   __ Hispanic/Latino
   __ Asian/Pacific Islander
   __ Native American
   __ Bi-Racial/Multi-Racial (Describe) ________________________________
   __ Other (Describe) ____________________________________________
Appendix D: Sample Items from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale© (Spanier, 1976)

Most persons have disagreements in their relationships. Please indicate below the approximate extent of agreement or disagreement between you and your partner for each item on the following list.

1. **Handling family finances**
2. **Friends**
3. **Sex relations**
4. **Household tasks**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Always Agree</th>
<th>Almost Agree</th>
<th>Occasionally Disagree</th>
<th>Frequently Disagree</th>
<th>Almost Disagree</th>
<th>Always Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

5. **How often do you or your mate leave the house after a fight?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All the time</th>
<th>Most of the time</th>
<th>More often than not</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

6. **Do you kiss your mate?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Every Day</th>
<th>Almost Every Day</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

There are some things about which couples sometimes agree or disagree. Indicate if either item caused differences of opinions or were problems in the past few weeks.

7. **Being too tired for sex**
8. **Not showing love**

Yes/No

The stars on the following line represent different degrees of happiness in your relationship. The middle point, “happy,” represents the degree of happiness of most relationships. Circle the star below the phrase which best describes the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.

*   *   *   *   *   *   *   *   *
Extremely Unhappy  Fairly Unhappy  A Little Unhappy  Happy  Very Happy  Extremely Happy  Perfect
Appendix E: Sternberg’s (1988) Commitment Questions

For each of the statements below, indicate how true (1=not at all true, 9=extremely true) each item is for you.

1. I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner
2. Because of my commitment to my partner, I would not let other people come between us
3. I have confidence in the stability of my relationship with my partner
4. I view my commitment to my partner as a solid one
5. I cannot imagine ending my relationship with my partner
6. I view my relationship with my partner as permanent
7. I plan to continue my relationship with my partner
8. Even when my partner is hard to deal with, I remain committed to our relationship
Appendix F: Before We Meet!

In preparation for our interview, which will explore the journey of your relationship, please discuss the following questions with your partner. Please jot down notes on this form so that it can be submitted to me as part of the data I collect, and so that it can be used as a cue for remembering the stories you would like to tell.

1. What is the story of coming together as a couple?

2. When did you know that this relationship was going to last?
   
   a. How did you know this?

3. What does it mean to you to be “successful” as a couple?
   
   a. Can you share a story or two that illustrate your success?

4. Can you tell me about some of the most significant challenges, life-events, and turning points in your relationship journey so far?
   
   a. How did you two navigate them?
   
   b. What made it possible for you to get through those times and stay together?
6. What would you say has led to your success as a couple? What are the key factors, qualities, circumstances?

   a. What stories highlight these factors and the role they have played?

7. Tell me about the photographs or documents that you chose to help illustrate your relationship.

8. What advice do you have for same-sex couples who are in the early years of their relationship?

Please collect any photographs or documents that you would be willing to share with me as part of the data for this study. All originals will be returned to you unaltered. If any documents contain your true names, these will be removed as described on the informed consent. If you are willing to allow your photographs and de-identified documents to be used for professional presentations of this study, please sign below, scan, and email to the address listed. Alternatively, you may bring the signed document to our in-person interview. Both of your signatures are needed in order for your documents/photos to be used. Choosing not to sign is perfectly fine and will have no effect on your participation in this study.

I agree to allow Jeni Wahlig to use our photographs and documents, excluding our true names, to be used for professional presentations of this study.

Partner 1: ____________________________ Date ________________

Partner 2: ____________________________ Date ________________

E-Mail to: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
Appendix G: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. What is the story of coming together as a couple?

2. When did you know that this relationship was going to last?
   a. How did you know this?

3. What does it mean to you to be “successful” as a couple?
   a. Can you share a story or two that illustrate your success?

4. Can you tell me about some of the most significant challenges, life-events, and turning points in your relationship journey so far?
   a. How did you two navigate them?
   b. What made it possible for you to get through those times and stay together?

5. What would you say has led to your success as a couple? What are the key factors, qualities, circumstances?
   a. What stories highlight these factors and the role they have played?

6. Tell me about the photographs or documents that you chose to help illustrate your relationship.

7. What advice do you have for same-sex couples who are in the early years of their relationship?
Appendix H: Relationship Lifeline

**Step 1:** In the space below, list as many significant events (both positive and negative) that affected your couple relationship. Consider successes, challenges, turning points, separations, major changes in your life or your family, and so on. Don’t forget to include meeting one another and how/when you decided to become a couple! (Use a separate sheet of paper if necessary).

**Step 2:** Next, organize the events chronologically. (Try using a number system—1 happened first, 2 happened next, etc.

**Step 3:** Use the following scale to rate your subjective experience of the event on your relationship.
-3 : Extremely hard/ challenging
-2
-1 : Hard/challenging
0: Neutral
1: positive/rewarding
2
3: Extremely positive/rewarding

**Step 4:** Use the graph on the reverse side of this page to plot your events in chronological order. Connect them with a line! Now you have a relationship lifeline!
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience of event</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>-1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>-2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relationship Lifeline
Appendix I: IRB Approval

Online IRB Application Approved: Building a life together: Lessons from same-sex couples who have “made it”. March 21, 2016, 11:38 am

klyness@antioch.edu <klyness@antioch.edu>

To: [Redacted] klyness@antioch.edu, bsammons@antioch.edu

Mon, Mar 21, 2016 at 9:38 AM

Dear Jeni Wahlig,

As Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Antioch University New England, I am letting you know that the committee has reviewed your Ethics Application. Based on the information presented in your Ethics Application, your study has been approved.

Your data collection is approved from 03/21/2016 to 03/20/2017. If your data collection should extend beyond this time period, you are required to submit a Request for Extension Application to the IRB. Any changes in the protocol(s) for this study must be formally requested by submitting a request for amendment from the IRB committee. Any adverse event should occur during this study, must be reported immediately to the IRB committee. Please review the IRB forms available for these exceptional circumstances.

Sincerely,

Kevin Lyness