

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Demography of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Heterosexual Couple Relationships in California

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Public debate about same-sex marriage and the rights of parents in same-sex relationships is increasing at the same time that social scientists have been working to improve knowledge about the size and characteristics of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual populations. An important focus of these efforts is identifying factors that affect union formation and dissolution for these groups. Our paper contributes by using newly obtained information from a large probability sample in California to describe cohabiting and serious dating relationships among lesbians, gay men, bisexual women and men, and heterosexual women and men. We pay particular attention to the measurement of sexual orientation, because sexual orientation defines the population at risk of forming a same or heterosexual relationship. We also investigate the socio-demographic characteristics associated with being in a union among lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and heterosexuals. Among those for whom it is relevant, we explore how individuals in cohabiting and serious dating relationships differ from each other and from those who are single on characteristics unique to sexual minorities, such as age of “coming out.” Our paper makes two contributions that distinguish it from most other recent research on this topic. First, we distinguish between behavioral and social-psychological definitions of sexual orientation. Second, we consider both cohabiting and serious dating relationships in addition to marriage (for heterosexuals) rather than restricting attention to cohabiting relationships.

Sexual orientation is a complex, multidimensional construct comprised of three primary domains: attraction, behavior, and identity (Peplau & Cochran, 1990; Sell, 1997). Attraction refers to desires, fantasies, and psychological attachment to a particular gender. Behavioral markers of sexual orientation include engaging in sexual activity with the gender one prefers. And the third domain, identity, denotes embracing a label such as “lesbian,” or “gay.” The domains of attraction, behavior, and identity do not always coincide (Laumann et al., 1994). That is, people who identify as heterosexual are not necessarily only attracted to or sexually involved with someone of the opposite sex. Likewise, someone who identifies as lesbian or gay may never engage in same-sex sexual contact.

Relying on only one measure of sexual orientation to classify populations may be problematic because each measure produces a somewhat different population: a behavioral definition will exclude individuals who have not had sex in the specified time frame. An identity definition of sexual orientation excludes individuals who engage in same-sex sexual activity, but do not adopt the label of lesbian, gay, or bisexual. In recognition of these ambiguities, we use both a behavioral and an identity definition in this paper, and examine how the findings change depending on the definition employed.

Like the issues involved in sexual orientation classification, there are a number of markers that can be used to decide what constitutes a “couple.” Relationships may be short-lived or

enduring, sexually-active or celibate, monogamous or open to others, and formally recognized or not. These dimensions of couple relationships are correlated with co-residence, but some couples in serious relationships do not live together. This paper focuses on serious couple relationships whether or not the partners co-reside. We consider three types of serious relationships, of any duration: marriage, nonmarital cohabitation, and dating couples who share strong emotional bonds but do not live together. We distinguish among these types of relationships to shed light on the similarities and differences in relationships across sexual orientations.

Previous Estimates of Same-Sex Couples

Several recent studies have attempted to estimate the proportion of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals in relationships, although some have had to rely on small or nonprobability samples. Several of these studies also restrict attention to cohabiting relationships. These studies are summarized below in Table 1. In general, lesbians are more likely than gay men to report being in some type of relationship. For example, among self-identified lesbians, Carpenter & Gates (in progress) report that 51% live with a partner while Black et al. (2000) report that 42% live with a partner. Black et al.'s (2000) estimate changes little when considering women who have had sex with a same sex partner in the past year (44%). In contrast, among self-identified gay men, Carpenter & Gates (in progress) report that 35% say they live with a partner while Black et al. (2000) report that 19% currently live with partner. Black et al.'s (2000) estimate increases to 28% when they consider men who have had sex with men in the past year. Among both self-identified gay men and men who have sex with men in San Francisco, Carpenter & Gates report that 25% live with a partner.

Table 1. Previous Estimates of Who Is in a Union for Lesbians and Gay Men					
Study	Sample method	Population	N	Relationship type	Estimate
WOMEN					
Black et al. (2000)	National probability sample	Same-sex sex in past year	102	Living with partner	44%
		Self-identified lesbian	12		42%
Carpenter & Gates (in progress)	Probability sample of California adults	Self-identified lesbians	329	Living with partner	51%
Bradford et al. (1994)	National purposive sample	Self-identified lesbians	1,917	Primary relationship with a woman	60%
Morris et al. (2002)	National purposive sample	Self-identified L/B non-mothers	1,919	Primary relationship with a woman	63%
		Self-identified L/B mothers	500		70%
MEN					
Black et al. (2000)	National probability sample	Same-sex sex in past year	102	Living with partner	28%
		Self-identified gay	27		19%
Carpenter & Gates (in progress)	Probability sample of California adults (2001 CHIS)	Self-identified gay men	568	Living with partner	35%

Carpenter & Gates (in progress)	Probability sample of high-gay density census tracts in San Francisco	Self-identified gay men and men who have sex with men	2,881	Living with partner	25%
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There is wide variation in these estimates, depending on several factors: sampling method, operational definition of sexual orientation, type of relationship considered, geographic area of the survey, and sample size. Because of the small number of studies it is not possible to determine what factors affect the estimates. For example, is Carpenter and Gates' (in progress) estimate of 35% for self-identified gay men slightly higher than Black et al.'s (2000) estimate of 28% for men who have sex with men because of differences in the operational definition of sexual orientation, or because the former use a sample from California instead of a national sample as in the latter study? We address the question of how the definition of sexual orientation affects population estimates by using survey data in which respondents reported about their behavior and identity as a gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

Data and Research Questions

This project uses data from the 2004-05 California Quality of Life Survey (Cal-QOL). The Cal-QOL interviewed approximately 2,300 individuals who had originally participated in the 2003 California Health Interview Survey (CHIS). The CHIS is a multistage probability sample of the California noninstitutionalized population, where, using CATI-based techniques, a single adult from each successfully contacted household was interviewed about health and access to health services (<http://www.chis.ucla.edu/about.html>). At the conclusion of the 2003 CHIS interview respondents were also asked if they would be interested in participating in a similar survey in the future. The Cal-QOL re-interviewed a sub-sample of these respondents. This sub-sample included all willing CHIS respondents who indicated a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity or who reported same-sex sexual activity in the year prior to the CHIS interview as well as a random sample of the remaining respondents. Respondents selected to be re-interviewed for the Cal-QOL were contacted between 6 and 18 months after they participated in the CHIS. Interviews were conducted in either English or Spanish. The Cal-QOL sample is representative of English and Spanish speakers in California. (See the California Quality of Life Methods Report (2005) for more on the Cal-QOL design.)

The Cal-QOL interview asked respondents about their sexual identity and same-sex sexual activity since age 18 and in the year before the interview without reference to their reports in the original CHIS interview. We use the Cal-QOL responses as indicators of sexual orientation.

The Cal-QOL data also includes responses to two questions about relationship status. The first question asked "Are you now married, living with a partner in a marriage-like relationship, widowed, divorced, separated, or never married?" Individuals who selected "married" and "living with a partner" are classified as married and cohabiting, respectively. For respondents who selected "living with a partner," a follow-up question determined the gender of their cohabiting partner. To further assess couple status, the second question asked only respondents who did *not* report that they were married or cohabiting: "When we began the interview, you indicated that you were not married or currently living with a partner. Do you have a relationship partner, but maybe the two of you don't live together?" We classify respondents who responded "yes" to this question as being in a serious dating relationship or having a non-cohabiting partner.

Our analysis pursues descriptive goals in light of the paucity of high quality information about gay, lesbian, and bisexual relationships in the general population. We ask: What is the correspondence between self-reported sexual orientation identity and sexual behavior and how do the different definitions of sexual orientation affect estimates of who is in a relationship, broadly defined? What socio-demographic characteristics are associated with being married, cohabiting or in a serious dating relationship and how do these vary among lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and heterosexuals. Although the number of bisexuals in the survey is small, we include them in the analysis to the extent possible. We use the well established literature on heterosexual relationships as a starting point in this analysis, and explore education, race-ethnicity, and cohort differences in relationship status for the various groups. We investigate the sensitivity of our findings about the socio-demographic correlates of union status according to how sexual orientation is operationalized. Finally, for lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, we describe how sexual-orientation specific factors, such as age of coming out, are associated with relationship status. The cross-sectional data we use do not allow us to determine the causal effects of individuals' characteristics on whether or not they are in a relationship, but the availability of this information for a reasonably large, representative sample provides a valuable opportunity to learn more about these greatly understudied populations.

State of the Analysis

All data have been collected by Westat under subcontract from the University of California—Los Angeles (Principal Investigator: Cochran). The Cal-QOL dataset is in the final stages of being cleaned and final minor adjustments to the weights are being evaluated. We are currently using a preliminary version of the data file, but we will have a final version to analyze within the month. We will complete the analysis early this spring and anticipate no difficulty in finishing the paper by March, 2006. We include here two tables to show the distributions of key variables for the analysis. In Table 2, we report the number and percent of heterosexuals, gay men, and lesbians in each relationship status using both the behavioral and identity definitions of sexual orientation to classify the groups. In Table 3, we provide analogous information for bisexuals. As can be seen in Table 2, lesbians and gay men are much less likely than heterosexuals to report a serious partner of any type. The differences among these groups, however, depend on whether sexual orientation is defined by behavior or identity. For instance, when sexual orientation is defined by self-reports about identity, 38% of lesbians report they are not in a relationship as compared to 21% of heterosexual women. The difference between gay and heterosexual men is even greater, 52% compared to 16%. When sexual orientation is defined by behavior the difference between lesbian and heterosexual women disappears – 12% of lesbians and 11% of heterosexual women report no serious partner. The difference in relationship status by sexual orientation for men persists though (45% vs. 12%). As our analysis progresses, we will investigate systematically gender differences in relationship status and the measurement of sexual orientation.

Table 2. Percent in Different Types of Relationships, Heterosexuals, Gay Men, and Lesbians, California 2004-05

	N	Married	Cohab.	Non-cohab. Partner	No Partner	Total
Lesbian						
Self-identified lesbian	152	1%	47	14	38	100%
Sex only with women in past 12 months	133	0%	67	20	12	100%
Gay						
Self-identified gay	264	0%	33	15	52	100%
Sex only with men in past 12 months	216	0%	36	19	45	100%
Heterosexual men						
Self-identified heterosexual man	766	65%	6	13	16	100%
Sex only with women in past 12 months	560	67%	7	14	12	100%
Heterosexual woman						
Self-identified heterosexual woman	892	59%	7	12	21	100%
Sex only with men in past 12 months	505	61%	10	17	11	100%

Notes: Data are unweighted. Percents may not equal 100 due to rounding.

In Table 3, we show that few women and men in the Cal-QOL sample reported that they had both male and female sexual partners in the past year. Regardless of how sexual orientation is defined, most bisexuals who are in a relationship are in heterosexual relationships of some type. The small number of cases in some cells will limit our multivariate analyses of correlates of relationship status for bisexuals, but because of the importance of learning more about this group from a probability sample, we include them in the first part of our analysis.

Table 3. Percent in Different Types of Relationships, Bisexuals, California 2004-05

	N	Hetero. Married	Hetero. Cohab	Hetero. Non-cohab Partner	Same-sex Cohab.	Same-sex Non-cohab Partner	None	Total
Women								
Same and opposite sex sexual partners in past year	22	18%	14	23	9	14	23	100%
Bisexual-identified women	118	21%	12	19	10	5	33	100%
Men								
Same and opposite sex sexual partners in past year	22	27%	5	23	5	5	36	100%
Bisexual-identified men	66	20%	2	15	3	3	58	100%

Notes: Data are unweighted. Percents may not equal 100 due to rounding.

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