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Abstract

This study contributes to the emerging demographic literature on same-sex couples by comparing the level and correlates of union stability among four types of couples: male same-sex cohabitation, female same-sex cohabitation, different-sex cohabitation, and different-sex marriage. I analyze data from two British birth cohort studies, the National Child Development Study ($N = 11,469$) and the 1970 British Cohort Study ($N = 11,924$). These data contain retrospective histories of same-sex and different-sex unions throughout young adulthood (age 16-34) from 1974-2004. Event history analyses show that same-sex cohabitations have higher rates of dissolution than do different-sex cohabiting and marital unions. Among same-sex couples, male couples had slightly higher dissolution rates than did female couples. In addition, same-sex couples from the 1958 and 1970 birth cohorts had similar levels of union stability. The demographic correlates of union stability are generally similar for same-sex and different-sex unions.

Keywords: Cohabitation; Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender; Marriage; Social Support; Social Trends / Social Change; Stability

In an era of high divorce rates, family scholars have sought to identify the forces that contribute to the stability of couple relationships. In doing so, researchers have compared the stability of marriages and unmarried cohabitations, marriages preceded by cohabitation and marriages that were not, and unions comprised of partners with varying demographic characteristics. Although less studied than other union types, same-sex couples also represent a unique opportunity to study cohesion in couple relationships. Most same-sex couples currently lack the institutionalization that underlies couple stability, but jurisdictions increasingly offer legal recognition to same-sex couples. Although same-sex couples remain socially stigmatized, attitudes are also growing more accepting. These shifts allow researchers to study how legal and social institutionalization contributes to the stability of couple relationships (Biblarz & Savci, 2010). In addition, the gender composition of same-sex couples—two men or two women—allows researchers to study how gender affects the stability and functioning of intimate relationships more generally (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983).

An important first step in investigating these theoretically rich issues is to describe the demography of same-sex unions. Spurred by the growing availability of data, researchers have begun to study the stability of same-sex unions in Sweden and Norway (Andersson, Noack, Seierstad, & Weedon-Fekjaer, 2006) and the Netherlands (Kalmijn, Loeve, & Manting, 2007). My research builds on these studies by studying a new set of correlates (e.g., birth cohort) and describing the stability of same-sex couples in Britain, a country with less legal and social acceptance of same-sex couples compared to the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden (European Commission, 2007). In this paper, I compare the levels and correlates of stability for male and female same-sex cohabitation, different-sex cohabitation, and different-sex marriage (“marriage” for brevity). I also explore whether the correlates of union stability—including birth cohort,

union history, and family background—are similar for the different types of couples. To investigate these questions, I analyze data from two British cohort studies, the National Child Development Study (NCDS; 1958 birth cohort) and the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS; 1970 birth cohort). The NCDS and BCS collected retrospective histories of same-sex and different-sex coresident unions since age 16 (Bynner, Butler, Ferri, Shepherd, & Smith, 2005). Because these data focus on couples that live together, I refer to coresident unions as “couples” in this paper for brevity. The NCDS and BCS are unique in that they contain comparable histories of same-sex and different-sex unions for two young adult cohorts spanning a long time period (1974-2004).

Background

Levinger’s theory of marital cohesion (Levinger, 1965, 1976) offers clues into the levels and correlates of stability for same-sex and different-sex couples. Grounded in social exchange theory, Levinger’s theory posits that union stability is a function of three factors: *rewards* from the relationship such as emotional support and social prestige; *barriers* to leaving the relationship such as legal requirements and joint investments; and attractive *alternatives* to the relationship such as another partner or being single. In this section, I discuss how the legal and normative context influences same-sex couples’ perceptions of the barriers, rewards, and alternatives to their unions, giving rise to differences in union stability. I begin by comparing the levels of stability between same-sex and different-sex unions. Next, I compare the levels of stability among male and female same-sex unions. I conclude by exploring the correlates of stability among same-sex and different-sex unions.

The Stability of Same-Sex and Different-Sex Unions

Same-sex couples experience a different legal and normative climate than do different-sex couples. Marriage between same-sex partners is not legally recognized in most parts of the world. And despite growing acceptance of same-sex relationships, same-sex couples continue to be socially stigmatized (Meyer 2003). The legal and normative climate means that same-sex couples likely perceive fewer barriers to exit, fewer rewards from the relationship, and greater alternatives compared to different-sex couples—leading to lower rates of stability.

Consider, first, the barriers to dissolution faced by same-sex couples. The lack of same-sex marriage means that same-sex couples rarely face legal hurdles when they seek to dissolve their relationship. Although legal barriers may themselves be insufficient to preserve an unhappy marriage (Knoester & Booth, 2000), the cost and time required for divorce may lead some different-sex couples to reconsider a divorce or resolve their problems (Preveti & Amato, 2003). In addition to legal hurdles, marriage also creates other barriers to exit, including “relationship-specific investments” such as children, specializing in paid and unpaid work, and pooling income (England & Kilbourne, 1990). These investments in the relationship foster interdependence and provide incentives to remain in the relationship (Treas, 1993). Marriage encourages relationship-specific investments because it reduces uncertainty about the relationship’s future and provides insurance against the risks of investment (Brines & Joyner, 1999; England & Kilbourne, 1990).

Same-sex couples may hesitate to make relationship-specific investments for several reasons. First, the inability to marry creates uncertainty about the relationship’s future and partners’ responsibilities to each other. Same-sex couples also lack legal protections for their investments such as marital property rights (Herek, 2006). Consistent with this perspective, same-sex couples are less likely than different-sex married couples to pool economic resources (Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2004) and specialize in paid and unpaid work (Black, Sanders,

& Taylor, 2007). Similarly, different-sex cohabiting couples make fewer relationship-specific investments than do married couples (Haskey, 2001; Heimdal & Houseknecht, 2003).

Second, same-sex couples may make fewer relationship-specific investments because of the social stigma associated with homosexuality. Lehmiller and Agnew's research on social marginalization shows that members of marginalized couples invest less in the relationship than do those in non-marginalized relationships (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006; Lehmiller & Agnew, 2007). Marginalized couples may prefer to keep their relationship secret or less visible to avoid unpleasant experiences with disapproving friends, family, or strangers. Lehmiller and Agnew (2006) argue that it is difficult to make relationship-specific investments while simultaneously maintaining a low visibility for one's relationship. Therefore, same-sex couples, who face disapproval of their relationship, might hesitate to invest in their relationship by establishing ties with their partner's family (Solomon et al., 2004) or by moving in together (Strohm, Seltzer, Cochran, & Mays, 2009) compared to both different-sex married and unmarried couples, who do not experience the stigma of homosexuality.

In sum, with fewer investments to bind them together, same-sex couples face fewer barriers to exiting the union than different-sex couples, particularly different-sex married couples. But in addition to barriers, union stability also depends on the availability of attractive alternatives such as being in another relationship or being single. Same-sex couples may have a greater number of alternatives to the relationship compared to different-sex (married and unmarried) couples. Although the population searching for a same-sex partner is relatively small, many lesbians and gay men are geographically clustered in some urban settings (Black, Gates, Sanders, & Taylor, 2000; Ellingson & Schroeder, 2004), providing a large pool of alternative partners and translating into less stability. Further, singlehood may be a more attractive status for

lesbians and gay men compared to heterosexuals. Many sexual orientation minorities, in response to anti-gay stigma, have developed thriving friendship networks, sometimes referred to as “families of choice” (Muraco, 2006; Weston, 1997). The salience of friendship means that there are fewer costs to relationship dissolution and becoming single for lesbians and gay men compared to heterosexuals.

Same-sex couples may perceive fewer rewards for being in their relationship compared to different-sex married couples. This is not because same-sex partners provide each other fewer rewards such as emotional support: same-sex and different-sex couples report being similarly satisfied with their relationships (Kurdek, 1998). Rather, same-sex couples likely derive fewer *social* rewards for being in their relationship. For different-sex couples, marriage is a sign of social prestige and marks a successful transition to adulthood (Cherlin, 2004). Most same-sex couples, however, cannot enjoy the social recognition of marriage nor the legitimacy of the relationship that marriage provides. Indeed, same-sex couples perceive less support for their relationship from their family compared to their married counterparts (Kurdek, 2004).

In sum, the lack of marriage and normative support means that same-sex couples perceive fewer barriers to leaving the union and more alternatives to the relationship compared to both different-sex married and unmarried couples. Further, same-sex couples are likely to perceive fewer rewards compared to different-sex married couples. Because barriers, rewards, and alternatives are associated with union dissolution, it follows that same-sex couples will experience greater levels of instability than different-sex couples, particularly married couples. Previous research supports these predictions (Balsam, Beauchaine, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2008; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek, 2004). In particular, two studies use population-based, longitudinal data to study the stability of same-sex unions. In Sweden, the dissolution rate for

male and female same-sex *marriages* was 1.4 and 3.0 times, respectively, greater than the rate for different-sex marriages (Andersson et al., 2006). This difference persisted even when analysis was restricted to childless couples, suggesting that same-sex couples' lower likelihood of having children does not fully explain their greater instability. Kalmijn et al. (2007) compared same-sex cohabiters, different-sex cohabiters, and different-sex married couples in the Netherlands between 1989 and 1999. In these longitudinal data, different-sex cohabiters who later marry are first classified as cohabiters and are then subsequently classified as married. The dissolution rate for same-sex cohabitation was twelve times higher than the rate for different-sex marriage, and three times higher than the rate for different-sex cohabitation (Kalmijn et al., 2007).

The Stability of Male and Female Same-Sex Unions

Few studies have examined the relative stability of male and female same-sex unions (Blumstein & Schwartz 1983; Kurdek, 2003). Differences in the social psychology and economic circumstances of men and women, however, suggest that women may experience lower dissolution rates compared to men. For example, the social psychological theory of self-construal (Cross & Madson, 1997) posits that women are more likely than men to adopt an interdependent understanding of the self, or self-construal, that is rooted in relationships. Men's self-construal, in contrast, is more likely to be grounded in autonomy and individualistic pursuits (Guimond, Chatard, Martinot, Crisp, & Redersdorff, 2006). Thus, self-construal theory suggests that women in same-sex couples may be more likely than men to derive meaning through their relationship (Kurdek, 2003) and perceive more rewards from being in a relationship. Women may also perceive greater rewards than men because of economic concerns: Women's lower wages may

lead women to view the economies of scale provided by cohabiting unions more favorably than do men. In addition to greater rewards, women may also perceive more barriers to exiting same-sex unions because female same-sex couples are more likely to have children than are male same-sex couples (Black et al., 2007). Finally, men might also have more alternatives to a relationship because men are more likely than women to live in large urban areas (Black et al., 2000) that sometimes contain highly organized social networks (Ellingson & Schroeder, 2004).

In sum, female couples may be more stable than male couples because women perceive more rewards, more barriers, and fewer alternatives than men. But these very factors may lead to greater stability among *male* same-sex cohabiters because of the different types of women and men who chose to enter same-sex cohabiting unions. For example, if women are particularly motivated to enter same-sex unions for social psychological or economic reasons, then a broad range of female couples (some highly committed, others less committed) may progress to coresident relationships. In contrast, only the most committed male couples may move in together because they perceive fewer rewards from relationships. Because commitment affects stability (Kurdek, 1995), it follows that the more highly “selective” group of male couples may be more likely to remain intact compared to the heterogeneous group of female couples.

The mixed empirical record on the stability of male and female couples reflects these divergent predictions. For example, while Kalmijn et al. (2007) find greater stability among female same-sex cohabiters compared to male cohabiters in the Netherlands, Andersson et al. (2006) find that male same-sex married couples in Norway and Sweden are more stable than their female counterparts. The available empirical evidence is inconclusive, in part because of the small number of studies, the varying definitions of couples, and the different contexts. By

comparing the stability of same-sex and different-sex cohabiting unions in Britain, this paper provides additional information to help resolve the mixed empirical record.

The Correlates of Union Stability

There is little reason to anticipate differences between same-sex and different-sex couples for some well-known correlates of stability such as childhood family structure or socioeconomic status (Berrington & Diamond, 1999), occupation and school enrollment (Ermisch & Francesconi, 2000), and childhood region (Berrington & Diamond, 1999). These correlates are likely to affect same-sex and different-sex couples similarly. For example, entering a union at a young age is positively associated with dissolution for different-sex couples (Ermisch and Francesconi, 2000) due to emotional immaturity or the poor quality of matches early in life. These mechanisms are likely to apply to same-sex couples. Indeed, Andersson et al. (2006) report a negative association between age of entry and the dissolution of same-sex marriages.

But some correlates might have different associations for same-sex and different-sex unions. Birth cohort is one example. There are unlikely to be differences between the 1958 and 1970 cohorts in the stability of different-sex married (Wilson & Smallwood, 2008) or different-sex cohabiting (Berrington, 2003) couples. However, the context of same-sex partnering was markedly different for the 1958 and 1970 birth cohorts. Public opinion had become more tolerant of homosexuality: 86% of British adults said homosexuality was “always,” “mostly,” or “sometimes” wrong when the 1958 cohort was 29 years old (1987), compared to 62% when the 1970 cohort was 29 years old (1999) (British Social Attitudes Surveys; author’s computations). The legal context had also changed. Whereas the 1958 cohort came of age during a resurgence of

anti-gay policies (Jivani, 1997), the 1970 cohort's young adulthood was marked by a series of policy victories for lesbians and gay men (Tobin, 2009).

The increasingly tolerant normative and legal climate leads to two opposing predictions. On one hand, young adults from the 1970 cohort may have had more supportive families and encountered less stigma, leading to greater stability for the 1970 cohort. On the other hand, "selection" processes may lead to the opposite pattern. The more unfavorable social context of the 1958 cohort's young adulthood may mean that only the most committed couples from that cohort would move in together. In contrast, a more heterogeneous group of couples from the 1970 cohort may have moved in together, suggesting greater stability among the 1958 cohort.

Like birth cohort, union history may operate differently for same-sex and different-sex couples. For different-sex couples, having previously cohabited or married is associated with dissolution (Steele, Kallis, Goldstein, & Joshi, 2005), in part because it signals poor relationship skills or liberal attitudes toward dissolution (Steele, Kallis, & Joshi, 2006). For same-sex couples, union history could also be a proxy for these risk factors. But a significant proportion of same-sex cohabiters have entered a different-sex union earlier in life (Andersson et al., 2006; Black et al., 2000) due to normative pressures to enter a different-sex union or changes in partner preferences. Because same-sex cohabiters might have experienced dissolution for reasons other than having poor relationship skills or liberal attitudes, union history might be a less robust predictor of dissolution for same-sex couples than for those in different-sex relationships.

Method

Data

I pool data from the National Child Development Study (NCDS) and the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS) (Bynner et al., 2005). The NCDS and BCS are prospective cohort studies of all people born in Britain in a particular week in 1958 and 1970, respectively. Children who immigrated to Britain by age 16 were also added to both cohorts. The NCDS and BCS have collected information from cohort members and their families periodically since birth. For the NCDS, I use data from the 11,469 individuals who participated in the paper-and-pencil age 33 interview, which represents 71% of eligible cohort members. I use data from the 11,924 BCS cohort members who participated in the age 30 or age 34 computer-assisted personal interview (CAPI) (74% of eligible cohort members). The NCDS and BCS remain largely representative of the original cohort, though there was more attrition among men and socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals (Hawkes & Plewis, 2006).

I analyze data from retrospective histories of coresident unions collected during in-person interviews at age 33 in the NCDS and at age 30 and 34 in the BCS. The NCDS and BCS did not collect complete information about nonresident relationships or periods of living apart from cohabiting partners or spouses. Because the NCDS and BCS were designed to be comparable, the question wording was nearly identical across surveys. For each coresident union that lasted one month or more since age 16, cohort members reported the month and year they began living with each partner, the month and year of marriage (if applicable), and whether the union ended through dissolution or a partner's death (if applicable). A unique feature of the NCDS and BCS is that cohort members were asked to report the sex of each previous partner ("Was this person male or female?"), allowing me to classify previous unions as same-sex or different-sex. I classify current cohabitations as same-sex or different-sex by linking the cohort member's sex with the sex of the cohort member's partner from the household roster.

After excluding 447 cohort members (1.9% of both cohorts) who provided incomplete or inconsistent union histories, there were 20,070 cohort members who reported at least one coresident union. Those who grew up in a non-traditional family, people from socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds, and those in low status occupations in young adulthood were more likely to have inconsistent or incomplete union histories. I include individuals' first and higher-order unions in the analysis and control for whether the respondent had a previous union in the analysis. There were 186 cohort members who ever entered a same-sex cohabitation; these cohort members reported a total of 263 same-sex relationships (138 from men and 125 from women). There were 17,219 unions (8,363 from men, 8,856 from women) that began as different-sex cohabitations, of which 8,663 eventually transitioned to marriage. Finally, there were 8,174 different-sex unions that began as marriages with no premarital cohabitation (3,641 from men, 4,533 from women). Using this information, I created a person-month file in which each partnered individual contributes one record for each month the union is at risk of dissolution (2,136,313 total person-months). Unions are at risk of dissolution until the relationship ends (for marriages, I use the date of separation rather than divorce) or the union is right-censored. Right-censoring may occur due to the partner's death, attrition, or if the union remains intact at the end of the observation period. Because individuals may marry their different-sex cohabiting partner, I treat union type as time-varying: cohabiting individuals who marry their partner are first classified as cohabiting and are then classified as married. Following Kalmijn et al. (2007), the variable measuring the relationship's duration continues to increase after the relationship transitions to marriage; this "clock" is not reset once they partners marry.

There are two main challenges to measuring same-sex relationships in large-scale surveys. First, like other data on sensitive subjects, the data I use may suffer from social

desirability bias: Individuals in same-sex unions may not agree to be interviewed to maintain privacy about their relationship. Alternatively, individuals who are interviewed may simply omit same-sex unions from their reports, particularly in interviewer-administered surveys such as the NCDS and BCS. I consider possible social desirability biases in my interpretation of the results. It is worth noting that the percentage of unions that are same-sex in the NCDS and BCS data is similar to other data sources. In the NCDS/BCS samples, same-sex couples account for 1.0% of all couples. Andersson et al. (2006) report that same-sex couples accounted for 0.7% of all couples in Swedish marriage register data between 1993-2001. Black et al. (2000), who use U.S. Decennial Census data, report that same-sex couples account for 0.2% of all couples.

A second potential problem is classification error, whereby the sex of a respondent's partner is miscoded, leading to a different-sex union being misclassified as a same-sex union (or vice versa). This problem has been documented in paper-and-pencil modes such as in the U.S. Decennial Census, in which stray marks or respondent error can lead to misclassification (Black et al., 2000). Even a small rate of misclassification of different-sex couples can result in significant "contamination" of the smaller group of same-sex couples (Black et al., 2000). Misclassification of partner's sex may be present in the paper-and-pencil NCDS, but is unlikely to occur in computer-assisted surveys such as the BCS because of additional quality controls (Gates & Steinberger, 2010). Fortunately, the age 33 NCDS interview collected union histories twice: once during a self-completion questionnaire and another time during the face-to-face CAPI-assisted interview. I used this unique information to reduce measurement error of same-sex unions. In a supplementary analysis (results not shown), I examined the consistency between the two data sources. There were substantial inconsistencies: of all same-sex unions, only 22% were reported in both sources. In this paper, I defined a union as same-sex if it met the following

conditions: (1) the respondent reported the union being same-sex in at least one data source, (2) the respondent never reported marrying their partner, (3) for current unions, the partner's sex in the household roster matched the partner's sex in the union history. This resulted in 86 same-sex unions from the NCDS. Another group of researchers analyzed these data and created an alternative definition of same-sex unions using slightly different assumptions (Di Salvo, 1995). These researchers reported 76 same-sex unions in the NCDS. In a supplementary analysis, I found that using this alternative classification scheme did not appreciably affect the parameters in my models.

Independent variables

In addition to gender and birth cohort, I include mother's education, childhood family structure, and childhood region of residence. In preliminary analyses, I experimented with different measures of childhood socioeconomic status such as father's education and father's social class. Mother's education had the closest fit to the data (results not shown). I define cohort members who were born to an unmarried mother or whose parents separated or divorced as growing up in a non-traditional family. I identify cohort members who have been married or lived with a partner previously using a time-varying, dichotomous variable. I use a linear and squared term for the cohort member's age of entering the union. A time-varying variable, lagged by one month, is used to identify respondents enrolled in full-time education. Socioeconomic status is a time-varying indicator of occupational and employment status, lagged by one month with the following categories: high-skilled (e.g., managerial, professional), medium-skilled (e.g., clerical, sales), low-skilled (e.g., machine operation), not working (e.g., unemployed, retired), and missing (Gregory, Zissimos, & Greenhalgh, 2001). Occupational skill level is a commonly-

used measure of socioeconomic status in Britain. Using a six or twelve month lag rather than a one month lag for this variable did not change the results. I treat missing data as an additional category of these independent variables. I do not consider children because there were only 14 NCDS cohort members and 47 BCS cohort members who had ever entered same-sex unions and also had children by age 34—less than 1% of the samples. In contrast, 75% of marriages and 24% of cohabitations in the NCDS had children (Steele et al. 2005). Other than the partner's sex, the NCDS and BCS do not contain information about previous partners' characteristics.

Analysis

I begin by describing the characteristics of individuals in each union type and showing the probabilities of union dissolution using life tables. Next, I conduct a series of discrete-time event history models predicting whether a union dissolves in a particular month. The event history analysis proceeds in two stages. The first stage tests for differences in the levels of stability across the four union types (female same-sex cohabitation, male same-sex cohabitation, different-sex cohabitation, and marriage). In this stage, I estimate a discrete-time logistic regression of dissolution on duration, union type, cohort, and family background (childhood region, childhood family structure, and mother's education). Next, I estimate two sequential models in which I first add age of union entry and union history to the model, and then add education enrollment and occupation/employment. These sequential models illustrate how compositional factors may explain differences in the stability of same-sex and different-sex unions. All models are adjusted for the clustering of unions within individuals. In all models, duration of the relationship is represented by two monthly linear splines: years 1-2 and year 3.

This specification had the closest fit to the data according to the BIC criteria (results not shown). All analyses are unweighted and were conducted using Stata version 10.

The second stage investigates the correlates of dissolution for each union type. In this stage, I estimate the final model from the first stage of the analysis, but stratify by union type (same-sex cohabitation, different-sex cohabitation, marriage). Due to small sample sizes, I pool male and female same-sex cohabitation. I use these models to test for the significance of variables within a union type (e.g., does the odds ratio for cohort differ from 1.0), as well as to test for differences of variables across models (e.g., does the odds ratio for cohort differ between same-sex and different-sex cohabitation). In a supplementary analysis reported in the text, I included interaction terms between occupation and gender to investigate whether the associations between occupation and dissolution differ by gender.

Results

Characteristics of individuals and their unions

Panel A in Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of individuals who report ever entering same-sex cohabitation, different-sex cohabitation, and marriage. Because I include an individual's first and subsequent unions, the columns are not mutually exclusive: An individual who cohabited with a different-sex partner and then cohabited with a same-sex partner would be represented in both the first and second columns. The results show that both same-sex and different-sex cohabiters were more likely than are married individuals to be from the 1970 cohort and live in a non-traditional family during childhood. Individuals who ever cohabited with a same-sex partner were more likely to be in full-time education at age 23 and have higher occupational attainment at age 29, relative to those who ever enter different-sex cohabitation or

marriage. The relatively high socioeconomic status of same-sex cohabiters is not due to differences in family background: The three groups did not differ in mother's education.

[Table 1]

The bottom panel of Table 1 describes the characteristics of unions. Forty percent of same-sex cohabitations were preceded by another union, compared to only 29% of different-sex cohabitations and 5% of marriages. In other words, same-sex cohabitations were more likely to be an individual's second or higher-order union compared to marriage and different-sex cohabitation. The median age of entry into same-sex cohabitation was 25.9 years. This is higher than the median age of entering different sex cohabitation (24.6 years) or transitioning from single to marriage (24.5 years) ($p < .05$). In a supplementary analysis of same-sex cohabitation, there was no difference between men and women in the number of previous unions or the median age of union entry (results not shown).

Life table estimates of dissolution

In Table 2, I show the probabilities that each union type will remain intact for the first eight years of the union. As in Table 1, individuals can contribute multiple relationships in this analysis. For the purposes of this analysis only, I use the union type at the beginning of the relationship; cohabitations that transition to marriage are treated as cohabitations. Subsequent analyses treat union type as a time-varying variable. The results show that marriage is the most stable union type, followed by different-sex cohabitation, and then by same-sex cohabitation. For example, the probability of a union lasting five years was .88 for marriage, .67 for different-sex cohabitation, and .37 for same-sex cohabitation. This survival probability for marriage is similar to that reported in Britain using vital records data (Wilson & Smallwood, 2008). The greater

instability of same-sex cohabitation is evident in the plot of the smoothed hazard of dissolution (Figure 1). Figure 1 also shows that female same-sex cohabitations appear to be slightly more stable than male same-sex cohabitations, although these figures are based on a small number of cases, particularly at high durations.

[Table 2, Figure 1]

Differences in the stability of same-sex and different-sex unions

Next, I estimate discrete-time event history models that test for differences in the levels of stability across union types (Table 3). The model in the first panel suggests that male and female same-sex cohabitations were less stable than are marriages ($Z = 18.2$ and 13.4 , respectively). Different-sex cohabitations were also less stable than marriages ($Z = 46.7$). Wald tests show that male and female same-sex cohabitations had higher rates of dissolution compared to different-sex cohabitation ($\chi^2(1) = 37.7$; $p < .001$ for men; $\chi^2(1) = 12.8$; $p < .001$ for women). The differences between same-sex and different-sex unions persisted even after age of union entry and union history are added in the second model, and socioeconomic status is added in the third model. In the third model, the dissolution rate for male and female same-sex cohabitation is 7.1 and 5.4 times greater, respectively, than the rate for marriage ($p < .001$). The difference between different-sex cohabitation and both male and female same-sex cohabitation continues to be statistically significant in the third model (for men, $\chi^2(1) = 48.4$; $p < .001$; for women, $\chi^2(1) = 13.3$; $p < .001$). These results suggest that these few demographic characteristics of individuals and their unions explain little of the variation in stability between same-sex and different-sex unions. Of course, these models do not control for other potentially confounding factors such as relationship values and risk aversion, an issue I elaborate on in the Discussion.

[Table 3]

Table 3 also tests for differences between male and female same-sex cohabitation. Wald tests show that there was little difference between female and male couples in the first model ($\chi^2(1) = 1.6; p = .20$) and second model ($\chi^2(1) = 2.4; p = .12$). The third model, which introduces controls for socioeconomic status, suggests that female couples have slightly lower rates of dissolution than do male couples, though the difference is marginally significant ($\chi^2(1) = 2.8; p = .095$). To determine whether my method of classifying same-sex couples biased comparisons in the stability of same-sex unions, I repeated the analysis using the alternative classification scheme (Di Salvo, 1995). The results were not substantively different from the results using my classification of same-sex couples. The models in Table 3 assume that the associations between the covariates and dissolution are the same for each union type. In the next section, I test this assumption.

The correlates of dissolution within and between union types

In Table 4, I present the results of discrete-time event history models predicting union dissolution, stratified by union type. For same-sex cohabitation, the odds ratios for the two spline functions of duration were 1.02 and 0.99, respectively, and are statistically significant. These parameters imply that the dissolution rate increases by 2% each month for the first two years of a union and decreases by 1% by each month thereafter. The associations between duration and dissolution were similar for same-sex cohabitation and both different-sex cohabitation and marriage.

[Table 4]

There is suggestive evidence that female same-sex cohabitations experience lower rates of dissolution compared to male same-sex cohabitations. The parameter for gender was not statistically significant by itself ($Z = -1.4$) in Table 4, but the Wald test between male and female same-sex cohabitations in the previous table (Table 3) was marginally statistically significant. The conclusion about greater instability among male same-sex couples must be regarded tentatively.

Many of the correlates of dissolution were similar between same-sex and different-sex unions. There is no evidence of cohort differences in the stability of same-sex cohabitation ($Z = -0.2$), different-sex cohabitation ($Z = 0.7$), or marriage ($Z = -0.1$). Growing up in a non-traditional family was associated with increased risk of dissolution for all union types, although the parameter for same-sex cohabitation itself was not statistically significant ($Z = 1.1$). Like different-sex cohabitation and marriage, the relationship between age of entry and dissolution for same-sex cohabitation followed an inverted U-shape.

Consistent with expectations, the relationship between having been in a previous union and dissolution varies by union type. Having been in a previous union was not associated with the stability of same-sex cohabitation, but was associated with an increased risk of dissolution for marriage (O.R. = 1.81; $Z = 9.3$) and different-sex cohabitation (O.R. = 1.16; $Z = 4.1$). Wald tests confirm that this association was significantly stronger for marriage than for same-sex cohabitation ($\chi^2 = 4.2$; $p = .04$), but there was no difference between same-sex and different-sex cohabitation ($\chi^2 = 0.0$; $p = .96$).

There was no significant association between occupation/employment and dissolution for same-sex cohabitation. Supplementary analyses showed that this association did not vary by gender for same-sex cohabitation, but it does for different-sex unions (results not shown). For

different-sex cohabitation, not working had a positive association with dissolution for men, but there was no significant association for women. For marriage, being in a high-skilled rather than low skilled occupation was negatively associated with dissolution ($Z = -2.5$) for both men and women. For men, however, not working was positively associated with marital dissolution, but was negatively associated with marital dissolution for women.

Discussion

By pooling retrospective data from two birth cohorts, I studied how the levels and correlates of stability depend on sexual orientation (same-sex versus different-sex unions), gender (male versus female same-sex unions), and cohort (1958 versus 1970). Three main conclusions emerge from this study. First, the dissolution rate for male and female same-sex cohabiters was seven and five times higher, respectively, the rate for marriage. Among cohabiters, the differences were smaller: the dissolution rate for male and female same-sex cohabiters was approximately double the rate for different-sex cohabiters. The direction and magnitude of the differentials are consistent with previous research in other countries (Andersson et al., 2006; Kalmijn et al., 2007). One potential limitation of using the self-reported NCDS and BCS data is that same-sex unions might be underreported due to social desirability concerns, which may bias the group comparisons. Underreporting of same-sex unions likely attenuates differences between same-sex and different-sex couples. This is because short-term same-sex unions are more likely to be underreported than longer-term unions: Shorter-term unions are less salient in people's lives and easier to conceal in a detailed life history interview. Further, longer-term same-sex cohabiters are also likely to have more experience being open about their relationships, making them less susceptible to social desirability biases. If short-term same-sex

unions are underreported, then observed rates of same-sex dissolution would be downwardly biased—leading to an underestimate of differences between same-sex and different-sex unions.

The findings are consistent with the perspective the lack of legal and social institutionalization of same-sex couples may lead same-sex couples to perceive fewer rewards, fewer barriers, and more alternatives to their unions—leading to higher rates of dissolution. This perspective is grounded in longstanding theory about institutionalization and investments and consistent with previous research on how same-sex couples organize their relationships. A competing explanation, however, is that the elevated rate of dissolution is due to the types of people who enter same-sex unions. If individuals who choose to cohabit with a same-sex partner have more liberal attitudes toward dissolution or are more open to change and risk taking, then higher dissolution rates may stem from selection processes rather than the lack of marriage and the normative climate. There is some evidence to support this reasoning. Although all sexual orientation groups value commitment and faithfulness, sexual orientation minorities are less likely to view these values as ingredients to a successful relationship (Meier, Hull, & Ortyl, 2009). These values may stem from the fact that same-sex couples may have different goals in pursuing relationships: while heterosexual life is largely grounded in marriage and childbearing, the lack of marriage for same-sex couples and greater difficulty having children means that there is not a logical “endpoint” for same-sex relationships (Strohm et al., 2009). Different relationship values, however, are insufficient to fully explain the results in this study: although different-sex cohabiters share many of the same individualistic values as same-sex couples (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995), same-sex cohabiters still had higher dissolution rates compared to different-sex cohabiters. It is likely that both institutional and selection processes are at work.

Future research that integrates attitudes and demographic behavior will be able to shed light on the relative importance of the “selection” and “institutional” perspectives.

Second, there was some evidence that male same-sex couples were less stable than were female couples. Although this finding should be interpreted as suggestive due to its marginal significance, this result may help to resolve the mixed research on the relative stability of male and female same-sex couples. My finding is consistent with another study that observed greater instability among male same-sex cohabiters in the Netherlands (Kalmijn et al., 2007). Another study, however, of same-sex married couples in Norway and Sweden found that female couples were less stable (Andersson et al., 2006). What explains these discrepant findings? One potential explanation concerns gender differences in the types of couples who choose to marry. Same-sex couples who chose to marry are more committed and have been together for longer than unmarried couples (Fingerhut & Maisel, 2010). But this selection process may be stronger for men than for women: a broad range of female couples may marry, but only the most committed male couples may marry. Indeed, male couples who chose to legally recognize their unions have been together longer than their female counterparts (Carpenter and Gates, 2008). Thus, male same-sex married couples in the 2006 study by Andersson et al. may have been particularly committed to their relationship compared to female couples, resulting in greater stability for male couples. To test this hypothesis, more descriptive studies of same-sex marriages and cohabitations in diverse contexts are needed. These studies could pave the way for research on how women’s greater social psychological investment in relationships and different economic circumstances affect the stability of relationships more generally.

Third, consistent with previous research (Andersson et al., 2006; Kalmijn et al., 2007), there were few differences in the correlates associated with the stability of same-sex and

different-sex unions. A notable exception was previous cohabitation or marriage, which was positively associated with dissolution for marriage, but had no association for same-sex cohabitation. Future research is needed to determine whether this null finding reflects true behavior or a lack of statistical power. My prediction of cohort differences in the stability of same-sex unions received no support. This may be due to three factors. First, the twelve year difference in birth cohorts may not be long enough to observe the effects of a changing normative climate. Second, small sample sizes also might not have provided sufficient statistical power to detect a difference. Third, the effects of the increasingly tolerant social climate (leading to greater stability in the 1970 cohort) may have been offset by “selection” processes, whereby only especially committed couples from the 1958 cohort chose to live together or report their relationship on a survey (leading to greater stability in the 1958 cohort). The plausibility of this selection process suggests that researchers studying cohort changes in same-sex couples should account for changes in the types of people who enter a same-sex union, possibly by measuring relationship commitment at the beginning of a panel study (Balsam et al., 2008) or by measuring attitudes or values in a cross-sectional study.

This study complements previous demographic studies on the stability of same-sex unions (Andersson et al., 2006; Kalmijn et al., 2007) and the burgeoning demographic literature on same-sex couples more generally. The limitations of this study described above—its reliance on self-report data, small samples, and lack of data on attitudes and values—point to directions for future research and the need for more data on same-sex couples. The investigation of gender and cohort differences in same-sex union stability also underscores the importance of incorporating selection effects into demographic studies of same-sex couples. By addressing these methodological challenges, researchers will be able to exploit the unique social context of

same-sex couples to study how institutionalization, gender, and social change affect intimate unions more generally (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983).

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Tables

Table 1. Characteristics of Individuals (N = 20,070) and Their Unions (N = 25,656)

<i>A. Characteristics of Individuals</i>	Ever in same-sex cohabitation (<i>n</i> = 186 individuals)	Ever in different-sex cohabitation (<i>n</i> = 13,266 individuals)	Ever married (<i>n</i> = 15,649 individuals)
Female	47	51	54
Cohort			
1958	27	36	59
1970	73	64	41
Region of residence in childhood			
London and Southeast	30	25	21
Scotland and the North	27	35	38
Wales and the Midlands	26	22	23
South and East	15	16	18
Missing or abroad	2	2	1
Family disruption in childhood	31	32	25
Mother's years of post- compulsory education			
0	57	58	57
1-2	27	25	28
3 or higher	9	11	9
Missing	7	6	7
Enrolled in full-time education ¹	14	7	6
Missing data on enrollment ¹	5	6	8
Occupation ¹			
High-skilled	44	33	30
Medium-skilled	34	36	37
Low-skilled	5	11	11
Not working	12	14	16
Missing	5	6	6
<i>B. Characteristics of Unions</i>	Same-sex cohabitation (<i>n</i> = 263 unions)	Different-sex cohabitation (<i>n</i> = 17,219 unions)	Marriages (<i>n</i> = 16,837 unions)
Number of previous unions			
Zero	60	71	95
One	28	24	5
Two or more	12	5	< 1
Median age at union entry (years)	25.9	24.6	24.5

Note: Variables defined in text. Totals may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Percentages Unless Noted.

¹ Time-varying variable. Education enrollment is shown at age 23; occupation is shown at age 29.

Table 2. Survival Probabilities by Union Type and Duration ($N = 25,656$ unions)

	<u>Same-Sex Cohabitation</u>			<u>Different-Sex</u>	<u>Marriage</u>
	All	Men	Women	<u>Cohabitation</u> ¹	
# of unions	263	138	125	17,219	8,174
<u>Duration (years)</u>					
1	.79	.76	.83	.90	.98
2	.67	.65	.69	.82	.95
3	.54	.52	.55	.76	.93
4	.47	.46	.48	.71	.91
5	.37	.37	.38	.67	.88
6	.33	.29	.38	.64	.86
7	.28	.24	.34	.62	.84
8	.25	.21	.31	.60	.82

¹ Includes unions that transitioned to marriage and those that did not.

Table 3. Odds Ratios (OR) From a Discrete-Time Event History Analysis of Dissolution (N = 25,656 unions)

	OR	Z	OR	Z	OR	Z
Duration						
Spline years 1-2	1.01	7.1	1.01	7.5	1.01	8.0
Spline years 3+	0.99	-13.6	0.99	-17.4	0.99	-16.9
Union type (marriage)						
Male same-sex cohabitation	6.93	18.2	7.19	18.5	7.12	18.5
Female same-sex cohabitation	5.62	13.4	5.57	13.2	5.43	13.2
Different-sex cohabitation	3.52	46.7	3.47	45.2	3.42	44.7
1970 cohort (1958 cohort)	0.94	-2.3	0.97	-1.3	0.99	-0.3
Childhood region (Southeast, South, East)						
Scotland, North, Wales, Midlands	0.90	-4.6	0.90	-4.4	0.90	-4.5
Missing	1.02	0.2	1.02	0.2	1.02	0.2
Non-traditional family in childhood	1.28	10.3	1.20	7.7	1.20	7.6
Mother's education (0-2 years) ¹						
3 or more	1.15	3.8	1.22	5.2	1.20	4.7
Missing	1.10	2.0	1.14	2.7	1.13	2.6
Age entered union (years)			0.72	-9.7	0.73	-9.3
Age entered union ² (years)			1.01	7.9	1.01	7.6
Had previous union(s) (none)			1.29	7.9	1.29	7.8
Enrollment in education (not enrolled)						
Enrolled					1.48	6.5
Missing enrollment					1.27	3.6
Occupation (low-skilled)						
High-skilled					0.93	-1.7
Medium-skilled					0.96	-1.0
Not working					0.98	-0.5
Missing					1.12	2.2
Log-likelihood	-52,624		-52,439		-52,404	

Note: Variables described in text. Reference category is in parentheses.

¹ Mother's years of post-compulsory schooling.

Table 4. Odds Ratios (OR) From a Discrete-Time Event History Analysis of Dissolution, Stratified by Union Type (N = 25,656 unions)

Duration	<i>Same-Sex</i>		<i>Different-Sex</i>		<i>Marriage</i>	
	<i>Cohabitation</i>		<i>Cohabitation</i>			
	OR	Z	OR	Z	OR	Z
Spline years 1-2	1.02	2.4	1.01	6.7	1.04	8.9
Spline years 3+	0.99	-3.0	0.99	-14.0	0.99	-13.1
Female	0.80	-1.4	0.83	-6.0	0.92	-2.1
1970 cohort (1958 cohort)	0.96	-0.2	1.02	0.7	1.00	-0.1
Childhood region (SE, South, East)						
Scotland, North, Wales, Midlands	0.83	-1.2	0.88	-4.1	0.93	-2.0
Missing	0.55	-1.0	0.96	-0.4	1.12	0.6
Non-traditional family in childhood	1.20	1.1	1.14	4.3	1.31	6.9
Mother's education (0-2 years) ¹						
3 or more years	0.83	-0.6	1.30	5.9	0.97	-0.4
Missing	1.62	2.1	1.21	3.1	1.04	0.4
Age entered union (years)	0.69	-1.7	0.87	-3.3	0.65	-6.3
Age entered union ² (years)	1.01	1.6	1.00	2.5	1.01	4.3
Had previous union(s) (none)	1.18	0.8	1.16	4.1	1.81	9.3
Enrolled in education (not enrolled)						
Enrolled	1.15	0.3	1.43	5.3	0.96	-0.2
Missing enrollment	1.75	1.6	1.18	1.8	1.34	3.3
Occupation (low-skilled)						
High-skilled	1.37	0.7	1.03	0.6	0.85	-2.5
Medium-skilled	1.20	0.4	1.00	0.1	1.00	0.1
Not working	1.07	0.1	1.22	3.4	0.82	-2.9
Missing	1.44	0.7	1.19	2.4	1.13	1.5
Log-likelihood	-841		-29,240		-22,125	
Number of couples	263		17,219		16,837	

Note: Variables described in text. Reference category is in parentheses.

¹ Mother's years of post-compulsory schooling.

Figure

