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Couples Argue about Influences Relationship Satisfaction**

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## Areas of Conflict for Gay, Lesbian, and Heterosexual Couples: What Couples Argue About Influences Relationship Satisfaction

*Data regarding the link between the frequency with which relationship conflict is experienced in specific content areas and both concurrent relationship satisfaction and change in relationship satisfaction over a 1-year period are presented for both partners of 75 gay, 51 lesbian, and 108 heterosexual couples who lived together without children. Couple scores fell into six clusters that represented areas of conflict regarding power, social issues, personal flaws, distrust, intimacy, and personal distance. Across the three types of couples, the rank order of frequency of conflict in each content area was very similar. Each partner's concurrent relationship satisfaction was strongly negatively related to the frequency of arguing in areas reflecting power and intimacy, and a decrease in each partner's relationship satisfaction over a 1-year period was linked to frequent arguing in the area of power.*

Although conflict is an ubiquitous aspect of any close relationship, researchers have paid more attention to *how* conflict gets resolved (e.g., Gottman, 1994; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen,

1993; Markman, Renick, Floyd, & Stanley, 1993) than to *what* couples fight about. To redress this imbalance, the focus of the current paper is on identifying the substantive areas in which couples experience conflict and examining whether the frequency of conflict in various content areas is differentially related to relationship satisfaction. Although the eventual research goal is to study how relationship well-being is affected by interactions between the content of what couples argue about and the manner in which couples manage and resolve conflict, the more modest goal of this study was to attend to the link between the content of couple conflict and relationship satisfaction.

The conceptual framework used to examine the link between the content of couple conflict and relationship satisfaction was interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). In this theory, the nature of the interaction between partners is the essence of a close relationship and is viewed in terms of degree of interdependence, that is, the extent to which each partner influences the other partner's positive and negative outcomes derived from the relationship. Generally, a person is satisfied with the relationship to the extent that perceived rewards from the relationship are high, perceived costs to being in the relationship are low, and the relationship is seen as meeting an in-

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ternalized standard of what a good relationship should be (Rusbult, 1983).

Within interdependence theory, frequent conflict between partners generally has been viewed as a cost to being in the relationship (e.g., Duffy & Rusbult, 1986). Indeed, frequency of interpartner conflict consistently has been found to be negatively related to appraisals of relationship satisfaction (e.g., Kurdek, 1991a, 1991b). However, the key issue of concern here is whether interpartner conflict over some areas is more strongly related to relationship satisfaction than is conflict over other areas. Based on interdependence theory (Braiker & Kelley, 1979), one would expect that interpartner conflict in areas that reflect high levels of interdependence would be especially strongly linked to relationship satisfaction because such conflict would directly affect perceived outcomes from the relationship.

Surprisingly, few studies have addressed the relation between frequency of relationship conflict in specific content areas and relationship satisfaction. Storaasli and Markman (1990), as part of a larger study, correlated 40 spouses' ratings of the intensity of conflict in 10 problem areas (money, communication, relatives, sex, religion, recreation, friends, alcohol/drugs, children, and jealousy) with their marital adjustment. Spouses were married for about 1 year and did not have children living with them. A key finding from this study was that the relation between marital adjustment and intensity of conflict varied by problem area. In particular, husbands' marital adjustment was most strongly negatively associated with the intensity of conflict over communication and sex. Wives' marital adjustment was most strongly negatively associated with the intensity of conflict over communication and sex as well as over relatives and jealousy.

In a study of 168 couples over the first 2 years of marriage, Vangelisti and Huston (1994) related each spouse's satisfaction with eight domains of marriage (communication, influence on making joint decisions, sex, leisure activities, division of household tasks, time together, time with friends/relatives, and finances) to marital satisfaction. Couples were studied shortly after their marriage and then again after their first and second wedding anniversaries. About half of the couples had children at the last assessment. As in the Storaasli and Markman (1990) study, the relation between satisfaction with domains of the marriage and marital satisfaction varied by domains. Specifically, for both spouses, the general pattern across

the three assessments was that dissatisfaction with communication and influence on making joint decisions was linked to overall dissatisfaction with the marriage. In addition, for both spouses, dissatisfaction with influence on making joint decisions tended to predict a decrease in marital satisfaction over the three annual assessments.

Taken together, these two studies suggest that conflict over areas of high interdependence is especially strongly linked to marital outcomes. In Storaasli and Markman's (1990) research, conflict over communication and sex was most strongly linked to marital satisfaction, whereas in Vangelisti and Huston's (1994) research, dissatisfaction with communication and influence on making joint decisions was most consistently linked to marital outcomes. Relative to the other areas of conflict sampled, these areas commonly reflect instances in which partners strongly control each other's outcomes; that is, they represent areas of high partner interdependence.

However, despite this commonality, both studies suffer from methodological problems. Storaasli and Markman (1990) assessed relationship satisfaction with a measure of marital adjustment—the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959)—in which eight of the 15 items assess the frequency of interpartner conflict. The overlap in content between the measure of conflict and the measure of marital adjustment likely produced inflated estimates of the linkage between these two variables (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987).

To their credit, Vangelisti and Huston (1994) used a measure of marital satisfaction that avoided content overlap with the domain measure. However, they did not indicate whether parenthood moderated the relation between domain satisfaction and marital satisfaction. Further, because domains were rated in terms of satisfaction (rather than degree of conflict), no direct assessment of conflict was made. Finally, no empirical analysis (such as a factor analysis) was performed regarding the extent to which the eight domains clustered together.

The current study addressed the limitations of previous work examining the link between what couples fight about and relationship satisfaction. First, the measure of relationship satisfaction employed did not sample content relevant to conflict. Second, the measure of relationship conflict used in this study sampled conflict areas similar to those studied by Storaasli and Markman (1990) and Vangelisti and Huston (1994), but ratings regarding frequency of conflict were factor ana-

lyzed to obtain groups of conflict areas. In addition, to assess the generality of findings derived from this study, gay and lesbian couples were studied as well as heterosexual couples. Because the gay and lesbian couples did not have children living with them, the heterosexual couples were also limited to those without children.

In view of limited descriptive data regarding the specific areas over which heterosexual couples (e.g., Buss, 1989; Douglass & Douglass, 1993; Geis & O'Leary, 1981; Storaasli & Markman, 1990) and gay and lesbian couples (e.g., Berger, 1990; Bryant & Demian, 1994) experience conflict, and the nonexistence of a single study in which all three types of couples have been surveyed about areas of relationship conflict, the first purpose of this study was to compare the areas of conflict reported by gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples. Findings that the three types of couples experience common frequent areas of conflict would complement existing evidence that these couples do not differ in level of relationship satisfaction (Kurdek, 1994).

The second purpose of this study was to relate the frequency of conflict in clusters of relationship problem areas to both concurrent relationship satisfaction and to change in relationship satisfaction over a 1-year period. Based on interdependence theory (Braiker & Kelley, 1979) as well as previous empirical findings (Storaasli & Markman, 1990; Vangelisti & Huston, 1994), it was hypothesized that the frequency of conflict in areas representing high levels of partner interdependence would be negatively related to each partner's concurrent relationship satisfaction. Based on the findings of Vangelisti and Huston (1994), it was also hypothesized that frequent arguing in the area of influence (or power) would predict a decrease in each partner's relationship satisfaction.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

Subjects were both partners from 75 gay, 51 lesbian, and 108 heterosexual couples who did not reside with children. Because partners in gay and lesbian couples do not have any formal role identifications (such as husband and wife), partners in these couples were randomly identified as "first partner" or "second partner." Gay and lesbian couples were recruited through requests for participants published in gay/lesbian periodicals and

newsletters as well as through nominations provided by participants. These couples were participants in the first two annual waves of data collection in an on-going longitudinal study of gay and lesbian couples. Heterosexual couples were among original participants in a separate on-going longitudinal study of newlywed couples who initially were recruited from marriage licenses published in the *Dayton Daily News* (see Kurdek, 1993, for further details on subject recruitment and attrition). The data reported here were collected in the fifth and sixth annual waves.

Most gay respondents were white (92% of first partners and 95% of second partners), and were employed (81% of first partners and 80% of second partners). The mean age of first partners was 42.26 years, whereas that of second partners was 40.70 years. More first partners (28%) had earned doctoral degrees than any other level of education, whereas more second partners (44%) had earned bachelor's degrees. The modal annual personal income was between \$50,000 and \$54,999 for each partner. Couples had lived together a mean of 127.78 months. One-year follow-up data were available for 66 of the 75 gay couples.

Most lesbian respondents were white (94% of first partners and 92% of second partners) and were employed (90% of first partners and 92% of second partners), and more had earned bachelor's degrees (35% of first partners and 33% of second partners) than any other level of education. The mean age of first partners was 40.29 years, whereas that of second partners was 40.03 years. The modal annual personal income was between \$50,000 and \$54,999 for first partners and between \$25,000 and \$29,999 for second partners. Couples had lived together a mean of 85.48 months. One-year follow-up data were available for 46 of the 51 lesbian couples.

Most heterosexual respondents were white (96% of husbands and 98% of wives), were employed (88% of husbands and 82% wives), and the largest group among them had earned bachelor's degrees (37% of husbands and 45% of wives). Husbands' mean age was 36.37 years, whereas that of wives was 34.76 years. The modal annual personal income was between \$40,000 and \$44,999 for husbands and between \$20,000 and \$24,999 for wives. Couples had lived together a mean of 57.34 months. One-year follow-up data were available for 92 of the 108 heterosexual couples.

Because the mean Dyadic Adjustment Scale score (Spanier, 1976) averaged over both partners

did not fall below the distress cutoff score of 100 for any of the three types of couples, it can be concluded that these couples on the average were not experiencing clinical levels of relationship distress. (Means for gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples were 113.50, 118.55, and 115.19, respectively.)

To assess possible bias in the subsample of couples for whom 1-year follow-up data were available, couples with follow-up data and couples without follow-up data were compared on the set of couple demographic scores (age, education, income, and months living together) and the set of each partner's relationship satisfaction scores. Separate analyses were conducted for the gay/lesbian couples and for the heterosexual couples. For the gay/lesbian couples, 2 (follow-up status)  $\times$  2 (gay/lesbian) MANOVAs on the two sets of scores yielded nonsignificant effects associated with follow-up status. For the heterosexual couples, one-way (follow-up status) MANOVAs on the two sets of scores also yielded nonsignificant follow-up status effects. Thus, the follow-up samples can be considered to be representative of the original samples.

#### Measures and Procedure

At both years of assessment, each couple was sent two identical surveys that included (among other measures) a statement of informed consent and

measures of demographic variables, areas of conflict, and relationship satisfaction. To promote honest responding, partners were directed to complete their surveys privately and not to discuss their answers with each other until the forms had been completed and returned in separate postage-paid envelopes.

*Demographic variables.* Information was obtained regarding age, race, education (represented by eight intervals ranging from completion of less than seventh grade to the award of a doctorate), employment status, annual personal income (represented by 18 intervals ranging from \$5,000 or less to \$80,000 or more), and number of months of cohabitation.

*Areas of conflict.* Information regarding areas of conflict was obtained by having respondents indicate for each of 20 issues, how frequently (1 = never, 5 = always) they and their partner fought or argued over each issue. Items were adapted from those used by Bloom, Hodges, and Caldwell (1983) and Spanier (1976) and are presented in Table 1. It is of note that six of these issues (finances, sex, drinking or smoking, friends, leisure time, and parents) were among the 10 sampled by Storaasli and Markman (1990), and that six of these issues (finances, sex, lack of equality in the relationship, friends, household tasks, and leisure time) were among the eight sampled by Vange-

TABLE 1. PEARSON CORRELATIONS BETWEEN PARTNERS' RATINGS OF THE FREQUENCY OF ARGUMENTS ON EACH ISSUE BY TYPE OF COUPLE AND THE TOTAL SAMPLE

Issue	Gay	Lesbian	Heterosexual	Total
Finances	.76**	.67**	.57**	.66**
Lack of affection	.59**	.72**	.49**	.58**
Sex	.64**	.64**	.56**	.61**
Previous lovers	.50**	.62**	.14	.49**
Drinking or smoking	.71**	.76**	.60**	.67**
Distrust or lying	.61**	.26*	.45**	.48**
Lack of equality in the relationship	.29**	.42**	.36**	.35**
Excessive demands or possessiveness	.51**	.33**	.27**	.37**
Frequent physical absence	.62**	.52**	.42**	.52**
Job or school commitments	.46**	.61**	.34**	.44**
Friends	.43**	.29**	.30**	.34**
Household tasks	.51**	.59**	.51**	.53**
Leisure time	.28**	.48**	.43**	.38**
Personal values	.29**	.42**	.45**	.39**
Politics and social issues	.32**	.23	.31**	.31**
Parents	.21**	.39**	.53**	.41**
Driving style	.58**	.69**	.54**	.58**
Personal grooming	.27**	.63**	.39**	.40**
Personal digs or insults	.39**	.15	.49**	.38**
Being overly critical	.56**	.56**	.49**	.52**
n	75	51	108	234

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

listi and Huston (1994). Thus, the present study covered conflictual issues that were very similar to those covered by the two previous studies in this area. (Respondents were also provided with a blank line on which they could identify a conflictual issue that was not covered by the provided list. However, because only 12% of first partners/husbands and 13% of second partners/wives did so, responses were too few in number to warrant further consideration.)

Because couples were not actually observed in the course of conflict, the validity of each respondent's ratings was of concern. Given that data were available from both partners, there were two indicators (each partner's ratings) of the same variable (frequency of conflict on an issue). To take advantage of the two sources of information, a couple score in which partners' ratings were averaged was of interest. To justify using couple scores, interpartner correlations for each conflictual issue should be fairly high. Because partners in gay and lesbian couples are not consistently identified by any characteristic (such as gender in heterosexual couples), intraclass correlations were used to assess partner agreement for each type of couple. However, because these were nearly identical to Pearson correlations, only the latter are presented in Table 1 by type of couple as well as for the total sample. The moderate level of these coefficients justified the use of couple scores which were used in all subsequent analyses.

To identify clusters of areas of conflict, the 20 couple frequency scores derived from the total sample were submitted to a principal components analysis. Because it seemed reasonable to expect overlap among conflictual issues, factors were allowed to correlate (i.e., an oblimin rotation was used). Six eigenvalues greater than 1.00 were extracted that collectively accounted for 68% of the total variance. The correlations between each conflictual issue and each of these six factors (the factor structure matrix) are presented in Table 2. To facilitate the identification of each factor, the highest loading obtained for each conflictual issue is presented in boldface.

Factor I was labeled Power because six of the eight issues that loaded most highly on it reflected a common theme of one partner "lording over" the other partner (e.g., personal digs or insults, being overly critical, lack of equality in the relationship, and excessive demands and possessiveness). Factor II was labeled Social Issues and was defined by the three areas of politics and social issues, personal values, and parents. Factor III was labeled Personal Flaws because it included three issues regarding personal characteristics of the partner (drinking/ smoking, personal grooming, and driving style). Factor IV was labeled Distrust because it was defined by the two issues of previous lovers and distrust/lying. Factor V was labeled Intimacy and was defined by the two issues of sex and lack of affection. Finally, Factor VI was labeled Personal Distance because the two is-

TABLE 2. LOADING OF EACH CONFLICTUAL ISSUE ON SIX FACTORS DERIVED FROM PRINCIPAL COMPONENTS ANALYSIS AND OBLIMIN ROTATION

Issue	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
Finances	<b>.55</b>	.19	.48	.02	.49	.40
Lack of affection	.46	.18	.25	.20	<b>.88</b>	.20
Sex	.29	.15	.18	.05	<b>.92</b>	.27
Previous lovers	.16	.11	.13	<b>.73</b>	.24	.32
Drinking or smoking	.17	.10	<b>.77</b>	.33	.04	-.19
Distrust or lying	.51	.16	.32	<b>.53</b>	.44	.13
Lack of equality in the relationship	<b>.79</b>	.18	.22	.08	.36	.36
Excessive demands or possessiveness	<b>.74</b>	.11	.33	.21	.38	.50
Frequent physical absence	.50	.20	.23	.29	<b>.46</b>	<b>.70</b>
Job or school commitments	.34	.25	.16	.08	.30	<b>.84</b>
Friends	<b>.59</b>	.37	.39	.25	.33	.45
Household tasks	<b>.55</b>	.30	.35	-.29	.36	.39
Leisure time	<b>.59</b>	.52	.28	-.11	.51	.44
Personal values	.65	<b>.67</b>	.32	.17	.28	.18
Politics and social issues	.24	<b>.86</b>	.17	.03	.13	.07
Parents	.16	<b>.85</b>	.24	-.06	.20	.26
Driving style	.23	.28	<b>.70</b>	-.29	.29	.42
Personal grooming	.46	.36	<b>.72</b>	-.05	.42	.32
Personal digs or insults	<b>.80</b>	.29	.36	.11	.51	.16
Being overly critical	<b>.79</b>	.44	.34	-.02	.44	.27

Note:  $n = 234$ . Values in boldface define a factor.

sues that defined it (job or school commitments and frequent physical absence) drew one partner away from the relationship.

Based on these findings, summed composite scores were derived for the total sample by averaging the issues defining each factor. Thus, there were eight items for Power, three items for Social Issues, three items for Personal Flaws, two items for Distrust, two items for Intimacy, and two items for Personal Distance. Respective Cronbach alphas for these conflict areas were .87, .75, .59, .47, .81, and .72. These were regarded as reasonable values, especially for the scores with few items. Correlations among these six conflict area scores ranged from .23 to .57 ( $p < .01$ ).

*Relationship satisfaction.* Relationship satisfaction was obtained by having respondents complete the three-item Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm et al., 1986). This scale requires subjects to rate how true (1 = not at all true, 9 = extremely true) each of three statements is (e.g., "I am satisfied with my relationship"). Cronbach's alphas for the summed composite scores across partners/spouses ranged from .96 to .97.

## RESULTS

### *Comparability of the Three Types of Couples on Demographic Scores*

Before addressing the two specific purposes of this study, it was necessary to assess the comparability of the three types of couples on demographic variables to identify whether covariates were needed in analyses that compared ratings among the three types of couples. Accordingly, gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples were compared on the following couple scores (derived by averaging partners' scores) in a one-way (type of couple) MANOVA: age, education, income, and months living together. The resulting effect was significant ( $F[8, 458] = 9.82, p < .001$ ). (Here and later all multivariate values for  $F$  are based on Pillai's trace statistic.) Univariate analyses indicated that the three types of couples differed on age, education, and months living together ( $F[2, 231] = 7.51, 11.57, \text{ and } 25.59$ , respectively,  $p < .01$ ). Generally, the gay and lesbian couples were older, had higher levels of education, and lived together more months than the heterosexual couples. Consequently, these three background scores were used as covariates in the subsequent analyses.

### *Did the Three Types of Couples Differ in the Relative Contentiousness of the Conflict Areas?*

To see whether the three types of couples differed in the frequency with which they argued about the six conflict areas, the six conflict area scores were submitted to a 3 (type of couple)  $\times$  6 (area of conflict) MANCOVA with age, education, and months living together as covariates. The area of conflict factor was a repeated measures factor. Means adjusted for the three covariates (and standard deviations) are presented in Table 3. The MANCOVA yielded a significant type of couple  $\times$  area interaction ( $F[10, 452] = 3.52, p < .001$ ). Depending on which variable is selected as the moderator variable, this interaction indicates that (a) the relation between type of couple and frequency of conflict varied by area of conflict and (b) differences in the frequency of areas of conflict varied by type of couple. Follow-up analyses using both area of conflict and type of couple as moderator variables were conducted.

TABLE 3. ADJUSTED MEANS FOR SUBSETS OF CONFLICTUAL AREAS FOR WHICH FREQUENCY RATINGS DID NOT DIFFER FROM EACH OTHER

Subset <sup>a</sup>	Mean <sup>b</sup>	SD
Gay couples		
Intimacy	2.17	0.72
Power	1.94	0.51
Personal flaws	1.90	0.51
Personal distance	1.74	0.61
Social issues	1.67	0.52
Distrust	1.49	0.49
Lesbian couples		
Intimacy	2.07	0.74
Power	1.93	0.48
Power	1.93	0.48
Personal flaws	1.83	0.60
Personal distance	1.82	0.68
Social issues	1.55	0.47
Distrust	1.54	0.49
Heterosexual couples		
Intimacy	1.92	0.64
Power	1.87	0.49
Power	1.87	0.49
Social issues	1.79	0.49
Personal flaws	1.77	0.56
Social issues	1.79	0.49
Personal flaws	1.77	0.56
Personal distance	1.67	0.54
Distrust	1.22	0.35

<sup>a</sup>Subsets are listed in order from most conflictual to least conflictual.

<sup>b</sup>Maximum mean score = 5.00.

Using area of conflict as the moderator variable, one-way (type of couple) ANCOVAs were computed. Significant type of couple effects were obtained for only social issues and distrust ( $F[2, 228] = 3.60$  and  $10.86$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Student Newman-Keuls comparisons ( $p < .05$  here and below) indicated that, relative to lesbian couples, heterosexual couples argued more frequently over social issues and that relative to heterosexual couples, gay and lesbian couples argued more frequently over distrust.

Using type of couple as the moderator variable, one-way (area of conflict) repeated measures MANOVAs were computed on the adjusted scores for each type of couples. A significant effect was obtained for gay couples ( $F[5, 70] = 17.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ), for lesbian couples ( $F[5, 46] = 9.84$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and for heterosexual couples ( $F[5, 103] = 46.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

The specific pattern of effects for each of the three couple types was examined by conducting Student Newman-Keuls comparisons to identify subsets of high to low conflict areas. For areas within each subset presented in Table 3, frequency ratings did not differ significantly from each other.

Two trends in Table 3 are of note. First, relative to the other areas of conflict, for each type of couple, intimacy and power were areas of high conflict whereas distrust was an area of low conflict. Second, social issues was an especially charged area for heterosexual couples, more so than for gay and lesbian couples.

#### *Was Conflict in Each Problem Area Differentially Related to Concurrent Relationship Satisfaction?*

Two issues were of interest here: (a) whether the frequency of arguing in the six problem areas was differentially negatively related to the relationship satisfaction of each partner and (b) whether this relation differed by type of couple. To address these issues, two three-step hierarchical multiple regressions were run on the total sample with relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable. In the first regression, gay/lesbian first partners were grouped with husbands, whereas in the second regression, gay/lesbian second partners were grouped with wives. In each regression, control variables (age, education, months living together, and two dummy variables representing the type of couple effect) were entered at step 1. To address issue (a), the set of six conflict area scores was entered at step 2. Finally, to address issue (b), interaction terms involving each type of couple dummy variable and each conflict area score were entered at step 3.

Findings for these regressions are summarized in the top portion of Table 4. Results were similar for each partner. With the effects of control variables considered, the set of six conflict area scores accounted for significant increases in the percentage of variance accounted for (step 2), and type of couple did not moderate the relation between conflict area and relationship satisfaction (step 3).

Findings regarding the six specific content areas were examined both bivariate and multivariate. The bivariate analyses involved partial

TABLE 4. SUMMARY OF HIERARCHICAL MULTIPLE REGRESSION FOR RELATION BETWEEN AREAS OF CONFLICT AND BOTH CONCURRENT RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION AND CHANGE IN RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION OVER THE 1-YEAR PERIOD

Step	Variable Set	First Partner/Husband		Second Partner/Wife	
		R <sup>2</sup>	F Change	R <sup>2</sup>	F Change
Concurrent relationship satisfaction					
1	Control	.05	2.41*	.04	1.85
2	Conflict areas	.27	14.45**	.28	15.03**
3	Type of couple × conflict areas	.06	1.74	.02	0.75
Change in relationship satisfaction					
1	Control	.08	3.63**	.04	1.49
2	Time-1 satisfaction	.36	128.09**	.37	125.27**
3	Conflict areas	.04	2.24*	.05	3.01**
4	Type of couple × conflict areas	.02	0.70	.03	1.10

Note: The set of control variables included type of couple (two dummy variables), age, education, and months living together. The set of conflict area variables included power, social issues, personal flaws, distrust, intimacy, and personal distance. The set of type of couple × conflict area variables included multiplicative terms for each of the two dummy variables representing the type of couple effect and each of the six conflict areas.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

TABLE 5. PARTIAL CORRELATIONS AND STANDARDIZED BETA WEIGHTS BETWEEN SIX AREAS OF CONFLICT AND BOTH CONCURRENT RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION AND 1-YEAR CHANGE IN RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

Conflictual Area	Partial Correlation						Standardized Beta		
	First Partner/Husband		Second Partner/Wife		First Partner/Husband		Second Partner/Wife		Change in Satisfaction
	Satisfaction	Change in Satisfaction	Satisfaction	Change in Satisfaction	Satisfaction	Change in Satisfaction	Satisfaction	Change in Satisfaction	
Power	-.44**	-.17**	-.50**	-.13*	-.29**	-.09	-.38**	-.04	-.04
Social issues	-.24**	-.17**	-.29**	-.23**	-.04	-.07	-.07	-.16**	-.16**
Personal flaws	-.15**	-.09	-.23**	-.17**	.11	.00	.06	-.08	-.08
Distrust	-.32**	-.20**	-.30**	-.13*	-.08	-.14*	-.03	-.07	-.07
Intimacy	-.45**	-.04	-.41**	-.01	-.29**	.02	-.21**	.04	.04
Personal distance	-.28**	-.04	-.30**	-.04	.00	.06	.00	.12	.12

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

correlations between each conflict area and relationship satisfaction with the effects of all control variables removed. These partial correlations are presented in the left portion of Table 5. The multivariate analyses involved an examination of the standardized beta weights derived from the two-step regressions presented in Table 4. These values, presented in the right portion of Table 5, indicate the extent to which each conflict area provided unique information regarding relationship satisfaction with the effects of both control variables and the other conflict areas considered.

As shown in Table 5, findings from bivariate and multivariate analyses were similar across partners. For each partner, the partial correlations indicated a negative relation between the frequency of conflict in each area and relationship satisfaction. For each partner, the standardized betas indicated that of the six conflict areas, two areas of conflict in particular—power and intimacy—provided unique explanatory power.

*Was Conflict in Each Area Differentially Related to Change in Each Partner's Relationship Satisfaction?*

Two issues were of interest here: (a) whether the frequency of arguing in the six problem areas at Time 1 was differentially related to change in relationship satisfaction of each partner over a 1-year period and (b) whether this relation differed by type of couple. To address these issues, two four-step hierarchical multiple regressions were run on the total sample in which Time-2 relationship satisfaction was the dependent variable. In the first regression, gay/lesbian first partners were grouped with husbands, whereas in the second regression, gay/lesbian second partners were grouped with wives. At step 1, the set of control variables (age, education, months living together, and two dummy variables representing the type of couple effect) was entered. At step 2, Time-1 relationship satisfaction was entered so that remaining steps in the analysis concerned regressed change in relationship satisfaction. To address issue (a), the set of six Time-1 conflict areas was entered at step 3. Finally, to address issue (b), product terms representing the interaction between type of couple and Time-1 relationship problem scores were entered at step 4.

Findings for these regressions are summarized in the bottom portion of Table 4. Findings were similar for each partner. With the effects of control variables considered, the set of six Time-1

conflict area scores was significantly related to the degree of change in relationship satisfaction (step 3), and type of couple did not moderate the relation between Time-1 conflict area and change in relationship satisfaction (step 4).

As with the concurrent findings reported earlier, findings regarding the six specific content areas were examined both bivariate and multivariate. The bivariate analyses involved partial correlations between each conflict area and relationship satisfaction with the effects of all control variables as well as Time-1 relationship satisfaction removed. These partial correlations are presented in the left portion of Table 5. The multivariate analyses involved an examination of the standardized beta weights derived from the three-step regressions presented in Table 4. These values, presented in the bottom portion of Table 7, indicate the extent to which each conflict area provided unique information regarding change in relationship satisfaction with the effects of both control variables and the other conflict areas considered.

As shown in Table 5, the partial correlations indicated that, for each partner, frequent arguing regarding power, social issues, and distrust predicted a decrease in relationship satisfaction. However, as also shown in Table 5, the standardized betas indicated that of the six conflict areas, the frequency of arguing over distrust provided unique information regarding change in relationship satisfaction for first partners/husbands, whereas the frequency of arguing over social issues did so for second partners/wives. Nonetheless, the betas for distrust and for social issues did not differ between partners/spouses.

## DISCUSSION

This study represents one of the first attempts to describe the nature of conflict for gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples and to explore the manner in which area of conflict is linked both to concurrent relationship satisfaction and to change in relationship satisfaction over a 1-year period. Findings regarding these two general issues are discussed in turn.

*The Nature of Conflict in Gay, Lesbian, and Heterosexual Couples*

The 20 specific conflictual issues of interest were found to cluster into six groups that represented areas of conflict regarding power (e.g., being

overly critical), social issues (e.g., politics and social issues), personal flaws (e.g., drinking or smoking), distrust (e.g., distrust or lying), intimacy (e.g., sex), and personal distance (e.g., job or school commitments). An examination of differences among the three types of couples on the frequency with which arguing occurred in these conflict areas revealed an interaction between type of couple and area of conflict. The nature of this interaction was that heterosexual couples argued more frequently regarding social issues than lesbian couples (who, in turn, did not differ from gay couples), that gay couples and lesbian couples argued more frequently over distrust than heterosexual couples, and that, in terms of the relative contentiousness of conflict areas, social issues was an area that was more problematic for heterosexual couples than for gay couples and lesbian couples.

These findings are perhaps most easily interpreted with regard to the contexts in which gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples develop. The conflict area of social issues specifically included politics and social issues as well as parents. Politics and social issues may be relatively more contentious for heterosexual couples than for lesbian (and gay) couples because, as members of a socially stigmatized group, lesbian/gay partners may have highly compatible viewpoints regarding controversial issues (such as civil rights for gays and lesbians). Further, social relationships involving parents may be more conflictual for heterosexual couples than for lesbian (or gay) couples because parents have been found to be more salient sources of support for heterosexual couples than for lesbian/gay couples (Kurdek, 1988; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987), and sources of support can also function as sources of distress (Coyne & DeLongis, 1986).

The conflict area of distrust included the specific issue of previous lovers. This issue may be more problematic for gay couples and lesbian couples than for heterosexual couples because previous lovers are likely to remain in the social support networks of gay men and lesbians (Kurdek, 1988), increasing the likelihood of jealousy and resentment.

Despite these areas of differences among the three types of couples, in balance, the three types of couples were more alike than they were different. Gay couples and lesbian couples did not differ in the frequency of conflict in any area, and gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples reported equal frequency of conflict in four of the six areas

studied (power, personal flaws, intimacy, and personal distance). In fact, with regard to the rank order of problem areas, intimacy and power were the top two problem areas for each type of couple, consistent with previous descriptive data for gay and lesbian couples (Bryant & Demian, 1994) and for heterosexual couples (Storaasli & Markman, 1990; see also Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). These findings regarding frequency of conflict provide further evidence that the dyadic processes that regulate gay and lesbian relationships are similar to those that regulate heterosexual relationships (Kurdek, 1994).

#### *The Relation Between Conflict in Specific Problem Areas and Relationship Satisfaction*

Consistent with the position that conflict represents a cost to being in the relationship (Duffy & Rusbult, 1986), bivariate analyses indicated that frequent conflict regarding power, social issues, personal flaws, distrust, intimacy, and personal distance was negatively related to each partner's concurrent relationship satisfaction. Further, the relation between frequency of conflict and relationship satisfaction was not moderated by type of couple.

Based on interdependence theory (Braiker & Kelley, 1979) as well as previous empirical findings (Storaasli & Markman, 1990; Vangelisti & Huston, 1994), it was hypothesized that the frequency of conflict in areas representing high levels of partner interdependence in particular would be negatively related to each partner's concurrent relationship satisfaction. Consistent with this expectation, multivariate analyses indicated that, for each partner, frequent conflict regarding power and intimacy was more salient to low relationship satisfaction than was frequent conflict regarding social issues, personal flaws, distrust, and personal distance. Relative to the other areas of conflict sampled, power and intimacy reflect areas in which partners strongly control each other's outcomes; that is, they represent areas of high partner interdependence (Braiker & Kelly, 1979; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978).

Based on the findings of Vangelisti and Huston (1994), it was also hypothesized that frequent arguing in the area of influence or power would predict a decrease in each partner's relationship satisfaction. In support of this prediction, bivariate analyses indicated that frequent arguing with regard to power at Time 1 predicted a decrease in relationship satisfaction for each partner over a 1-

year period. Further, the relation between frequency of conflict at Time 1 and change in relationship satisfaction was not moderated by type of couple.

However, the standardized beta weights derived from the multiple regression analyses indicated that, with controls for the frequency of conflict in other areas, the frequency of conflict regarding power did not explain a unique portion of variability in change in relationship satisfaction. Nonetheless, the pattern of findings from the concurrent analyses and the longitudinal analyses add to a small body of evidence that indicates that the variables that predict concurrent relationship satisfaction need not predict change in relationship satisfaction (Fincham & Bradbury, 1993; Gottman, 1994; Vangelisti & Huston, 1994).

In the present study, although frequent arguing with regard to intimacy was relatively strongly related to each partner's concurrent relationship satisfaction, it did not predict change in relationship satisfaction for either partner. In contrast, frequent arguing with regard to power was linked to both low concurrent relationship satisfaction as well as to a decrease in relationship satisfaction over time. In general, these findings are consistent with previous work that has shown that the variables that are concurrently related to aspects of dyadic functioning need not be those that predict later dyadic functioning (Gottman, 1994).

To the extent that decreases in relationship satisfaction begin a chain of events leading to relationship dissolution (Gottman, 1994), conflict regarding power may be more important than conflict regarding intimacy in its effect on relationship stability. From the perspective of interdependence theory, there are important differences between conflict regarding intimacy and conflict regarding power. Unlike power, intimacy is an area in which internalized comparison levels may change because of normative declines in relationship satisfaction over time (Vangelisti & Huston, 1994). Thus, the potential negative effects of low rewards and high costs regarding intimacy might be offset by the perspective that even partners in good relationships experience fluctuations in this area (Rusbult, 1983).

However, unlike intimacy, power is an area in which internalized comparison levels may not fluctuate over time. Indeed, having one's relationship outcomes be negatively affected by one's partner's power tactics may contribute to the process of relationship deterioration (Gottman, 1994) because, over time, the experience of inequity

may set the stage for sources of need gratification other than the partner being perceived as more attractive (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Van Yperen & Buunk, 1990). Longitudinal patterns of change predictive of relationship dissolution are needed to address this issue.

#### *Limitations and Implications*

Four limitations of this study need to be noted. First, although gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples were included, the representativeness of the couples in each sample can be questioned. The findings at best generalize to only predominantly white and well-educated couples without children and to gay and lesbian couples in which partners are willing to disclose their sexual orientation. Second, although the effects of demographic variables on relationship outcomes were covaried, cleaner comparisons among different types of couples would have involved couples who were matched on demographic variables. Third, no direct observations of conflict were made. Finally, long-term relationship outcomes were limited to a change in relationship satisfaction of a 1-year period, and did not include data on relationship stability.

Perhaps the major implication of the current findings is that future work in the area of interpartner conflict needs to attend to what couples argue about as well as how they go about resolving conflict. For example, in studies involving observations of couple problem-solving styles, it is common to ignore the content of the area of conflict in favor of a focus on the style of conflict resolution regarding a frequent relationship problem (e.g., Gottman, 1994). The current findings provide a basis for suggesting that before couples are observed during problem-solving interactions, their relationship problems should be rated along continua of frequency, intensity, and interdependence. With this three-dimensional assessment, target conflict topics could be selected so that they are frequent and intense and represent high levels of interdependence. The failure to consider multiple dimensions of conflict may partially account for some of the inconsistent findings regarding the short- and long-term effects of particular conflict resolution styles (Gottman, 1994).

#### NOTE

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