

**Social Networks, Structural Interdependence, and Conjugal Adjustment in Heterosexual, Gay, and Lesbian Couples**



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## Social Networks, Structural Interdependence, and Conjugal Adjustment in Heterosexual, Gay, and Lesbian Couples

This study examines the social networks and conjugal adjustment of heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples. Partners of 50 heterosexual, 50 gay, and 33 lesbian couples completed a structured interview ( $n = 266$ ) about their social networks. The three types of couples did not differ in the partners' separate networks. The joint networks of both gay and lesbian couples were bigger, comprised more friends, but had a similar number of kin, relative to heterosexual couples. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses indicated that for heterosexual couples, more balanced inclusion of the two partners' kin in their joint network predicted better conjugal adjustment. For gay couples, less dependency on both separate and shared friends predicted higher conjugal adjustment, and for lesbian couples, fewer separate friends and less dependency on separate kin led to better adjustment.

The relevance of social networks to conjugal and family adaptation has been emphasized in research traditions as varied as social ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1988), network analysis (Milardo, 1986;

Wellman, 1983), and clinical psychology (Coyne & DeLongis, 1986). For instance, social networks have been associated with marital violence (Mitchell & Hodson, 1986), the household division of labor (Bott, 1971), parenting skills (Jenning, Stagg, & Connors, 1991), and marital satisfaction (e.g., Julien, Markman, Léveillé, Chartrand, & Bégin, 1994; Parks & Eggert, 1991). However, the theories of and the findings on the associations between social networks and relationship outcomes have been based on samples of heterosexual couples and families. We do not know whether they generalize to same-sex couples. Because the homosexual minority in the industrialized West has become increasingly visible and active in recent years (West & Green, 1997), the growing numbers of individuals who have now identified themselves openly as gay or lesbian or bisexual offer opportunities to examine the structures, processes, and outcomes of their relationships, to test the generalizability of current theories of close relationships (Kurdek, 1995a), and to broaden our understanding of the role of social networks in relationship outcomes.

We studied the social networks of heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples. Our objectives were to examine whether the social networks of the three types of couples had different structural features and whether the features of the social network predicted conjugal adjustment.

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## SOCIAL NETWORKS AND CONJUGAL RELATIONSHIPS

*Structurally Created Constraints and Opportunities*

According to network analysts, social behavior is determined by the pattern of ties among members of a social network, in addition to the independent effects of personal dispositions or dyadic ties (Milardo, 1988). The particular features of a social network influence social behavior because they create constraints and provide opportunities for accessing resources such as information, wealth, power, affection, and support (Wellman, 1983). For instance, a social network composed of members who know and interact with one another is more likely and more able to coordinate support for one of its members in times of stress than a social network in which the members are loosely connected.

Network analysis has implications for understanding couples' development. When two individuals choose each other for a committed relationship, they also adopt one another's social network of kin and friends. In doing so, they modify a local social structure that affects their access to resources. Conversely, the theory implies that terminating intimate relationships forces the partners to restructure their social environment in ways that have functional implications for access to resources.

*Structural Interdependence and Conjugal Outcomes*

Milardo (1986) has suggested the concept of structural interdependence as a theoretical basis for linking network structure to conjugal outcomes. Structural interdependence refers to the pattern of ties among the members of a couple's social network by virtue of the partners' dyadic tie. When the partners become increasingly interdependent in their personal lives, they develop increasingly interdependent social networks. The structural interdependence theory implies that, beyond the impact of intradyadic processes on conjugal adjustment (e.g., Gottman, 1994; Julien, Markman, & Lyndahl, 1989), the pattern of ties in the couple's social network influences the flow of resources affecting the potential for the couple's adjustment.

Research on heterosexual couples has provided evidence of variations in structural interdependence as a function of time and stage of relationship development. During dating, for instance, partners reduce the number of contacts with members in their respective network, and they increase joint social exposure (e.g., Johnson & Leslie,

1982; Milardo, 1982; Milardo, Johnson, & Huston, 1983). Once married, they jointly interact more often with kin and with married people (Rands, 1988; Spanier & Thompson, 1984). When divorced, they stop maintaining relationships with the joint network.

*Network overlap.* Partners' joint exposure to outsiders raises the probability of being socially visible and perceived, defined, and supported as a couple (Lee, 1979). Thus, a joint social life creates opportunities to develop and maintain a couple identity. Conversely, partners' separate affiliations raise the probability of being exposed to different sets of values and norms and of developing divergent interests and conjugal conflicts. Through their separate social ties, partners facilitate support for individuation from the dyad, constrain the development of their identity as a pair, and facilitate individual emotional gratification. In doing so, they create opportunities to develop alliances that compete with the conjugal bond.

Several studies have documented the effect of network overlap on couples' conjugal adjustment. For instance, anthropological data have indicated that societies in which husbands and wives have separate social networks are more inclined to divorce than societies in which spouses share their network (Ackerman, 1963). More recent studies also have shown that higher degrees of network overlap are associated with higher degrees of conjugal adjustment (e.g., Hansen, Fallon, & Novotny, 1991; Julien & Markman, 1991; Kim & Stiff, 1991; Stein, Bush, Ross, & Ward, 1992; Veiel, Crisand, Stroszeck-Somschor, & Herrle, 1991). Therefore, on both theoretical and empirical grounds, it seems that a joint network contributes to couples' conjugal adjustment and stability.

*Bilateral contribution of the families to the joint network.* In a study of the composition of couples' social network, Stein et al. (1992) found that more family members in the joint network were associated with better conjugal adjustment. Kinship ties, especially parent-adult child ties, are important for conjugal outcomes because the obligatory nature of those ties make them more likely to provide support tailored to the members' needs (Ridley & Avery, 1979). When family members marry, it is expected that family support will extend to the pair.

Some authors have suggested that the inclusion of each partner's respective kin in the composition of the joint network influences conjugal adjustment (e.g., Lee, 1979). A bilateral network is one

that is composed of both partners' kin, whereas a unilateral network has the attribute of a clique and is composed of one partner's family of origin exclusive of the other partner's family. Thus, a unilateral network structurally isolates one partner, even in the context of high network overlap (e.g., the couple may socialize as a pair with several friends but with only one family). Equalitarian kinship relationships are likely to bring satisfaction to the couples because bilateral contacts with kin prevent the formation of coalitions in the event of conjugal conflict. Conversely, unilateral kin relationships may prevent conjugal intimacy because the partner whose family is included in the joint network is still intensely involved with the family of origin, which competes with the marital bond (Mindel, 1972); because the partner whose family is excluded had childhood conflicts with his or her family, which damaged his or her capacities for intimate relationships and generalized into marriage (Bowly, 1973; Noller & Feeney, 1994); or because the excluded family has current conflicts with one partner (or with his or her mate), which prevent family support of the couple (Blood, 1969). In all cases, the asymmetry in family ties in the joint network creates an unequal conjugal relationship and prevents its strengthening.

Research has provided support for the association between bilateral network composition and conjugal outcomes. Stein et al. (1992) and Farber (1966) observed that families with asymmetrical kin relationships were more disturbed than families with symmetrical patterns of kinship. Mindel (1972) also found that husbands in couples with predominantly matrilineal family links were more prone to divorce than husbands in couples with bilateral kinship orientations. Dobash and Dobash (1979) found that abused wives in couples with networks composed predominantly of husbands' kin had more difficulties coping with their marital problems than wives in couples with bilateral networks. Also relevant, Blood (1969) showed a curvilinear association between the frequencies of wives' interactions with their kin and marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction reached its highest levels at the frequency of kin interactions once a week but reached points of diminishing returns at frequencies of more than once a week or once a month or less. Overall, these studies suggest that the inclusion of both partners' families in the joint network helps protect both their interests and facilitates conjugal adjustment.

#### *Social Networks and Conjugal Adjustment in Heterosexual, Gay, and Lesbian Couples*

These theories and findings have been based on samples of heterosexual couples, and we do not know whether they generalize to same-sex couples. There are a few ethnographic accounts and comparative studies of gay and lesbian couples (Kurdek, 1995a). Research on the conjugal adjustment of same-sex couples, compared with opposite-sex couples, has shown that same-sex and opposite-sex couples appraise the quality of their relationships in similar ways (Cardell, Finn, & Marecek, 1981; Kurdek, 1995b; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Ramsay, Latham, & Lindquist, 1978) and perceive the quality of partner support similarly (Kurdek, 1992). They develop feelings of love in a similar fashion (McWhirter & Mattison, 1984) and have comparable degrees of intimacy (Gentile, 1987). Moreover, the psychological variables associated with the conjugal adjustment of same-sex couples are not different from those associated with the conjugal adjustment of opposite-sex couples (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Kurdek, 1994). Finally, reactions to separation and stressful events are comparable in both types of couples (Julien, Chartrand, & Bélanger, 1994; Kurdek, 1991).

However, beyond these similarities with heterosexual couples, gay and lesbian couples develop and maintain their relationships in a generally heterosexist social context, in "an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community" (Herek, 1990, p. 316). Various degrees of legal reform and the granting of some civil rights to the homosexual minority have taken place in Europe and North America, but lesbian and gay relationships generally have no legal status and are not acknowledged by institutional policies (e.g., marriage, insurance regulations, inheritance laws; West & Green, 1997). According to Ulin and Milardo (1992), alienation from public sources of support may lead gays and lesbians to rely more strongly than heterosexuals on close kin or close friends for basic support. They are likely to develop more multiplex ties. Also, the lack of public acknowledgment of same-sex couples may lead the partners to socialize more often as a pair in order to build a social identity as a couple. A potential effect of greater dependency on social networks is greater impact of social networks on conjugal relationships.

Because disclosure on one's sexual orientation incurs the risk of disrupting family relationships and longstanding friendships, gays and lesbians who develop couple relationships may face a par-

ticular dilemma. On the one hand, the partners can maintain separate networks in order to preserve long-term supportive ties with kin and friends, but by doing so, they create barriers to the flow of network resources likely to strengthen their couple relationship. On the other hand, the partners can socialize jointly in order to preserve conjugal companionship and intimacy, but in being more visible as a couple, they may be exposed to rejection from kin and friends who do not fully accept their difference, which may also weaken their couple relationship. Because gays and lesbians face potential rejection by kin, they have to develop conjugal relationships with the support of networks that are structurally different from those of heterosexual couples. Yet, few studies have examined the structure of same-sex couples' networks and its influence on their conjugal adjustment.

Research on members of same-sex couples has shown that partners disclose their identity less freely to family than to friends (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984). Compared with heterosexual partners, gay and lesbian partners perceive less family support (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986) and relatively more support from friends than from family (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987). Gay and lesbian partners more often have friends than family members as providers of support (Kurdek, 1988), and the support of friends, but not of family, is associated with their conjugal adjustment (Chartrand & Julien, 1996). In the latter studies, there was no heterosexual comparison group, so we do not know whether the difference in support by kin or by friends was specific to same-sex couples. These findings were also based on the partners' separate list of network members, and the couples' network interdependence has not been examined.

## HYPOTHESES

### *Sexual Orientation and Network Features*

On the basis of the findings about the relative importance of support by friends and family, we hypothesize that same-sex couples have fewer family members and more friends in their separate and joint networks than do opposite-sex couples. Their kinship ties are also likely to be less multiplex (to provide fewer kinds of support) than the kinship ties of heterosexual couples. Conversely, the potential substitution of friends for family in the social networks of same-sex couples also leads us to predict that friendship ties in their separate and

joint networks are likely to be more multiplex than friendship ties in the network of heterosexual couples.

Because same-sex couples generally have no legal status and are not acknowledged by institutional policies, the partners may socialize more often as a pair in order to construct a social identity as a couple. Thus, we expect that same-sex partners are likely to share a larger proportion of their network than heterosexual couples.

### *Network Features and Conjugal Adjustment*

Based on earlier findings, we predict that, for all couples, network overlap is likely to lead to greater conjugal adjustment. Because earlier research has shown the importance of family relations for heterosexual couples' adjustment, we expect that the inclusion of the two partners' kin in the joint network is likely to contribute to heterosexual couples' conjugal adjustment. Conversely, given the potential functional equivalence of family and friendship ties in providing support, we assume that friends' bilateral support of the two homosexual partners is likely to be as relevant to their conjugal adjustment as the bilateral contribution of families is to heterosexual couples' adjustment. In the absence of family, for instance, friends' bilateral support of partners may prevent the formation of coalitions during conjugal conflict. Therefore, we expect that the bilateral support of friends is likely to predict homosexual couples' adjustment. Finally, because gays and lesbians, relative to heterosexuals, may be more dependent on networks for basic support, we expect that variations in the features of their networks account for a greater portion of the variance in their conjugal adjustment.

### *Sex-Related Differences in Social Networks*

Several studies have shown that men and women participate differently in social relationships. For instance, boys and girls are socialized differently with regard to expressiveness and help seeking (e.g., Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). When experiencing difficulties, husbands are less inclined than wives to mobilize their network, and they are more dependent on their partner for support (e.g., Belle, 1987; Julien & Markman, 1991). Because this study assessed the features of social networks on the basis of the support provided by network members, we predict that heterosexual women's networks are likely to be bigger and more multiplex than their partners' networks. Moreover, because

women maintain tighter bonds with their family of origin than men do (e.g., Bott, 1971), we expect that the heterosexual couples' networks are composed more of the woman's than the man's kin.

As children, gays and lesbians do not conform to stereotyped notions of what it means to be a boy or a girl (Bell, Weinberg, & Hammersmith, 1981), and as adults they are more likely than heterosexuals to endorse traditional traits of the opposite sex in self-descriptions (Kurdek, 1987) and are less likely to show communication dissimilarities based on sex (Julien, Arellano, & Turgeon, 1997). Therefore, we predict that, relative to heterosexual couples, same-sex couples are likely to show smaller discrepancies between the multiplexity of the two partners' social networks and between the size of their networks.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 133 cohabiting couples (266 White French-speaking partners from Montreal and suburbs). There were 50 heterosexual married couples, 50 gay couples, and 33 lesbian couples. The couples were recruited by classified advertising and interviews with the research team in the media. Homosexual couples were also recruited by announcements in gay and lesbian publications with the help of gay men's and lesbians' associations. Screening criteria stipulated that couples had to have been living together for at least 2 years at the time of their participation because couples' social networks change when the partners become more interdependent (Milardo et al., 1983) and because cohabiting, rather than living separately, may have implications for each partner's respective network (e.g., partners living together are less likely to socialize individually).

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the demographic variables. Tests of difference on demographic variables as a function of participants' sexual orientations indicated no differences among groups, except for the number of children,  $F(2, 263) = 29.90, p < .001$ . As expected, orthogonal contrasts showed that heterosexual couples had more children than homosexual couples,  $t(263) = 7.68, p < .001$ . No differences were found between gay and lesbian couples. Given that raising children is currently more probable by heterosexual couples than by same-sex couples (Patterson, 1995), subsequent analyses did not take into account the difference in the number of children.

### Procedure

During a visit of the couple to the laboratory, both partners completed a set of questionnaires and participated in a 45-minute structured interview about their social network. The two partners were interviewed in two adjacent rooms. All the measures were administered in French.

### Measures

*Conjugal adjustment.* Conjugal adjustment was measured with an adapted version of the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959). It has high internal consistency (split-half  $r = .90$ ), good concurrent validity ( $r = .86$ ) with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1987), and excellent validity in terms of discriminating between unadjusted and adjusted couples (Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977). Our adapted version eliminated any gender-specific wording. Scores for Item 10 were modified. In the original version for heterosexual couples, a score of 2 was given to husbands, and a score of 1 was given to wives when they reported

TABLE 1. MEANS (AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS) OF PARTICIPANTS' DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AND CONJUGAL ADJUSTMENT

	Heterosexual		Gay		Lesbian	
	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>
Age	33.01	(6.04)	33.84	(8.87)	32.59	(7.17)
Years living together	7.26	(5.18)	5.58	(4.65)	5.69	(4.91)
Number of children	1.14	(1.19)	0.25	(0.69)	0.24	(0.70)
Income <sup>a</sup>	2.47	(1.34)	2.58	(1.19)	2.60	(1.20)
Percentage with college degree	45		33		35	
Percentage working full-time	59		67		64	
Conjugal adjustment	100.44	(25.89)	103.82	(23.69)	108.10	(23.12)
<i>n</i>	100		100		66	

<sup>a</sup>Income was categorized from 1 to 5 (1 = less than \$10,000, 5 = \$40,000 or more in Canadian dollars).

being the one who always "gives in" during disagreements. In the version we used, a score of 2 was given to either one or the other partner who "gives in." All three groups of couples were administered the adapted version. Earlier studies with male couples showed good reliability and concurrent validity of the adapted version (Julien, Chartrand, & Bégin, 1996; Julien, Pizzamiglio, Léveillé, & Brault, 1992). Cronbach's alpha of the adapted version with the current sample was .79. An analysis of variance of conjugal adjustment scores as a function of couples' sexual orientation showed conjugal adjustment mean scores of heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples were not different (Table 1).

*Social network features: interview.* We measured the structural characteristics of social networks with a French version of the Northern California Community Study Interview Schedule (NCCS; McCallister & Fischer, 1978). The NCCS has shown good discriminating validity in urban and rural populations (Fischer, 1982) and in adjusted and unadjusted American heterosexual couples (Julien & Markman, 1991). The NCCS includes questions that elicit the names of the people in one's network who fulfill six basic support functions: (a) helped in the house in the last 3 months, (b) socialized with respondent in the last 3 months, (c) shared personal interests with respondent, (d) offered advice when important decisions had to be made, (e) listened to respondent who was bothered by personal problems, and (f) loaned money in an emergency. It also includes questions about the nature of the support network member's tie with the respondent (e.g., family of origin, friend, coworker, neighbor, cousin, ex-lover). The interview data were used to derive the measures of partners' separate and joint networks.

*Social network features: variables.* The joint network was composed of the same persons named independently by both partners. The separate networks were composed of the remaining persons on the partners' respective lists of names. For both the separate and joint networks we computed (a) the number of members from the family of origin (self), (b) the multiplexity of ties with the family of origin, (c) the number of friends, and (d) the multiplexity of ties with friends. Because the NCCS procedure specifies that a respondent can be connected in more than one way to a network member (e.g., a member can be both a mother and a friend) and because the distinction between fam-

ily members and others is an important point of the current study, network members were classified in one of two exclusive categories: family of origin (self) and friends (all others). The family-of-origin category had precedence over the friends category. The family-of-origin category excluded members of the extended family (e.g., grandparents, cousins) because previous research has indicated that family members other than parents and siblings do not predict gays' and lesbians' outcomes (Laird, 1993). The two multiplexity measures referred to the average number of support functions performed by family members and friends, respectively. In addition to the eight variables thus created, a ninth variable, network overlap, was measured as follows:

$$\text{Overlap} = c / [(n1 + n2) - c]$$

where  $c$  is the number of same persons named in an independent manner by both partners,  $n1$  is the size of Partner 1's network, and  $n2$  is the size of Partner 2's network (Kim & Stiff, 1991). It is a dyadic measure of the proportion of joint network members relative to the total number of unique network members identified by either partner.

#### *Analytical Strategy*

*Unit of analysis.* For all the analyses, the couple was the unit of analysis because the partners' scores within couples were correlated. Given that partners' discrepancies on several of the network variables were the focus of this study and given that partners' differences in same-sex couples could not be qualified, partners' mean scores and partners' absolute difference scores on the network variables were used as the two measures for each unit of analysis (Kenny, 1996). There were no difference scores for network overlap, or for the number of friends in the joint network because the partners' scores for these variables were the same. Thus, all the analyses were conducted using 16 measures. (See Table 2.)

*Missing cases.* Different numbers of couples were included in the analyses of separate and joint networks. Eight couples had partners without a separate network. Therefore, the multiplexity of ties in the separate networks and the partners' differences in the number of ties and in the multiplexity of those ties could not be computed for these couples. Six other couples who had no joint networks had to be excluded for some of the analyses of joint networks. Of the 127 couples with joint networks,

TABLE 2. MEANS (AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS) FOR COUPLES' SEPARATE AND JOINT NETWORKS BY SEXUAL ORIENTATION

	Heterosexual Partners				Gay Partners				Lesbian Partners			
	M		Difference		M		Difference		M		Difference	
	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)
Separate networks												
Number of kin	1.82	(1.03)	1.87	(1.54)	1.98	(1.31)	2.33	(2.22)	2.08	(1.60)	1.85	(1.68)
Number of friends	4.84	(2.85)	3.52	(2.69)	4.41	(2.23)	3.98	(3.70)	4.24	(2.31)	2.82	(2.60)
Multiplexity kin	1.23	(0.85)	1.30	(1.11)	1.23	(0.72)	1.19	(0.97)	1.31	(0.68)	1.05	(0.86)
Multiplexity friends	1.58	(0.49)	1.07	(0.88)	1.56	(0.76)	1.09	(0.86)	1.46	(0.67)	0.82	(0.67)
Joint network												
Number of kin	1.88	(1.79)	1.26	(1.07)	1.74	(1.95)	1.78	(1.18)	1.70	(1.49)	1.46	(1.06)
Number of friends <sup>a</sup>		1.94	(2.10) <sup>b</sup>			3.20	(2.01) <sup>c</sup>			3.83	(2.68) <sup>c</sup>	
Network overlap <sup>d</sup>		0.19	(0.11) <sup>b</sup>			0.25	(0.14) <sup>c</sup>			0.25	(0.10) <sup>c</sup>	
Multiplexity kin	2.04	(1.04)	1.22	(1.32)	1.95	(0.77)	1.40	(1.57)	2.00	(0.68)	1.45	(1.29)
Multiplexity friends	2.28	(1.03)	1.28	(1.08)	2.35	(1.01)	1.06	(0.76)	2.30	(0.67)	1.15	(0.99)

Note: For kin and friends in separate networks,  $n = 133$ . For all the other separate network variables,  $n = 125$ . For network overlap, kin, and friends in joint network,  $n = 133$ . For multiplexity kin in joint network,  $n = 93$ . For multiplexity friends in joint network,  $n = 109$ .

<sup>a</sup>There were no difference scores for friendship ties in the joint network because the friends were included in the joint network when they were named by the two partners. <sup>b,c</sup>Means in the same row that do not share superscripts differ at  $p < .05$  in the Newman-Keuls post hoc comparison. <sup>d</sup>There were no difference scores for network overlap because its value is the proportion of the two partners' joint network size relative to the sum of their joint networks and their two separate networks.

34 had no family members, and 24 had no friends in their joint network. Thus, the multiplexity of ties in the separate networks and the differences in the number of partner ties and in the multiplexity of those ties could not be computed for all 127 couples. Tests of differences in the proportions of rejected couples as a function of sexual orientation indicated that a higher proportion of heterosexual couples than same-sex couples had no friends in their joint network,  $\chi^2(1, n = 127) = 11.17, p < .01$ . No other differences were found. A test of difference in conjugal adjustment as a function of the couple's status (rejected or not rejected) indicated no differences in conjugal adjustment.

*The effect of sexual orientation on network features.* We examined whether heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples' social networks differed with a series of MANOVAs with sex orientation (heterosexual-gay-lesbian) as the independent variable and the network features as the dependent variables. To increase the power of the analyses, the MANOVAs used two sets of dependent variables for the separate networks and three sets of dependent variables for the joint network. For the separate networks, the sets were (a) number of kin and number of friends ( $n = 133$ ), Bartlett  $\chi^2 = 6.17, p < .05$ , and (b) partners' discrepancy in number of kin, number of friends, multiplexity of kin, multiplexity of friends, partners' discrepancy in multiplexity of kin, and in multiplexity of friends ( $n = 125$ ), Bartlett  $\chi^2(15) = 54.96, p < .001$ . For the joint

network, the sets were (a) number of kin, number of friends, and network overlap ( $n = 133$ ), Bartlett  $\chi^2(3) = 141.89, p < .01$ , (b) partners' difference in number of kin, kin multiplexity and partners' difference in kin multiplexity ( $n = 93$ ), Bartlett  $\chi^2(3) = 53.37, p < .01$ ; and (c) friends multiplexity, and partners' difference in friends multiplexity ( $n = 109$ ), Bartlett  $\chi^2 = 13.10, p < .01$ .

*The effect of social networks on conjugal adjustment.* Using multiple regression analyses with the network variables as the predictors and conjugal adjustment as the outcome, we examined whether network features predicted conjugal adjustment. We used separate equations for heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples, and we compared the amount of variance in conjugal adjustment predicted in each group. We preferred this strategy, rather than the use of a single equation including the three groups, because such a model would have comprised 33 variables (sex orientation, 16 network variables, and 16 orientation  $\times$  network interaction terms). Our sample, which varied from 133 to 93, was too small to hold such an equation. We also decided not to combine the gay and lesbian couples in a single group because the bivariate correlations between the network features and conjugal adjustment suggested that different network features determined conjugal adjustment for gay and lesbian couples.

A hierarchical regression model took into account both theoretical and practical constraints.



The rationale underlying the model and the resulting order of entry for the variables are as follows. First, because partners' joint network is dependent on partners' prior separate networks, the model had to give priority to the separate network variables over the joint network variables. This was also concordant with the fact our sample size diminished as we moved from the separate network analyses ( $n = 133$ ) to the joint network analyses ( $n = 93$ ). Therefore, by entering sets of separate network variables first, followed by sets of joint network variables, we were able to determine whether the features of the joint network improved the prediction of conjugal adjustment beyond that afforded by the separate networks. Second, in the two respective sets of separate and joint network variables, subsets of family variables followed subsets of friends variables. Thus, we could determine whether the family variables improved prediction beyond that afforded by the friends variables. Third, because network overlap was correlated with the size of the joint network but was less specific than the number of kin and friends, we entered it in the last step. Thus, the hierarchical model comprised five steps. (See the order of the five sets of variables in Table 3.)

The regression equations were derived using all the variables that showed significant bivariate correlations with conjugal adjustment. A first regression was run with the first set of variables that showed significant correlations with conjugal adjustment. Variables that did not significantly increase prediction were dropped, whereas those that did were entered first in the regressions that followed. The second regression included the next set of variables that showed significant bivariate correlations with conjugal adjustment. We used the same procedure until we entered the last set with significant correlations with conjugal adjustment.

## RESULTS

### *The Effect of Sexual Orientation on Network Features*

*Separate networks.* The two MANOVAs on the separate network variables indicated no effects of sexual orientation on the features of the couples' separate networks. Therefore, contrary to expectation, the separate networks of heterosexual, gay, and lesbian partners did not differ in the number of kin or the number of friends. Also, the three types of couples did not differ in terms of the multiplexity of their ties with kin and friends, nor

in terms of the partners' discrepancies on those variables.

*Joint network.* The MANOVA on number of kin, number of friends, and network overlap yielded a main effect for orientation, Wilks' lambda  $F(6, 256) = 3.52, p < .001$ . The univariate findings showed a sex-orientation effect for number of friends and network overlap, but not for number of kin. As expected, the Newman-Keuls tests ( $p < .05$ ) with the three groups showed that both gay and lesbian couples had more friends in their joint network than did the heterosexual couples and that they had more network overlap (25%) than heterosexual couples (19%). Gay and lesbian couples were not different. These findings indicated that the proportion of kin, compared with friends, was smaller for same-sex couples than for heterosexual couples, but our prediction that there would be fewer family members in the joint network of same-sex couples was not verified.

The MANOVA on partners' difference in number of kin, kin multiplexity, and partners' difference in kin multiplexity, and the MANOVA on friends multiplexity and partners' difference on friends multiplexity did not yield sex-orientation effects. Contrary to predictions, therefore, kin and friends in the joint network of heterosexual couples did not provide more or fewer kinds of support than kin and friends in the joint network of gay and lesbian couples, and heterosexual partners did not have larger discrepancies on those variables.

### *The Effect of Social Network and Conjugal Adjustment*

Table 4 shows the standardized regression coefficients ( $b$ ), the changes in  $R^2$ , and the adjusted  $R^2$  of the final equation for each group.

*Heterosexual couples.* Partners' discrepancy in the number of kin in the joint network was the only variable that was significantly associated with conjugal adjustment, and  $R$  was significantly different from zero only for that variable,  $F(1, 37) = 5.36, p < .05$ . As expected, smaller discrepancies between the number of partners' kin in the joint network predicted higher levels of conjugal adjustment in heterosexual couples.

*Gay couples.* Bivariate correlations indicated that lower multiplexity of friends in both the separate and the joint networks and smaller partners' discrepancies in kin multiplexity in the joint network

TABLE 4. HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION OF CHARACTERISTICS OF SEPARATE AND JOINT NETWORKS ON COUPLES' CONJUGAL ADJUSTMENT

Heterosexual Couples			Gay Couples			Lesbian Couples		
Variable	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	Variable	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	Variable	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Difference number of kin in joint network	-.36	.13*	Multiplexity of friends in separate networks	-.29	.08*	Number of friends in separate networks	-.42	.18**
			Multiplexity of friends in joint network	-.36	.13**	Multiplexity of kin in separate networks	-.48	.17**
Adj. $R^2$		.11			.18			.30

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

predicted higher levels of conjugal adjustment.  $R$  was significantly different from zero with the multiplexity of friendship ties in the separate networks,  $F(1, 44) = 4.07, p < .05$ . The addition of multiplexity of friends in the joint network significantly increased  $R^2$ ,  $F(2, 43) = 6.99, p < .01$ . Partners' difference in kin multiplexity did not reliably increase  $R^2$  and was dropped. For gay couples, therefore, the final equation showed that less dependence on friends in the separate and joint networks determined higher levels of conjugal adjustment.

*Lesbian couples.* The bivariate correlations for the separate networks of lesbian couples indicated that fewer separate friends, lower multiplexity of separate kin, and larger partners' discrepancies in the number of separate kin predicted better conjugal adjustment. Similarly, more kin in their joint network and larger network overlap predicted higher levels of conjugal adjustment. The regression findings indicated that  $R$  was significantly different from zero for the number of friends in the separate network,  $F(1, 29) = 6.21, p < .01$ . The addition of multiplexity of kin ties in the separate network significantly increased  $R^2$ ,  $F(2, 28) = 13.83, p < .01$ . The addition of the other variables did not significantly improve prediction. Therefore, fewer separate friends and less partner dependence on separate kin determined higher degrees of adjustment in lesbian couples.

Contrary to expectation, smaller discrepancies in the multiplexity of partners' friends were not associated with higher conjugal adjustment for gays and lesbians. Also, for all couples, the addition of overlap in the equation did not increase  $R^2$ .

In order to compare the variance in conjugal adjustment accounted for by the network variables in the three equations, we calculated the 95% confidence limit for  $R$  in the three regressions. Their respective limits were .11-.63, .22-.72, and .35-.83. Therefore, contrary to expectation, the social networks of gay and lesbian couples did

not explain more variance in conjugal adjustment than the social networks of heterosexual couples.

#### *Sex-Related Differences in Heterosexual Couples*

Whether heterosexual women had a larger and more multiplex networks than did their husbands was examined using a series of paired  $t$  tests of difference between spouses on number of kin, number of friends, and multiplexity of those ties. As expected, wives had more kin ( $M = 1.20$ ) in the joint network than their husband did ( $M = 0.68$ ),  $t(49) = -2.34, p < .05$ . No other differences were found. Thus, our prediction that wives would have a more multiplex network was not verified.

#### DISCUSSION

This research examined the specific structure of the social networks of heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples and determined whether the features of their social networks predicted conjugal adjustment. This study was a first attempt to use the concept of structural interdependence as a theoretical basis for linking the networks of the two partners to the conjugal adjustment of gay and lesbian couples.

#### *Sexual Orientation and Social Networks*

In line with our hypothesis, our findings showed that both gay and lesbian couples shared a larger portion of their social network than did heterosexual couples. Because shared social relationships are expected to favor partners' interdependence and couple identity, facilitate conjugal communication (Burger & Milardo, 1995), and increase the opportunities for conjugal interaction (Larson & Bradney, 1988), it makes sense that sharing a large proportion of personal ties helps lesbian and gay couples to legitimize their relationship when institutional acknowledgment and cultural support are lacking.

Also, in accord with prediction, the joint network of same-sex couples comprised more friends than the joint network of heterosexual couples, but there was no support for the prediction that the joint network of same-sex couples would comprise fewer kin. Consistent with clinical reports and empirical studies, our findings suggest that, because same-sex couples are less likely than heterosexual couples to get family support for their relationship, they are more likely to make their own family with friends who are usually more accepting of their orientation. Our measure of social networks was based on the supportive functions provided to the individual partners, not to the couple, and the inclusion of kin and friends in the joint network was derived from the two partners' respective lists of individual supporters. We did not use a measure of support directed at the intimate relationship of gays and lesbians. Other studies have shown that friends, but not kin, to whom gays and lesbians had disclosed their sexual orientation fully accepted their conjugal partner (e.g., inquiring about the conjugal partner, developing good camaraderie with the partner, or commenting that "you two seem to get along so well," Chartrand & Julien, 1996; Clunis & Green, 1988). Kin may invite gays' and lesbians' conjugal partners to or tolerate them at social reunions (which would contribute to kin inclusion in our measure of the joint network), but they may not provide the signs of full family acceptance.

Earlier research shows that gays and lesbians more often have friends than family members as support providers (e.g., Kurdek, 1988). When using proportions of kin to friends, our findings also showed same-sex couples have a larger proportion of friends to kin than heterosexual couples. Our findings also indicated, however, that all couples, irrespective of sexual orientation, more often named friends rather than family members in their joint network. Thus, having more friends than kin was not specific to same-sex couples, but more friends surrounded same-sex couples than heterosexual couples.

In contrast to the joint network findings, the separate networks findings showed that the features of partners' separate networks were unrelated to sexual orientation. Compared with heterosexual partners, homosexual partners did not have fewer separate kin, or more separate friends. Also, in both the separate and joint networks, kin and friends were not more or less supportive (multiplex) for one group than the other. Overall, the findings at the separate and joint levels showed more similarities than differences between the social networks

of heterosexual and same-sex couples. The joint network differences, however, suggest that in the current cultural context that constrains the development and maintenance of gays' and lesbians' intimate relationships, sharing more ties and having more friends are adaptive strategies that compensate for the absence of institutional support.

### *Social Networks and Conjugal Adjustment*

To what extent did the features of couples' network predict their conjugal adjustment? The analytical strategy that we used does not permit interpreting quantitative differences between the three groups, although it allowed us to consider the relevance of social networks for predicting adjustment in same-sex couples. Thus, we venture to compare the three groups only with reference to qualitative differences in how social networks can shape the conjugal relationship and with reference to potential paths for future empirical verification.

Our findings with heterosexual couples showed that the more balanced the inclusion of both husbands' and wives' kin in their joint network, the better the conjugal adjustment of heterosexual couples. Our prediction was verified. In preventing coalitions that could be detrimental to the couple's interdependence, equitable distribution of kin support for the partners appears to help partners to adjust better in their conjugal life.

However, the overlap of heterosexual partners' social networks did not show the expected impact on their adjustment. That is surprising, given that so many studies have shown associations between overlap and adjustment in heterosexual couples. However, most of these studies have used samples of dating couples or couples in the early months of their marriages. Our heterosexual couples had been living together for an average of 7 years, and it is possible that sharing networks plays a more important role in the early stages of couple formation. When the partners develop other bases of interdependence over the years (e.g., children, common properties), overlap may become less causal in maintaining a couple's identity and stability. Cultural variations in the couples' social contexts may also account for our results. In North America, the French Canadian community shows high residential stability, compared with English-speaking groups, mainly because of linguistic barriers. In the United States, where most of the research on couples' social networks has taken place, residential stability is low, and family members and long-time friends often live far apart. Given that lower resi-

dential stability is associated with less couple social integration (Glenn & Shelton, 1985), it may be that in a changing social environment, such as the U.S., couples have to initiate efforts to integrate into the community and develop a common support network to maintain a couple identity. However, because we did not have measures of residential mobility, this interpretation should be considered with caution.

Our findings regarding gay couples' conjugal adjustment indicated that less dependency of both partners on separate friends and on joint friends and more balanced inclusion of both partners' kin in the joint network facilitate conjugal adjustment. The latter, however, did not contribute unique variance beyond the variance accounted for by the partners' dependency on friends for basic support. Thus, partners' friends, in both separate and joint networks, play a key role in gay couples' adjustment. It may be that highly multiplex friendship ties in the separate networks make available alternative partners to gays who may not feel completely satisfied with their current partner. This may destabilize the couple (Johnson, 1986). Also, when the two conjugal partners interact often with close friends in the joint network, they interact mainly in groups and engage only in shared activities, so their dyadic interactions tend to remain superficial (Surra, 1988). Others have suggested that high partner dependency on friends for personal needs prevents the development of conjugal interdependence because the partners do not need or do not have to provide support to each other (Ulin & Milardo, 1992). At both the separate and joint levels, there are no cultural limitations for sex and partnership with friends, as opposed to limitations inherent to kin relationships. Those interpretations are also consistent with studies showing that partners in heterosexual and homosexual couples who value independence from their partner are more likely to be dissatisfied and to separate than those who value interdependence (Kurdek, 1992; Rusbult, 1983). Therefore, achieving an optimal distance from friends would permit access to resources while preserving partner intimacy. That also could explain why we could not verify our hypothesis that friends' bilateral provision of support would facilitate adjustment.

Our findings regarding the adjustment of lesbian couples indicated that fewer separate friends, less partner dependency on their separate kin, and larger partner discrepancies in number of separate kin predicted better conjugal adjustment. Relative to their joint network, more kin and a larger net-

work overlap predicted higher levels of conjugal adjustment. However, beyond partners' separate friends and partners' dependency on separate kin, the predictors did not contribute unique variance to lesbians' conjugal adjustment.

The findings for lesbians suggest that women who develop and maintain close ties with their family throughout their lives face particular difficulties in developing intimate relationships. When the family supports them individually but does not support their relationship, for instance, they may feel torn between loyalty to the family and their love for their partner. They may not want to upset their parents by coming out to them and may resent their partner's pressure to do so (Clunis & Green, 1988). The maintenance of a public and a private life has an impact on the development of their intimacy, as well. For instance, because in our culture several social rituals involve family reunions (e.g., Christmas Eve), the exclusion of the couple or at least one member of the couple deprives partners from sharing culturally meaningful moments with people and encourages individual gratification and individuation from the dyad.

Overall, the regression findings for same-sex couples highlighted the impact of separate ties on conjugal adjustment, whereas the only finding for heterosexual couples referred to their shared ties. Because other studies of heterosexual couples also have shown an impact of outside ties on heterosexual couples' adjustment (Stein et al., 1992), future research with larger samples should test whether different network factors predict the conjugal adjustment of heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples.

Heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples did not differ in the amount of variance in adjustment accounted for by the network features. Contrary to expectation, social networks were not more determinant of same-sex couples' adjustment, compared with heterosexual couples' adjustment. Beyond the diverse and specific ways that social networks seem to affect conjugal adjustment when couples develop their relationship in supportive or unsupportive cultural contexts, our findings highlighted a uniformity of function that generalizes to heterosexual and lesbian and gay couples.

#### *Sex-Related Differences*

No differences were found between the network structures of gay and lesbian couples. This lack of difference shows that gays and lesbians are similar in several dimensions of conjugal processes, as many studies have previously observed (e.g.,

Bell et al., 1981; Julien et al., 1997; Kurdek, 1992). The regression findings suggested a tendency for different predictors—mostly friend-related for gays and friend- and kin-related for lesbians—to predict their conjugal adjustment, although our analytical procedure prevents inference of differences. For heterosexual couples, we found that wives tended to have more kin than husbands in the joint network. Thus, kin support may be a crucial factor for harmony in women's intimate relationships, irrespective of their sexual orientation.

Overall, our findings underline the relevance of pursuing a structural interdependence perspective for analyzing the influence of couples' social networks on their conjugal adjustment. The results should be interpreted with caution, however, given the limitations of this study. First, even though our theoretical framework emphasized the effect of social networks on dyadic outcomes, the cross-sectional nature of our design does not permit inferring causality, and we acknowledge that the associations that we found were possibly the products of bidirectional processes. Second, the measures used in this study have been normed for American, English-speaking, heterosexual couples and could potentially have affected the results. Third, it is probable that the same-sex couples who volunteered to participate in our study were openly self-identified gays and lesbians in their communities, which is not necessarily typical of nonparticipating couples. Fourth, the couples in this study were White, middle class, from a large metropolitan area, so our findings may not generalize. Couples' networks may vary according to ethnicity, social class, and region of residence. We also know that some of our couples were not monogamous, and that may have affected the results of our study. Fifth, given that the presence of children was not a controlled variable in this study, it was impossible to examine the influence of the presence of children on the characteristics of the couples' social networks. For instance, children may explain why heterosexual women had more kin than their husbands in the joint network. Because a growing number of gay and lesbian couples are raising children, future research could examine whether raising children accounts for some of the sexual-orientation effects that we found. The acceptance of homosexuality is a changing social phenomenon, and our findings may not generalize to future cohorts of couples.

Because homosexuality is still taboo in our culture, we do not yet know whether same-sex couples are less stable than heterosexual couples. Our find-

ings suggest that some of the same-sex couples who may be at risk because they live in a homophobic context develop particular adaptive strategies, such as building a joint network with features that constrain and facilitate couple adjustment and maintenance. Future studies could document the network changes in the early years of same-sex couples' formation.

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