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Commitment in Same-Sex Relationships: A Qualitative Analysis of Couples' Conversations

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**Accepted 02/02/04**

**Rostosky, S.S., Riggle, E.D.B., Dudley, M.G., & Comer Wright, M.L. (In press). Relational commitment: A qualitative analysis of same-sex couples' conversations. Journal of Homosexuality.**

**PRE-PUBLICATION PRINT**

This research study was funded by the American Psychological Foundation's Wayne E. Placek Award (2000) and a 2002 University of Kentucky Summer Faculty Fellowship to the first author. Many thanks to Beth Goldstein, Ph.D., for providing consultation and feedback on qualitative methods. For serving as project coordinators, we express appreciation to Todd Savage, Ph.D., Ashley Reed, M.S., and Cydney Jackson, M.S. For help with data collection we thank Gina Owens, M.S., and Robert A. Prather, B.A. For transcribing the data we owe a huge debt of gratitude to Marc Frisiello, M.S. Finally, we thank the couples who generously shared their lives with us, thereby profoundly enriching our own. Please address correspondence concerning this article to Sharon S. Rostosky, Ph.D., Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology, 245 Dickey Hall, University of Kentucky, 40506-0017. Email: [rostosk@uky.edu](mailto:rostosk@uky.edu).



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## Abstract

Theoretical constructs and meanings of relational commitment for same-sex couples have typically been generalized from heterosexual relationships. Same-sex couples, however, face a unique set of challenges in constructing committed relationships. To expand our knowledge of the meaning of commitment, same-sex couples described their lived experiences in defining and creating a committed relationship. Transcripts of the conversations of 14 same-sex couples (7 male and 7 female couples) were subjected to analysis using the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) method (Hill, Thompson, and Williams, 1997). Seven domains emerged, revealing that these same-sex couples constructed the meaning of commitment through comparisons, costs, intra-couple differences, investments, personal and relationship values and ideals, rewards, and sexual boundaries. Unique aspects of commitment are discussed as well as the implications of these findings for future research and service delivery.

**KEYWORDS:** Relational commitment, couples, qualitative

## Commitment in Same-Sex Relationships: A Qualitative Analysis of Couples' Conversations

The pursuit, formation, and maintenance of intimate relationships are central life cycle tasks.

Recognition of the desire for and pursuit of enduring and satisfying close relationships in adulthood has generated a large theoretical and empirical literature in the field of relationship science (see review in Bercheid & Reiss, 1998). Within this field, theoretical and empirical studies of commitment in close relationships have been late arrivals and have focused predominantly on marital commitment, partially in reaction to rising divorce rates (see Adams & Jones, 1999). This focus on marital commitment has largely excluded same-sex couples from consideration. The applicability of the resulting conceptualizations based on heterosexual experiences to the experiences of same-sex couples, therefore, need to be examined and evaluated rather than assumed.

Same-sex couples hold relationship values that are unique to their position in an era dominated by AIDS discourse, conservative politics, and heterosexual hegemony. Past literature has suggested that the lack of role models or scripts for same-sex couples has led many to make commitments hastily as a means of solidifying their partnerships and validating their relationships (e.g., Berger, 1990; Reilly & Lynch, 1990). Others have concluded that the lack of institutional and social supports for same-sex relationships discourages couples from making economic investments (such as purchasing a home together) and emotional investments (such as maintaining a public couple identity), which, in turn, weaken commitment and reduces barriers to dissolving the relationship (Kurdek, 1991). And, unlike peers in urban gay and lesbian communities, the interpersonal commitment of couples in more rural and suburban settings, especially in the South, is likely to be influenced by a greater degree of social isolation and access to fewer partners (Lynch, 1992).

For same-sex couples, creating and expressing commitment in the context of an intimate relationship is a complicated task. The lack of institutional and social supports for same-sex couples and the accompanying stigmatization and discrimination have important psychosocial implications for couple

members. This social context creates a need for couples to anticipate and negotiate relationship definitions (Kuehlein & Gottschalk, 2000; Green & Mitchell, 2002), including their definition of commitment to a long-term, mutually beneficial and satisfying intimate relationship.

This study used an inductive process to elucidate the experiences and perceptions involved in the construction of commitment by same-sex couples. We employed a qualitative methodology appropriate to the exploration of a complex and multifaceted construct that is not easily quantifiable, especially in understudied and marginalized populations. Consistent with interdependence theory, and mindful of critique of sexuality literature that has used the individual as the unit of analysis to understand couple-level phenomena (e.g., Orbuch & Harvey, 1991), we focused on the couple as the appropriate unit of analysis. Through the systematic analysis of couples' relational experiences, we sought to generate findings useful for evaluating the adequacy of the current understanding of commitment in same-sex couple relationships and bringing to consider the implications for future research with same-sex couples.

#### Commitment: Past Empirical Study

In the limited number of studies of commitment in same-sex couples, interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) has served as the general theoretical framework. Kelley (1983) defined commitment as a dyadic level variable composed of all factors that operate in promoting and maintaining interaction between individuals. In close relationships, commitment is a process whereby, over time, partners coordinate their behaviors to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. Behaviors enacted on behalf of the partner or on behalf of the relationship, even if costly or effortful, are therefore not perceived as contrary to individual goals or self-interest (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978).

Within the interdependence theory tradition, commitment has been conceptualized as a two-dimensional construct composed of forces of attraction and forces of constraint (Levinger, 1979; 1999; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Kurdek (1995) validated facets of these two components of commitment using comparative samples of heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples. In these samples, components of attraction

were rewards, costs, perceived match to ideal partner, and perceived quality of alternative relationships; constraining forces included investments and barriers to relationship dissolution. Both attraction and constraining forces were associated with a global measure of commitment. In longitudinal analyses, changes in the partner A's levels of attraction uniquely predicted changes in Partner B's global commitment beyond that Partner B's own levels of attraction and constraint, thereby demonstrating that relational commitment is a couple-level phenomenon and providing support for assuming the interdependent nature of relational outcomes (Kurdek, 2000).

Duffy and Rusbult (1986) also applied Rusbult's investment model of commitment to a comparison of partners from same-sex and heterosexual couples. These authors found that greater relationship satisfaction, more investments and poorer quality of alternatives were associated with greater levels of commitment to a relationship. They concluded that gender was a more important predictor of these associations than relationship type (heterosexual versus same-sex), although several significant interactions were noteworthy. For example, casual dating was most attractive to gay males and least attractive to lesbians, with heterosexual males and females falling in between these two groups. Significant predictor variables included specific rewards such as attitudinal similarity, shared interests, and partner's sense of humor; specific costs included level of conflict, partner's irritating habits and failure to live up to agreements; and specific investments included monetary and shared material possessions.

In sum, interdependence theory has proven useful for creating variables that are associated with commitment and relational stability in empirical studies of same-sex couple relationships. Researchers using constructs based on this theory have concluded that relational processes in cross-sex and same-sex couples are not significantly different from each other. Nevertheless, the underlying assumption of heterosexuality may be limiting research in ways not readily apparent. Certainly the denial of normative institutional status socially constructs differences in the interpersonal experiences of same-sex couples as compared to their heterosexual counterparts. This basic socio-contextual difference renders suspect the

adequacy of conceptualizations of commitment based on heterosexual relationships and their attendant social privileges (Patterson, Ciabattari, & Schwartz, 1999; see also Beals, Impett, & Peplau, 2002). Therefore, examining relational commitment as created and sustained by same-sex couples serves as a foundational description of the phenomenon that can inform theory and future research based on the lived experience of same-sex couples.

## Method

### *Participants*

As part of a larger study of same-sex couple relationships, ninety couples over the age of 18 who had self-defined as a “couple” for a minimum of six months were recruited in a mid-size Southern city and the surrounding region to participate in a research study. Consistent with the Consensual Qualitative Research method (CQR: Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; cf. Glaser & Strauss’ grounded theory, 1967), 7 male and 7 female couples were randomly chosen to be part of this analysis. Individually, twenty-four of these respondents were Caucasian/White and four were African-American or other non-White race/ethnicity. The mean age of these participants was 31.9 years with a range of 19 to 54. Sixty-one percent of participants were college graduates or had attended graduate/professional school. The mean score on Sternberg’s Triangular Love Scale commitment sub-scale (Sternberg, 1997) was 8.1 (standard deviation of 1.4) on a 9 point scale, indicating a very high level of commitment to the relationship overall. Since we are interested in “commitment,” and not the lack thereof, this high level of commitment is consistent with the purpose of the study.

Couples had been together for an average of 6.4 years with a range of 7 months to 22 years. One lesbian couple had a child together; three individuals had children from a prior relationship. The majority of participants (89%) reported that their families were aware of their sexual orientation, although less than half of their families were perceived as accepting and supportive of the same-sex couple relationship.

### *Instruments*

A list of open-ended discussion questions regarding the process of creating and the definition of commitment was generated for use as prompts in this study. The open-ended nature of the questions ensured the possibility that new constructs could emerge in the context of the conversations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The list of discussion questions included: (1) “Think back to the first time the two of you began your relationship. What attracted you to each other? How did you make the decision to become a couple?”; (2) “What does commitment mean to you? How do you know you are in a committed relationship? What were the “steps” involved in forming a committed relationship with each other?”; (3) “What are the pros and cons of being in a committed relationship?”; (4) “Who (or what) has shaped or influenced your ideas about commitment?”; and (5) “How is commitment like (or not like) commitment in heterosexual relationships?”.

As part of the larger project, each participating couple member was individually interviewed and completed a questionnaire. The questionnaire elicited information about demographics, relationship quality, religiosity, perceived social support, and psychological adjustment. This paper focused on the analyses of the videotaped conversations between couple members regarding interpersonal commitment, supplemented by the demographic information supplied on the questionnaires.

### *Procedures*

The sample of couples was recruited using announcements that were distributed in local newsletters, at local community events, on community bulletin boards, on local listservs serving the LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) community, and through “snowballing,” the technique of giving extra flyers announcing the study to each participating couple that was willing to give the information to friends and acquaintances whom they thought might meet the selection criteria and who might be interested. Each couple that responded to the announcements was scheduled for a three-hour appointment at the university at a time of their convenience. The couple was taken to a private room to discuss all study procedures, have questions answered, and obtain informed consent for participation. Couple members were assured that their

participation was completely voluntary, that they could skip any question(s) they did not want to discuss, and that they could cease participating at any time they so desired without any penalty to them.

A portable video camera was in the couples' full view. Following the informed consent procedures, each couple member was given a card with the list of the open-ended questions described above. The couple was left alone to engage in a 30-minute conversation guided by the list of open-ended questions. At the end of the data collection session, each couple member received debriefing materials and a stipend to compensate for his or her time.

### *Data Analysis*

The conversation transcripts of the 7 randomly selected male couples and 7 randomly selected female couples were subjected to qualitative analysis using the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) method developed by Hill, et al. (1997). CQR suggests that thorough, in-depth analysis is best performed on a limited number of participants (8 to 15 is suggested; p. 532). Using this suggestion, initially 12 manuscripts were coded; the final 2 manuscripts were coded to check for stability of the initial coding scheme.

Data were subjected to a series of analyses by a primary research team of three coders and one external auditor. The primary team of coders began by identifying all content relevant to the research question. Next, the primary team coded four of the transcripts to reach consensus on the general topic areas, or domains, found in the text. After determining the domains, two members of the primary team independently placed the data from 12 of the 14 transcripts into the appropriate domains. During a consensus meeting, the two main coders, the third primary coder, and a faculty advisor verified the results of this first level of coding. The coded transcripts were then given to the external auditor who evaluated the coding and offered specific feedback to the primary team. The feedback was incorporated as appropriate into revisions of the coding.

Once a consensus was reached with the domains, the primary coders wrote abstracts of the couple conversations within each domain for every transcript and met to reach consensus on the content of the abstracts. The primary coding team used these abstracts to decide upon subcategories that captured the ideas within each domain that were consistent across the couples. The primary team reached a consensus on the subcategories and the external auditor examined and offered feedback regarding the results. Finally, the remaining two transcripts were coded using the established domain and subcategory structure to confirm the coding structure. We concluded that the domain and subcategory structure was reliable and stable, since all of the applicable data from these two transcripts were successfully coded using the emergent scheme (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As a final check on the coding scheme, the results were sent to two participants (one male, one female) for feedback. Each participant responded positively that the results were consistent with their perceptions of their own experiences.

## Results

The domain and subcategory structures of the data are presented in Table 1. Domains represent the general topic areas that comprise all of the raw data addressing the phenomenon of commitment. In this sample of same-sex couples, the phenomenon of commitment was composed of 7 domains. These domains, in alphabetical order and discussed in more depth below, were comparisons, costs, intra-couple differences, investments, personal and relationship values and ideals, rewards, and sexual boundaries.

Subcategories were explicated through the cross-analysis of the core ideas abstracted from the data in each domain for each transcript. These subcategories, shown in Table 1, represent the similarities that emerged within the domains across the 14 transcribed conversations. Between two and six (with a mode of 3) subcategories emerged for each domain.

The representativeness of each of the domains and subcategories was charted by counting the frequency of each (see Table 1). Categories that applied to all of the couples in the sample are considered **general** categories. Categories that occurred in half or more of the couples' conversations are considered

**typical** categories; categories that applied to less than half of the conversations are considered **variant** categories (Hill et al., 1997). Using this classification, four domains were classified as *general*, and the three remaining domains classified as *typical* (with the typical domains discussed by 13 of the 14 couples as shown in Table 1). Each of the domains and their subcategories are examined in greater detail in the sections that follow.

### *Comparisons*

All 14 couples described their commitment to each other in comparison to other committed relationships that they observed. Couples often compared their parents' relationships to their own, as illustrated by the following exchange:

Partner A: "I base a lot of how I deal with you in our relationship in how I remember my parents relating to one another and there are things that I definitely didn't take away from that relationship that I specifically didn't want, like my mother's subservient wife thing."

Partner B: "No, I can't see you being that (laughs)... I think, truthfully, we've taken the good parts, the good aspects of our parents' relationship and have built our own."

Partner A: "Do you think our relationship is better than our parents'?"

Partner B: "I think so."

Partner A: "I think we're more...our relationship is more equal than my father's and mother's."

Partner B: "We're more in tune to each other, too." (Couple 3)

Likewise, a male couple who had been together 3 ½ years used parental marriages as negative examples of committed relationships:

Partner A: "I certainly learned from my mother's marriage what not to do."

Partner B: "I think I've done that also." (Couple 6)

Even more than comparisons to other couple relationships within the family, these couples compared their relationship to other gay and non-gay couples in their social networks. Again, a consistent theme was that couples perceived their own relationship as more positive and more desirable than other couples' relationships that they observed. Some couples noted that their relationships were just as committed as the heterosexual couple relationships that they observed, although they perceived more challenges to staying together. Finally, six couples discussed the impact of past romantic relationships on their perception of commitment to each other and their behaviors toward each other. In most of these

interactions, couples expressed a keen desire to avoid past mistakes that they had made in choosing partners with whom they could not communicate or who “cheated” on them.

### *Costs*

All 14 couples noted psychological “costs” to committing themselves to their relationship. The most frequently cited cost was limitations on personal freedom. Examples of these limitations included having to “answer” to one’s partner (Couples 1 and 12), “give up parts of oneself for the relationship” (Couples 13 and 14), or simply consider the partner’s needs before making a decision (Couples 2, 7, and 8). Three couples (Couples 9, 10, and 11) specifically mentioned limits on sexual freedom as a cost of being in a committed relationship.

In addition to limited personal freedom, five couples listed arguing, conflict and disagreements as a cost of being in a committed relationship. Eight couples talked specifically about legal and social restraints that they experienced as costs to being in a committed relationship with each other. This subcategory included three couples who specifically noted they would like to marry each other and perceived the lack of legal recognition of their relationship as a cost that they incur. One male couple who had been together three years expressed it this way:

Partner A: “Let’s face it, we can’t get married.”

Partner B: “And for me it really wouldn’t change anything to my way of thinking. To me, moving in together, sharing everything with the other person is really...”

Partner A: “The equivalent.”

Partner B: “Exactly.”

Partner B: “I wish we could get married. I mean, if we could I’d like to. I mean, you know how I feel about that. And we’ve discussed that before, yes?”

Partner A: “Yes.” (Couple 12)

Socially, couples noted that because they were same-sex couples, they were more isolated and less open with others about their relationship because of anticipated social disapproval. Couple 14, for example, described negative social experiences as having “eroded” their commitment to each other. Another couple, together 21 years, expressed their sense of social isolation in the following interaction:

Partner A: "I think it is really harder, too, for any gay couple to stay together than it is, I mean if you look at the overall picture, there's much more going against any gay couple than there is any heterosexual couple."

Partner B: "Oh, yeah."

Partner A: "I would think that's exactly the reason that a lot of them are hidden; I mean, look at us."

Partner B: "True."

Partner A: A whole lot of the time, we've not been maybe as forward as we would like to be because of who we are. I mean, we don't go walking down the street holding hands."

Partner B: "No."

Partner A: "There wouldn't be a thing in the world wrong with that if we did, but we don't do it because we're aware of where we live and the reaction that would cause in other people around us that kind of thing is just automatically shunned when it comes to us..." (later in the conversation) "... In a lot of ways we've not really had that much of a choice other than to isolate ourselves a little bit if we wanted to survive."

Partner B: "True."

Partner A: "We've not really had the choice of being as open as we would like to be or as affectionate as we're capable of being toward each other even, because of that. And at the same time, I'm not necessarily blaming society for me choosing to be isolated, because it was my choice and I withdraw from a lot of areas of society on purpose because I don't want the hassle... and then when you try to come back out of isolationism you are not accepted anyway... so that really does irritate me; I have to admit that." (Couple 5).

This sense of social isolation often extended to a lack of supportive ties to their families. One couple described this psychological cost by simply stating, "look at the sorrow and anguish that they've (referring to their parents) created for us" (Couple 3). Another couple, together for just seven months, shared the following perceptions regarding the influence of family members' rejection of their relationship:

Partner A: "It's definitely influenced my relationship with you because, especially since I'm not out to my parents... and she (mom) wouldn't speak to me for a month when she found out my friends were gay. Remember, last August? So, just all that hate she has made me feel like, 'what's the point in continuing (the relationship) if I could lose my mom or she would...'"

Partner B: "Oh yeah, cuz you feel like your family's gonna disown you."

Partner A: "Right." (Couple 13)

Likewise, a female couple together for 3 ½ years described their relationship as invisible to family members:

Partner A: "But most people don't think [the relationship is] real."

Partner B: "Yeah."

Partner A: "They're just going through a phase; they're codependent."

Partner B: "Ha, then we've been 'going through a phase' for several years now... I don't think Mom and Dad see it as the same all the time. I think they have their moments when they do, but then I think they have their moments where they don't either."

Partner A: "We're just buddies hanging out."

Partner B: “Well, sometimes Mom will call you my roommate, sometimes she’ll call you my friend...you know.” (Couple 12)

### *Intra-Couple Differences*

An important aspect of commitment for these couples appeared to be the recognition or acceptance of differences between the partners. Thirteen of the 14 couples discussed differences between them that ranged from differing sleep habits to differing needs, wants, and personality styles. Three couples attributed their differences to the age difference between them. All of the couples dealt with these differences by stating acceptance of their differences or by negotiating a compromise that would address both of their needs. One couple acknowledged their differences and put them in the context of their commitment:

Partner A: “I think [commitment] probably means different things to us on different levels, simply because of who we are and the differences in how we deal with things. I hope that you don’t question my commitment to you, because I do love you...but I know the I’m different than you and I do things differently, and most likely I’ve been shaped in many ways differently than you have – both positively and negatively.”

Partner B: “...Commitment is trying to be supportive and being there for you and even at the times when I don’t understand what to do or what’s going on, is to try and at least somehow be there...” (Couple 10)

Some couples noted that individual needs and wants change over time and therefore negotiating differences is an on-going process that ensures an overall balance between couple members. One couple illustrated this process:

Partner A: “I was standing there (wondering) if I was badgering you enough and finally getting you to talk. I wonder if it was bothering you.”

Partner B: “You don’t have to talk 24 hours a day!”

Partner A: “Yes we do...at least I do.”

Partner B: “O.K. What do you think? I’d kick you down the stairs and say, ‘Leave me alone?’”

Partner A: “And that’s one reason why we work, in some respects, is that we respect each other’s privacy and quiet time.” (Couple 2)

### *Investments*

All of the couples described their commitment as evolving through specific acts that signified emotional investment in the relationship. The most typical investments that couples considered “markers” of their commitment included moving in together, disclosing their sexual orientation and relationship to

family and/or others, and making plans for a future together. For example, Partner B of Couple 5 noted to her partner that "...your coming out is a big part of what made us a couple." Couple 2 listed "moving in and doing the ring thing, and our commitment ceremony" as the steps in their forming a committed relationship.

Disclosure of a same-sex relationship to others involves dealing with possible or actual negative reactions. Couples indicated that dealing with those reactions and continuing to disclose their relationship was a signal of their commitment to their partner.

Partner A: "...in a way, I'd like it if my family could meet you and see us in action. Just go out to dinner or something, because I think that a lot of straight people, like my dad and sister, have misconceptions about gay relationships and that's why...like, I slip it in there all the time about the most banal things. Oh, [Partner B] and I went to the store. It's like, that's the kind of shit that couples do."

Partner B: "I say things like that to my parents too." (Couple 14)

On-going efforts to communicate were also considered an investment in the relationship as illustrated by this male couple who had been together 3 ½ years:

Partner A: "I know that we've discussed openly most of the things that are important to me enough...set up some kind of guideline or agreement about it, and we've talked about it and you've understood or tried to understand where I'm coming from and then we agreed about it. I think that element of you actually understanding and reflecting my thoughts back to me to show that you did understand makes me believe or affirms that idea that we are together as one...one about it, about the relationship."

Partner B: "I would say that I know I'm in a committed relationship is I feel like I know what the understood rules of our relationship are, that I abide by those, and I know I can talk to you and discuss what's on my mind. I think we've weathered enough storms together to know that I can depend on you and count on you. I hope you'd feel the same way."

Partner A: "I do." (Couple 14)

Less frequently mentioned investments included securing legal documentation, combining finances and/or purchasing property together, and spending time together. For example, Partner B in Couple 8 changed her last name so that it would be the same as her partner's and her partner's child. Couple 21 noted opening a joint banking account and signing both of their names on a lease as a step in their commitment process.

*Personal and Relationship Values and Ideals*

All 14 couples discussed personal values and ideals that influenced their perceptions of commitment. Within this domain, three typical subcategories emerged. These subcategories included sexual and emotional intimacy, communication, and relationship quality. Five female and five male couples discussed the importance of sexual and emotional intimacy in their relationship. While two couples emphasized the importance of a satisfying sex life, the majority of these couples stated that the emotional intimacy of the relationship was more important to them than the sexual intimacy. This subcategory is illustrated by the following couple, who stated:

Partner A: "I think sex is a very important aspect of a committed relationship but I don't think it's the only important aspect."

Partner B: "No."

Partner A: "... In the context of a long term relationship, especially, sex takes a back burner. It's important, you want it to be there, you want it to be good, as always, but it's not the most important thing."

Partner B: "No, definitely not." (Couple 5)

Over half of the couples listed good communication as an important personal value related to a committed relationship. One couple expressed this value thus:

Partner A: "Communicating, I think that is key, which we work on, and communication goes along with commitment I think."

Partner B: "I agree... We have a responsibility to each other to communicate what we need..." (Couple 8)

In addition to good communication, the majority of couples listed other relationship qualities that they considered vital to a long-term committed relationship. Mutual trust and respect were the most frequently listed relationship qualities. Other qualities that were emphasized included honesty and companionship.

*Rewards*

Thirteen of the 14 couples described commitment as rewarding, particularly in providing companionship and sexual fulfillment. For instance, one couple addressed both of these rewards in the following exchange:

Partner A: “There are a lot of pros; just to know that you’re going through things with someone...”  
 Partner B: “Someone who’s got your back.”  
 Partner A: “Yea, together; dealing with things in life together. And to know that you’re not expecting to go run off with the next person you see that you kinda like and your partner isn’t gonna do the same thing. And yea, just having someone to be there when you want to go to dinner.”  
 Partner B: “Or have sex (laughs).” (Couple 10)

Several couples also referred to other personal benefits that they experienced as part of their committed relationship. These personal benefits included “settling down” (Couple 7), expanding family support (Couple 9) and friendship networks in the gay community (Couple 8), and working through conflicting viewpoints that challenged their world views (Couple 10). Couple 3 described their relationship as “filling a void” in the life of each person.

### *Sexual Boundaries*

Thirteen of the 14 couples discussed sexual boundaries as an important component of commitment in their relationship. For 11 of these couples, an agreement or expectation of sexual fidelity or monogamy was central to their perception of commitment. For example, one female couple stated:

Partner A: “Commitment to me...that would mean honesty, trust, love, that big word monogamy.”  
 Partner B: (later in the conversation) “Commitment means to me someone will always be there for you. Basically if you’re committed to me, you’re mine, don’t sleep with anybody, don’t go touching on anybody.” (Couple 7)

The majority of male couples also talked about sexual monogamy as being an important indicator of their commitment. One male couple put it this way:

Partner A: “...You’re not going to lie and wander and seek what’s out there. You know what my past is like (referring to many sex partners) so it’s very interesting to just be with each other all the time.”  
 Partner B: “Commitment is sharing a life with one person and deciding that no matter how many other people come along in your life, that I’m always gonna be faithful to you...we always want to be together and some people have open relationships and we said we don’t want to do that.” (Couple 9)

Two of the 14 couples, both male, perceived that monogamy was unessential or even undesirable in a committed relationship. One of these couples stated:

Partner A: “Certainly we’re not enamored of the notion that the relationship has to be monogamous.”

Partner B: "That's true."

Partner A: "...which I think a lot of couples get stumbled up on and get in trouble about, because as soon as you set boundaries and say, 'Thou shalt not stray,' the temptation to stray is unbelievable."

Partner B: "Mmm...hmmm" (nodding agreement). (Couple 2)

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of commitment in same-sex couples through their own lived experiences. We found that couples perceived commitment in their relationships in ways that are consistent with past empirical work. Similar to Kurdek's (1995) findings within the interdependence tradition of commitment research, the couples in this sample perceived their commitment as involving investments, rewards, costs, and match with personal values and ideals. For example, Kurdek's measure of rewards included an item about companionship and Duffy and Rusbult's (1986) measure an item about sexual satisfaction (significant for lesbians but not gay men). Similarly, the couples in our sample typically discussed sexual fulfillment as a reward, thus adding to our understanding of the phenomena of commitment in same-sex couples. Likewise, past measures of perceived costs have inquired about limits on personal freedom, which these couples also discussed. However, the couples in this study also typically mentioned conflict and stress from disclosure of their relational status as well as legal constraints as factors that had effects on their perceptions of commitment to each other.

Couples understood their decision to commit to each other as a process that involved evaluation of the match between their personal and relational values and ideals. Global assessment of this construct has been related to global measurement of commitment. The couples in this study consistently described these ideals for their relationships as sexual and emotional intimacy, communication, and an overall high relationship quality. Obtaining these ideals in the context of their relationships was perceived as central to the commitment of the couple.

Same-sex couples perceived their commitment in terms of additional factors beyond the consistencies with previous findings noted above. Decisions about monogamy were central to couples'

perceptions of commitment; this decision was seen as a unique marker of their commitment to each other. Likewise, all of these couples defined their commitment to each other in juxtaposition to models provided by family-of-origin and non-family relationships that they were close enough to observe. This is in contrast to previous suggestions that same-sex couples have few or no role models, although as the couples sometimes note, these may be “negative role models” (e.g. “I don’t want to have a relationships like my parents”) as well as positive role models; same-sex couples do compare themselves to other relationships, whether those are same-sex couples or, much more likely, opposite-sex couples.

Finally, same-sex couples perceived their commitment as involving recognition of and negotiation of individual differences. Interestingly, these factors are often assumed in traditional heterosexual marriages. That is, adopting traditional heterosexual scripts that are based on gendered power relations and roles may preclude the active discussion and negotiation that same-sex couples find necessary and integral to the definition and development of their committed relationship. The scripts that emerged among these same-sex couples appeared to be actively co-constructed rather than assumed and adopted from traditional heterosexual/gendered scripts.

While some of the factors in same-sex couples may look very similar to factors in traditional heterosexual scripts, they can have different meanings or importance for same-sex couples. For instance, for same-sex couples, moving in together, social disclosure of their relationship, actively making plans for their future, and continuing efforts to communicate were particularly salient investments that signified their commitment to each other. While these “maintenance behaviors” may also be observed in heterosexual couples and are consistent with empirical findings from the marital commitment literature (see review in Adams & Jones, 1999; see also Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Haas & Stafford, 1998), our findings point to the unique meanings of these behaviors among couples occupying a stigmatized social category.

Consistent with past research (e.g., Peplau, 1991; Kurdek, 1995, 1998), we found no obvious differences between same-sex female and male couples in their definitions or conceptions of commitment.

The only possible difference that we will note pertains to sexual boundaries. The variant category of an open or non-monogamous relationship was discussed by two male couples and no female couples. Because it is a variant category it would be difficult to generalize this as a male-couple phenomena. However, that it was male couples who incorporated non-monogamy into committed relationships is consistent with previous findings that male members of same-sex couples are less likely to be monogamous (cf. Kurdek, 1991; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986).

### *Limitations*

Since the goal of this study was to discover possible ways in which the concept of commitment might be fruitfully modified or expanded, we used a qualitative methodology appropriate to this goal (see Morrow & Smith, 2000). As with any method, certain limitations must be taken into account in interpretation of the findings. This study used a small, purposive sample to study a phenomenon in-depth; therefore, generalizing the findings to the general population of same-sex couples should be done with appropriate caution. In this sample, for instance, the methods and procedures may have resulted in a sample of couples who are further along in their identity development, more satisfied with their couple relationship, and more accessible through gay and lesbian community and social support networks than the ‘average’ same-sex couple. Therefore, we do not assume that these factors describe the general population of same-sex couples. Because random samples of sexual minority populations are nonexistent, we do not have a good way to compare our sample to the population. Beyond these limitations, however, we are confident that our findings contribute to an understanding of the phenomenon of commitment that informs both theory and practice and provides a launching point for additional studies that seek to replicate and extend these initial findings.

The couple was used as the unit of analysis in reflection of the assumptions of interdependence theory. Having couple members direct their own conversation allowed them to have a conversation that hopefully reflected the importance of various ideas in their co-construction of commitment within their

relationship. The dynamics of the conversation may have masked or silenced the thoughts of individual members of the couple because of personality or individual differences in communication style. While an interviewer may have helped to draw out individual members of the couple more on some points or direct their attention, that might have also distorted the conversation and pre-empted interaction between couples members in favor of interaction with the interviewer. However, this type of conversation may have limited, for instance, the discussion of the attractiveness of alternatives to the current relationship, a construct in the investment models of commitment. This may play a larger role in individual levels of commitment as opposed to couple levels.

#### *Implications for future research*

It is important to examine the extent to which current conceptualizations about interpersonal commitment apply to same-sex couples, given that the majority of research has been based on theory that assumes intimate relationships are composed of opposite-sex pairs. Our analyses suggest that the phenomenon of interpersonal commitment as experienced and articulated by same-sex couples is consistent with Rusbult's (1980) investment model of commitment and Kurdek's (1995) multiple determinants of commitment model. However, our findings also indicate that investment models of relationships may not fully account for same-sex couples' perceptions of commitment in their relationships. Beyond investment models, same-sex couples co-construct the meaning of commitment through the negotiation of boundaries, values, ideals, and personal differences. In fact, the process of negotiation, or communication, appears twice as a category within different domains, underscoring the importance of discussion and sharing for same-sex couples. The need to co-construct these domains rather than assume them reinforces the essential nature of communication in relationships. Communication as a feature of commitment, as opposed to a process, is included only as a type of investment in previous models; for same-sex couples it is not only a process, but the willingness to engage in communicating with their partner is concrete evidence of

commitment. Therefore, models that limit the operationalization of commitment to investments, costs, and rewards may fail to include important aspects relevant to same-sex couples.

The additional domains that emerged in this study intuitively apply to heterosexual couples as well. For instance, many heterosexual couples may compare their relationships to those of their parents. Replication of this study with heterosexual couples might further inform theory regarding relational processes that are similar to and unique to same-sex couple relationships. Quantitative studies based on interdependence theory have previously documented that same-sex and cross-sex couples are highly similar in their levels of commitment, satisfaction, and relationship quality (Kurdek, 1995, 1996; 1997; 2000). The extent to which these models fail to capture the richness and complexity of the phenomenon of commitment among heterosexual couples warrants further research.

The emergence of a potentially unique dialectical process among same-sex couples as they create their relationships is not surprising given the differences between the social and legal context for same-sex versus heterosexual couples. Whereas heterosexual relationship expectations, roles, and values are taught and modeled for individuals from birth, similar modeling of roles and values for same-sex relationships are non-existent for most individuals. Further, given that heterosexual models of relationships rely heavily on gender roles, they are not neatly transferable to same-sex relationships. Therefore, same-sex couples must create new roles and new rules and modify their values and expectations for their partnership (Scrivner & Eldridge, 1995). Unless conceptualizations and empirical inquiry into relationships take this social context into account, heterosexist assumptions will continue to proliferate in the literature, in clinical practice, and in social policy.

### *Implications for Practice*

Specific to counseling practice, practitioners need to carefully evaluate models of treatment that are based on heterosexual couples versus models based on the needs of same-sex couples. Although stigma suffered by self-identified bisexual, gay and lesbian individuals has been documented (Herek, 1998), its

impact on couple relationships should be explored and assessed. Additionally, the lack of models for same-sex couple relationships means that practitioners may need to prompt discussion of psychosocial issues that the partners may not recognize as barriers or problems affecting their commitment (e.g., social isolation, lack of legal protections, etc.; see Kuehlwein & Gottschalk, 2000).

Further, given that heterosexual models may not be applicable or may be rejected outright as unequal and sexist by same-sex couple members, practitioners may need to help couples co-create more flexible roles that are supportive of their long-term commitment. Practitioners may also help couples generate strategies for continually evaluating and re-negotiating their relationships in the absence of available role models. The necessity of creating gender and relational scripts is a central task for which many same-sex couples may seek affirmative couples counseling. Bepko and Johnson (2000) suggest that narrative approaches (e.g., White & Epston, 1990, as cited in Bepko & Johnson, 2000) may be particularly useful for exploring old and generating new gender and relational narratives that are supportive of the couple's goals.

Perhaps this challenge is summarized best by a 32-year-old participant who had been with his partner for 3 ½ years:

If you're straight, everything is already written out for you and you've already seen it somewhere. It's like it's imprinted on you and you take it for granted because you just know what you're supposed to do...or you think you do, anyway. But if you try to follow that model in a gay relationship it won't work, because there's too many things that you have to figure out for yourself. If you just try to be in automatic mode, do it the way you think things are supposed to go, it's absolutely not gonna work, because there's too many things that you have to adapt to, and too much pressure from all directions that you have to really pick and be careful—define things for yourself.

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Table 1

*Commitment in Same-Sex Couple Relationships: Domains, Subcategories, Frequencies, and Coding Criteria*

<b>Domains and Subcategories</b>	<b>No. of Occurrences</b>	<b>Definition or Coding Criteria</b>
<b>Comparisons</b>	<b>14</b>	
• Family Relationships	8	Comparisons made to relationships involving family members.
• Non-Family Relationships	12	Comparisons made to relationships not involving family members.
• Previous Romantic Relationships	6	Comparisons made to previous romantic relationships.
<b>Costs</b>	<b>14</b>	
• Social/Legal Restraints	8	Inability to be open about the relationship or to derive legal benefits.
• Conflict/Stress	7	Tension related to being in the relationship.
• Limitations on Personal Freedom	11	Actions of the individual constrained due to consideration of the other person.
<b>Intra-Couple Differences</b>	<b>13</b>	
• Background/Age	3	Distinctiveness of individual due to demographics or previous experiences.
• Recognized/Accepted	10	
• Negotiated/Compromised	7	Interpersonal differences noted in the relationship. Personality and lifestyle differences affecting the relationship.
<b>Investments</b>	<b>14</b>	
• Co-Habitation	8	The couple lives together.
• Legal and/or Monetary	5	Legal and/or financial dependence on each other.
• Social Disclosure	10	Couple makes the existence of their relationship known publicly.
• Time Spent Together	4	Couple engages in joint activities to be with one another.
• Efforts to Communicate	10	Engaging in discussion to solve problems or to express feelings.
• Plans for the Future	12	Plans made to continue the relationship on a long-term basis.
<b>Personal &amp; Relationship Values and Ideals</b>	<b>14</b>	
• Sexual and Emotional Intimacy	10	Importance placed on sexual and emotional needs within the relationship.
• Communication	8	Willingness of the partners to discuss issues with each other.
• Relationship Quality	10	Characteristics perceived to engender successful relationships.

Table 1 (continued)

<b>Rewards</b>	<b>13</b>	
• Sexual Fulfillment	9	Benefits specific to the couples' sexual relationship.
• Companionship	12	Positive affect derived from the presence of the other person.
• Personal Benefits	5	Evidence that the individual is a better person due to being in the relationship.
<b>Sexual Boundaries</b>	<b>13</b>	
• Monogamy	11	Couple members only engage in sex with each other.
• Non-Monogamy	2	Members have sex with individuals outside the relationship.