

Public and Private Physical Affection Differences between Same-Sex and Different-Sex Couples: The Role of Perceived Marginalization

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Abstract

Despite its connection with relationship satisfaction, research on physical affection is scarce and fails to disentangle private and public displays of affection. It is important to examine both types if marginalized couples are less comfortable displaying affection publicly. The present study examined whether same-sex couples display less public (but not private) physical affection than different-sex couples due to stronger feelings of relationship marginalization. It also examined how public/private affection and marginalization relate to relationship satisfaction. Women in committed same-sex and different-sex relationships completed surveys of public affection, private affection, marginalization, and relationship satisfaction online. As predicted, women in same-sex relationships displayed less public affection than those in different-sex relationships, an effect mediated by general societal marginalization. Both private and public affection predicted higher relationship satisfaction, whereas feelings of marginalization by friends/family predicted lower relationship satisfaction. We discuss implications for relationship counseling and propose new ways of looking at marginalization.

Keywords: physical affection; public affection; marginalization; relationships; homosexual relationships

Imagine wanting to comfort your partner physically or hold your partner's hand, but feeling reluctant to do so for fear of social disapproval. Many couples use physical affection to comfort their partner and show their love. However, same-sex couples may limit their public displays of affection if they feel a looming sense of social disapproval of their relationship. As a result, they may not reap as many of the relationship-enhancing benefits stemming from physical affection. The purpose of the present study was to examine whether same-sex couples display less public affection than different-sex couples due to stronger feelings of social disapproval of their relationship. It also examines how physical affection and perceptions of social disapproval (marginalization) may be associated with relationship satisfaction.

The present study specifically examined women in same-sex relationships, a group that is vastly understudied. Over the last 50 years, psychology has focused more and more attention on personal relationships, though with a primary focus on heterosexual pairings. When research entered the 1970s, psychology research began to include homosexuals, but with a primary focus on gay males and their sexual lives

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(Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). It was not until the 1980s that psychology began to see some research emphasis on relationships among lesbian couples. Thus, more and more research on same-sex couples, particularly female couples, is needed, if we are to fully understand same-sex relationships.

The research on physical affection itself is even scarcer, with only a handful studies placing a central focus on non-sexual physical affection among couples (Bell, Daly, & Gonzales, 1987; Burleson, Trevathan, & Todd, 2007; Gullledge, Gullledge, & Stahmann, 2003; Gullledge, Stahmann, & Wilson, 2004; Haas & Stafford, 1998; Mackey, Diemer, & O'Brien, 2000; see also Hall & Veccia, 1990, and Regan, Jerry, Narvaez, & Johnson, 1999, for studies examining dyads appearing in public, who may or may not be couples). Among these studies, only a few specifically investigated same-sex relationships (Burleson et al., 2007; Haas & Stafford, 1998; Mackey et al., 2000). Thus, research has only scratched the surface when it comes to understanding the physical affection component of both different-sex and same-sex relationships. The present study was aimed at increasing our knowledge of physical affection behaviors among same-sex female couples, as well as our understanding of the connection between physical affection to relationship satisfaction.

Physical Affection and Relationship Satisfaction

Gullledge et al. (2003) defined *physical affection* as “any touch intended to arouse feelings of love in the giver and/or the recipient,” and identified seven main types of physical affection: backrubs/massages, caressing/stroking, cuddling/holding, holding hands, hugging, kissing on the lips, and kissing on the face (not lips). They noted that the affection need not be intended as an immediate precursor to sexual intercourse. We have adopted the same definition of physical affection in the present study.

Much of the research exploring physical affection has examined its importance to relationship maintenance and satisfaction. For example, Gullledge et al. (2003) found that five physical affection behaviors (backrubs/massages, cuddling/holding, hugging, kissing on the lips, and kissing on the face) were positively correlated with relationship and partner satisfaction in a college sample (of unknown sexual orientation). In addition, Bell et al. (1987) found that women’s estimates of their own and their husband’s frequency of physical affection were each positively correlated with the

women's reports of their marital quality. Moreover, in a sample of long-term same-sex and different-sex relationships, Mackey et al. (2000) found a connection between physical affection, such as hugging and touching, and feeling psychologically intimate with one's partner. These studies have led researchers to conclude that physical affection may be an important contributor to relationships.

Although causation cannot be established in the studies discussed above, research has shown that individuals believe physical affection to serve a causal role in enhancing their romantic relationships. For example, people report using physical affection as a maintenance behavior for their relationships (Bell et al., 1987; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Gullede et al., 2003; Haas & Stafford, 1998). Dainton and Stafford identified affection as one of six day-to-day relationship maintenance behaviors among heterosexual couples. In a follow-up study, Haas and Stafford asked members of same-sex couples to indicate the routine things they do to maintain their relationships, and 40% mentioned shows of affection, such as "kissing goodbye in the morning." Using a sample of teachers (assumed to be heterosexual), Bell et al. found that wives rated the use of physical affection as quite important in maintaining liking and solidarity within their marriage. Moreover, the more they viewed the strategy as important to either themselves or their husbands, the higher their perceived marital quality.

Not only do couples believe that physical affection increases the quality of a relationship, but researchers have also explicitly supported this perspective, providing various reasons for suspecting a causal relationship (see Gullede, Hill, Lister, & Sallion, 2007). For example, physical touch can cause the release of the hormone, oxytocin, which appears to promote lasting relationship bonds (see Gullede et al., 2007, for a review). Given the potential contributions of physical affection to a relationship, one goal of the present study was to extend past work by examining whether same-sex couples show the same level of affection as different-sex couples, and to examine possible underlying reasons for any differences that might emerge. We also add to the literature base by investigating the connection between private and public affection, separately. This would be an especially important distinction if same-sex couples show less affection in public settings only, which is the pattern we expect.

Public and Private Affection among Same-Sex and Different-Sex Couples

We have begun to see an increase in the U.S. media of images of happy and healthy, gay and lesbian couples showing physical affection in both public and private settings. But are these images reflective of the actual behaviors of individuals in same-sex relationships? Although the literature, scant as it is, has investigated the physical affection of both different-sex and same-sex couples, it has not compared them on physical affection. This is important because social disapproval of same-sex relationships may keep same-sex couples from displaying physical affection towards one another in public, which they may not necessarily make up for in private. We propose that same-sex couples refrain from displaying much public affection due to feelings of societal marginalization.

Lehmiller and Agnew (2006) define *marginalized relationships* as “nontraditional, romantic involvements in which couple members experience social disapproval as a result of their union.” Using a marginalization questionnaire assessing acceptance of their relationship by society in general and by friends and family, Lehmiller and Agnew found that individuals in same-sex relationships perceived higher marginalization of their romantic relationships than those in different-sex pairings.

Research has not yet examined whether these feelings of marginalization may result in fewer public displays of affection among same-sex couples. However, Vaquera and Kao (2005) found that individuals in different-race relationships, one type of marginalized relationship, were less likely to hold hands in public than those in same-race relationships, but equally likely to exhibit private displays of affection, such as kissing and sexual touching. Vaquera and Kao attributed the difference to feelings of marginalization decreasing public affection, though their work was limited in examining only hand-holding, using only adolescents and heterosexual couples in their sample, and not specifically measuring feelings of marginalization.

Nevertheless, these findings suggest that although marginalized couples may show fewer public displays of physical affection, their intimate displays of affection may be no different from those in non-marginalized relationships. Similarly, we predicted that being involved in a same-sex relationship would be associated with less public (but not less private) physical affection. We also speculated that feelings of marginalization would predict less frequent displays of public affection.

Social Disapproval and Relationship Quality

Not only may feelings of marginalization minimize public displays of affection, but they may also impact relationship satisfaction. Over the last 35 years, mixed findings have emerged regarding the issue. Initially, research suggested that a lack of social support could be beneficial to relationships. In 1972, evidence for a “Romeo and Juliet effect” emerged (Driscoll, Davis & Lipitz, 1972). Specifically, Driscoll et al. found that parental disapproval of romantic relationships predicted increased commitment between romantic partners. Some years later, Parks, Stan, and Eggert (1983) gathered data that partially supported Driscoll et al.’s findings. In their sample of heterosexual dating couples, Parks et al. found that although minimal disapproval was associated with stronger relationship commitment, stronger disapproval was associated with lower commitment. Furthermore, minimal disapproval only predicted an increase in how long the individuals thought the relationship would last, and not in how “in love” they felt. In fact, the majority of Parks et al.’s research contradicted “the Romeo and Juliet effect,” showing that support from a couple’s social network of family and friends was generally positively correlated with romantic involvement.

Social disapproval has also predicted poorer relationship quality among same-sex and other marginalized couples. Lehmiller and Agnew (2006; 2007) investigated feelings of marginalization among nonmarginalized couples and marginalized couples (same-sex couples, different-race couples, and couples with a 10 or more year age gap). They found that the more individuals perceived their relationship as marginalized by others, the less committed they were to their relationship and the less personally invested they were in it (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006). Moreover, perceived marginalization from friends and family predicted lower relationship satisfaction, a decline in commitment over time, and a greater likelihood of a break-up seven months later (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2007). Perceived marginalization by the larger society had less consistent results, and was thus interpreted as having less of a detrimental effect on relationships, though it still predicted lower relationship satisfaction (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2007).

A study using different measures of marginalization and relationship quality yielded similar results in a sample of 124 lesbians (Caron & Ulin, 1997). The authors found that the women’s relationship quality was positively correlated with a number of social support indices, such as their family knowing and approving of the women’s

sexual orientation, the women's level of comfort in expressing partner affection in front of their family, and their family inviting the couple to social gatherings. Openness about one's sexual orientation to one's family, extended family, and friends was also positively correlated with relationship quality, though openness with coworkers was not. It is likely that individuals have less need for support from coworkers and other less significant societal members in comparison to close others, a notion consistent with Lehmiller and Agnew's (2007) conclusions about societal versus friend/family marginalization. Thus, although same-sex couples are likely to experience greater marginalization from both the larger society and from close others, it is possible that the latter may be more involved in lowering relationship satisfaction.

The Current Study

The current study gathered data via an internet survey completed by women in different-sex and same-sex committed relationships. We targeted female participants because women in same-sex relationships are so vastly understudied. Participants who chose to participate in the present study completed measures assessing the amount of physical affection they showed towards their partner in public (settings open to the general community, but in absence of family/friends) and private settings (where nobody but one's partner is present). They also completed measures of relationship quality (satisfaction and commitment) and perceived relationship marginalization by both society and friends/family. It was hypothesized that (1) women in same-sex relationships would report less public, but not private, physical affection than women in different-sex relationships, (2) women in same-sex relationships would report greater relationship marginalization, (3) stronger societal marginalization would predict less public affection and would mediate the effect of relationship type on public affection, (4) higher perceptions of marginalization, at least by close others, would predict lower relationship quality in the overall sample. With regard to the third hypothesis, we did not predict friend/family marginalization to be related to physical affection because we did not measure physical displays of affection in front of friends/family. Note that we did not expect participants in same-sex relationships to differ in relationship quality (i.e., satisfaction or commitment) from those in different sex-relationships, given that past work has not uncovered such a difference (e.g., Kurdek, 1998; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986). Instead, we believe marginalization to be a more important predictor of

relationship quality. We also predicted that (5) physical affection would predict higher relationship satisfaction. Past work linking physical affection and relationship satisfaction has not measured private and public displays separately, so we did not have specific predictions regarding private versus public affection, but examined both on an exploratory basis.

Method

Participants

To acquire participants, links to a “relationships survey” were provided on internet discussion boards associated with multiple websites, such as Yahoo.com and AOL.com. We chose primarily discussion boards that would be especially pertinent to women in same-sex relationships. When participants arrived at the website, they were asked to read a disclosure statement and either agree or disagree to continue participation in the study. All data were collected in accordance with APA ethical guidelines and the relevant Institutional Review Board.

Seventy-six female participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 34$) completed the study, 51 involved in different-sex relationships and 25 involved in same-sex relationships. Respondents’ reports of the length of their relationship averaged 6.49 years ($SD = 6.75$). They expressed a high level of commitment when asked “How committed are you and your partner to one another” on a scale from 1, *Not at All*, to 6, *Completely* ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 0.95$). Approximately 89% of the sample was Caucasian and about 93% reported residing in the U.S.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were presented with the Assessment of Public and Private Physical Affection (APPPA), which was designed specifically for this study. The participants indicated the frequency with which they and their partners engaged in several types of physical affection. Though slightly modified, the categories of affection identified by Gullledge et al. (2003; 2004) were used to develop seven physical affection items, all of which are presented in Appendix A. Participants responded to the items by indicating how frequently they engage in each behavior on a 7-point scale from *never* (coded as 1) to *always* (coded as 7). Participants were asked to respond to the statements based on how much affection they display in public settings ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.54$, Cronbach’s α

= .95) and then in private settings ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.42$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$). *Public* was defined to the participants as "any location that is open to anyone in a general community (e.g., a shopping mall, grocery store, restaurant, etc.) and in which no other support group members are immediately present (e.g., friends or family)." *Private* was defined as "any location in which no one is present, or is expected to be present, other than oneself and one's partner (e.g., one's home)." Refer to Table 1 for descriptive statistics computed separately for participants in same-sex and different-sex relationships.

Second, participants were asked to complete Hendrick's (1988) Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS), a measure of relationship satisfaction. This seven-item measure asked participants to respond to questions such as "how well does your partner meet your needs" and "how good is your relationship compared to most?" Participants completed each item on scale from 1 (reflecting low satisfaction responses) to 5 (reflecting high satisfaction responses), and all items were averaged ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.96$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$).

Third, participants completed Lehmiller and Agnew's (2006; 2007) measure of marginalization, which consisted of four statements designed to measure the perceived social disapproval of one's relationship. Two of the items assess societal marginalization ("My relationship has general societal acceptance" (reversed) and "I believe that most other persons (whom I do not know) would generally disapprove of my relationship") and two assess friend/family marginalization ("My family and friends approve of my relationship" (reversed) and "My family and/or friends are not accepting of this relationship"). The responses were made on a 9-point scale from 0, *Not true of my relationship at all*, to 8, *Very true of my relationship*. The two reversed items were rescored, such that higher scores always meant greater marginalization, and all four were averaged ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.98$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$). Although the two friend/family marginalization items had high internal consistency reliability ($\alpha = .81$), the two societal marginalization items did not ($\alpha = .64$), and thus were treated separately in the analyses when investigating specific types of marginalization. Thus, we had four assessments of marginalization: overall marginalization, friends/family marginalization, general societal marginalization, and marginalization by unknown others (strangers).

The important demographic items (own gender and partner gender) appeared at the very beginning of the study because the data would be rendered useless if this information was not obtained. However, some additional demographic items were

added at the end of the study (e.g., race/ethnicity, age, relationship commitment). At this time, participants were also asked to report how much they approved of other people displaying public affection on a scale from 1, *Not at all*, to 6, *Extremely*. This was assessed because general acceptance of public affection, perhaps due to one's cultural background (Regan et al., 1999), is likely to be a big contributor to whether people exhibit public affection themselves. As such, accounting for its variance could provide a clearer picture of the results at hand. Because participants' general acceptance was, in fact, correlated with their actual displays of public affection, $r(61) = .37, p < .01$, but some participants left the acceptance item blank (along with some or all of the other supplemental items), we performed most analyses involving public affection both with and without controlling for general acceptance. However, aside from one correlation going from nonsignificant to marginally significant, accounting for approval of affection made no notable difference in the tests of the hypotheses, and so was not discussed in the results except in that one case.

Results

Hypothesis 1: Relationship Type and Physical Affection

As predicted, participants in same-sex relationships reported significantly less public affection than participants in different-sex relationships, $t(74) = 2.16, p = .03$ (Refer to Table 1 for all means and standard deviations). The frequency of private displays of affection did not differ significantly between same-sex and different-sex relationship participants, $t(74) = -0.47, p = .64$. Thus, same-sex participants have lower levels of physical affection for one another only when they are in public settings.

Hypothesis 2: Relationship Type and Marginalization

For the second hypothesis, t-tests were performed to compare mean marginalization scores of participants in same-sex versus different-sex relationships. As predicted and replicating Lehmiller and Agnew (2006), participants in same-sex romantic relationships reported higher levels of overall marginalization than did participants in different-sex relationships, $t(74) = 6.03, p < .001$. As seen in table 1, same-sex participants experienced higher marginalization of all types ($ps \leq .001$). In

comparing the three specific types of marginalization, women in same-sex relationships experienced significantly more marginalization by general society than by friends/family, $t(24) = 2.31, p = .03$. No other differences reached significance, nor were there any differences among the women in different-sex relationships.

Hypothesis 3: Marginalization and Physical Affection

We predicted that stronger societal marginalization would be associated with fewer displays of public affection. Because we made this prediction regarding the entire sample, and there were no interactions between relationship type and marginalization on public affection when examined in a general linear model analysis, we present the overall results for the entire sample.

Consistent with predictions, higher societal marginalization was associated with less public affection, $r(71) = -.30, p = .01$. None of the other measures of marginalization were significantly correlated with public affection, but when partialing out participants' general approval of public affection, a marginally significant negative correlation appeared between overall marginalization and public affection (see Table 1 for a complete correlation matrix).

Thus far, the results indicate that relationship type predicts general societal marginalization and that general societal marginalization predicts lower quantities of physical affection. It is possible, then, that the general societal acceptance item specifically taps at the feelings of social disapproval that may be causing same-sex couples to limit their public affection. Using Baron and Kenny's (1986) steps for testing for mediation, we tested whether general societal marginalization mediated the effect of relationship type on public affection. We performed a regression analysis examining the effects of relationship type on public affection, both with and without including the societal marginalization item. Societal marginalization was a significant covariate in the model, $F(1, 70) = 3.79, p = .05$ ($\beta = -.26$). Moreover, the effect of relationship type on public affection dropped from a statistically significant one, $F(1, 74) = 4.66, p = .03$ ($\beta = -.24$), to a nonsignificant one ($\beta = -.06$), $F(1, 70) = 0.19, p = .66$, after adding societal marginalization into the model. Thus, general societal marginalization appeared to serve a role in accounting for the difference between individuals in same-sex and different-sex relationships in shows of public affection.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix

Variable	(Same-Sex)		(Different-Sex)		Variable										
	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
1. Public Affection (Partial <i>r</i>)	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----										
2. Public Affection	3.01	(1.51)	3.80	(1.50)	-----	-----									
3. Private Affection	5.29	(1.27)	5.12	(1.49)	.61**	.69**	-----								
4. Marginalization (Overall)	4.66	(1.94)	2.26	(1.46)	-.23 ^{ms}	-.14	.07	-----							
5. Marginalization (Fnd/Fam)	4.30	(2.67)	2.10	(1.72)	-.13	-.04	.12	.88**	-----						
6. Marginalization (Societal)	5.60	(2.69)	2.52	(2.00)	-.34**	-.30**	.00	.81**	.55**	-----					
7. Marginalization (Strangers)	4.44	(2.40)	2.29	(2.18)	-.15	-.06	.02	.67**	.34**	.48**	-----				
8. Relationship Satisfaction	3.70	(0.99)	3.91	(0.94)	.42**	.53**	.60**	-.22*	-.23*	-.18	-.07	-----			
9. Commitment to Partner	5.22	(1.04)	5.56	(0.88)	.31*	.38**	.42**	-.25*	-.30*	-.20	-.02	.65**	-----		
10. Approval of Affection	4.33	(1.31)	3.64	(1.31)	-----	.37**	.35**	.13	.07	.03	.23 ^{ms}	.52**	.28*	-----	

Note. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, ^{ms} $p = .07$. The partial correlations involving partialing out participants' general approval of people displaying physical affection in public.

Hypothesis 4: Marginalization and Relationship Quality (Satisfaction and Commitment).

The relationships between marginalization and relationship quality did not differ based on relationship type (i.e., there were no significant interactions), so we computed the correlations between marginalization and relationship quality across the entire sample. As seen in Table 1, higher overall marginalization was associated with lower relationship satisfaction and commitment. The same was true for friend/family marginalization, but marginalization by general society or unknown others were unrelated to the relationship quality indices. Despite these patterns, but consistent with past work, participants involved in same-sex relationships did not differ significantly from those involved in different-sex relationships in either relationship satisfaction ($p = .36$) or commitment ($p = .17$).

Hypothesis 5: Physical Affection and Relationship Quality

There were no interactions between relationship type and physical affection on either of the relationship quality measures, so the data were again combined across relationship type. As predicted, more frequent private physical affection was associated with higher relationship satisfaction in the overall sample, $r(74) = .60, p < .001$. Public affection was also significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction, $r(74) = .53, p < .001$. In addition, both private and public affection were positively associated with relationship commitment, $r(60) = .42$ and $.38$, respectively, $ps \leq .002$.

To examine whether private and public affection may contribute independently to relationship satisfaction, correlations between each physical affection type and relationship quality were performed while partialing out the other physical affection type. The partial correlation between private affection and relationship satisfaction was significant, $r(73) = .39, p = .001$ when controlling for public affection, and the partial correlation between public affection and relationship satisfaction was marginally significant $r(73) = .20, p = .09$ when controlling for private affection. The partial correlation between private affection and relationship commitment was marginally significant, $r(59) = .23, p = .08$, while the partial correlation between public affection and relationship commitment was nonsignificant, $r(59) = .15, p = .26$. Thus, it is

possible that private affection may be a more important contributor than public affection when it comes to relationship quality.

Discussion

Physical affection in romantic relationships has been rarely been studied, despite its potential contribution to relationship quality. The present study extended prior work by examining how private and public affection individually relate to relationship quality, whether perceptions of relationship marginalization are associated with less frequent public affection, and whether women in same-sex relationships display less public (but not private) affection than those in different-sex relationships due to stronger feelings of marginalization.

The present research hypothesized that participants in same-sex relationships would feel more marginalization and consequently display less physical affection in public. As Lehmiller and Agnew (2006) found, participants in same-sex relationships reported a higher level of all types of marginalization than those in different-sex relationships. This is not surprising given society's continual disapproval of same-sex relationships and that disapproval's prevalence in media reports.

The prediction that same-sex relationship participants would report less frequent public affection was also supported. In addition, greater societal marginalization was associated with less public affection, and seemed to be responsible for the public affection differences between the relationship types. Interestingly, one of the two societal marginalization items was specifically responsible. Perhaps that item was more revealing of participants' overall view of how their relationship is perceived in public because it asked about "general societal acceptance" as opposed to the disapproval of "most other persons." It is possible that participants had a broader focus when thinking about the former and it is the lack of large-scale acceptance that may limit same-sex couples' displays of affection in public.

It is possible that mediators other than societal marginalization are involved in causing same-sex couples to be less affectionate publicly. One such variable could be the desire to avoid possible negative repercussions by others. Individuals in same-sex relationships may worry that if they display physical affection, they may experience discrimination, such as staring, negative comments or perhaps even hate crimes. Finding extra attention uncomfortable or threatening may result in less public affection, whether

those feelings are one's own or known to exist in one's partner. Thus it would be interesting to assess the real or perceived feelings of marginalization held by one's partner as well. Only one partner may need to feel society's disapproval (or believe it to exist in one's partner) in order for physical affection to remain hidden.

In addition, some feelings of marginalization may be beyond our level of consciousness. If poor past experiences or media influences cause members of same-sex couples to experience marginalization and then bury those feelings as a method of coping, then repressed unconscious feelings of marginalization may still be present and affect their willingness to be affectionate with their partner in public. Future research in this area may benefit from developing an implicit/unconscious measure of marginalization, given that it is an anxiety-provoking feeling that individuals may not want to recognize fully.

Aside from predicting less physical affection, the experience of marginalization is also important in that it may impact relationship quality. Supporting some findings from past research (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006; 2007), the present study found that more marginalization from family and friends predicted lower relationship satisfaction and weaker commitment to one's partner. This contradicts past work on the Romeo and Juliet effect, and instead is consistent with the idea that social approval may be an important component to a relationship. Marginalization from society and strangers were unrelated to relationship satisfaction and commitment. Lehmiller and Agnew (2007) suggest that societal marginalization may have important effects on a relationship, but also be less implicated in relationship quality and duration than marginalization by family and friends. People likely care more about what their close others think of them than about society's opinion of them. However, as evidenced in this study, society's opinion is likely to carry more weight when it comes to how one behaves in public with his/her partner.

Past research has shown that physical affection is related to relationship quality, but has not disentangled public and private affection. Because marginalization is associated with reduced public affection, it is important to know whether public affection may also be a contributor to relationship satisfaction. In the present study, private and public affection were both strongly correlated with relationship satisfaction, as well as relationship commitment. Although private affection seemed to be a more important contributor to relationship quality, there was still a marginally significant connection between public affection and relationship satisfaction when controlling for

private affection. Although we cannot know causation in this or any of the other previous studies examining the link between physical affection in romantic relationships and relationship satisfaction, it is possible that both private and public affection are contributors. If so, then perhaps same-sex couples do not reap all of the relationship benefits from public affection that different-sex couples enjoy.

It is noteworthy, however, that women in same-sex relationships did not have lower relationship satisfaction or commitment than those in different-sex relationships, which is consistent with past work (e.g., Kurdek, 1998; Kurdek & Schmitt 1986). Thus, perhaps individuals in same-sex couples have alternative means of showing affection and support in public than the traditional shows of affection. Haas and Stafford (1998) believe that same-sex couples develop unique relationship maintenance behaviors as a way of compensating for the lack of widespread social acceptance. One might expect same-sex couples to add more private affection to suit that need, though we found no evidence of that in the present study. Same-sex couples may instead focus on other more subtle ways of expressing their love and support for one another in public, such as a loving glance. Supporting the notion of compensation, Haas and Stafford's participants reported some relationship maintenance behaviors that have not been reported in heterosexual samples, such as choosing gay/lesbian friendly supportive environments and viewing their relationship as similar to that of a heterosexual couple, such as their parents. Future research could be specific in asking members of same-sex couples what behaviors they use in public to express their affection for one another non-physically.

Because, like in all similar studies, the findings in the present study are correlational, it is unknown whether physical affection actually increases relationship quality. However, people report using physical affection as a means of maintaining their relationship (Bell et al., 1987; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Gullledge et al., 2003; Haas & Stafford, 1998); physical affection may enhance pair bonding by increasing levels of oxytocin (Gullledge et al., 2007); and it certainly makes sense that physical affection could bring couples closer together. It is also likely that physical affection increases in romantic relationships as a result of experiencing relationship satisfaction and partner commitment. In addition, a third variable, such as feelings of love, may lead to both more physical affection and higher relationship quality, causing them to be related. Although these explanations are not mutually exclusive, and all are likely to have some merit, it would be beneficial to examine whether physical affection

specifically impacts relationship quality given that the former would be easier to regulate. Future work could consider randomly assigning some couples to exhibit more than their typical level of physical affection in public and other couples to exhibit more than their typical level of physical affection in private and compare their relationship quality to that of a control group at some later point in time. The connection between marginalization and public affection was also correlational, though would be hard to test ethically using an experimental design. Future research could, however, take a qualitative approach and ask individuals in same-sex relationships what factors may limit their public shows of affection.

Future research in this area should also investigate whether males in same-sex relationships show the same increase in marginalization and decrease in public affection that we observed among females in the present study. Aside from the fact that society seems generally less accepting of male-male romantic relationships, we have no reasons to suspect any gender differences from past research. In fact, males in same-sex relationships report similar levels of marginalization (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006) and social support (Kurdek, 2003) as do women. Moreover, Gullledge et al. (2003) found that males (of unknown sexual orientation) reported similar levels of physical affection as did women. In studies investigating relationship satisfaction/quality among same-sex couples, one found women to score higher (Kurdek, 2003) and one yielded identical means for men and women (Todosijevic, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2005). We sought to gather data regarding the vastly understudied female-female relationships, but future research is needed to make any conclusions about public affection the role of marginalization in male-male romantic relationships.

Professionals in the mental health field are continually looking for new information to help guide their work in assisting couples with relationship issues. Over the past two decades, relationship education programs have been limited in their inclusion of a physical intimacy component, as well as their inclusion of same-sex couples (Lieser, Tambling, Bischof, & Murray, 2007). The present research suggests that programs be developed to help same-sex couples address issues pertaining to marginalization and public physical affection. If increasing the amount of private or public physical affection increases relationship quality, then physical affection could be used as a therapeutic intervention. If relationship quality, in turn, increases physical affection, then a cycle of relationship-enhancing change could result, possibly reducing

the more frequent relationship dissolutions observed in same-sex couples (Kurdek, 1998).

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Appendix A

1. My partner and I hug or embrace each other:
 Never Almost Never Occasionally Sometimes Often Almost Always Always
2. My partner and I hold hands with each other:
 Never Almost Never Occasionally Sometimes Often Almost Always Always
3. My partner and I kiss each other on the lips:
 Never Almost Never Occasionally Sometimes Often Almost Always Always
4. My partner and I kiss each other's faces (e.g., cheek or forehead):
 Never Almost Never Occasionally Sometimes Often Almost Always Always
5. My partner and I sit very close to each other:
 Never Almost Never Occasionally Sometimes Often Almost Always Always
6. My partner and I sit on each other's laps:
 Never Almost Never Occasionally Sometimes Often Almost Always Always
7. My partner and I cuddle/hold each other:
 Never Almost Never Occasionally Sometimes Often Almost Always Always

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