

Structural and Moral Commitment Among Same-Sex Couples: Relationship Duration, Religiosity, and Parental Status

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This study examined ecological predictors of structural and moral commitment among cohabiting same-sex couples. Structural commitment was operationalized as the execution of legal documents, and moral commitment was operationalized as having a commitment ceremony. The authors tested 2 logistic regression models using a subsample of Rainbow Illinois survey respondents. First, the execution of legal documents was examined using the entire subsample ($n = 190$). Because antigay victimization may sensitize individuals to the importance of legal protection, actual and feared victimization were hypothesized to predict legalization. These hypotheses were not supported. However, relationship duration, a control variable, did predict legalization. The authors then used data only from those individuals who had executed a legal document ($n = 150$) to determine those who also reported a commitment ceremony (Model 2). Parental status, religiosity, involvement with a supportive congregation, and an interaction between gender and parental status were hypothesized to predict ritualization. Only religiosity and parental status emerged as significant. Results from this study demonstrate the importance of distinguishing between legalization and ritualization. Further, they extend knowledge about how same-sex couple commitment is shaped by noncouple factors, such as time, individual religiosity, and parental status.

Keywords: lesbian/gay, legal, ritual, same-sex couples, relationship commitment

All intimate unions, including those with same-sex partners, are pursued within macroenvironmental contexts that organize microlevel experiences over time (Huston, 2000). The macroenvironment of the United States includes a legal opportunity structure that has increasingly allowed the establishment of legal ties, ranging from owning joint property to entering into state civil marriage, between same-sex partners (Oswald & Kovalanka, in press). Further, as a culture that places tremendous importance on weddings (Ingraham, 1999; Otnes & Pleck, 2003), the United States possesses increasing secular and religious resources that can be drawn upon to create same-sex relationship rituals (e.g., Butler, 1997).

Although the macroenvironment shapes what is possible,

it is within specific ecological niches that individuals and couples make decisions about what available opportunities to pursue (Huston, 2000). The term *ecological niche* refers to specific settings (e.g., urban vs. rural communities), social network membership (e.g., having children vs. not), and resource availability (e.g., income) that shape daily life. For example, nonmetropolitan lesbian and gay communities are more likely to be organized by private networks than gay neighborhoods or organizations (Oswald & Culton, 2003) and may thus require a different set of social skills to navigate. Parents may be organized around children's needs, whereas nonparents may be oriented toward adults (Fiese, 1993), and lives of affluent individuals are organized differently than are the lives of those who live in poverty (Lareau, 2003). Thus, same-sex relationships are affected not only by societal opportunity structures but by specific locations, relationship networks, and resource availability. Our purpose in this study is to examine how same-sex relationship commitment is affected by ecological niche factors.

Intimate relationship commitment includes remaining with one's partner over time and believing that the relationship promotes the well-being of both parties (Rusbult, 1983). Commitment is in turn related to pro-relationship maintenance behaviors and the longevity of the relationship (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989). Examining a longitudinal sample of married spouses, Johnson, Caughlin, and Huston

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(1999) identified three dimensions of commitment: personal, structural, and moral. Personal commitment refers to an individual's desire to be in the relationship and was related to relationship quality and life satisfaction for both wives and husbands. Structural commitment pertains to the social, economic, and other external barriers that inhibit leaving a relationship or promote its stability. Moral commitment refers to the sense that one "should" be in a given relationship and was highly correlated with religiosity for both husbands and wives. This article is concerned with structural and moral commitment.

Executing legal documents is one way that same-sex partners establish structural commitment (i.e., link their relationship to an external system that provides protections and recognition and that makes dissolution more difficult). For example, at least one legal document (e.g., power of attorney) had been executed by 43% of lesbians and gay men surveyed by Bryant and Demian (1994); wills had been established by 51% of the gay men in Berger (1990). Further, more than 6,000 same-sex couples have been married in Massachusetts (Grossman, 2005), and more than 7,000 civil unions have been obtained in Vermont (Vermont Department of Health, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004; aggregated by authors). A growing number of couples are registered as domestic partners (Human Rights Campaign, 2006).

Despite knowledge that same-sex couples establish legal protections for their relationships, researchers have only begun to distinguish those same-sex couples who seek this form of structural commitment from those who do not. Structural commitment may be a function of relationship duration, as Bryant and Demian (1994) found that legal document execution was more likely after 1 year. Structural commitment may also be facilitated by personal commitment, disclosure, and income. For example, legal document execution in Riggle, Rostosky, Prather, and Hamrin (2005) was most likely among lesbians and gay men who were in (personally) committed same-sex relationships, who earned a higher income, and/or who were more out to their families of origin. The disclosure to family of origin finding (Riggle et al., 2005) was replicated with a different sample (Riggle, Rostosky, & Prather, 2006). It was bolstered by Solomon, Rothblum, and Balsam's (2004) finding that, for lesbians, civil union status was associated with increased disclosure to both family and nonfamily members.

One context variable that has yet to be examined relative to structural commitment is victimization. Victimization is perpetrated by people within one's ecological niche (e.g., strangers, neighbors, and coworkers) and can range from fearing antigay acts or overhearing hate speech to being beaten or killed (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999). Some lesbian and gay individuals pursue legal remedies for violence inflicted against them (e.g., Kuehnle & Sullivan, 2003). This fact suggests that victimization may sensitize individuals to the importance of legal recognition and protection.

Commitment ceremonies are one way for same-sex partners to establish moral commitment (i.e., to link their relationship to religious or cultural traditions that provide a

moral imperative for remaining a couple). Commitment ceremonies draw their moral validity from the power of friends and family who witness and affirm the spiritual or cultural traditions to which the same-sex partners link themselves symbolically. A link between religiosity and moral commitment was found by Johnson et al. (1999).

Religiosity is one element of ecological niche, because religious beliefs and involvement connect individuals to larger groups and traditions. The commitment ceremony literature notes the importance of religion for some same-sex couples (e.g., Lewin, 1998; McQueeney, 2003; Suter, Bergen, Daas, & Durham, 2006). Thus, religiosity is likely to motivate some lesbians and gay men to demonstrate moral commitment by ritualizing their relationships.

Parental status is a second ecological niche characteristic that may encourage moral commitment. Rituals have been found to promote positive development in children (Markson & Fiese, 2000) and thus may be more important for parents than for nonparents. Further, the relationship between parental status and ritualization may be moderated by gender. Indeed, 35% of lesbians who obtained civil unions were mothers, whereas only 18% of gay men who obtained civil unions were fathers (Solomon et al., 2004).

This study examined how ecological niche influences structural and moral commitment. Specifically, it was hypothesized that experiencing more types of antigay victimization and reporting more fear of victimization would significantly predict whether a participant had established a legal tie with his or her same-sex partner (structural commitment). Second, it was hypothesized that among those participants who did establish a legal tie with their partner, those who placed more importance on their religious beliefs, those involved in supportive congregations, and those who were parents would be significantly more likely to report having a commitment ceremony (moral commitment). This study also examined the interaction effects of gender and parental status on moral commitment, as we expected that mothers, more than fathers, would report a commitment ceremony. Given the findings of prior studies, this analysis controlled certain variables (e.g., relationship duration). Hypothesized predictor variables were expected to explain variance in the dichotomous outcome variables above and beyond that explained by the control variables.

Method

Participants

The Rainbow Illinois survey sampled 527 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals across 38 Illinois counties. The study was approved by the institutional review board of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign prior to data collection. For the present analysis, a subsample of 190 Rainbow Illinois participants was selected. All of the participants cohabited with a same-sex partner, some of them had established a legal tie, and some of them reported both establishing a legal tie and having a commitment ceremony.

Subsample selection began with 310 participants who had

indicated that they were in one same-sex relationship at the time of data collection. This group incorporated all possible combinations of cohabitation, legal, and ritual status. To establish a more conceptually focused sample, however, we selected only cohabiters for the present study ($n = 217$). Within this sample of cohabiters, a subgroup of legalizers was identified. Within legalizers, a subgroup of ritualizers was identified. Ten cohabiters who ritualized but did not legalize were dropped from the sample. The initial Rainbow Illinois questionnaires had been sent to individuals, not couples, so it was possible that both partners in a couple might have been participants. To correct this, we sought cases that matched on key variables (e.g., ZIP code, gender, length of relationship, as well as cohabitation, legal, and ritual status) and found 27 matching cases. The likelihood of their relationship to each other was confirmed by examination of the original surveys. One person from each of these couples was then randomly deleted from the subsample. Within the remaining group of 190 cohabiters, 40 cohabited only; 102 cohabited and had taken steps to legalize their couple relationship; and 48 cohabited, legalized, and ritualized their relationship.

To restate, all 190 participants in the subsample were cohabiting with their same-sex partner at the time of data collection. The average participant believed in god (88.7%) and was 42.1 years old ($SD = 9.8$), White (95%), and female (62%). The participants had completed some graduate school (55.4%). Their average individual annual income ranged from \$30,001 to \$40,000 ($SD = \$20,000$). About one third (27%) were parents, and most of their children were from prior relationships (5 lesbians and no gay men had children from their current relationship). They rated their personal relationship commitment on a scale of 1 to 7 ($M = 6.7$, $SD = 0.7$). Using reported ZIP codes, we determined that 64% of the subsample lived in nonmetropolitan cities with populations between 81,860 and 119,571 and that 36% lived in small town or country settings (populations between 224 and 33,904). No statistically significant demographic differences were found between lesbians and gay men. Compared with Census 2000 counts of same-sex partner households in Illinois (Romero, Baumle, Badgett, & Gates, 2007), this sample is similar on age, income, and parental status. The fact that this sample is more White, more female, and more highly educated than are same-sex partner households in the state overall may reflect real differences in the lesbian and gay populations of downstate Illinois and Chicago.

Procedures

The Rainbow Illinois project provided 2,000 stamped survey packets to downstate Illinois LGBT organizations and social networks for distribution among their members in the spring of 2000. As an incentive, participants who completed questionnaires could indicate to which LGBT organization they would like \$1 donated. Five hundred and twenty-seven completed surveys were returned, and \$527 was donated accordingly. Descriptive findings in the form of a community report (Oswald, Gebbie, & Culton, 2001)

were mailed to every individual and group that assisted with data collection, as well as to local and state legislators.

Measures

The Rainbow Illinois Survey was designed to document a broad range of information about LGBT individuals living in the downstate Illinois region. In addition to demographic questions, participants were asked closed-ended questions about their partner, family of origin, and friend relationships; victimization experiences; religious beliefs; workplace, community, and congregation climate; and Internet use. Participants also responded to four open-ended questions: What is the best thing about your life as a LGBT person in downstate Illinois? What is the worst thing? What would improve your life? What else would you like us to know?

Dependent variables. All participants who reported having a same-sex partner were asked on the survey whether they had established a legal tie with that partner (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*), for example, through wills or the purchase of joint property, and whether they had had a commitment ceremony (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*). One hundred and fifty participants (79%) had legalized their relationship; from here on, they are referred to as legalizers. Forty-eight legalizers reported having a commitment ceremony in addition to establishing a legal tie with their partner (27% of legalizers); this group is referred to as ritualizers.

Predictor variables. Victimization is the extent to which a lesbian/gay person has been negatively sanctioned by others for being lesbian/gay (Herek, 1992). Participants were presented with a list of 13 different acts, ranging in seriousness from overhearing anti-lesbian/gay comments to experiencing severe physical violence. For each act, participants were asked if they were ever afraid it would happen to them, as well as whether it ever did happen. This measure was developed from academic (D'Augelli, 1992) and community-based (Gay and Lesbian Community Action Council, 1987) victimization research instruments. Fear of victimization was a sum of all types of acts that participants feared would happen to them. Fear scores ranged from 0 to 13 ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 3.5$). Victimization experience was a sum of all types of acts that participants had actually experienced. Scores ranged from 0 to 13 ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 2.3$).

Religiosity includes belief in god or a higher power, belief in the importance of religion for daily living, and involvement in religious events or organizations (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). Importance and involvement were the two elements of religiosity measured in this study. Using a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all important*, 5 = *extremely important*), we assessed the importance of religion for daily life ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 1.1$). With regard to the involvement variable, congregation climate was measured as 1 = *hostile*, 2 = *tolerant*, 3 = *supportive*. For the present analysis, congregation climate was collapsed into a dummy variable, with 1 = *supportive* and 0 = *other*. This was done for two reasons: First, we were theoretically interested in supportive congregations rather than a range of climates. Second, because the climate question was answered only by those who

belonged to a congregation, the decision to collapse this measure allowed us to preserve the 111 noncongregant cases that otherwise would have been dropped from the sample. Fifty-three participants (28%) reported belonging to a supportive congregation. Thus, the “other” reference group for this dummy variable includes both noncongregants ($n = 111$) and those who belonged to tolerant ($n = 22$) or hostile ($n = 4$) religious organizations.

Parental status was measured as a dummy variable, with 1 = *parent* and 0 = *nonparent*. Fifty-one participants (27%) were parents.

Control variables. Participants provided their year of birth; age was calculated by subtracting birth year from the year of data collection. Age ranged from 20 to 73 years ($M = 42.1$ years, $SD = 9.8$) and was included as a control, given previous findings that older individuals are more likely to legalize a same-sex partnership (Riggle et al., 2006).

Individual annual income was measured ordinally, according to \$10,000 categories (e.g., 1 = *under \$10,000*, 2 = *\$10,000–\$20,000*, to 11 = *more than \$100,000*). Reported income included all categories, with a median and mean category of \$30,001–\$40,000 ($SD = \$20,000$). Income was included as a control, in that individuals with more financial resources might be more likely to afford and pursue legalization (Riggle et al., 2005).

Relationship duration was measured by asking participants how many years and months they had been with their partner. Scores ranged from 1 to 44 years ($M = 9.4$ years, $SD = 7.7$). Relationship duration was included as a control, because previous research has found that individuals in longer term relationships are more likely to establish legal protections (Bryant & Demian, 1994).

Gender was measured as 1 = *female*, 0 = *male*. One hundred and eighteen participants (62%) were female. Gender was included as a control, because research on civil unions (Solomon et al., 2004) has reported differences between lesbians and gay men.

Disclosure refers to the extent that a lesbian or gay person has informed others of her or his sexual orientation. Three indicators were used for this construct: general visibility (range from 1 = *invisible* to 5 = *visible*); degree of disclosure to immediate family of origin (IFO; includes parents

and siblings); and degree of disclosure to extended family of origin (EFO; includes grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins; anchors 1 = *no one*, 2 = *more don't know than know*, 3 = *some know/some don't*, 4 = *more know than don't*, 5 = *everyone knows*). General visibility scores ranged from 1 to 5 ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 1.1$). Family of origin disclosure scores ranged from 1 to 5 (IFO, $M = 4.4$, $SD = 1.1$; EFO, $M = 3.5$, $SD = 1.3$). Disclosure was included as a control, given that individuals who are more “out” may be more likely to legalize (Solomon et al., 2004).

Data Analysis

We examined zero-order correlations between the first dependent variable (legalizer status) and the hypothesized predictor and control variables, using the entire subsample of 190 participants (see Table 1). Hypotheses were directional; thus, one-tailed tests were used. Then, using only the subsample of 150 participants who reported establishing a legal tie with their partner, we examined zero-order correlations between the second dependent variable (ritualizer status) and the hypothesized predictor and control variables (see Table 2). Because the dependent variables are dichotomous, Spearman's rho was used for all associations with interval and ordinal data and Cramér's V was used for associations between two dummy variables. Results for Cramér's V were identical to those for Spearman's rho; thus, for simplicity of presentation, Spearman's rho is reported in the tables.

After examining the correlation matrices, we conducted two logistic regressions, one for each dependent variable (see Tables 3 and Table 4). Though not all hypothesized control and predictor variables were significantly associated with the specified dependent variable, they were retained in the logistic models to account for their effects on each other. Control variables were entered as block 1 and the predictors of interest as blocks 2 and 3. The normality of the distributions was not a concern, because logistic regression is a nonparametric test.

To clarify the extent to which ritualizer findings might be confounded by differences between legalizer and cohabiter status, we examined associations between legalizer status and religious beliefs, congregation support, and parenthood.

Table 1
Correlates of Legalizer Status ($n = 190$)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Legalizer	—									
2. Fear of victimization	-.15*	—								
3. Actual victimization	-.01	.21**	—							
4. General visibility	.11	-.17*	.20*	-.02	—					
5. IFO disclosure	.03	-.09	.15*	.04	.34**	—				
6. EFO disclosure	.08	-.16*	.11	.02	.40**	.54**	—			
7. Age	.28**	-.26**	-.22**	.14*	.05	-.18*	-.02	—		
8. Income	.11	-.15*	.05	.10	.08	-.04	.01	.23**	—	
9. Relationship duration	.43**	-.18**	-.17**	.02	.11	-.01	.05	.57**	.21*	—
10. Female	-.06	.03	-.08	.01	-.15*	-.05	-.15*	-.01	-.09	-.08

Note. All tests are one-tailed. IFO = immediate family of origin; EFO = extended family of origin.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2
Correlates of Ritualizer Status Among Legalizers (n = 150)

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Ritualizer	—					
2. Importance of religious beliefs	.22**	—				
3. Congregation support	.11	.15*	—			
4. Parental status	.29**	.05	.15*	—		
5. Relationship duration	-.02	.10	.02	-.02	—	
6. Female	.19*	.04	.12	.15*	-.09	—

Note. All tests are one-tailed.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

No significant nonparametric associations were observed between legalizer status and strength of religious beliefs or parenthood. Congregation support was, however, significantly associated with legalizer status ($\rho = .15, p = .02$). This finding is integrated into the interpretation of results.

Results

Legalizer status was significantly associated with fear of victimization, age, and relationship duration (see Table 1). That is, compared with participants who did not report executing legal documents, those who did legalize tended to be less afraid of victimization, older, and in relationships of longer duration.

To test whether the correlates significantly predict legalizer status, we ran two ordered logistic regression models (see Table 2). The first included demographic and control variables; the second added the hypothesized variables of interest. Model 1 was statistically significant ($p < .01$) and explained 27% of the variance in legalizer status. However, only relationship duration, among the control variables, emerged as a robust predictor of legalizer status ($p < .01$). When fear of victimization and victimization experience were added (Model 2), relationship duration remained significant but neither of the additional variables was significant. Thus, Model 1 provided the best fit for these data. The

effects found were partial effects, given the inclusion of other predictors in each model.

The correlates of ritualizer status are shown in Table 3. This analysis was limited to the subsample of participants who legalized their relationships. Participants who legalized and ritualized their relationship were more likely than were those who legalized but did not ritualize to report that their religious beliefs were important to their daily lives, to have children, and to be female.

To test whether the correlates significantly predicted ritualizer status within the group of legalizers, we ran two ordered logistic regression models (see Table 4). The first model included control variables; the second added the hypothesized variables of interest. Model 1 was not statistically significant, and none of the control variables significantly predicted ritualization. Model 2 was statistically significant ($p < .01$) and explained 21% of the variance in ritualizer status. Further, it resulted in statistically significant improvement in model fit. In Model 2, both the importance of religious beliefs ($p < .05$) and parental status ($p < .01$) were significant; belonging to a supportive congregation was not. When we controlled for all variables in the model, parents were 3.8 times more likely to have had a commitment ceremony than were nonparents. Also, every unit increase in the importance of religious beliefs increased

Table 3
Logistic Regression to Predict Legalization

Variable	Model 1					Model 2				
	B	SE B	Wald	df	Exp(B)	B	SE B	Wald	df	Exp(B)
Constant	-3.17	1.65	3.71*	1	0.04	-2.64	1.76	2.25	1	0.07
General visibility	0.13	0.22	0.39	1	1.14	0.09	0.23	0.15	1	1.09
IFO disclosure	0.20	0.25	0.63	1	1.22	0.18	0.25	0.52	1	1.20
EFO disclosure	0.08	0.19	0.16	1	1.08	0.07	0.18	0.14	1	1.07
Age	0.04	0.03	1.83	1	1.04	0.04	0.03	1.64	1	1.04
Income	0.03	0.12	0.05	1	1.03	-0.02	0.11	0.02	1	1.02
Relationship duration	0.19	0.06	9.25**	1	1.21	0.19	0.06	9.10**	1	1.21
Female	-0.44	0.44	1.00	1	0.65	-0.47	0.44	1.13	1	0.63
Fear of victimization						-0.06	0.06	1.11	1	0.94
Victimization experience						-0.02	0.09	0.07	1	1.02
			$\chi^2(7, N = 167) = 32.54^{**}$					$\chi^2(10, N = 167) = 33.69^{**}$		
			Pseudo $R^2 = .27$					Pseudo $R^2 = .27$		
			-2 log likelihood = 151.34					-2 log likelihood = 150.19		
								$\Delta\chi^2(1) = 0.02$		

Note. IFO = immediate family of origin; EFO = extended family of origin.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

Table 4
Logistic Regression to Predict Ritualizer Status

Variable	Model 1				Model 2			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	Wald	Exp(<i>B</i>)	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	Wald	Exp(<i>B</i>)
Constant	-1.13	0.49	5.35*	0.32	-3.54	1.07	11.00**	0.03
Relationship duration	-0.03	0.03	0.74	0.98	-0.03	0.03	0.63	0.97
Female	0.61	0.45	1.84	1.84	0.53	0.48	1.18	1.69
Importance of religious beliefs					0.48	0.23	4.48*	1.62
Congregation support					0.07	0.15	0.22	1.08
Parental status					1.35	0.46	8.76**	3.84
			$\chi^2(2, N = 121) = 3.08$				$\chi^2(5, N = 121) = 18.60^{***}$	
			Pseudo $R^2 = .04$				Pseudo $R^2 = .21$	
			-2 log likelihood = 138.72				-2 log likelihood = 123.20	
							$\Delta\chi^2(1) = 11.11^{***}$	

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

the odds of having a commitment ceremony 1.6 times. Again, the effects found were partial effects, given the inclusion of other predictors in each model.

To determine whether gender moderated the effect of parental status on ritualization, we added an interaction term (Gender \times Parental Status) as Model 3 (not shown in Table 4). This interaction was nonsignificant ($B = -0.16$, $SE B = 0.98$, Wald = 0.03). Further, Model 3, $\chi^2(6, N = 121) = 18.63$, pseudo $R^2 = .21$, did not improve upon Model 2, $\Delta R^2(1) = 0.00$. Thus, Model 2 provided the best fit for these data.

Discussion

In summary, among lesbians and gay men who reported cohabiting with their same-sex partners, those who indicated longer term relationship duration were more likely to have established structural commitment by executing a legal tie with their partner. Among those participants who reported legalizing their relationship, parents were more likely than were nonparents to have established moral commitment by having a commitment ceremony. Further, self-reported ritualizers were more religious than were non-ritualizers. These results demonstrate the value of distinguishing between the legal and ritual aspects of commitment and extend knowledge about how ecological niche affects the use of available legal and ceremonial resources for establishing relationship commitment.

Contrary to expectations, legalizer status was not significantly predicted by fear of victimization or by the reported number of anti-lesbian/gay acts experienced. Measurement limitations may explain this finding. For example, the frequency or severity of acts, type of perpetrator, or beliefs about one's own victimization may have been better indicators and should be considered in future research. Further, the fact that the slopes for these variables were negative suggests that the relationship between victimization and the establishment of legal actions is the inverse of what was hypothesized. Instead of victimization having sensitized participants to the value of legal ties, the establishment of legal ties may have reduced both fear and actual incidence.

The relationship between fear of victimization and legalization clearly warrants further research.

Regarding the control variables, relationship duration and participant age were significantly correlated to each other and to legalizer status. However, only reported length of relationship was associated with reports of having created legal protections in the regression models. Every year of being in a relationship increased the odds of legal tie establishment by 1.2 times. Thus, length of the relationship may have been more important than was age of the individual in the relationship. Indeed, previous research that found older individuals were more likely to legalize (Riggle et al., 2006) may actually have been tapping the effects of relationship duration.

The finding that individuals in longer relationships were more likely to establish legal ties supports previous research (e.g., Bryant & Demian, 1994) and is open to several possible interpretations. First, it may be that establishing legal ties is simply a function of opportunity over time. Alternatively, filing legal documents may inhibit dissolution. Indeed, Herek (2006) suggested that the execution of legal documents may stabilize couple relationships. Perhaps same-sex couples use legal documents as a mechanism for creating institutional barriers not otherwise available to them and thereby establish some measure of structural commitment. In addition to this within-couple interpretation, increased social support over time perhaps provides external validation for the relationship that facilitates the taking of legal steps. Longitudinal research examining couples' reasons for legalizing may elucidate whether legal ties inhibit or increase relationship satisfaction.

With the exception of relationship duration and age, the predictor variables were not significantly associated with legalizer status in either the correlation analyses or the regression models. Legalizers were not more out, higher in income, or more likely to be female, compared with non-legalizers. This lack of support for the findings of previous research (e.g., Riggle et al., 2005, 2006) suggests contextual differences. For example, Riggle et al. (2005) collected national data after civil unions and state level marriage became possible in some jurisdictions. Rainbow Illinois

data were collected at the advent of Vermont's civil union legislation. No participants indicated in open-ended comments that they had obtained a civil union; even if they had, the civil union would not have given them any rights within the state of Illinois. Even though both studies similarly operationalized legal actions, the macroenvironmental context was different for participants in each sample.

The finding that strength of religious beliefs was related to ritualization is consistent with prior findings relating religiosity to moral commitment in heterosexual couples (e.g., Johnson et al., 1999) and needs to be situated within the ecological niche of downstate Illinois. Social life in this region is often organized around church, and Christians of all sexual orientations are forthright about their beliefs (e.g., Oswald & Culton, 2003). Debates regarding the acceptance of homosexuality within mainstream denominations have included whether or not same-sex relationships will be affirmed through Holy Unions or other rituals (Comstock, 1996). In addition to mainstream religious involvement, downstate Illinois has a long history of lesbian separatism and "women's communities" (Krieger, 1983) through which members may pursue alternative and private spiritualities that value ritual (e.g., Barrett, 2003).

Whether religious or spiritual, participants who rate their beliefs as more important for daily life are likely to value the ritualized affirmation of same-sex couples. Furthermore, because legalizers in the present sample were more likely to belong to a supportive congregation than were nonlegalizing cohabiters, it may be that faith communities encourage the structural validation of same-sex couples, even if partners do not desire ritual. With few exceptions (e.g., Yip, 1996), the current literature on same-sex relationships has failed to address religiosity or congregational involvement; researchers are urged to include issues of religion in their inquiries. If religion is found to be relatively unimportant to same-sex couples (cf. Kurdek, 2006), such findings should be situated within ecological niches that, unlike downstate Illinois, are not organized by faith communities.

Both mothers and fathers were 3.5 times more likely to ritualize their relationship through a commitment ceremony than were nonparents. Thus, gender did not moderate parental status. The hypothesis in this study had been based upon civil union research (e.g., Solomon et al., 2004). It may be that civil unions and commitment ceremonies are not equivalent phenomena. Further, Rainbow Illinois participants may be different from those individuals who obtained civil unions.

The importance of ritualization for lesbian and gay parents may reflect their similarity to all parents. Mothers and fathers of any sexual orientation may be expected to participate in a wide range of family-oriented rituals and ceremonies, including baby showers, birthday parties, and large holiday gatherings. Perhaps a logical next step is the commitment ceremony. In addition to the expected involvement in ritual, parents who take part in such a ceremony may be attending to their children's developmental needs. In the present study, commitment ceremonies were held when the mean ages of the mother's youngest child and the father's youngest child were 12 and 14 years, respectively. Parents

of early-adolescents may take part to provide their children with an example of moral commitment that will inform the children's own present and future relationship explorations.

Ritualization may also have unique importance for lesbian and gay parents in stepfamilies. Most parents in the present sample had children from a previous relationship. It is not known if participants were previously heterosexually married. If they were, they may have retained their value of wedding rituals after coming out as lesbian or gay or may have felt that couples with children "should" be ritually united. Alternatively, parents may be using the ritual to build cohesion within stepfamilies (cf. Whiteside, 1989). The role of lesbian and gay stepparents is often vague (Lynch, 2004), and same-sex couples may use commitment ceremonies to facilitate recognition of the family in general and the stepparent, specifically, within their ecological niche.

Given the political and religious pundits who routinely cite children's best interests and scripture as reasons for denying marriage rights to same-sex couples (e.g., Sprigg, n.d.), it is perhaps ironic that, in this study of cohabiters, religiously invested lesbians and gay men, and those with children, were the most likely to cohabit *and* to legalize and ritualize their couple relationships. This group perhaps represents those lesbians and gay men who most desire marriage and who may value marriage for conventional, if not conservative, reasons of procreation and religion. As seekers of moral and structural commitment, they may also represent the couples most likely to stay together.

There are several strengths of the current study. First, the study disentangled ritualization from legal actions by distinguishing those who established a legal tie from those who both legalized and ritualized their relationships. Despite the media attention to marriage for same-sex couples, the reality remains that few U.S. citizens actually have access to these rights. By distinguishing between these constructs and mapping them to an existing typology of commitment (Johnson et al., 1999), researchers will be better able to identify the specific motivating factors, strategies, and desired outcomes for same-sex partners who pursue any (or none) of these options. Also, commitment types were linked to a macroenvironmental framework (Huston, 2000), which enabled the documentation of a connection between relationship dynamics and factors external to the relationship. Given the increasing complexity of heterosexual couple and family relationships (Cherlin, 2000), this study may have provided a conceptual tool for the study of heterosexual unions outside of marriage. Finally, several important but rarely studied variables (religiosity, victimization) were examined as correlates and predictors of establishment of legal ties and ritualization.

There are, however, several limitations of the current study. First, the fact that this study was a secondary data analysis necessarily constrained the questions that could be asked. For example, the legal status dummy variable that was available prevented the examination of specific variations in types of legal protections. Second, the individual, rather than the couple, was treated as the unit of analysis. Different or more complex findings might have emerged if

both members of the couple had been surveyed. Third, use of cross-sectional data rather than longitudinal data imposes limitations, as the causation of relationships cannot be determined. Finally, the focus on one geographic region limits one's ability to generalize these data to same-sex couples in other geographic locales, such as urban settings.

The findings of the present study have a number of practical and therapeutic implications. By distinguishing between the structural/legal and moral/ritual aspects of commitment, clinicians may be able to help clients assess their options beyond the "married versus not married" dichotomy. Further, clinicians can assist clients in same-sex relationships who want to evaluate their own motivations and reasons (e.g., religious; protection oriented) for pursuing relationship commitment. Additionally, practitioners are encouraged to acknowledge and critically evaluate the potential role of religion and spirituality in the lives of lesbian and gay persons. As the current study demonstrates, many lesbian and gay persons are religiously committed, and their beliefs may affect how they conduct their relationships. Finally, findings from the present study suggest that lesbian and gay stepparents and stepfamilies may find it useful or meaningful to ritualize their relationships. Practitioners should consider this in their work with stepfamilies.

Regarding future directions, more in-depth analysis of legal and ritual activities regarding coparental and parent-child relationships is warranted. This study also points to the importance of linking religiosity and victimization to lesbian and gay families. Finally, regional comparisons are needed. Given the rapidly changing legal context for same-sex couples (Oswald & Kuvalanka, in press), these comparisons should account not only for cultural differences but for variations in the available legal options within a given jurisdiction.

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