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Commitment Timing in Same-Sex and Different-Sex Relationships

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Abstract

Using the representative and longitudinal dataset *How Couples Meet and Stay Together* (HCMST), we analyze the relative timing of relationship formation and cohabitation entry among same-sex and different-sex couples. In doing so, we consider the extent to which gender and sexuality affect private negotiations regarding the progression of intimate relationships. We find that rates of romantic relationship initiation are highest for male same-sex couples relative to female same-sex couples and different-sex couples. Contrary to popular conceptions of lesbians as eager to commit, our results indicate that after controlling for couple age there are no significant differences in relative rates of cohabitation among couple types.

Keywords

Same-sex relationships, cohabitation, commitment, relationship transitions

Introduction

Romantic relationship formation and commitment timing have been studied extensively among different-sex couples in the United States (Sassler 2004; Sassler and Miller 2010; Manning, Brown, and Payne 2014). Social scientists often understand relationship progression through the lens of gendered sexual scripts, which consist of socially shared beliefs and expectations of appropriate sexual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors deemed socially desirable for each gender (Gagnon and Simon 1973). Our current understanding of sexual scripts and commitment timing is limited in that it is narrowly focused on the interaction between one male and one female partner. To date, there has been almost no empirical research on the timing of commitment in same-sex relationships.

Intimate unions are the foundation of family life, and the timing of union formation and development has profound impacts on the structure and stability of American families more broadly. This paper includes an examination of two significant relationship milestones: relationship formation and cohabitation. Using nationally representative, longitudinal data from the 2009-2015 *How Couples Meet and Stay Together* (HCMST) surveys (Rosenfeld, Thomas, and Falcon 2015), we expand scientific knowledge on commitment in romantic relationships by evaluating the relative timing of these transitions among same-sex and different-sex couples in the United States.

When two individuals meet, form a relationship, move in together, and marry, we imagine these choices reflect a combination of each partner's preferences. Our analysis of this negotiation process relies on the interactionist framework of "doing gender," which reflects how interpersonal interactions reinforce and shape the structure of gender more broadly (West and Zimmerman 1987). Relationship expectations and appropriate sexual scripts for men and women may vary depending on whether they are in same-sex or different-sex relationships. In this paper, we consider the ways in which men and women in different interactional contexts may experience unique relationship outcomes by analyzing differences in when and how same-sex and different-sex unions progress.

Relationship formation and development

Sexual mating rituals have been observed in practically every society throughout human history (Westermarck 1891; Lévi-Strauss 1969). Relationship formation in modern society is no exception. Though it takes only two individuals to technically form a union, social and familial influences play an important role in shaping when and how people meet and mate. In the United States, premodern heterosexual courtship traditions included a brief period of courtship, strong agency by the man, and high levels of supervision by the woman's parents (Godbeer 2002). Modern heterosexual courtship features less universal progression towards marriage and young adults who have less parental oversight and more individual freedom (Bailey 1988; Rosenfeld 2007). This independence has produced increased variation in heterosexual relationship timing, but has not altered the basic path to the ultimate institution of monogamous commitment, marriage (Cherlin 2009; Laumann et al. 1994). In the sections that follow, we provide an overview of two foundational steps in this process: (1) relationship formation and (2) cohabitation.

Relationship formation

Social and familial desires are less influential in dictating the formation of modern romantic relationships than they were in the past, allowing individuals more flexibility in how and when they couple (Bailey 1988; Rosenfeld 2007). A “couple” is established when two individuals openly acknowledge that their relationship is romantic or sexual in nature and consider themselves to be “in a relationship.” We refer to this initial transition as “relationship formation,” or the process by which couples establish romantic partnerships. Many couples become acquainted long before an intimate relationship develops (e.g. through school or family ties), but other times the process of finding a mate is much more explicit, with individuals seeking one another out with the overt intention of initiating a sexual or romantic encounter (e.g. through an online dating service) (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). How couples meet and decide if and when the relationship will advance to an intimate stage is a complex process that requires at least one individual actively working to move the relationship forward. In other words, contemporary romantic relationships are not something that *happen to* couples, but rather require active agency and initiation by one or both partners. Putting other considerations aside, we might expect that individuals who desire romantic or sexual companionship (relative to those who do not) would be more likely to initiate such a relationship once finding a suitable partner. However, this is not always the case, since partners with more power often control relationship outcomes and commitment timing, regardless of each partner's individual preferences. While this paper does not speak to the specific reasons why initiation does or does not occur, it does highlight variation in formation timing among certain groups (i.e. men or women), which potentially provides insights into the relative preferences and power dynamics present in same-sex and different-sex couples.

Cohabitation

Once a romantic relationship is established, couples may begin to consider how and when to advance their commitment to one another. Historically, this process has occurred through the institution of marriage, which validates the union with an advanced degree of legal and social recognition. In recent decades, couples are increasingly opting to precede or replace marriage with a period of cohabitation (Cherlin 2009). Recent estimates suggest that the majority of married Americans premaritally cohabited, and that roughly two thirds of women will have lived with a partner by their mid-20s (Chandra et al. 2005; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). Though cohabitation has yet to surpass or replace the institution of marriage in the United States, it is increasingly recognized as an important stage in relationship progression and a serious expression of commitment (Smock 2000). Though the costs and benefits of cohabitation and marriage vary by gender and are often debated, scholars consistently frame the relationship stability achieved by both transitions as a net positive for men and women (Waite and Gallagher 2002).

Further motivating our focus on cohabitation (as opposed to marriage) is the fact that prior to 2015, same-sex couples lacked the legal right to marriage recognition in the United States (see *Obergefell v. Hodges* 2015). However, this exclusion did not prevent same-sex couples from forming cohabiting and marriage-like relationships (e.g. domestic partnerships and civil unions). In this paper, we regard both the decision to cohabit and to marry as expressions of increased commitment, and analyze whichever transition occurs first in a relationship.

As with relationship formation, the decision to cohabit or marry involves one or both partners to raise the possibility of moving in together or marrying, generally followed by a discussion of if and when the couple will advance the relationship (Sassler and Miller 2010). While “commitment-orientation” is typically used to explain individual preferences for relationship investment, commitment is as much if not more of a social condition as it is a personal trait or preference (Becker 1960). In deciding whether or not to combine households, individuals weigh their belief in the continuation of the relationship versus the potential loss of ease in domestic living consequent on having to move to his or her own household. By investing in relationship-specific capital, individuals are essentially “betting” on the continuation of their relationship, thereby risking the loss of time and resources involved in its potential dissolution and resulting domestic separation. The wedding ceremony creates additional social expectations for a couple, by providing an advanced degree of social recognition of the union at the risk of potentially losing face after unsuccessfully carrying through public vows made in front of one’s closest social ties. Furthermore, recent studies have found that couples who marry have lower rates of breakup than those who do not (Cherlin 2009; Rosenfeld 2014). In general, the personal, financial, and social risks entailed in these transitions help to ensure the union’s continuation, and are therefore seen as acts of commitment.

The decision to cohabit or marry is complicated by variation between partners in the extent to which expressions of commitment are socially rewarded, the degree to which an individual’s access to resources might be limited in the event of a breakup, and the extent to which the benefits corresponding to increased investment are valued by those inside and outside of the relationship. Such factors are shaped and reinforced by relationship power dynamics, as the partner with more power tends to have more of a say in whether or not a transition will occur. As will be discussed in the following sections, such power is frequently unevenly distributed by gender, and individual, social, and institutional constraints and opportunities play a crucial role in determining the bargaining power and preferences held by men and women in same-sex and different-sex relationships.

“Doing gender” in same-sex and different-sex relationships

Gender is a key organizing principle of sexual and romantic partnerships, and expectations dictating the behavior of individuals in different-sex relationships nearly always differ by sex. For much of history, gender differences were understood as internalized masculinity or femininity, but scholars now argue that gender is a multi-level system and is more appropriately characterized as cognitive images that constrain action (Risman 1999). Gender stratification is thought to constrain action on three levels, (1) at the individual level, through socialization and the development of gendered identities, (2) at the institutional level, where men and women face different constraints and opportunities, and (3) at the interactional level, where men and women are met with varying expectations, regardless of structural positioning. Gender schemas defining stereotypically “masculine” and “feminine” traits and desires translate into gender-specific sexual scripts, which are then acted out in the mate selection process. In deciding if and when to advance a relationship, men and women in same-sex relationships may share similar individual and institutional constraints compared to men and women in different-sex relationships, but vary in interactional contexts given their shared gender. In the following sections, we overview various gendered constraints and pressures that may drive commitment timing among men and women in same-sex and different-sex relationships.

Gender socialization (individual level)

Individualist approaches to the study of gender share the assumption that maleness and femaleness are (or become) properties of individuals, and focus on how these differences shape resulting preferences and behavior. Such arguments often involve a mix of social and biological theories about gendered characteristics (e.g. male aggression and competitiveness or female nurturance and domesticity), which are used to explain variation in men's and women's desires and expectations in the context of intimate relationships. Contemporary studies have demonstrated that in the United States men are viewed as more agentic and instrumental than women, and women are viewed as more communal and emotional than men (Eagly, Wood and Diekmann 2000; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). In traditional heterosexual relationship models within the United States men are often expected to initiate relationships, putting women in a submissive position of accepting or rejecting such propositions (Gilbert, Walker, McKinney, and Snell 1999). Online dating has allowed researchers to observe this process in action and indicates that men tend to maximize the number of women they contact, while women are less inclined to initiate contact and more likely to focus their energy on sustaining communication (Rudder 2014; Scharlott and Christ 1995). Men and women are also motivated to fill these socially appropriate relationship roles through culturally determined gender differences that are established early on through sex-role socialization.

Qualitative research on different-sex relationships in the United States has demonstrated that male partners tend to play a dominant role in initiating whether couples become romantically involved, while female partners are typically the ones to first suggest that the couple move in together or raise the issue of marriage (Sassler and Miller 2010). Given that sex-role socialization is present early in the life course and prior to sexual development, the socialization literature would predict that gay men would behave similarly to heterosexual men in regards to actively initiating relationships and postponing serious commitment. If men in same-sex relationships initiate romantic relationship formation at a similar rate as men in different-sex relationships, we might expect to see a pattern in which male same-sex couples form at a faster rate than different-sex couples, simply because such couples have two male partners. Since women in same-sex relationships lack a male partner, one may anticipate slower relationship formation than is present among different-sex couples.

If women in same-sex relationships hold similar preferences and experience similar constraints as women in different-sex relationships, then we may expect female same-sex couples to transition to cohabitation or marriage at a faster rate than different-sex or male same-sex couples. While men and women in different-sex relationships must compromise on gendered expectations and desires, same-sex couples need not negotiate in this regard, resulting in potentially faster relationship formation among male same-sex couples and potentially higher rates of cohabitation and marriage among female same-sex couples.

Gender and structure (institutional level)

Structuralist approaches to gender argue that men and women behave differently because they fill different positions in institutional settings, such as organizations and families. Women have historically lacked access to opportunities in the paid labor market, and as a result were often reliant on a male partner for access to economic resources. The development of the notion of "separate spheres" restricted women

from fully participating in public life and also increased women's investment in the private sphere, particularly in regard to maintaining romantic and kinship ties. Though economic opportunities for women have increased substantially over the past century, women continue to see lower returns on their labor than men, in part because employers hold certain expectations regarding proper roles for women and mothers in both work and family life (Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007).

What role do structural forces play in the formation of same-sex relationships? In some ways, men and women in same-sex relationships face different structural constraints than men and women in different-sex relationships. Past studies have found that gay men generally earn less than other men, while lesbian women generally earn more than other women (Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor 2000). Additionally, lesbian women are more likely to have children than gay men, but less likely to have children than heterosexual men and women (Black et al. 2000; Rosenfeld 2014; Simmons and O'Connell 2003). We might expect both of these factors to reduce lesbian women's reliance on a partner for support (relative to heterosexual women) while potentially increasing the reliance of gay men (relative to heterosexual men).

Though very little empirical research has been done on the timing of commitment in same-sex relationships, a 2013 Pew Research Center study found that unmarried gay and lesbian individuals express a similar desire to someday marry (56% vs. 58%), but differ significantly in the extent to which they prioritize marriage as an important LGBT issue. Seventy-one percent of lesbians argued that same-sex marriage should be a top priority, compared to only 57% of gay men. The similarity of gay male and lesbian individual desire for marriage versus their prioritization of access to it as a social institution provides evidence that perhaps lesbian women have more to lose from having restricted access to legally recognized partnerships. Such findings are consistent with the idea that lesbians may be more reliant on formalized partnerships not due to individual preferences but rather due to structural necessities.

Gendered expectations (interactional level)

Sex-role socialization and structural constraints might explain variation in male and female relationship preferences and desires, but these explanations leave out an important aspect of relationship processes: gendered interaction. Heterosexual men and women may for various reasons desire different things out of a relationship, but their ability to achieve said desires rests on their interaction and negotiation with one another. Men may be socialized to be agentic and sexually aggressive, but are confronted with the constraints of women who must learn to avoid unintended pregnancy and physical aggression that can result from intimate contact with men. Institutional constraints disadvantage women in the labor market and increase their reliance on male partners with stable jobs, which puts them in the difficult position of negotiating with male partners who may have little to no incentive to settle down and commit. Normative gender identities and structural constraints produce and continue to be reinforced by gendered sexual scripts. These differences in gendered expectations might translate into differences in heterosexual relationship desires, resulting in a dynamic in which men aggressively initiate sex and women passively accept or reject such advances in exchange for intimacy and commitment.

How are sexual scripts and expectations enacted in the context of same-sex relationships? Historical analyses of same-sex relationships in the United States suggest that it was common for gay and lesbian couples in the mid-twentieth century to adopt traditional heterosexual scripts, with one partner taking on a

masculine role as the sexual aggressor and the other adopting a more passive and submissive feminine role (Faderman 1991). During this period in history, women were perceived to be lacking in sexual interest, so developing a masculine identity allowed more flexibility for women to pursue sexual relationships with other women (for a historical breakdown of the “butch-femme dynamic,” see (Faderman 1991:169). Gender was so closely identified with sexuality that it was not the choice of a partner of the “same sex” that indicated homosexuality, but rather adopting the role of the “opposite sex” in the pursuit of sexual relations with the “same sex”. Over time, homosexual identity based in gender inversion has shifted to one more focused on object choice, weakening the relationships between lesbianism/masculine identity and gay men/femininity.

Data and methods

Data

The data analyzed in this study comes from the 2009-2015 *How Couples Meet and Stay Together* (HCMST) surveys (Rosenfeld, Thomas and Falcon 2015). HCMST is a longitudinal and nationally representative random sample of adult couples in the United States. It is unique in that it oversamples same-sex couples, making it one of the first representative studies tracking same-sex couples over time in the United States. It includes a total of 3,009 couples, with an oversample of 471 same-sex couples. HCMST is also unique in that it includes not only same-sex and different-sex couples, but also a wide range of romantic unions such as marriages, civil unions, domestic partnerships, cohabiting couples, non-cohabiting couples, and informal sexual relationships. The data were collected online from a nationally representative panel of participants by Knowledge Networks/GfK (for more details on the study methodology, see Rosenfeld 2014; Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012).

HCMST did not ask respondents to report on all past relationships, but rather requested detailed information on the history of each respondent’s relationship as it existed in 2009. To determine whether an individual was in a relationship, they were asked: “Do you have a boyfriend, a girlfriend, a sexual partner or a romantic partner? By sexual partner, we mean someone you have intimate physical contact with, beyond holding hands.” Individuals with a romantic or sexual partner are included in this analysis.

We exclude the 25 couples in which the subject’s self-reported gender varies across waves. HCMST carefully employs a number of methods to accurately identify same-sex couples. Individuals report their own gender, the gender of their partner, as well as whether or not they are in a same-sex relationship. From these responses, we identify couples in which one partner is identified as male and one as female as “MF”, couples in which both partners are identified as female as “FF”, and couples in which both partners are identified as male as “MM”. Summary statistics in Table 1 (see p.10) detail the makeup of the sample, which is comprised of 2,492 MF couples, 221 FF couples, and 235 MM couples.

All transitions from acquaintance to relationship, and most transitions from relationship to cohabitation occurred prior to HCMST Wave 1 in 2009. The time dimension for the event history datasets used below is couple-years, since the retrospective questions from HCMST Wave 1 were asked in units of years (e.g. “How old were you [in years] when you first met [Partner_Name]?”). The fact that the data are retrospective in nature means that analyses below may be affected by couple dissolution bias, or the left

censoring of couples who did not remain intact up until 2009. The left censoring potential of the analyses is partly alleviated by the controls for calendar year and time since meeting (or time since the beginning of the relationship), which are included in the multivariable analyses below. In Table A1 of the Appendix, we show that the finding that MM couples form relationships faster than other types of couples is robust to data restrictions that limit the sample to couples who met on or after 1990, or on or after 2000. Though this sharply limits the sample size in terms of couple-years, it demonstrates substantively similar findings, that is that MM couples appear to have transitioned to relationships more quickly after first meeting.

The first outcome we model is years from meeting to relationship formation, which is calculated using responses to two questions from HCMST Wave 1, “How old were you [in years] when you first met [Partner_Name]?” and “How old were you when your romantic relationship with [Partner_Name] began?” By subtracting the age that the respondent first met his or her partner from their age when the romantic relationship began, we calculate a variable measuring the number of years it took for a romantic relationship to form. Every subject whose transition to relationship timing is known in HCMST was in a relationship with that same partner in 2009, meaning there is the potential for bias due to the absence of data on meetings that did not result in relationships.

The second outcome of interest is time to cohabitation. We model transitions from non-cohabiting romantic relationships to cohabitation, marriage, civil union, or domestic partnership. We determine when couples began a romantic relationship based on responses to the question “How old were you when your romantic relationship with [Partner_Name] began?” Entry to cohabitation is constructed from the questions “Have you ever lived together with [Partner_Name]?” and if so, “How old were you when you first lived together with [Partner_Name]?” For couples who reported cohabiting but not yet marrying, years to cohabitation is calculated by subtracting the respondent’s age at relationship formation from the age that they first began cohabiting. If a couple married but did not cohabit premaritally, this variable is calculated by replacing age at cohabitation with age at marriage (“How old were you when you married [Partner_Name]?”).

In both sets of analyses, we include a control for the calendar year in which the couple first met (0 = 1960). Since the timing of transitions to marriage and cohabitation tend to vary at different stages of the life course, we control for respondent age and age-squared (both time-varying). Romantic involvement often occurs when a couple first meets, but may also arise through a gradual process over multiple years. In Table 2 (see p.11), which models relationship formation, we include a time-varying control for logged years since a couple first met in order to place a greater emphasis on incremental increases in the first few years after meeting. We also control for logged years to relationship formation in modeling transition to cohabitation in Table 3 (see p.13), since cohabitation timing may in part depend on the timing of previous relationship transitions. Since Table 3 predicts entrance to cohabitation, we include a time-varying control indicating years since a romantic relationship began. Couple race is included as a control, with relationships categorized as (0) having two white partners, (1) having one white partner and one non-white partner, and (2) having two non-white partners. We include a binary variable for whether or not either partner’s mother has a college degree as a proxy for socioeconomic origin. Mother’s education is used instead of respondent education because some respondents may not have completed their schooling at the time of the survey. Since relationship formation occurred prior to HCMST Wave 1, we include a variable for religion at age 16 in Table 2, indicating whether (0) either partner identified with a religion at

age 16, or (1) both partners were non-religious at 16. In the Table 3 analysis predicting entry to cohabitation, we include a binary control for religion at the time of Wave 1 of HCMST, which indicates whether respondents reported that (0) neither they nor their partner are an evangelical Christian, or (1) either they or their partner are an evangelical Christian.

Methods

To analyze the two transitions detailed above (relationship formation and commitment), we perform two separate unweighted discrete time event history logistic regressions, in logistic format. All analyses are unweighted, and all coefficients in Tables 2 and 3 include standard errors clustered by couple (Rogers 1993). The variable **resource** (for recruitment source) is included as a predictor in all of the unweighted multivariable models, since unweighted regressions are recommended in HCMST when same-sex couples are predictors in the models (Knowledge Networks and Rosenfeld 2012) and **resource** predicts the HCMST weights (Rosenfeld 2014; Winship and Radbill 1994).

We employ unweighted discrete time event history logistic regressions to predict probability of transition, the formula for which is presented below (Allison 1982; Yamaguchi 1991)

$$\log\left(\frac{P_i}{1 - P_i}\right) = \alpha_i + \beta x_i$$

Here, P_i represents a couple's predicted probability of experiencing a transition during period i (the i^{th} year of their relationship). This is conditional on the couple having not yet transitioned at the beginning of year i . βx_i represents a vector of coefficients and covariates included in the model, some time varying and others time invariant. The coefficients can be interpreted as the log-odds of experiencing an event relative to not experiencing an event, for each couple at time t . Therefore, positive coefficients indicate an increased likelihood of experiencing a transition and negative coefficients indicate a decreased likelihood of experiencing a transition.

According to Allison (1982), there are two main reasons to prefer event history models over non-event history models when modeling transitions. The first reason is that event history models deal appropriately with right censoring. Right censoring occurs when cases are censored before the transition event is observed. The second reason to prefer event history models is that they can appropriately account for time-varying covariates. In the case of the transitions to relationship data examined in Table 2, the event history model provides one of these two advantages. There is no right censoring, because all individuals in the sample formed relationships before Wave 1 of HCMST in 2009. The other advantage (inherent in event history models) of being able to account for time varying covariates remains. Because some readers might prefer to see the timing of relationship formation (among existing couples) modeled as a non-event-history Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) model predicting the length of time between first meeting and relationship initiation, we include such a model in Table A2 of the Appendix. The results of the OLS and the event history model are not fully consistent, as we explain below.

Results

Table 1. Description of Individual and Couple-Level Variables – Mean/Percent

	<i>Couple gender composition</i>		
	FF	MF	MM
Respondent age when first meeting partner	33.9***	25.8	37.2***
Respondent age when romantic relationship began	35.2***	27.4	37.7***
Calendar year relationship began	1996.3***	1990.4	1996.0***
Number of years between meeting and relationship formation	1.35	1.53	0.49***
Number of years from romantic relationship formation to cohabitation or marriage (for couples who ever cohabited or married)	1.33**	1.94	1.47*
Couples who experience a transition (cohabit or marry) by last survey wave (2015)	88%	88%	83%*
<i>Race</i>			
Both partners are white	77%	79%	79%
One white partner	14%	10%	15%
Both partners are non-white	8%	11%	6%
One or both partners are Evangelical	12%***	38%	12%***
Either partner's mother has college degree	40%***	27%	32%
<i>N</i> (couples)	221	2492	235

Source: HCMST (Waves 1-5)

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$, two-tailed tests comparing FF and MM couples to MF couples.

Table 1 shows that the average time between meeting and relationship formation was 1.35 years for FF couples, 1.53 years for MF couples, and 0.49 years for MM couples. The faster transition of existing MM couples into relationships was robust to multivariable controls, as we will show below. Table 1 also shows that transitions from non-cohabiting romantic relationships to cohabitation (or to marriage, whichever came first) were faster for same-sex couples relative to different-sex couples, yet same-sex couples entered relationships at older ages, on average, than the different-sex couples did. Since same-sex couples in our sample entered relationships later and at older ages, controlling for age and life stage will be important in our multivariable analyses.

One of the reasons that existing MF couples appear to have taken longer to form relationships is that they were more likely to have first met as children, and therefore lacked the potential to begin a relationship until years after first meeting. (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). Table 1 further reveals that 27.4% of MF couples first met when one of the partners was younger than 18, compared to 2.5% of MM couples. Relative to same-sex couples, MF couples were significantly more likely to meet through family, church, and school. Life stage and age are important predictors of transitions from meeting to relationship.

Table 2. Coefficients from Discrete-Time Event History Logistic Regressions: Predicting Romantic Relationship Formation for Different-Sex and Same-Sex Couples

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>Filter</i>	None	None	None	Excludes couples who met as children
<i>Couple Gender Composition</i> (ref = MF couple)				
FF couple	0.12 (0.23)	-0.014 (0.13)	0.10 (0.12)	0.05 (0.15)
MM couple	1.15*** (0.33)	0.74*** (0.19)	0.88*** (0.19)	0.81*** (0.20)
Years since meeting (logged, time-varying)		-0.74*** (0.021)	-0.67*** (0.022)	-0.70*** (0.03)
Calendar year first met (0 = 1960)		0.023*** (0.0015)	0.027*** (0.0017)	0.026*** (0.0025)
Age of youngest partner at first meeting			-0.023*** (0.0024)	-0.043*** (0.0033)
<i>Race</i> (ref = Both partners are white)				
One white partner			0.09 (0.10)	0.04 (0.12)
Both partners are non-white			-0.08 (0.10)	-0.12 (0.12)
Either partner's mother has college degree			-0.18** (0.07)	-0.11 (0.08)
Both partners were non-religious at 16			-0.06 (0.12)	-0.27 (0.17)
Constant	-0.43*** (0.06)	-0.60*** (0.05)	-0.056 (0.07)	1.03*** (0.11)
<i>N</i> (couple-years)	7161	7161	7161	3970
<i>df</i>	5	7	12	12
Pseudo R ²	0.012	0.196	0.205	0.226

Source: HCMST (Wave 1)

Note: Standard errors are clustered by couple. Each model includes 3df of controls for the variable **resource** (recruitment source), which predicts the weights and is used in lieu of the weights here. Model 4 excludes couples who first met when either partner was younger than 18.

+ p<0.10 *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001, two tailed tests.

Table 2 displays an unweighted discrete-time event history model predicting the speed of transition to relationship among existing couples in our sample, with coefficients in log odds. A positive coefficient means that respondents with a high value on that characteristic were more likely to enter into a romantic relationship in a given year of acquaintance with their future partner; a negative coefficient means that such a characteristic corresponds to the respondent being less likely to enter into the romantic

relationship. Model 1 includes an indicator for couple gender composition prior to the introduction of control variables. With different-sex couples (MF) as the reference category, we find that male same-sex couples (MM) had significantly higher log odds of relationship formation ($\beta = 1.15$, odds ratio of $e^{1.15} = 3.16$, $p < 0.01$), consistent with the results from Table 1. In other words, at any given year of acquaintance with their future partner, MM couples were significantly more likely to transition to a romantic union than were MF or FF couples.

Model 2 includes two key controls: a logged time-varying indicator of years since first meeting, and the calendar year in which the couple first met. Year of meeting (logged) had a negative effect on the probability of relationship transition, indicating that couples were more likely to transition soon after meeting, with the likelihood of transition diminishing with the duration of the acquaintanceship. Model 3 adds controls for the age of the younger of the two partners when they first met, the race of both partners, the maternal education of both partners, and their religious backgrounds. After all the controls are entered, MM couples retained their significant advantage in proceeding to relationships at a faster pace than other couple types. As a robustness test, Model 4 excludes couples who first met when one or both partners were younger than 18 years of age, thereby excluding those (mostly MF couples) who met as children and had a longer duration from first meeting to initiation of their romantic relationship. Model 4 fits better by pseudo R-square than Model 3 (0.226 compared to 0.205), and the coefficient for MM couples is slightly lower (0.81 in Model 4 compared to 0.88 in Model 3), but the core finding remains: MM couples in our sample appear to have transitioned from meeting to relationship significantly faster than MF couples.

An alternate version of Table 2 is presented in Table A2 of the Appendix. This table includes OLS models, where every couple (rather than couple-year) is one observation in the data. In the OLS models, the faster transition to relationships among MM couples is only robust and significant if the couples who met as children are excluded from the sample. We prefer the event history models to the OLS models because of the event history models' superior ability to include time-varying covariates, but we present the OLS results so that readers may decide for themselves.

Because the OLS models do not include important time-varying covariates, it is particularly important to exclude couples who met as children, since such couples did not have an opportunity to form relationships until later in life, thereby misleadingly inflating the length of their transitions. Once excluding such couples, the findings of the OLS model do not substantially differ from the event-history results presented in Table 2.

Table 3. Coefficients from Discrete-Time Event History Logistic Regressions Predicting Cohabitation and/or Marriage for Different-Sex and Same-Sex Couples

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Couple Gender Composition</i> (ref = MF couple)			
FF couple	0.33+ (0.19)	0.19 (0.12)	0.22 (0.13)
MM couple	0.03 (0.19)	0.07 (0.12)	0.05 (0.13)
Years since romantic relationship began (time-varying)		-0.11*** (0.008)	-0.12*** (0.0077)
Respondent age (time-varying)		0.11*** (0.015)	0.13*** (0.016)
Respondent age squared (time-varying)		-0.0017*** (0.00022)	-0.0018*** (0.00022)
Calendar year first met (0 = 1960)			-0.0086*** (0.0017)
Years from meeting to romantic relationship beginning (logged)			-0.058* (0.027)
<i>Race</i> (ref = Both partners are white)			
One white partner			-0.17+ (0.08)
Both partners are non-white			-0.42*** (0.080)
Either partner's mother has college degree			-0.10+ (0.05)
One or both partners are Evangelical Christian			0.14** (0.05)
Constant			
<i>N</i> (couple-years)	10002	10002	10002
<i>df</i>	5	8	14
Pseudo R ²	0.0011	0.0573	0.0648

Source: HCMST (Waves 1-5)

Note: Standard errors are clustered by couple. Each model includes 3df of controls for the variable resource (recruitment source), which predicts the weights and is used in lieu of the weights here.

+ $p < 0.10$ * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$, two tailed tests.

Table 3 models the relationship between couple gender composition and transition to cohabitation through the use of an unweighted discrete-time event history model. In Model 1, prior to including control variables, we find that transition to cohabitation for MM couples ($\beta = .03$, $p > 0.05$) was not significantly different from that of MF couples. However, FF couples ($\beta = 0.33$) were more likely to progress from relationship to cohabitation, but the effect is only marginally significant ($p < 0.10$). This finding is consistent with the summary statistics in Table 1, which showed a significant difference in the timing of transition to cohabitation among FF couples relative to MM or MF couples.

Model 2 introduces three time-related variables: a time-varying indicator of the length of time the couple had been in the romantic relationship, the age of the respondent, and the age of the respondent squared. According to Model 2, the rate of transitions to cohabitation peaked when subjects were at age $(-0.11/(2[-0.0017]))=32.4$.¹ Since the FF couples in HCMST entered into their relationships when they were 35.2, on average, whereas MF couples entered into their relationships when they were 27.4, on average, the FF couples settled into cohabitation more quickly in part because of their position in the life course. After controlling for age, FF and MM couples were not significantly different in their log odds of transitioning to cohabitation. Model 3 of Table 3 adds covariates that are known to be associated with transitions to marriage for heterosexuals, including race, social class, and Evangelical Christianity. None of these controls overturns the key finding from Model 2, that controlling for age, there is no significant difference between MF, MM, and FF couples in the speed of transition to cohabitation.

Discussion

In this article, we examined variation in commitment timing among same-sex and different-sex couples. We observed two phases of relationship commitment: romantic relationship formation and cohabitation. Our findings indicate that couples with two male partners had shorter periods of acquaintance before entering into a romantic relationship. In regard to the decision to cohabit, we find that all couple types enter into cohabitation at similar rates, once age of the subjects is taken into account.

The univariate analyses in Table 1 suggests that FF couples have the fastest rate of transition from couplehood to cohabitation. The apparently faster rate of FF couple transition to cohabitation would, if the finding were robust, lend credence to a notion in popular culture that lesbian couples are especially quick to settle down and nest (Gordon 2006). We find, however, that because FF couples form partnerships later in life than MF couples do, accounting for subject age reduces the difference in transitions to cohabitation between FF couples and MF couples to insignificance.

A number of potential explanations could produce these observed patterns. The literature on sex-role socialization suggests that men are expected to initiate relationships more often than women are, regardless of which partner desires the transition more. However, gender functions at multiple levels, and if men do indeed feel more comfortable initiating relationships regardless of their partner's gender, this would explain the pattern we have observed in the context of relationship formation.

In regard to cohabitation, multiple interpretations are possible. We hypothesized that female same-sex couples may experience faster transitions to cohabitation than different-sex couples, in part due to structural positioning as well as a previously demonstrated tendency for women to place a greater emphasis on serious relationship transitions than men, such as moving in together or marrying. Despite the fact that same-sex couples face different interactional opportunities and constraints, their patterns of relationship progression appear quite similar to different-sex couples, suggesting that gender and sexuality are perhaps less important to relationship transitions than has been previously suggested. Recent work on relationship stability has also found similarities between same-sex and different-sex

¹ The age where the transition rate is greatest is $-b/2a$, where b is the coefficient for age, and a is the coefficient for age squared.

couples (Rosenfeld 2014; Manning, Brown, and Stykes 2016). This research as well as our findings highlight the importance of looking beyond gender in understandings of how and when individuals build and maintain relationships.

The data used here, HCMST, have some unique advantages for an analysis of relationship transitions among same-sex couples, including national representativity, specific questions that identify same-sex couples, and an oversample of same-sex couples. Additionally, these data are unique in that they include a wide range of romantic unions, such as marriages, civil unions, domestic partnerships, cohabiting couples, non-cohabiting couples, and informal sexual relationships. The disadvantages of HCMST for the analyses herein are HCMST's modest sample size, which limits the power of statistical tests, and the fact that all of the transitions to relationships, and most of the transitions to cohabitation, predated Wave 1 of HCMST (see Table A1 in the Appendix for robustness checks). Our analysis on the timing of relationship formation is also limited by the fact that our study population consists only of individuals already in a relationship and can therefore not be used to make claims about the overall population of individuals.

Conclusion

This study contributes to a growing literature on the formation and development of same-sex couples and their families. Because romantic courtship and commitment negotiation often go unobserved, little is known about when and how relationships form and develop, and even less is known about how these processes play out in same-sex relationships. The major goal of this analysis was to understand the timing of relationship transitions among both same-sex and different-sex couples. Though same-sex couples are unique in various ways, transition timing occurs at similar rates among couples of varying gender compositions. Male same-sex couples appear to transition from meeting to relationship more quickly, though the absence of data on meetings that do not result in relationships may bias these results. Additionally, though same-sex couples are dissimilar from different-sex couples in several ways, transitions to cohabitation appear to occur at similar rates (holding life stage constant).

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Appendix

Table A1. Coefficients from Discrete-Time Event History Logistic Regressions Predicting Romantic Relationship Formation for Same-Sex and Different-Sex Couples, robustness check with filter of when couples met

	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<i>Filter</i>	None	Year Met >=1990	Year Met >=2000
<i>Couple Gender Composition (ref=MF couple)</i>			
FF couple	0.10 (0.12)	0.32 (0.19)	0.61* (0.28)
MM couple	0.88*** (0.19)	0.94*** (0.26)	0.95** (0.34)
Years since meeting (logged, time-varying)	-0.67*** (0.022)	-0.58*** (0.037)	-0.45*** (0.070)
Calendar year first met (0 = 1960)	0.027*** (0.0017)	0.094 (0.007)	0.20 (0.02)
Age of youngest partner at first meeting	-0.023*** (0.0024)	-0.009* (0.004)	-0.0039 (0.0057)
<i>Race (ref=Both partners are white)</i>			
One white partner	0.09 (0.10)	-0.002 (0.12)	0.09 (0.17)
Both partners are non-white	-0.08 (0.10)	-0.09 (0.13)	-0.12 (0.18)
Either partner's mother has college degree	-0.18** (0.07)	-0.11 (0.08)	0.07 (0.13)
Both partners were non-religious at 16	-0.06 (0.12)	0.19 (0.17)	0.72* (0.32)
Constant	-0.056 (0.07)	-3.03*** (0.28)	-7.78*** (0.89)
N (couple-years)	7161	3094	1416
<i>df</i>	12	12	12
Pseudo R ²	0.205	0.129	0.096

Source: HCMST (Wave 1)

Note: Standard errors are clustered by couple. Each model includes 3df of controls for the variable resource (recruitment source), which predicts the weights and is used in lieu of the weights here.

+ p<.10 *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001, two tailed tests.

Table A2. Coefficients from OLS regressions predicting time from first meeting to relationship formation.

<i>Filter</i>	None	None	Exclude couples who met as children
<i>Couple Gender Composition (ref=MF couple)</i>			
FF couple	-0.12 (0.40)	0.41 (0.40)	-0.04 (0.29)
MM couple	-1.00** (0.39)	-0.36 (0.38)	-0.56* (0.27)
Calendar year first met (0 = 1960)		-0.051*** (0.0056)	-0.035*** (0.005)
Age of youngest partner at first meeting		-0.056*** (0.0085)	0.009 (0.007)
Either partner's mother has college degree		0.17 (0.18)	0.19 (0.14)
Constant			
N (couples)	2951	2938	2238
<i>df</i>	5	8	8
R ²	0.0045	0.072	0.028

Source: HCMST (Wave 1)

Note: Each model includes 3df of controls for the variable recsource (recruitment source), which predicts the weights and is used in lieu of the weights here. Negative coefficients mean shorter time and therefore faster transition from meeting to relationship formation.

+ p<.10 *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001, two tailed tests.