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## Predictors of Relationship Dissolution in Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Adoptive Parents

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### Abstract

Little work has examined relationship dissolution or divorce in adoptive parents or same-sex parent couples. The current study examined predictors of relationship dissolution across the first 5 years of parenthood among a sample of heterosexual, lesbian, and gay male adoptive couples. Of the 190 couples in the study, 15 (7.9%) dissolved their relationships during the first 5 years of adoptive parenthood. Specifically, 7 of 57 lesbian couples (12.3%), 1 of 49 gay male couples (2.0%), and 7 of 84 heterosexual couples (8.3%) dissolved their unions. Results of our logistic regression analysis revealed that the odds of relationship dissolution were significantly higher for (a) couples who adopted a non-infant (i.e., older) child; (b) participants who reported feeling less prepared for the adoption, three months post-adoptive placement; and (c) couples in which both partners reported very low, or very high, pre-adoption levels of relationship maintenance behaviors. Findings have implications for adoption professionals seeking to support same-sex and heterosexual prospective adopters, as well as societal debates and policy regarding same-sex relationships and parenting.

### Keywords

adoption; divorce; gay; lesbian; relationship dissolution; separation

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An extensive literature has examined predictors of relationship dissolution and divorce in heterosexual parents with biological children. The current study examined predictors of relationship dissolution across the first 5 years of parenthood among a sample of heterosexual, lesbian, and gay male adoptive couples. This study is unique in that: (a) it utilizes a diverse sample of couples, including same-sex and heterosexual couples; (b) all of the couples in the sample are adoptive parents; and (c) it includes predictor variables measured before the adoption of the child (i.e., during the pre-adoptive period), as well as characteristics of the adopted child, measured 3 months post-adoptive placement. Little research has examined both parent and child characteristics as predictors of divorce in heterosexual couples of biological children (Wymbs et al., 2008), much less using an adoptive sample. Further, the examination of pre-parenthood risk factors for relationship

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dissolution is also unique (Rosand, Slinning, Roysamb, & Tambs, 2014). Given that same-sex couples' experiences of building their families and seeking relationship recognition differ from those of heterosexual couples (e.g., same-sex couples are four times as likely as heterosexual couples to adopt, and, in many states, continue to face barriers to marrying their partners; Gates, 2013), examining predictors of relationship dissolution in same-sex adoptive parents is quite timely, and can inform prevention and intervention efforts with these families.

The literature review that follows summarizes prior work on predictors of divorce in heterosexual couples. It then reviews the limited work on relationship dissolution and divorce in same-sex parents. Finally, it addresses the adoptive context and parent relationship quality.

## Divorce in Heterosexual Couples

Research on predictors of divorce in heterosexual couples has fairly exclusively focused on parents who are biologically related to their children. This research has examined a wide range of predictors of divorce, many of which fall into two categories: demographic variables, and aspects (or quality) of the couple's relationship, both of which may impact a couple's risk for divorce.

Regarding demographics, studies of heterosexual couples have found that income is strongly related to divorce, with couples of lower income being at greater risk (Andersen, 2005; Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Conger et al., 1990). Likewise, financial disagreements have also been linked to divorce (Dew, Britt, & Huston, 2012). With respect to education, individuals with lower levels of education tend to be at greater risk for relationship dissolution than individuals with higher levels of education (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Rosand et al., 2014).

Studies have also documented a variety of interpersonal predictors of relationship dissolution among heterosexual couples. For example, unhappiness with the relationship is associated with an increased likelihood of divorce (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Devine & Forehand, 1996), with some research showing that wives' dissatisfaction is a better predictor of divorce than husbands' (Rosand et al., 2014). Likewise, low levels of affection and perceived closeness have also been linked to greater divorce proneness (Graber, Laurenceau, Miga, Chango, & Coan, 2011). High levels of conflict have also been identified as a risk factor for divorce (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Gottman & Levenson, 2000), although some authors point out that more important than the overall level of conflict in a relationship is how couples resolve conflict (Gottman, 1993; Hetherington, 2003).

Low commitment to the relationship (high ambivalence) has also been identified as a risk factor for divorce, whereas high commitment has been found to protect against divorce, even in the context of low relationship quality (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Hetherington, 2003; Schoebi, Karney, & Bradbury, 2012). Relationship maintenance behaviors (i.e., behaviors aimed to enhance desired qualities in relationships, such as talking about or "working on" the relationship) have also been examined in relation to relationship quality, but not necessarily divorce. Some cross-sectional studies have found a positive relationship

between maintenance behaviors and relationship quality (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Stafford, 2003), whereas several longitudinal studies have found that higher levels of maintenance behaviors predict declines in relationship quality (Goldberg & Sayer, 2006; Goldberg, Smith, & Kashy, 2010); and, one study found that women's relationship maintenance was more strongly related to their male partners' negative relationship quality than positive relationship quality (Malinen, Tolvanen, & Ronka, 2012). Individuals may utilize maintenance behaviors when aiming to correct problems in their relationships as opposed to using them to preserve the current relationship; this would explain the association between maintenance and declining relationship quality (Malinen et al., 2012).

## Relationship Dissolution/Divorce in Same-Sex Couples

Despite the timeliness of the topic (Goldberg & Allen, 2013), few studies have examined relationship processes in same-sex parents who dissolve their unions. Gartrell and colleagues (2000, 2006) examined relationship dissolution among lesbian mothers in the National Lesbian Family Study (NLFS), a longitudinal study of 73 planned lesbian-mother families formed via donor insemination. This study found that by the time the children were 5 years old, 23 couples (31.5% of couples) had broken up; by the time the children were 10, 30 couples (41% of couples) had ended their unions. Although the authors did not explore women's explanations for their separation in depth, they reported that women cited growing apart, infrequent sexual intimacy, incompatibility, and different parenting styles as reasons for dissolving their unions (Gartrell et al., 2006). In an unpublished dissertation, Turteltaub (2002) interviewed 10 lesbian mothers (five former couples) and found that women named disagreements about parenting and money as contributors to their breakup; they also noted that weak communication was often exacerbated by the challenges of parenting.

No quantitative studies have examined predictors of relationship dissolution among same-sex couples who are parents. But, studies examining predictors of relationship dissolution among male and female same-sex couples who are not parents have found that, similar to research on heterosexual couples, interpersonal processes predicted relationship dissolution: namely, low levels of positive affect, high levels of conflict, and poor communication have been linked to a higher likelihood of relationship dissolution (Kurdek, 1991, 1996). Furthermore, using observational and self-report data obtained from male and female same-sex cohabiting couples, Gottman and colleagues (2003) found that partners who demonstrated higher levels of empathy for their partners were less likely to dissolve their unions 12 years later.

## The Adoptive Context

Becoming a parent can be stressful to couples' relationships, possibly leading to declines in intimacy and communication (Nystrom & Ohrling 2004). Reflecting this, the transition to parenthood is often associated with declines in relationship quality, in both heterosexual biological parent families and adoptive families (Ceballo, Lansford, Abbey, & Stewart, 2004; Goldberg et al., 2010). Becoming a parent through adoption, specifically, can introduce additional challenges (e.g., difficult child characteristics), beyond those faced by new parents in general, that may impact the couple's relationship (Goldberg, Kinkler,

Moyer, & Weber, 2014). Couples who adopt children that are older, have an abuse history, or have attachment problems are at greater risk for parenting dissatisfaction and disruption of the adoptive placement (Howard & Berzin 2011; Timm, Mooradian, & Hock, 2011). Adopting an older (i.e., non-infant) child in particular has been linked to negative parenting outcomes, including greater parenting stress, in that older child age often serves as a proxy for prior child placements, as well as a likelihood of child attachment and adjustment problems (Bird, Peterson, & Miller, 2002; Goldberg & Smith, 2014). A qualitative study of heterosexual women who adopted via the child welfare system, for example, found that dealing with disappointment regarding their children (who were often older and/or had behavioral issues) or their roles as parents, was described as especially wearing on their marriages (Timm et al., 2011). Likewise, a study of same-sex and heterosexual couples who adopted via child welfare found that couples often described the transition to parenthood as taking a toll on their relationship, in that they were often adopting a child who was older and had special needs, thus creating unique demands on their time and energy (Goldberg et al., 2014).

In addition to aspects of the adopted child, aspects of the adoption process – including how much adoption- and parenting-related preparation the couple receives before adopting – may also contribute to individual and relational stress (Goldberg, 2010a). Indeed, parents who feel less prepared for the adoption, and for parenting an adopted child, report higher levels of parenting stress, and are more likely to disrupt the placement (McKay & Ross, 2010; Reilly & Platz, 2003, 2004). In their sample of adoptive parents, McKay and Ross (2010) found that “many participants described...being thrown into parenthood without having adequate adjustment time,” which led to significant stress (p. 606). Relatedly, perceptions of inadequate pre- and post-adoption support, and dissatisfaction with one’s adoption agency, have been linked to lower perceived quality of both marital and child relationships (Goldberg et al., 2010; Mooradian, Hock, Jackson, & Timm, 2012; Reilly & Platz, 2003, 2004). A study that used focus groups with adoptive parents found that adopters often felt that the adoption process was so focused on “meeting the immediate needs of children that workers never seemed to consider the impact of adoption on the marriage” (Mooradian et al., 2012, p. 392). That is, pre-adoption education and training typically focuses on adjusting and responding to the needs of the child, rather than helping couples to prepare for the challenges that they might face as a couple once they adopt.

## The Current Study

The current study examines predictors of relationship dissolution across the first 5 years of parenthood among a sample of heterosexual, lesbian, and gay male adoptive couples. We examine the role of interpersonal processes (i.e., aspects of the couple’s relationship quality, pre-parenthood), as well as child and adoption factors (i.e., child age at adoption and parents’ lack of preparation for the adoption, measured 3 months post-adoptive placement) as predictors. We control for demographic variables that have been linked to risk for relationship dissolution (i.e., family income and education), as well as several other variables (child gender, type of adoption).

## Method

### Recruitment and Procedures

Inclusion criteria for the original transition to parenthood study, which focused on the transition to adoptive parenthood, were: (a) couples must be adopting their first child; and (b) both partners must be becoming parents for the first time. We recruited couples in the pre-adoptive period by asking adoption agencies throughout the US to provide study information to clients who had not yet adopted. We utilized U.S. census data to identify states with a high percentage of same-sex couples (Gates & Ost, 2004), and we made an effort to contact agencies in those states. Over 30 agencies provided information to their clients, and interested clients were asked to contact the principal investigator for details regarding participation. Both heterosexual and same-sex couples were targeted through these agencies to facilitate similarity on geographical location and income. Because some same-sex couples may not be “out” to agencies, several national gay organizations also assisted with recruitment.

Participants in this study completed a set of questionnaires and individual telephone interviews (approximately 1–1.5 hours) during the pre-adoptive stage (while participants were waiting for a child placement), and then again 3 months post-adoptive placement. Approximately 5 years post-adoptive placement, participants were re-contacted and asked to complete a follow-up assessment. This follow-up assessment took place between 5–6.5 years post-adoptive placement (hereafter referred to as the 5 year assessment point).

### Description of the Sample

The current sample consists of 190 adoptive couples, 15 of whom dissolved their relationships over the course of the first 5 years of parenthood. These 15 couples were identified as “separators” based on the fact that they had ended their unions between the time that they were placed with their child and the 5 year post-placement assessment. The remaining 175 couples were identified as “intact” couples. Of the 15 couples, 7 were lesbian, 1 was gay male, and 7 were heterosexual. Specifically, 7 of 57 lesbian couples (12.3%), 1 of 49 gay male couples (2.0%), and 7 of 84 heterosexual couples (8.3%) dissolved their unions. Thus, 7.9% of 190 couples who remained in the study up through their 5 year post-placement follow-up ended their unions.

Some couples (8.1% of lesbian couples, 10.9% of gay male couples, and 7.7% of heterosexual couples) dropped out of the study after the initial transition to parenthood study (pre-adoptive placement to 3 months post-placement) and were therefore not included in the sample of 190 couples. That is, some couples who participated in the pre-placement and post-placement assessments either did not respond to, or declined, our request to participate in the 5 year follow-up. We do not include these participants who dropped out after 3 months post-placement in the larger comparison sample of intact couples, as they may in fact have ended their unions sometime after the initial transition to parenthood, without our knowledge. Our larger comparison sample of intact couples represents those participants who, as of 5 years post-placement, were verified as remaining intact. A total of 91.9% of the lesbian couples, 89.1% of the gay couples, and 92.3% of the heterosexual couples who

participated in the initial transition to parenthood study also participated in the 5 year follow-up, and are included in the present investigation of relationship dissolution among same-sex and heterosexual couples. Of note is that attrition analyses were conducted to determine whether the current sample of adoptive parents differed from those who dropped after the initial follow-up. We compared the two groups on race, education, income, and geographic region, and found no significant differences between the two groups.

Some participants in the present investigation separated from their partners as early as 1 year post-placement, whereas others separated closer to 5–6.5 years post-placement. Specifically, 2 heterosexual couples separated between 1–2 years postplacement; 1 lesbian couple, 1 gay male couple, and 2 heterosexual couples separated between 2–3 years postplacement; 1 lesbian couple separated 3–4 years post-placement; 1 lesbian couple and 1 heterosexual couple separated 4–5 years post-placement; and 4 lesbian couples and 2 heterosexual couples separated 5–6.5 years post-placement.

Regarding legal recognition of their intimate unions, all of the heterosexual couples who dissolved their unions had been legally married, whereas only one of the same-sex couples, a lesbian couple, had been legally married (marriage equality was not yet a reality in most of the same-sex couples' states of residence at the time that they participated in the study, 2005–2010). Thus, these relationship dissolutions constituted legal divorces for all of the seven heterosexual parent couples that broke up, but only one of the eight same-sex couples that broke up.

Participants were 38.04 years old (range: 26–60;  $SD = 5.32$ ), on average, when they adopted. They had been in their relationships for an average of 8.27 years when they became parents (range: 1–23;  $SD = 3.97$ ). Their mean annual salary was \$69,262 ( $Mdn = \$60,000$ ; range \$0–\$650,000;  $SD = \$59,203$ ) and their mean family salary was \$138,754 ( $Mdn = \$115,500$ ; range \$37,000–\$650,000;  $SD = \$86,098$ ). Of the 380 participants included in the final sample, 24 (6.3%) had a high school diploma, 36 (9.5%) had an associate's degree, 137 (36.1%) had a bachelor's degree, 123 (32.4%) had a master's degree, 54 (14.2%) had a professional degree (Ph.D., J.D., or M.D.), and 6 (1.6%) did not report their education level. The sample was 85% white ( $n = 323$ ), 10.5% of color, and 4.5% of participants did not report their race. In 144 couples (76%), both partners were the same race; 34 couples were mixed race. Table 1 contains demographic information separately for intact couples and for couples who dissolved their unions.

Demographic data on the children in the sample also appear in Table 1. Ninety-two couples were placed with a boy, 89 couples were placed with a girl, and 9 couples were placed with a girl-boy sibling pair. Children's average age at placement was 16.66 months ( $Mdn = 0.5$  months; range: 0–16 years;  $SD = 36.59$  months). The majority of couples—114 (60.0%)—adopted young infants (i.e., 3 months old or less) and 76 adopted older children. Of these 76 older children, 39.5% were between 3 months and 1 year, 27.6% were between 1 and 3 years, 11.8% were between 3 and 5 years, 10.5% were between 5 and 10 years, and 10.5% were between 10 and 16 years. In 110 cases (57.9%) the children were of color (including multiracial); in 71 cases (37.4%) they were white; and 9 cases (4.7%) did not have information on child's race. A total of 111 couples (58.4%) adopted via private domestic

adoption, 41 couples (21.6%) adopted via the child welfare system (i.e., public domestic adoption), and 38 couples (20.0%) adopted internationally.

## Measures

**Outcome: Relationship Status**—Whether or not participants had dissolved their unions, by the 5 year post-placement mark, was dummy coded such that 1 = separated, and 0 = intact. This was a couple-level variable (i.e., the same value for both partners).

### Predictors: Interpersonal

**Sexual orientation:** Sexual orientation, a couple-level variable, was effects coded (1 = same-sex, -1 = heterosexual).

**Time 1 (T1; pre-adoption) relationship quality:** Relationship quality was assessed before couples had been placed with a child using the Relationship Questionnaire (Braiker & Kelley, 1979), which contains 4 subscales: love (10 items), conflict (5 items), ambivalence (i.e., lack of commitment) (5 items), and maintenance (5 items). All four subscales were treated as predictors of relationship dissolution. Items such as “To what extent do you have a sense of ‘belonging with your partner?’” (love), “How ambivalent are you about continuing in the relationship with your partner?” (ambivalence), “How often do you and your partner argue?” (conflict) and “How much time do you and your partner spend discussing and trying to work out problems between you?” (maintenance) are answered on a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 9 = *very much*). Higher scores indicated higher levels of love ( $M = 7.96$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ), conflict ( $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ), ambivalence ( $M = 1.82$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ), and maintenance ( $M = 5.88$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ).

T1 Cronbach’s alphas for love were .75 for lesbians, .82 for gay men, and .84 for heterosexual couples. T1 alphas for ambivalence were .68 for lesbians, .73 for gay men, and .73 for heterosexual couples. T1 alphas for conflict were .73 for lesbian, .59 for gay men, and .66 for heterosexual couples. T1 alphas for maintenance were .58 for lesbian couples, .62 for gay men, and .62 for heterosexual couples. Prior studies show similarly low alphas for the maintenance scale, from .52 (Huston & Chorost, 1994) to .64 (Curran, Hazen, Jacobvitz, & Feldman, 2005).

### Predictors: Child and Adoption

**T2: Child age:** Children’s age at the time of placement, in months, was assessed. We examined child age as a dichotomous variable: namely, infant, defined as 3 months or younger (1), versus non-infant/older child (0). Sixty percent of couples adopted infants and 40.0% adopted non-infants/older children. Of note is that we also tested child age as a continuous variable, and the findings were almost identical.

**T2: Adoption preparedness:** Three months after they were placed with a child (T2), participants were asked, “How prepared did you feel for the adoption?” and asked to rate their level of preparedness from 1 to 5, where 1 = *very prepared*, 2 = *somewhat prepared*, 3 = *neither prepared nor unprepared*, 4 = *somewhat unprepared*, and 5 = *very unprepared*. Thus, higher scores indicated greater perceived unpreparedness.



## Controls

**T1: Family income:** Annual family income (i.e., both partners' combined income) was included as a control.

**T1: Education level:** Participants' highest level of education (1 = less than a high school education; 2 = high school diploma; 3 = some college/an associate's degree; 4 = bachelor's degree; 5 = master's degree; 6 = Ph.D./J.D./M.D.) was included as a control.

**T2: Child gender:** Child gender was included as a control as some research has found that heterosexual couples are less likely to divorce when they have sons (Hetherington, 2003). In order to deal with the fact that a small number of couples adopted siblings ( $n = 9$ ), child gender was coded such that 1 = female child and 0 = any male child (singleton or siblings).

**T2: Adoption route:** Adoption route was included as a control. Child age and adoption route are somewhat interrelated (children who are adopted via private domestic adoption are typically infants, whereas children who are adopted via public domestic adoption, and from abroad, are often non-infants). To tease apart child age (infant versus non-infant) from differences across adoption routes, we used three dummy codes, where 1 = *private domestic* and 0 = *not private domestic*; 1 = *public domestic* and 0 = *not public domestic*; and 1 = *international* and 0 = *not international*. Because of concerns about statistical power, and because distributions of adoption type did not differ between intact and dissolved couples in our cross-sectional analyses, we only include the public domestic adoption dummy code variable in the full model – inasmuch as children adopted via public adoption are the most likely to have a neglect and abuse history, and special needs, which may present unique challenges to parents' intimate relationship quality (Goldberg & Smith, 2014; Timm et al., 2011).

## Results

### Analysis Strategy

To investigate the effects of a variety of factors on relationship dissolution we used logistic regression analyses. Although relationship dissolution (split up or not) is at the couple-level (i.e., partners have the same score for relationship dissolution), some of the predictors of relationship dissolution are at the couple-level (e.g., family income, child's age), and others are at the individual-level (e.g., parental unpreparedness for the adoption). Each partner has their own score on these individual-level constructs, but, because it is arbitrary who is partner 1 and partner 2, we include these variables as sum of the two members' score (Kenny, 2012; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). That is, if  $Y$  is a couple-level, or a between-dyads, variable and our predictors are individual-level constructs,  $X$ , we have that,

$$Y_i = b_1 X_{ipartner\ 1} + b_2 X_{ipartner\ 2} + e_i$$

For each couple  $i$ . Partner 1 and partner 2 are arbitrary when we have indistinguishable dyads—e.g., dyadic data with some same-sex couples—so we need to constrain the effects of these two predictors to be equal (i.e.,  $b_1 = b_2$ ), resulting in the following equation:

$$Y_i = b_1 X_{i\text{partner } 1} + b_1 X_{i\text{partner } 2} + e_i = b_1 (X_{i\text{partner } 1} + X_{i\text{partner } 2}) + e_i.$$

Thus, the sum of predictors is included in place of the two individual-level predictors separately (Kenny, 2012). We include the sums of the partners' two scores on love, conflict, ambivalence, maintenance, and parental unpreparedness for adoption as predictors of relationship dissolution. The sum of the partners' education scores is also included as a control variable.

Further, to assess the effect of the partners' match (i.e., level of similarity) on reported relationship quality (i.e., love, conflict, commitment, and maintenance), as well as their match on parental unpreparedness for adoption, we also include the actor-partner interaction between the two partners' love scores, conflict scores, commitment scores, maintenance scores, and unpreparedness scores (Kenny et al., 2006). Examining the interaction between partners' scores allows us to assess, for example, whether having different levels of commitment to the relationship increases the likelihood of relationship dissolution.

Before reporting the results from the logistic regression analysis, we first report simple tests for differences on the study variables between intact couples and those who split up.

### Descriptive Statistics

First, we tested basic demographic differences between the couples who split ( $n = 15$ ) and those who were still intact 5 years post-adoptive placement ( $n = 175$ ; see Table 1). Fisher's exact  $p$ -values are given instead of chi-square  $p$ -values where appropriate.

Participants whose relationships dissolved were in general very similar demographically to those whose relationships remained intact. They were about the same age,  $t(185.99) = -0.38$ ,  $p = .71$ ,<sup>1</sup> in their relationships for approximately the same length of time at the time they adopted,  $t(14.83, \text{equal variances not assumed}) = -0.20$ ,  $p = .85$ , and similar in racial composition as the larger sample, with participants in intact couples being 89.22% white, and those from couples who split being 86.21% white,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.25$ ,  $p = .54$ . There were similar percentages of same-race couples among the intact couples (81.60%) and those who split (73.33%),  $\chi^2(1) = 0.61$ ,  $p = .49$ . Regarding child gender, there was no significant association between adopting a girl versus a boy and relationship dissolution, with 40% of those who split up having adopted a son, compared to 54.29% of those who stayed together,  $\chi^2(1) = 1.13$ ,  $p = .29$ . There were also no differences in the distribution of adoption types among intact and dissolved couples when adoption type was treated as three separate groups,  $\chi^2(2) = 2.59$ ,  $p = .27$ , and there were no significant differences when comparing

<sup>1</sup>Dyadic multilevel models were run to obtain unbiased estimates of standard errors and  $p$ -values for the differences between participants whose relationships ended and those whose relationships remained intact on all variables measured at the individual-level. Note that these models can yield fractional degrees of freedom.

public adoption to private and international,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.25, p = .62$ , or when comparing private adoption to public and international,  $\chi^2(1) = 2.28, p = .13$ .

Of note, too, is that same-sex couples who split up were not more likely to have inequities in their legal standing as parents than same-sex couples who remained intact,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.49, p = .43$ . That is, of the same-sex couples who split up, 1 out of 8 were couples in which only one parent was a legal parent (i.e., they were unable to co-adopt their child because of legal restrictions in their state prohibiting same-couples from adopting), and, of the same-sex couples who remained together, 6 of 98 were couples in which only one parent was a legal parent. Again, this difference was not significant.

Because of past work finding a relationship between income and relationship dissolution risk, it is worth noting that participants whose relationships ended had lower family incomes, on average, compared to intact couples ( $M = \$103,679, SD = \$32,049$  versus  $M = \$141,609, SD = \$88,504$ ) – but this difference did not reach statistical significance,  $t(185) = -1.59, p = .11$ .

Break-up rates for same-sex couples did not differ from those of heterosexual couples,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.04, p = .84$ . There was also no difference in break-up rates when lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual couples were treated as three separate groups in the analysis,  $\chi^2(2) = 3.84, p = .15$ , and, there were no significant differences when comparing gay couples (the group with lowest number of break-ups) to lesbian and heterosexual couples,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.11, p = .12$ . Due to the small numbers of couples breaking up in each group, and the fact that only one gay couple broke up, we control only for heterosexual versus same-sex relationship status in the main analysis.

Again, the timing of couples' dissolution varied, with some couples separating as early as 1–2 years post-placement and others separating up to 5–6.5 years post-placement. Of note is that although lesbian couples stayed together for longer ( $M = 5.07$  years,  $SD = 1.62$ ) than heterosexual couples ( $M = 3.50$  years,  $SD = 2.00$ ), this difference did not reach statistical significance,  $t(12) = -1.62, p = .13$ .

Several variables did differ between the intact and separated groups. Participants in couples who split had marginally lower education levels,  $M = 4.07, SD = 1.08$ , than those in intact couples,  $M = 4.42, SD = 1.05, t(372) = -1.78, p = .08$ . There was a marginally significant association between adopting an infant versus an older child and relationship dissolution rate, with 61.71% of those who stayed together adopting an infant and only 40.0% percent of those who split up adopting an infant,  $\chi^2(1) = 2.71, p < .10$ . Thus, adopting an older child was more common among those couples who split up.

### Logistic Regression

Due to a relatively small number of couples dissolving their unions (i.e., splitting up/divorcing) in our final sample ( $n = 15$ ), we minimized the number of predictors included in our final model (Vittinghoff & McCulloch, 2006) by trimming variables that did not approach statistical significance. Table 2 presents the Full Model (all predictors and controls) and the Final Model which includes predictors that were at least marginally

significant ( $p < .10$ ) in the Full Model. In the Full Model, as predictors of relationship dissolution, we included the full set of interpersonal predictors, child/adoption related predictors, and controls. Namely, (1) sexual orientation (same-sex vs heterosexual), (2) the sum of the partners' love scores; (3) the sum of the partners' conflict scores; (4) the sum of the partners' commitment scores; (5) the sum of the partners' relationship maintenance scores; (6) the interaction between the partners' love scores; (7) the interaction between the partners' conflict scores; (8) the interaction between the partners' commitment scores; (9) the interaction between partners' maintenance scores; (10) the age of the child (infant or not), (11) the sum of the partners' adoption unpreparedness scores, and (12) the interaction between the partners' unpreparedness scores. As control variables we included family income, the sum of the partners' education levels, child gender, and adoption type (public domestic or not).

In the Full Model there were no statistically significant effects of the control variables (i.e., family income, education, child gender, adoption type) on relationship dissolution ( $p$  values ranged from .24 to .55). Contrary to some past literature, there were no significant effects of love,  $b = 0.05$ ,  $\exp(b) = 1.05$ ,  $p = .90$ , conflict,  $b = -0.08$ ,  $\exp(b) = 0.93$ ,  $p = .73$ , or ambivalence (low commitment),  $b = 0.54$ ,  $\exp(b) = 1.72$ ,  $p = .12$ . Nor were there significant actor-partner interactions of love, conflict, or commitment. There were significant or marginally significant effects of child age at adoption (infant vs. older child;  $p = .03$ ), sum of parental adoption unpreparedness ( $p = .09$ ) and the actor-partner interaction for relationship maintenance ( $p = .09$ ). These predictors were retained in the Final Model while all other predictors and control variables were removed because they failed to meet the criteria of being marginally significant.

In the Final Model, consistent with expectations, the log odds of dissolution were significantly lower for those couples who adopted an infant than for those who adopted an older child,  $b = -1.59$ ,  $\exp(b) = 0.21$ ,  $p = .02$ . There was also a significant effect of parental unpreparedness for the adoption, such that the more unprepared participants reported feeling regarding the adoption, the higher the log odds of breaking up,  $b = 0.32$ ,  $\exp(b) = 1.38$ ,  $p = .02$ . Lastly, there was a marginally significant interaction of the two partners' relationship maintenance scores,  $b = 0.40$ ,  $\exp(b) = 1.49$ ,  $p = .07$ . This interaction is such that having two partners who are both high, or both low, on relationship maintenance, increases the log odds of break-up (see Figure 1).

## Discussion

This study represents the first study to examine predictors of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents' relationship dissolution. A contribution of the study is that it provides rates of relationship dissolution among both same-sex and heterosexual adoptive parents, and finds no differences between same-sex and heterosexual couples in terms of odds of dissolving their unions. Of note is that Gartrell et al. (2000) documented a 31.5% break-up rate in her sample of planned lesbian-mother families formed through donor insemination, at the time that the children were five. The present study, in contrast, documented an 8% break-up rate overall, with a 12% break-up rate for lesbian couples specifically. What might account for the relatively low break-up rates in this study? First, it is possible that social and

historical factors are responsible. Gartrell et al.'s sample became parents during the early 1990s, when gay parenthood was still considered relatively "novel" and did not enjoy the same level of acceptance as it did in the mid-2000s, when the current sample became parents. National survey data suggest that attitudes toward homosexuality in general and gay parenthood specifically have shifted sharply over the past two decades, and the past decade in particular (Pew Research Center, 2013), with same-sex couples pursuing parenthood reporting less stigma and fewer barriers to parenthood than in decades past (see Goldberg, 2010b). Thus, Gartrell et al.'s sample may have encountered more sexuality-related stigma and stress during the process of building their families and raising young children, which may have contributed to relational tension and distress. Lower levels of perceived societal approval and support – and lower levels of support from one's own families – could undermine relationship stability (Goldberg & Sayer, 2006), and ultimately raise the risk of dissolution.

Another factor to consider is the adoptive nature of the current sample. Although virtually all lesbian and gay couples who become parents do so intentionally, with great planning and consideration, the process of adopting a child is often even more time- and labor-intensive than achieving parenthood via donor insemination – assuming that the latter did not involve extensive fertility treatments (Goldberg, 2010a). Adopting a child means interfacing with bureaucratic systems, attending mandatory parenting classes, and undergoing an evaluation to be "approved" to adopt. Thus, couples who stick together through the adoption process, and come out the other side intact, perhaps have a greater chance of weathering the challenges of new parenthood, given that they represent a highly select group of couples: namely, couples who remained committed through the time-consuming and often challenging process of adopting. Indeed, although prior work comparing biological and adoptive heterosexual parent couples did not find overall differences in relationship quality (Ceballo et al., 2004), this work did not examine divorce proneness. Perhaps overall relationship quality (e.g., levels of love and conflict) is similar across biological and adoptive parent couples, but levels of commitment, and openness to divorce/relationship dissolution, differ. Further evidence for a possible difference between biological and adoptive parents' divorce proneness can be gleaned from data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG; 2010–2013), which indicate that 15% of heterosexual couples had dissolved their relationships 5 years after their initial transition to biological parenthood (i.e., birth of their first child); the dissolution rate was 18% 6 years after the initial transition to parenthood (Wendy Manning, personal communication, February 8, 2015). Thus, the 8% relationship dissolution rate in the current adoptive sample is almost half that of the NSFG biological parent sample – although notably, the two samples inevitably differ in other key ways which could have implications for relationship dissolution (e.g., the current sample is more highly educated and affluent).

Of note is that most demographic factors did not differentiate between couples who remained intact and those that split up. Indeed, although those couples who broke up did have lower incomes on average, family income was not significant in differentiating intact couples from those who dissolved their unions. As the logistic regression analyses showed, the most salient predictors were (a) interpersonal processes, (b) adoption-related processes, and (c) child factors. Starting with interpersonal processes, we found that relationship



behaviors (Goldberg et al., 2014; Howard & Berzin, 2011) – but also to help them manage their relationships (Mooradian et al., 2012).

It is interesting that love, conflict, and commitment were not significant predictors of relationship dissolution – although commitment did come close to significance in the full ( $p = .12$ ) model, such that couples who reported higher ambivalence (lower commitment) pre-adoption were slightly more likely to break up. It is possible that these different relational processes may interact; for example, couples who are low in love and high in conflict may be more likely to break up; or, couples who are low in love and low in commitment may be more likely to break up. Likewise, the dynamics and processes surrounding these relational processes may matter more than their overall level. As some scholars have pointed out, the relational context surrounding conflict (i.e., is conflict balanced out by high positive affect? How do couples resolve the conflict?) may be more important than the actual level of conflict (Gottman, 1993; Gottman et al., 2003; Hetherington, 2003). Unfortunately, due to the small number of separated couples in our sample, we could not test higher-order interactions (e.g., between love and conflict); future work with larger samples should do so. It is also possible that other measures of intimate relationship functioning that have been linked to divorce, such as relationship satisfaction (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Rosand et al., 2014), empathy (Gottman et al., 2003), and communication (Kurdek, 1991, 1996), may have been more powerful in predicting relationship dissolution than the relational processes under investigation. Additionally, it may observational or partner report data (e.g., of conflict), which we did not include, may have predicted relationship dissolution. Finally, it is of course possible that it is simply easier to predict relationship endurance versus dissolution from measurements of relationship quality obtained soon after the transition to parenthood than those obtained pre-parenthood; indeed, the potentially stressful and unpredictable nature of the transition to adoptive parenthood may ultimately destabilize relationships that were very solid pre-parenthood (Goldberg, 2010a).

Despite some prior research suggesting income and educational disparities between couples who break up and couples who stay together (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Rosand et al., 2014), these differences were not significant in our sample – although they were in the expected direction. Namely, couples who split up did have lower incomes and educational levels than intact couples, but the differences were not significant.

## Limitations

A major limitation of the current study is that, because such a small number of gay male couples broke up (i.e., one couple), our ability to examine or differentiate among lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual adoptive couples was limited. Additionally, we did not have a comparison sample of heterosexual parents of biological children (or lesbian/gay male parents with biological children, for that matter), and, thus, our ability to state whether these findings are specific to or limited to adoptive parents is limited. A third limitation is that we did not examine co-parenting, parenting-related disagreements, or parenting stress as predictors or mediators. Older child age, or parental unpreparedness, for example, may affect relationship distress and dissolution indirectly via their effect on parenting-related distress, or the co-parenting alliance. A fourth limitation of the study is that approximately

10% of the sample dropped out; it is possible that some of those participants dissolved their relationships. We have no way of knowing this, however.

A fifth limitation is the low alphas for our relationship maintenance measure. Notably, low alphas for relationship maintenance are common (Curran et al., 2005; Huston & Chorost, 1994). Of note, though, is that the relatively low reliability of our relationship maintenance measure would only have attenuated the relationship between maintenance and dissolution, making it harder to detect. A final limitation is the variability in the timing of the follow-up. Some couples were assessed closer to 5 years, whereas others were assessed closer to 6 years. Thus, it is possible that the couples interviewed at the 5 year follow-up (whom were verified as intact) might have broken up by 6 years. While this may ultimately have had an effect (very likely small) on the breakup rates in each group, it is not likely to have an effect on our ability to predict differences between groups. Indeed, if there were couples who were considering, or close to, breaking up in the intact couple group, this pattern would most likely have made the differences between groups more difficult to find. Hence, in light of this limitation, our tests of differences between intact and dissolved couples are relatively more conservative.

### Implications and Conclusions

The study findings have several practical and policy implications. First, our findings provide no evidence that same-sex parents are more likely to dissolve their relationships than heterosexual parents, which has implications for societal discussions and debates about the stability and longevity of same-sex relationships (see Goldberg, 2010b; Heaphy, Smart, & Einarsdottir, 2013). Indeed, while we must be cautious in our statements to this effect in light of the small, selective, and non-representative nature of the sample, the findings indicate low rates of relationship dissolution among both same-sex and heterosexual adoptive parents overall, with same-sex parent couples staying together longer before they split up (i.e., they separated later after the initial transition to parenthood, on average) – although this difference was not statistically significant. It is unknown whether and how the presence of legal safeguards – namely, marriage equality – might have altered the course of the same-sex couple's relationships. The presence of children is recognized as one relationship constraint (i.e., factor that keeps couples together); marriage represents another, in that it is associated with greater symbolic and structural support for relationships (Heaphy et al., 2013). Thus, perhaps the same-sex couples in the sample might have had an increased likelihood of staying together had they been married – like the heterosexual couples in the sample.

Regarding practical implications, our findings suggest that pre-parenthood and pre-adoption emphasis on the factors that enhance relationship quality, as well as the behaviors that may harm relationship health, is needed. Perhaps it would be useful for adoption workers to explicitly ask pre-adoptive couples about maintenance behaviors, in order to assess whether couples are in a healthy place with regard to taking responsibility for their relationships – but are not trying to repair a broken relationship.

Given the significance of parents' subjective feelings of unpreparedness for the adoption, it is important that adoption professionals provide services and support that aim to enhance



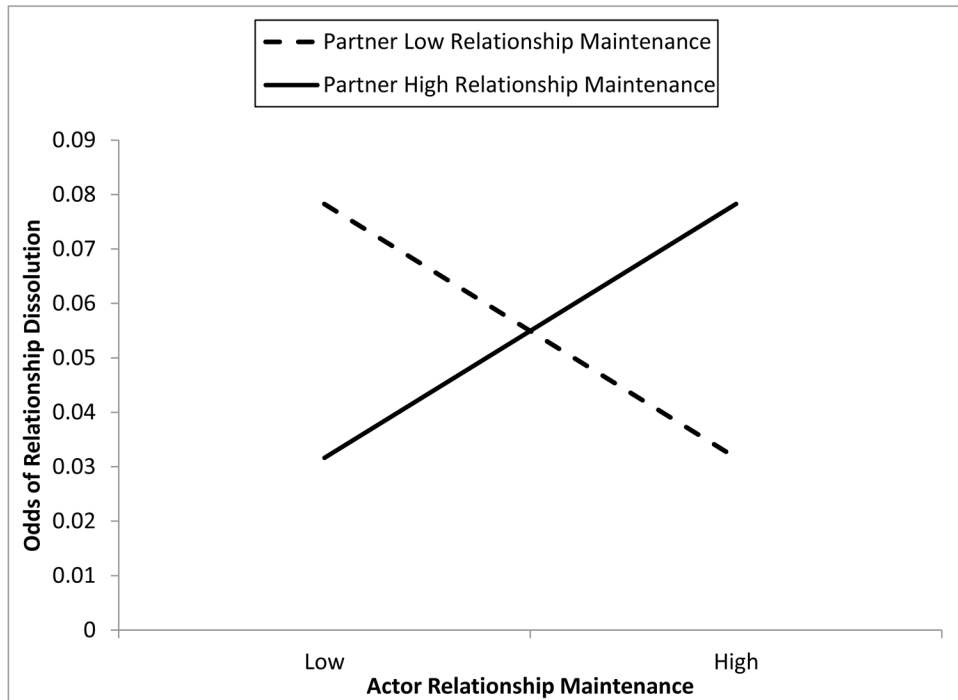
parents' feelings of preparedness. For example, prospective adoptive parents would benefit from extensive pre-adoption preparation regarding the arrange and severity of child problems that they might encounter, as well as post-adoption support and services aimed at helping them to effectively handle child- and parenting-related difficulties. Parents who adopt older children or children with difficult histories or behaviors might need special attention paid to their relationships (e.g., in the form of therapy or support groups aimed at helping them to proactively and constructively handle stress and minimize its impact on their intimate relationship). Future research should also explicitly address (e.g., via in -depth interviews with adoptive parents) the factors that are most valuable and effective in helping adoptive parents to feel prepared for the adoption and their adopted child. By providing both same-sex and heterosexual couples who seek to adopt with appropriate support, guidance, and services, professionals can play a role in enhancing relationship quality and reducing the risk for relationship dissolution – an outcome that will benefit children and families as a whole.

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**Figure 1.** The Interaction of Actor Maintenance and Partner Maintenance on Relationship Dissolution. High and low are at one standard deviation above and below the mean of relationship maintenance respectively.

**Table 1**

Differences on Demographic, Control, and Predictor Variables Between Couples in Intact and Dissolved Unions

	Relationship Dissolved ( <i>M, SD</i> or %)	Relationship Intact ( <i>M, SD</i> or %)
<b>Demographics</b>		
Parent Age at Adoption	37.63 (6.15)	38.08 (5.25) <sup>a</sup>
Relationship Duration	7.97 (6.39)	8.30 (3.71)
Participant Race (% white)	86.21%	89.22%
% Couple Same Race	73.33%	81.60%
Child Race (% white)	15.38%	41.07% <sup>+</sup>
% With Only 1 Legal Parent <sup>l</sup>	12.5%	6.12%
<b>Controls</b>		
Family Income	\$103,679 (\$32,049)	\$141,609 (\$88,504)
Education	4.07 (1.08)	4.42 (1.05) <sup>+</sup>
Child Gender (% with son)	40.00%	54.29%
Adoption Type		
% private domestic	40.00%	60.00%
% public domestic	26.67%	21.14%
% international	33.33%	18.86%
<b>Predictors: Interpersonal</b>		
Sexual Orientation (% Same-Sex)	53.33%	56.00%
Love	7.96 (0.63)	7.96 (0.74) <sup>a</sup>
Conflict	3.79 (1.33)	3.65 (1.07) <sup>a</sup>
Ambivalence (Low Commitment)	2.05 (1.08)	1.80 (0.85) <sup>a</sup>
Maintenance	6.10 (1.33)	5.86 (1.14) <sup>a</sup>
<b>Predictors: Child and Adoption</b>		
Child Age (% infant)	40.00%	61.71% <sup>+</sup>
Unpreparedness for Adoption	2.37 (1.19)	1.96 (1.22) <sup>a</sup>

Note.

\*\*  
*p* < .01.\*  
*p* < .05.+  
*p* < .10.<sup>l</sup>  
Percents are out of the total number of same-sex couples.<sup>a</sup>  
unbiased *p*-values obtained from dyadic multilevel models.

**Table 2**  
Logistic Regression Predicting Relationship Dissolution: Full and Final Models

	Full Model		Final Model	
	<i>b</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>
<b>Controls</b>				
Couple's Education	-0.20	0.82	.24	
Family Income	-0.09	0.92	.19	
Child's Gender	0.93	2.53	.23	
Public Adoption (dummy)	-0.79	0.46	.40	
<b>Interpersonal</b>				
Heterosexual (dummy)	-0.18	0.83	.80	
Sum of Love	0.05	1.05	.90	
Sum of Conflict	-0.08	0.93	.73	
Sum of Ambivalence	0.54	1.72	.12	
Sum of Maintenance	0.22	1.25	.27	0.10
Actor Love X Partner Love	-0.12	0.89	.84	
Actor Conflict X Partner Conflict	0.18	1.20	.47	
Actor Ambiv X Partner Ambiv	-0.02	0.97	.97	
Actor Maint X Partner Maint	0.46	1.58	.09	0.40
<b>Child and Adoption</b>				
Adopt an Infant (dummy)	-1.75	0.17	.03	-1.59
Sum of Unpreparedness	0.55	1.73	.09	0.32
Actor Unprep X Partner Unprep	-0.19	0.83	.39	
Constant	-2.47	0.09	.77	-2.53
			0.08	<.01

Note. Full Model:  $\chi^2(16) = 24.17, p = .09$ , Final Model:  $\chi^2(4) = 13.49, p = .01$ .