



# The Lives of the Others: Sexual Identity and Relationship Quality in Australia and the United Kingdom

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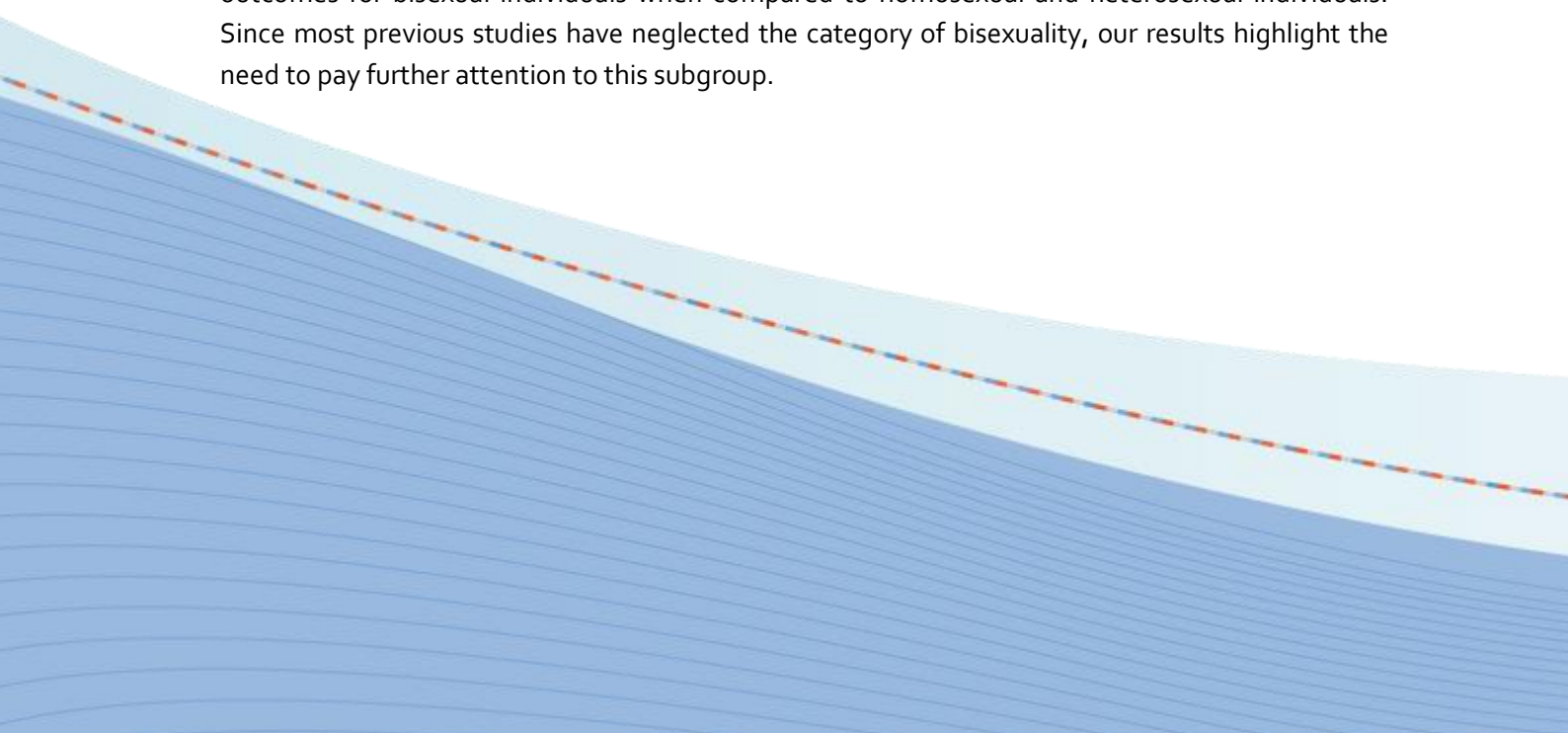
## NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

Same-sex couples have been the subject of a lot of media and political debates in recent years, primarily in relation to formal rights to marry and raise children. Similar to discussions about the rise of cohabitation and single-parent families in the 1970s, concerns have been expressed about how the emergence of same-sex couples could contribute to the demise of the nuclear family and the wellbeing of children. However, we still know comparatively little about the family outcomes, relationship dynamics and household arrangements of sexual minorities. Gaining a fuller understanding of these issues is important to contribute to legal and political discussions about human rights and strategies to reduce social inequalities. For example, state and federal judiciaries in the United States have relied on evidence from social science research to make legal decisions about marriage and adoption in same-sex couples.

Stereotypes depict homosexual relationships as unhappy and dysfunctional, especially when compared to heterosexual relationships. These negative perceptions can fuel negative public opinion about same-sex couples, but are based on questionable and untested conventional wisdom. In this paper, we investigate the quality of the intimate relationships of heterosexual, gay/lesbian and bisexual individuals in Australia and the UK using quantitative research methods. We contribute to previous research by considering bisexual individuals and mixed-orientation couples, and using recent, large and nationally-representative cross-national data.

Our results are timely and provide important information for policymakers in relation to current debates about same-sex marriage laws and adoption laws for same-sex couples. We find that relationship quality in same-sex couples is as high as, if not higher than, in heterosexual couples. These findings indicate that sexual minority couples are well-placed to raise children in warm and loving environments. They also suggest that policies to legalise same-sex marriage are well-guided, even though same-sex couples appear to do just as well as their heterosexual counterparts in the absence of such laws.

Another key finding is that the lowest relationship quality in both Australia and the UK is reported by bisexual individuals (who could be partnered to either homosexual or heterosexual individuals). This resonates with a wealth of literature reporting comparatively lower health and wellbeing outcomes for bisexual individuals when compared to homosexual and heterosexual individuals. Since most previous studies have neglected the category of bisexuality, our results highlight the need to pay further attention to this subgroup.



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## **Abstract**

Same-sex couples have been the subject of intense media and political discussion in relation to formal rights to marry and raise children. However, we still know comparatively little about the family outcomes of individuals from sexual minorities. We investigate the quality of the intimate relationships of heterosexual, gay/lesbian and bisexual individuals in Australia and the UK. We contribute to previous research by considering bisexual individuals and mixed-orientation couples, and using recent, large and nationally-representative cross-national data. We find that relationship quality in same-sex couples is as high as, if not higher than, in heterosexual couples. This suggests that policies to legalise same-sex marriage are well-guided and sexual minority couples are well-placed to raise children in warm and loving environments. Another key finding is that the lowest relationship quality in both Australia and the UK is reported by bisexual individuals, which highlights the need to pay further attention to this subgroup.

**Keywords:** relationship quality; family outcomes; sexual identity; same-sex couples; Australia; United Kingdom

## Introduction

Same-sex couples have been the subject of intense media and political discussion in recent years, primarily in relation to formal rights to marry and raise children. Similar to discussions about the rise of cohabitation and single-parent families in the 1970s (Popenoe, 1988, 1993), concerns have been expressed about how the emergence of same-sex couples could contribute to the demise of the nuclear family and the wellbeing of children (Washington, Pollvogt, Smith, & Fontana, 2015). Despite widespread debate about the inequality of traditional marriage laws, rising awareness of homophobic discrimination, and a burgeoning academic literature on sexual minorities, we know comparatively little about the family outcomes, relationship dynamics and household arrangements of sexual minorities (Knudson-Martin & Laughlin, 2004; Rothblum, 2009). Gaining a fuller understanding of these issues is important to contribute to legal and political discussions about human rights and strategies to reduce social inequalities. For example, state and federal judiciaries in the United States have relied on evidence from social science research to make legal decisions about marriage and adoption in same-sex couples (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007; Rothblum, 2009; Umberson, Thomeer, Kroeger, Lodge, & Xu, 2015).

Peplau and Fingerhut (2007, p.409) argue that *“stereotypes depict gay and lesbian relationships as unhappy and dysfunctional, especially in comparison with heterosexual relationships”*, which potentially fuels negative public opinion about same-sex couples. This paper investigates the accuracy of these perceptions, and examines the relationship quality of heterosexual, gay/lesbian and bisexual individuals in Australia and the United Kingdom. Although there is a wealth of research on the determinants and outcomes of relationship quality amongst individuals in heterosexual relationships, little attention has been paid to sexual minorities (Rothblum, 2009). Previous research suggests that socio-demographic characteristics, relationship interaction styles and levels of social support contribute to relationship quality and stability equally in heterosexual and same-sex couples (Kurdek, 2004), and that pathways to union dissolution are similar across couple types (van Eeden-Moorefield, Martell, Williams, & Preston, 2011). However, individuals in same-sex couples face a number of challenges that may inhibit their ability to establish enduring high-quality relationships, including a lack of legal and social recognition, and the experience of discrimination, prejudice

and harassment (Otis, Rostosky, Riggle, & Hamrin 2006; Mohr & Fassinger, 2006; Graham & Barnow, 2013). These factors may influence the quality of the interpersonal relationships of individuals in same-sex couples *directly* by adding stress and tension to their day-to-day interactions. They may also contribute to poorer relationship outcomes in these couples *indirectly*, through their negative effects on earnings, occupational achievement, physical health, psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction (Powdthavee & Wooden, 2015).

We add to the body of research examining variations in relationship quality across individuals with differing sexual identities in several ways. First, while most previous studies have relied on small-scale purposive samples, we use recent, large and nationally-representative data. This makes our findings generalizable to the broader population. Second, unlike previous research, we consider the relationship quality of individuals who identify as bisexual. This is important, as the number of individuals falling within this category is at least as high as the number of individuals falling into the gay/lesbian category –see e.g. Miller, Ebin, & Bessonova (2007) and Perales (2015), and such individuals can be partnered with either gay/lesbian or heterosexual others. Third, we consider the relationship quality of individuals in mixed-orientation couples: couples in which each of the partners has a different sexual identity (e.g. a couple comprising a heterosexual man and a bisexual woman). By doing so, we provide a closer examination of ‘gendered relational contexts’, and consider the relationship quality effects not just of one’s sexual identity, but also of one’s sexual identity in relation to the sexual identity of one’s partner (Umberson et al., 2015). Fourth, we compare results for two countries, Australia and the United Kingdom, teasing out the role of institutional differences and providing greater confidence that our findings are replicable.

## **Literature review**

There is a large and long-standing body of literature on the determinants and outcomes of relationship quality and partner satisfaction. Psychological work focuses on issues of identity, commitment, personality and conflict resolution styles, while sociological work focuses on gender, marriage, socio-economic standing, and institutional and contextual factors (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007;

Kamp Dush, Taylor, & Kroeger, 2008; Jackson, Miller, Oka, & Henry, 2010). Together with literature on sexual minority stressors and group membership, this knowledge can be used to elaborate theoretical expectations about the relative levels of relationship quality of heterosexual, gay/lesbian and bisexual individuals.

### *Same-sex couples: Reasons for lower relationship quality*

There are several reasons to expect lower relationship quality amongst individuals in same-sex couples. The first one has to do with the ability to marry. Many studies document that individuals in marital relationships are happier or more satisfied than individuals in cohabiting couples (Brown & Booth, 1996; Soons & Kalmijn, 2009). Some argue that this effect is due to differences in the characteristics of individuals who enter different types of relationships –e.g. commitment levels, attitudes to relationships, socio-economic resources and ethnic or religious background (Wiik, Bernhardt, & Noack, 2009). However, others maintain that it is the institution of marriage that in and of itself produces more lasting and harmonious unions (Waite & Gallagher, 2001). As individuals in same-sex couples were not allowed to marry in either of the countries examined at the time of data collection, they might experience lower relationship quality as a result.

A second reason for comparatively lower relationship quality in same-sex couples is that sexual minority status is associated with poorer outcomes across a range of indicators, including occupational achievement, earnings, wellbeing, physical health and mental health (Allen & Demo, 1995; King et. al., 2007; Prokos & Keene, 2010; Uhrig, 2013; Perales, 2015). Poor outcomes in these domains may impact relationship quality by making it more difficult to form stable relationships or placing greater stress on partnered individuals.

Third, minority stress theory provides grounds to expect the relationship quality reported by individuals in same-sex couples to be lower than that reported by individuals in heterosexual couples. Individuals from sexual minorities are subject to continuous direct and indirect forms of stigmatization, discrimination and harassment in their day-to-day lives that impact on their mental health (Meyer, 1995, 2003). These stressors may influence self-perceptions and lower self-esteem, which may in turn

impair individuals' ability to form enduring positive social relationships with others (van Eeden-Moorefield & Benson, 2014; Doyle & Molix, 2014).

Fourth, many individuals in same-sex couples keep their sexual identity (and consequently their relationship status) hidden from friends, co-workers and/or family members (Rothblum, 2009). The tensions and stress associated with these circumstances may spill over into the day-to-day intimate relationships of individuals in same-sex couples.

#### *Same-sex couples: Reasons for higher relationship quality*

There are also theoretical reasons to expect comparatively high relationship quality amongst individuals in same-sex couples. First, these individuals (particularly lesbians) are more equitable in the ways in which they allocate domestic work –including childcare, and less likely to specialize in market and non-market work (Kurdek, 2007; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007; Rothblum, 2009; Goldberg, 2013). Gender display theory suggests that individuals re-affirm their gender identity by performing gender-appropriate behaviour. In opposite-sex relationships, this involves men and women undertaking gender-typed housework and care tasks, and leads to unequal divisions of labour (Bittman, England, Sayer, Folbre, & Matheson, 2003; Baxter & Hewitt, 2013). These unequal household burdens are associated with poor relationship outcomes, including marital conflict and divorce (Ruppanner, 2012; Frisco & Williams, 2003). If gender display is not as salient in same-sex couples and these relationships are more egalitarian than heterosexual couples, we might expect higher levels of relationship quality in same-sex couples compared to heterosexual couples.

Second, social identity theory suggests that group membership is an important part of identity formation that increases self-esteem and contributes to personal and social wellbeing (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). It has been argued that individuals from sexual minorities may enhance their self-esteem through developing in-group and out-group statuses that provide a sense of belonging that is not possible for heterosexual couples (Mohr & Fassinger, 2006; Kurdek, 2008). Same-sex couples who feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to a broader community of in-group



couples may experience increased levels of wellbeing and relationship quality compared to heterosexual couples.

Third, differential selection into relationships may also result in higher relationship quality for individuals in same-sex couples. Given the personal and institutional barriers that individuals from sexual minority groups experience when negotiating intimate relationships in a heteronormative environment (Vinjamuri, 2015), many of them may decide not to enter relationships at all. As a result, there may be an overrepresentation of 'truly' committed individuals with a tendency to report higher relationship quality in same-sex couples compared to opposite-sex couples.

#### *Differences in relationship quality by sexual identity: Empirical evidence*

Very few studies explicitly and directly compare the relationship quality experienced by individuals in same- and opposite-sex couples. Kurdek (1994a) found that heterosexual couples argued more frequently over social issues than lesbian couples, and that gay/lesbian couples argued more frequently over distrust than heterosexual couples. Kurdek (1994b) reported that gay couples experienced less relationship quality than both heterosexual couples and lesbian couples –which did not differ from each other. Kurdek (1998) found that gay couples enjoyed higher autonomy and fewer barriers to leave relationships than heterosexual couples, while lesbian couples enjoyed higher intimacy, autonomy and equality, and fewer barriers to leave relationships than heterosexual couples.

In addition to inconsistencies in their findings, these studies have other significant limitations: (i) they are based on small, purposive samples of 100-200 couples, (ii) they use data that is now very old and unlikely to represent the current *status quo* for same-sex couples, (iii) they concentrate exclusively on couples in the United States, and (iv) they do not consider bisexuality. We contribute to this small literature by improving on these and other dimensions.

### *Accounting for bisexuality*

While quantitative research on same-sex couples and sexual minorities has grown substantially in recent years, less consideration has been paid to sexual identities that do not fit neatly into either heterosexual or homosexual categories. For example, relatively few studies distinguish bisexual individuals from gay/lesbian and heterosexual individuals (Miller et al., 2007). Importantly, these contributions tend to show that bisexual individuals fare worse than both heterosexual and gay/lesbian individuals in health and wellbeing outcomes (Miller et al., 2007; McLaughlin et al., 2012; Perales, 2015), as well as in earnings, wealth and housing (Uhrig, 2013).

There are several possible reasons for the relatively poor outcomes of bisexual individuals. First, bisexual individuals may experience more minority stress due to being 'a minority group within a minority group'. Bisexuality has been regarded by many as a 'silenced sexuality' within the media, lesbian/gay communities, sexology and psychology (see e.g. Barker & Langdrige, 2008). Bisexuals have also been recurrently typecast as confused (with bisexuality being regarded as 'a transitional phase'), uncommitted, unfaithful and promiscuous in both mainstream heterosexual and gay/lesbian communities (Miller et al., 2007). As a result, bisexual individuals may fail to fit neatly into the heterosexual mainstream and the gay/lesbian community, which may lead to poorer social networks and lower levels of social support. Relatedly, there is less institutional and legal support for bisexual individuals compared to other groups. It is also possible that establishing stable and secure romantic relationships may be more difficult for bisexual than heterosexual and gay/lesbian individuals due to difficulties in identifying partners who are not threatened by their sexual identity. This is consistent with research showing that bisexual individuals are more likely to be exposed to intimate partner violence than both heterosexual and gay/lesbian individuals (McLaughlin et al., 2012).

Research on the relationships between sexual identity and relationship quality has almost exclusively compared the outcomes of same-sex and opposite-sex couples, failing to account for the fact that a substantial share of individuals identify as bisexual (Rothblum, 2009). We contribute to this literature by considering bisexual individuals as a sexual identity category of its own.

## *The context for same-sex couples in Australia and the United Kingdom*

Different institutional contexts provide varying levels of support for different types of relationships, and this results in different outcomes across relationship types (Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006). For example, cohabiters in countries offering more support for relationship diversity have higher levels of relationship quality than cohabiters in other countries (Soons & Kalmijn, 2009). Similarly, different national contexts provide varying levels of support for same-sex couples, reflected in normative perceptions about the legitimacy of homosexuality and the legal/political landscape concerning homosexual rights. Differences in the degree to which same-sex couples are institutionalized across societies should result in cross-national divergences in the outcomes of individuals in same-sex couples. In societies where there is more institutional support for relationship diversity we might expect same-sex couples to have comparatively higher levels of relationship quality. However, most previous research on sexual orientation and relationship outcomes has focused on a single country, namely the United States. Our study contributes to the existing evidence base by beginning to tease out institutional differences across other countries.

Cross-national studies have documented an almost universal shift towards more tolerant attitudes towards sexual minorities over the last few decades (see e.g. Scott, 1998). This is the case for the two countries under examination, Australia and the United Kingdom. In the 1983 Australian Values Study, a national sample of over 1,200 respondents, 76% of Australians found homosexuality to be unjustifiable and 32% would not like to have homosexuals as neighbours (Perales, 2015). In contrast, in the 2012 Australian World Values Survey (n≈1,500) 38% of Australians viewed homosexuality as unjustifiable and 14% would not like homosexuals as neighbours (Perales, 2015). Data from the British Social Attitudes surveys show similar trends. In 1983, 50% of British respondents viewed same-sex relationships as being 'always wrong', compared to 20% in 2010 (NatCen, 2013). The percentage of respondents stating that same-sex relationships are 'not at all wrong' increased from 17% in 1983 to 45% in 2010 (NatCen, 2013).

The two countries that we examine provide context variation with respect to the most often researched United States. In a recent study, individuals in Australia displayed

substantively more progressive views towards homosexuality than individuals in the United States, whose inhabitants in turn displayed more permissive views than individuals in the United Kingdom (Andersen & Fetner, 2008). Attitudes in these three countries are nevertheless not within the global extremes: they are less progressive than in Scandinavian countries, and more progressive than in Eastern European, Latin American, African, Middle Eastern and Asian countries (PEW Research Centre, 2013).

While Australians report more tolerant attitudes towards sexual minorities than people from the United Kingdom, legislation concerning same-sex unions in Australia is substantially more restrictive than in most of the United Kingdom. In Australia, same-sex couples are prevented from marrying due to the *1961 Marriage Act*, which defines marriage as the consensual union of a man and a woman. Same-sex marriages that took place in other countries are not recognised as legal marriages in Australia. In some Australian states, same-sex couples can nevertheless become registered domestic partnerships, and in the Australian Capital Territory they can form civil unions. The Australian Federal Government is currently debating same-sex marriage and a national plebiscite is projected for 2016. Within the United Kingdom, same-sex marriage is legal since the 13<sup>th</sup> of March 2014 in England and Wales, and since the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 2014 in Scotland (note that our data were collected before these dates). Same-sex marriages are still illegal in Northern Ireland, which treats same-sex marriages from other countries as civil unions. Similarly, adoption law is more favourable for same-sex couples in the United Kingdom than in Australia.

## **Data**

Nationally representative surveys that include information on individuals' sexual identity are scarce due to the sensitivity of the subject matter. In the past, quantitative researchers have used data on partner's sex to identify individuals in same-sex relationships (Umberson et al., 2015). This course of action is nevertheless restrictive. First, it does not enable respondents to ascertain their own identities, which may differ from those imposed upon them. Second and most importantly, bisexual individuals in same-sex as well as opposite-sex relationships cannot be identified. Some recent large-scale surveys are beginning to collect information on individuals' self-reports of their

sexual identity. In the present study we leverage two such surveys: the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey and the UK Longitudinal Household Study (*Understanding Society*). *Understanding Society* is the successor to the British Household Panel Survey (in fact, it incorporates its sample members) and the HILDA Survey was designed using the latter as a model. Hence, the design, structure and contents of *Understanding Society* and the HILDA Survey are highly consistent, enabling robust cross-national comparisons across datasets. As explained in a recent review by Umberson et al. (2015, p.106): “incorporating relationship quality measures into representative data sets will contribute to a better understanding of the predictors and consequences of relationship quality for same-sex couples”. Most previous studies have relied on small, purposive samples (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007; Rothblum, 2009; Umberson et al., 2015), and so our study adds to previous literature by identifying patterns that are likely to be generalizable to the population in Australia and the United Kingdom.

*Understanding Society* is an ongoing household panel study which since 2009 tracks over 45,000 individuals age 16 and older in the United Kingdom. In its third wave (2011-2013) and for the first time, this survey included a question asking about individuals' sexual identity. This was located within a self-complete questionnaire, read “Which of the following options best describes how you think of yourself?”, and had the following response options: ‘heterosexual or straight’, ‘gay or lesbian’, ‘bisexual’, ‘other’, ‘don’t know’ and ‘prefer not to say’. The HILDA Survey is another ongoing household panel study which since 2001 follows around 17,000 individuals in Australia age 15 and older. In its twelfth wave (2012), the HILDA Survey incorporates a question on individuals' sexual identity within a self-complete questionnaire. The wording of and response items for this questionnaire item were the same as those for *Understanding Society*. For simplicity and parsimony, in both surveys in multivariate analyses we pool together all individuals which did not specify their sexual identity as ‘heterosexual’, ‘gay/lesbian’ or ‘bisexual’ into an ‘other response’ category. We use information from wave 12 in the HILDA Survey and wave 3 in *Understanding Society*. Our analyses focus on a sample of individuals in co-residential unions with no missing data on model variables. This yields a sample size of around 25,000 individuals in *Understanding Society* and around 9,000 individuals in the HILDA Survey.

The country-specific distributions for the sexual identity variables amongst partnered individuals are reported in Table 1. In the sample for the United Kingdom 94.47% (n=24,475) of partnered individuals report being 'heterosexual', 0.89% (n=231) gay/lesbian and 0.69% (n=179) bisexual, with the remaining 3.94% (n=781) falling into the other categories. The results for the Australian sample are very similar: 93.75% (n=9,127) of partnered respondents identified as 'heterosexual', 1.12% (n=109) as gay/lesbian, 1.11% (n=108) as bisexual, and 4.02% (n=339) fell into other response categories. Hence, despite partnered individuals from sexual minorities comprise only a small share of respondents, the large sample sizes in *Understanding Society* and the HILDA Survey ensure sufficient numbers for multivariate analyses.

**Table 1**

Sexual identity of partnered individuals

	United Kingdom		Australia	
	n	%	n	%
Heterosexual	24,475	94.47	9,127	93.75
Gay/Lesbian	231	0.89	109	1.12
Bisexual	179	0.69	108	1.11
Other	242	0.93	52	0.53
Prefer not to say	733	2.83	182	1.87
Refused	27	0.10	93	0.96
Unsure/Don't know	21	0.08	64	0.66
Total	25,908	100	9,175	100

*Note:* Australia (HILDA Survey, 2012/13) and United Kingdom (*Understanding Society*, 2011/13).

We are interested in the associations between individuals' sexual identity and their relationship quality. Both *Understanding Society* and the HILDA Survey include batteries of questions aimed at measuring this construct. In *Understanding Society* respondents are asked within a self-complete questionnaire how often they: (i) 'have a stimulating exchange of ideas with their partner', (ii) 'calmly discuss something with their partner', (iii) 'work together on a project with their partner', (iv) 'consider divorce, separation or terminating the relationship', (v) 'regretted that they married or lived together', (vi)

'quarrel', (vii) 'get on each other nerves', and (viii) 'kiss their partner'. Possible responses for items (i) to (iii) are: [1] 'never', [2] 'less than once a month', [3] 'once or twice a month', [4] 'once or twice a week', [5] 'once a day', and [6] 'more often'. For items (iv) to (viii) response options are [1] 'all of the time', [2] 'most of the time', [3] 'more often than not', [4] 'occasionally', [5] 'rarely', and [6] 'never'. There is also a question asking about respondents' overall degree of happiness with their relationship, with the following response options: [1] 'extremely unhappy', [2] 'fairly unhappy', [3] 'a little unhappy', [4] 'happy', [5] 'very happy', [6] 'extremely happy', and [7] 'perfect'.<sup>1</sup>

In the HILDA Survey, relationship quality is assessed through the following questionnaire items: (i) 'how good is your relationship compared to most?', (ii) 'how many problems are there in your relationship?', (iii) 'how much do you love your spouse/partner?', (iv) 'how often do you wish you had not married/got into this relationship?', (v) 'how well does your spouse/partner meet your needs?' and (vi) 'to what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?'. Response options are on a scale from 1 ('poor'/'not many'/'not much'/'never'/'hardly at all') to 5 ('excellent'/'very many'/'very, very much'/'very often'/'completely'). Another question asks respondents about their overall satisfaction with the relationship with their partners, on a scale from 0 ('completely dissatisfied') to 10 ('completely satisfied').<sup>2</sup>

In each survey, we transformed the scores for the overall satisfaction questions to have the same range as the other relationship quality items, and averaged the scores for the relationship quality and satisfaction items into composite indices of relationship quality.<sup>3</sup> Where necessary, the item categories were reverse-coded so that high values always represent higher relationship quality. For ease of comparison, the resulting indices were transformed to range from 0 (worst possible relationship quality score) to 10 (best possible relationship quality score). Descriptive statistics on the different relationship quality items and the overall scales are presented in Table 2.

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<sup>1</sup> These items come from Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment scale (Spanier, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> These items come from Hendrick's Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> We exclude respondents who did not answer at least 50% of all the relationship quality items. Cronbach Alpha statistics of 0.79 for the UK and 0.89 for Australia indicate that the items form a reliable index.

**Table 2**

Descriptive statistics on relationship quality items and index

	United Kingdom				Australia			
	mean	sd	range	n	mean	sd	range	n
Index	7.10	1.35	0-10	25,579	8.34	1.76	0-10	9,212
How often do you have a stimulating exchange of ideas?	4.17	1.23	1-6	25,542				
How often do you calmly discuss something?	4.54	1.17	1-6	25,574				
How often do you work together on a project?	3.61	1.42	1-6	25,559				
How often do you consider divorce, separation or terminating your relationship?	5.61	0.83	1-6	25,573				
How often do you regret that you married or lived together?	5.58	0.82	1-6	25,559				
How often do you and your partner quarrel?	4.48	0.83	1-6	25,570				
How often do you and your partner “get on each other's nerves”?	4.30	0.88	1-6	25,566				
Do you kiss your partner?	4.56	1.30	1-6	25,480				
Degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship	4.73	1.44	1-7	25,563				
How good is your relationship compared to most?					4.29	0.82	9,498	1-5
How many problems are there in your relationship					4.27	1.06	9,506	1-5
How much do you love your spouse/partner					4.64	0.69	9,498	1-5
How often do you wish you had not married/got into this relationship?					4.54	0.83	9,505	1-5
How well does your spouse/partner meet your needs?					4.14	0.91	9,505	1-5
To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?					4.11	0.90	9,485	1-5
Satisfaction with your relationship with your partner					8.43	1.82	9,654	0-10

*Note:* Australia (HILDA Survey, 2012/13) and United Kingdom (Understanding Society, 2011/13). High values denote better relationship outcomes.



## Results

We model the associations between sexual identity and relationship quality using multivariate ordinary least square (OLS) regression models that control for a parsimonious set of potential confounders used in previous studies. These include respondent's age and its square, whether or not the respondent is a woman, legally married or has children, respondent's education, ethnicity and region (United Kingdom) or state (Australia) of residence, residence in a rural area, and data collection year.<sup>4</sup>

Table 3 shows the results of these models for partnered individuals in the United Kingdom sample. All else being equal, women report their relationships to be of lesser quality than men. This is apparent for the relationship quality index ( $\beta_{\text{index}}=-0.19$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) as well as for each of the separate relationship quality items. Concerning sexual identity, there are no statistically significant differences in overall relationship quality between individuals who identify as 'gay or lesbian' and those who identify as heterosexual ( $\beta_{\text{index}}=-0.05$ ,  $p>0.1$ ). 'Gay or lesbian' individuals report lower scores than heterosexual individuals in the items concerning quarrelling ( $\beta_{\text{quarrel}}=-0.14$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), thinking about separation ( $\beta_{\text{separation}}=-0.14$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and regretting getting into the relationship ( $\beta_{\text{regret}}=-0.21$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), but greater scores in the item concerning working on projects together with their partner ( $\beta_{\text{project}}=0.26$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Overall, individuals who identify as bisexual in the United Kingdom report lower relationship quality than individuals who identify as heterosexual ( $\beta_{\text{index}}=-0.26$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). This is driven by relatively low relationship quality in items pertaining to overall relationship happiness ( $\beta_{\text{index}}=-0.22$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), quarrelling ( $\beta_{\text{index}}=-0.22$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), thinking about separation ( $\beta_{\text{index}}=-0.36$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and regretting entering the relationship ( $\beta_{\text{regret}}=-0.40$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). The differences between homosexual and bisexual people in the United Kingdom sample are relatively small and more often than not statistically insignificant. While the interpretation of the coefficient on the 'other response' variable is difficult due to

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<sup>4</sup> Descriptive statistics on these variables can be found in Table A1 in the Appendix. Relationship duration is another potential confounder of the relationship between sexual identity and relationship quality – particularly if the unions of individuals from sexual minorities are shorter than those of heterosexual individuals. We did not include this measure in the models because it is not available in *Understanding Society*. Analyses of the HILDA Survey including relationship duration as a control variable in the models yield remarkably similar results to those presented here. These are available upon request.

within-group heterogeneity, individuals in this category report lower average relationship quality than heterosexual individuals ( $\beta_{\text{index}}=-0.09, p<0.05$ ).

Table 4 shows the results of models of relationship quality for the sample of partnered individuals in Australia. As for the United Kingdom, women in Australia report lower relationship quality than men overall ( $\beta_{\text{index}}=-0.25, p<0.05$ ) and for each of the relationship quality items. The same applies to individuals who identify as bisexual ( $\beta_{\text{index}}=-0.85, p<0.01$ ). However, the negative effect of bisexuality on relationship quality in Australia is substantially larger and more consistent across relationship quality items than that in the United Kingdom. The results for individuals who identify as 'gay or lesbian' in Australia are also very different to those for the United Kingdom. 'Gay or lesbian' individuals in Australia report significantly higher overall relationship quality than heterosexual individuals ( $\beta_{\text{index}}=0.38, p<0.05$ ). This is the aggregate effect of higher relationship quality amongst homosexual than heterosexual individuals in 5 out of 7 relationship quality items. As a result, the differences in relationship quality between homosexual and bisexual individuals in Australia are also more pronounced than in the United Kingdom, and statistically significant in all cases. Finally, as for the United Kingdom, individuals who fall into the 'other response' category report lower relationship quality than heterosexual individuals ( $\beta_{\text{index}}=-0.26, p<0.01$ ).

**Table 3**

Regression models of relationship quality index and items, United Kingdom

	(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)	(v)	(vi)	(vii)	(viii)	(ix)	(x)
	INDEX	Happiness with relationship	How often... quarrel	discuss things calmly	think about separation	exchange ideas	get on each other's nerves	kiss	regret being together	work together on project
<u>Sex</u>										
Female	-0.19***	-0.09***	-0.05***	-0.13***	-0.03***	-0.10***	-0.16***	-0.09***	-0.08***	-0.14***
<u>Sexual identity</u>										
Heterosexual ( <i>ref.</i> )										
Gay/Lesbian	-0.05	-0.10	-0.14**	0.11	-0.14**	0.05	-0.04	-0.01	-0.21***	0.26***
Bisexual	-0.26**	-0.22**	-0.22***	-0.07	-0.36***	0.04	-0.11	0.08	-0.40***	0.07
Other response	-0.09**	-0.05	-0.03	-0.09**	-0.16***	-0.15***	0.07**	0.03	-0.13***	0.03
$\beta_{\text{gay/lesbian}} = \beta_{\text{bisexual}}$	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	***	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	**	n.s.
N	25,348	25,332	25,339	25,342	25,342	25,311	25,335	25,250	25,328	25,327
R <sup>2</sup>	0.03	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.09	0.03	0.02

Note: Understanding Society, 2011/13. OLS models. High values denote better relationship outcomes. Models control for age, age squared, married, parenthood, highest educational qualification, ethnicity, region, residence in a rural area

\* p<0.10, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.01, n.s. = not statistically significant at the 10% level.

**Table 4**

Regression models of relationship quality index and items, Australia

	(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)	(v)	(vi)	(vii)	(viii)
	INDEX	Satisfaction with relationship	Relationship compared to most	Wished not in relationship	Relationship meets expectations	How much loves partner	How many problems	Partner meets needs
<u>Sex</u>								
Female	-0.25***	-0.24***	-0.11***	-0.09***	-0.14***	-0.08***	-0.07***	-0.18***
<u>Sexual identity</u>								
Heterosexual ( <i>ref.</i> )								
Gay/Lesbian	0.38**	0.10	0.17**	0.19**	0.19**	0.23***	0.08	0.15*
Bisexual	-0.85***	-1.04***	-0.19**	-0.33***	-0.43***	-0.18***	-0.43***	-0.33***
Other response	-0.26***	-0.08	0.00	-0.23***	-0.17***	-0.11***	-0.10*	-0.08*
$\beta_{\text{gay/lesbian}} = \beta_{\text{bisexual}}$	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***
N	9,206	9,648	9,492	9,499	9,479	9,492	9,500	9,499
R <sup>2</sup>	0.05	0.05	0.04	0.03	0.04	0.05	0.03	0.05

Note: HILDA Survey, 2012/13. OLS models. High values denote better relationship outcomes. Models control for age, age squared, married, parenthood, highest educational qualification, ethnicity, state, residence in a rural area.

\* p<0.10, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.01.

The results in Tables 3 and 4 do not take into account the potential role of intersections between biological sex and sexual identity in influencing relationship quality. To examine these, the models in Columns (i) and (iii) in Table 5 include a variable that separates individuals from different sexual identities by their biological sex, distinguishing between heterosexual men ( $n_{uk}=11,432$ ,  $n_{australia}=4,479$ ), heterosexual women ( $n_{uk}=13,043$ ,  $n_{australia}=4,648$ ), gay men ( $n_{uk}=117$ ,  $n_{australia}=54$ ), lesbian women ( $n_{uk}=114$ ,  $n_{australia}=55$ ), bisexual men ( $n_{uk}=77$ ,  $n_{australia}=33$ ), bisexual women ( $n_{uk}=102$ ,  $n_{australia}=75$ ), men in the 'other response' category ( $n_{uk}=436$ ,  $n_{australia}=169$ ) and women in the 'other response' category ( $n_{uk}=587$ ,  $n_{australia}=222$ ).

Results for the United Kingdom using this categorization are enlightening. Comparing first *across* biological sex, homosexual men report substantially worse relationship quality than homosexual women –who are actually the most satisfied subgroup, ahead of heterosexual men. Similarly, bisexual men experience worse outcomes than bisexual women. Comparisons *within* biological sex are also interesting. Amongst women, lesbians are significantly more satisfied with their relationships than heterosexual women, who are in turn more satisfied than bisexual women (though not significantly). Amongst men, heterosexual men are significantly more satisfied than gay men, who are in turn more satisfied than bisexual men (though not significantly). Hence, two clear patterns of results emerge from the models for the United Kingdom. First, while heterosexual men's relationship quality is higher than heterosexual women's relationship quality, the reverse holds true for men and women from sexual minorities. Second, the relationship quality of bisexual individuals is always the lowest.

In Australia, the only difference across biological sex is the higher satisfaction of heterosexual men relative to heterosexual women. Comparisons within men suggest no difference in the relationship quality of heterosexual and gay men, but significantly higher satisfaction of men in both of these groups than bisexual men. Comparisons within women reveal that lesbian women are significantly more satisfied with their relationships than heterosexual women, who are in turn significantly more satisfied than bisexual women.

The analyses so far have examined how the gender and sexual identity of the respondent affect his/her relationship quality reports. However, it is highly likely that such reports are not just the product of the gender and sexual identity of respondents, but also of the

gender and sexual identity of their partners. Due to small sample sizes and collinearity it is not plausible (or reliable) to consider all possible permutations of self's and partner's gender and sexual identity. However, in Columns (ii) and (iv) in Table 5 we present the results of models that consider those dyadic combinations of self and partner traits that yield sufficient observations for parsimonious multivariate analysis.<sup>5</sup> The categories considered include men in heterosexual unions ( $n_{uk}=9,440$ ,  $n_{australia}= 4,067$ ), women in heterosexual unions ( $n_{uk}=9,440$ ,  $n_{australia}= 4,067$ ), men in homosexual unions ( $n_{uk}=80$ ,  $n_{australia}=46$ ), women in homosexual unions ( $n_{uk}=84$ ,  $n_{australia}=42$ ), bisexual men coupled with heterosexual women ( $n_{uk}=49$ ,  $n_{australia}=19$ ), and bisexual women coupled with heterosexual men ( $n_{uk}=61$ ,  $n_{australia}=49$ ). All other combinations are contained within a residual category, 'individuals in all other couple types' ( $n_{uk}=6,754$ ,  $n_{australia}= 1,445$ ).

Results for the United Kingdom indicate that relationship quality is reported to be highest by women in homosexual unions, followed in this order by men in heterosexual unions, women in heterosexual unions, bisexual women partnered with heterosexual men, individuals in all other couples, men in homosexual unions, and finally bisexual men partnered with heterosexual women. In Australia, the analogous relationship quality ordering of couple types is men in homosexual unions, women in homosexual unions, men in heterosexual unions, women in heterosexual unions, individuals in other couples types, bisexual men partnered with heterosexual women and finally bisexual women partnered with heterosexual men.

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<sup>5</sup> Couples in which one member fell into the 'other response' category were relatively numerous and could have been used to create additional categories. For simplicity, we refrain from doing so because of the little analytical value of the 'other response' category due to within-group heterogeneity.

**Table 5**

Regression models of relationship quality index (additional specifications), Australia and United Kingdom

	(i) United Kingdom	(ii) United Kingdom	(iii) Australia	(iv) Australia
<u>Sex and sexual identity</u>				
Heterosexual man ( <i>ref.</i> )				
Heterosexual woman	-0.20***		-0.25***	
Gay	-0.54***		0.31	
Lesbian	0.25**		0.18	
Bisexual man	-0.59***		-0.81***	
Bisexual woman	-0.21		-1.12***	
Other response, man	-0.09		-0.24*	
Other response, woman	-0.30***		-0.53***	
$\beta_{\text{gay}} = \beta_{\text{lesbian}}$	***		n.s.	
$\beta_{\text{bisexual man}} = \beta_{\text{bisexual woman}}$	*		n.s.	
$\beta_{\text{gay}} = \beta_{\text{bisexual man}}$	n.s.		***	
$\beta_{\text{heterosexual woman}} = \beta_{\text{lesbian}}$	***		***	
$\beta_{\text{heterosexual woman}} = \beta_{\text{bisexual woman}}$	n.s.		***	
$\beta_{\text{lesbian}} = \beta_{\text{bisexual woman}}$	**		***	
<u>Couple type</u>				
Man in a heterosexual union ( <i>ref.</i> )				
Woman in a heterosexual union		-0.16***		-0.25***
Man in a homosexual union		-0.34**		0.31
Woman in a homosexual union		0.49***		0.09
Bisexual man with heterosexual woman		-0.70***		-0.73*
Bisexual woman with heterosexual man		-0.26		-1.26***
Individuals in all other couple types		-0.29***		-0.59***
$\beta_{\text{man in homosexual union}} = \beta_{\text{woman in homosexual union}}$		***		n.s.
$\beta_{\text{bisexual man with heterosexual woman}} = \beta_{\text{bisexual woman with heterosexual man}}$		*		n.s.
$\beta_{\text{woman in heterosexual union}} = \beta_{\text{woman in homosexual union}}$		***		n.s.
N	25,348	25,348	9,206	9,206
R <sup>2</sup>	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.05

Note: UK (Understanding Society, 2011/13) and Australia (HILDA Survey, 2012/13). OLS models. High values denote better relationship outcomes. Models control for age, age squared, married, parenthood, highest educational qualification, ethnicity, state, residence in a rural area.

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , n.s. = not statistically significant at the 10% level.

## **Conclusion and discussion**

In this paper we have examined differences in relationship quality amongst men and women with differing sexual identities, using data from Australia and the United Kingdom –most of the earlier literature concentrated in the United States. We contribute to previous research by including bisexual individuals as a subgroup of interest, considering mixed-orientation couples using dyadic data, and undertaking the analyses using recent, large and nationally-representative data from two different countries. Our analyses yield a number of important findings.

First, we find that relationship quality in same-sex couples is not lower than in heterosexual couples. In the United Kingdom, there were no statistically significant differences in overall relationship quality between heterosexual and gay/lesbian individuals, while in Australia gay/lesbian individuals reported significantly higher overall relationship quality than heterosexual individuals. These findings are consistent with social identity theory, whereby a sense of belonging stemming from feeling part of an in-group raises relationship quality (Mohr & Fassinger, 2006; Kurdek, 2008). They can also be explained by high levels of egalitarianism in domestic work and better conflict management strategies in same-sex couples (Kurdek, 2005). Irrespective of the reasons why the association emerges, this pattern of results constitutes evidence against stereotypical depictions of same-sex couples as conflictive and problematic (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007; Rothblum, 2009).

Second, we find clear evidence in both Australia and the United Kingdom that bisexual individuals report lower relationship quality than gay/lesbian and heterosexual individuals. This pattern of results is apparent for both bisexual men and bisexual women, though the worst outcomes are observed for bisexual men in the United Kingdom and bisexual women in Australia. The mechanisms producing these associations remain blurry, but these are highly consistent with earlier claims that bisexuality remains a silenced and invisible sexual identity in contemporary post-industrial societies –with bisexual individuals not fitting into neither the heterosexual majority nor homosexual communities (Miller et al., 2007; Barker & Langdridge, 2008). This evidence also adds to a large body of work documenting how the health and wellbeing of bisexual individuals are comparatively poor (Miller et al., 2007; McLaughlin et al., 2012; Uhrig, 2013; Perales, 2015). Previous studies of relationship quality had



largely neglected bisexuals as a category of interest. Our findings highlight the importance of considering bisexuality in analyses of family outcomes.

Third, our analyses are also innovative in that they began to consider 'gendered relational contexts', i.e. the influence of the gender and sexual orientation not only of the respondent, but also of the respondent's partner (Umberson et al., 2015, p.103). While we were constrained by cell sizes in the specification of the categories of interest, our results suggest that there is value in examining the associations between gender, sexual identity and relationship outcomes using this approach. The original formulation of the 'gender-as-relational' perspective by West and Zimmerman (2009) stressed that, in making comparisons, researchers should differentiate between (i) men partnered with men, (ii) men partnered with women, (iii) women partnered with women, and (iv) women partnered with men. We argue that this categorization needs to more explicitly incorporate sexual identity, given the complexities brought about by the bisexual category: men and women in same-sex couples could actually identify as bisexual, and so could men and women in heterosexual relationships. Hence, subject to data availability, we prompt researchers to explore these issues using analytical categories which consider permutations not only of respondent's and partner's genders, but also of respondent's and partner's sexual identities.

Fourth, some of the patterns in the data differed visibly between Australia and the United Kingdom. For example, as noted above, the relationship quality of gay/lesbian individuals is equal to that of heterosexual individuals in the United Kingdom, but much higher in Australia. Also, the negative effect of bisexuality on relationship quality is stronger in Australia than the United Kingdom. These and other observed differences highlight how institutional contexts can play a part in influencing how individuals' sexual identities determine their relationship outcomes –even when countries feature relatively comparable institutions. We theorised that normative attitudes towards sexual minorities and the availability of equal rights concerning family processes (particularly marriage) would be important contextual factors moderating the relationship between sexual identity and relationship quality. At the time in which the surveys analysed took place neither country had legalised same-sex marriage, but individuals in Australian held more favourable attitudes towards sexual minorities than individuals in the United Kingdom. This might explain why the relationship quality

outcomes observed for gay men and lesbian women were better in Australia than in the United Kingdom.

Fifth, in addition to the findings on sexual identity and consistent with previous literature, we find that women report lower levels of relationship quality than men in Australia and the United Kingdom. Although this is not a new finding, it is based on recent nationally-representative data and adds confidence to our measures. Interestingly, in the United Kingdom, this gender difference reverses for homosexual individuals, with lesbian women reporting better relationship quality than gay men. This suggests that the relatively poor relationship quality reported by heterosexual women may be driven by being partnered to a man, rather than by being women.

Our approach has several limitations that may be addressed in future research. First, although we use two large household panel surveys, we can only use a single wave of data in which the question on sexual identity was included. Our analyses are thus cross-sectional. If the same question on sexual identity was included in subsequent survey waves, it would be possible to undertake more insightful longitudinal analyses of relationship outcomes by sexual identity. Second, the number of partnered individuals who identify as gay/lesbian or bisexual in our data is small, which reduces the precision of some of our comparisons. Given that the datasets that we use are very large and larger nationally-representative household panel data is unlikely to be collected, a more promising way to research the relationship outcomes of individuals from sexual minorities would be to design surveys which oversample these individuals (see Rosenfeld, Thomas, & Falcon, 2014). Third, Australia and the United Kingdom are relatively similar in their institutional context and levels of political and community support for sexual minorities. Our analyses add confidence that our findings are not country-specific, but additional comparisons across countries which vary more strongly in these dimensions would be better able to fully capture the importance of context. Finally, although both surveys use identical questions to measure sexual identity and the data were collected in approximately the same year, the measures of relationship quality are different. As a result, we cannot discard that differences in the measures used in each survey are behind the observed differences in relationship quality by sexual identity across countries.

Nevertheless, our results are timely and provide important information for policymakers in relation to current debates about same-sex marriage laws, adoption laws for same-sex couples and treatment of sexual minorities. Our findings indicate that the relationship quality of gay and lesbian couples is as high as, if not higher than, that of heterosexual couples. This can be taken as evidence that sexual minority couples are well-placed to raise children in warm and loving environments. It also suggests that policies to legalise same-sex marriage are well-guided, even though same-sex couples appear to do just as well as their heterosexual counterparts in the absence of such laws. More studies on the intersections between sexual identity and relationship quality are urgently needed. Promising avenues for further research include investigation of how the legitimization of same-sex marriages affects relationship quality in same-sex couples, as well as identification of specific mechanisms producing differences in relationship quality by sexual identity.

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## Appendix

**Table A1**

Descriptive statistics for control variables

	Mean (sd)	
	United Kingdom	Australia
Age	49.30 (15.06)	47.81 (15.94)
<i>Education</i>		
High	0.39	0.29
Medium	0.50	0.34
Low	0.11	0.36
Married	0.82	0.77
Parent	0.38	0.49
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
White	0.89	
Asian	0.07	
Black	0.02	
Other/mixed	0.02	
Australian born, not Indigenous		0.74
Migrant (English-speaking country)		0.12
Migrant (Non-English-speaking country)		0.13
Australian born, Indigenous		0.02
<i>Region</i>		
England (except London)	0.67	
London	0.10	
Wales	0.08	
Scotland	0.10	
Northern Ireland	0.06	
<i>State</i>		
New South Wales		0.30
Victoria		0.24
Queensland		0.21
South Australia		0.09
Western Australia		0.10
Tasmania		0.03
Northern Territory		0.01
Australian Capital Territory		0.02
Residence in rural area	0.27	0.34
<i>Survey year</i>		
2011	0.60	
2012	0.38	0.98
2013	0.02	0.02

Note: UK (Understanding Society, 2011/13) and Australia (HILDA Survey, 2012/13).