Individual, Couple, and Contextual Factors Associated with Same-Sex Relationship Instability

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Abstract

Despite being highly similar to different-sex couples in relationship quality, same-sex couples are at heightened risk for break-up, highlighting the need for research to identify risk factors for instability in same-sex relationships. Using a national sample of 595 adults involved in cohabiting same-sex romantic relationships, we examined several individual, relationship, and contextual factors as predictors of relationship instability. Specifically, we estimated cross-sectional associations between perceived instability (i.e., thinking about and taking steps towards relationship dissolution) and depressive symptoms, sexual identity distress, relationship satisfaction, quality of alternatives, commitment, destructive couple conflict, and social support for the relationship. We examined the unique role of each factor controlling for demographics and relationship satisfaction, and tested for gender differences in associations. Results indicated that beyond relationship satisfaction, destructive conflict and lower social support for the relationship were associated with instability in both males and females in same-sex relationships. For females only, instability was also predicted by higher sexual identity distress, quality of alternatives, and lower commitment. These findings suggest that same-sex relationship models and interventions may require some specificity based on the gender of the partners. Whereas destructive couple conflict and low relationship satisfaction may represent common risk factors for relationship instability across all couples, female couple stability may also be influenced by other individual, relationship, and contextual risk factors that represent potential targets for relationship interventions designed specifically for female couples.

Individual, Couple, and Contextual Factors Associated with Same-Sex Relationship Instability

Same-sex couples represent a sizeable minority of the United States population. Nearly 650,000 committed same-sex couples live in the U.S., about one-fifth of whom are raising children (Gates, 2013). A growing body of research demonstrates that same-sex relationships are, on average, equivalent to different-sex (i.e., composed of a female and a male) relationships in most domains of couple functioning, such as relationship satisfaction, conflict, intimacy, and commitment (see Kurdek, 2005 and Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007 for reviews). However, same-sex couples are less stable than different-sex couples. For example, in a longitudinal study of U.S. couples, approximately 19% of male couples and 24% of female couples ended their relationships within 12 years, versus 15% of married different-sex couples (Kurdek, 2004). In a large sample from the Netherlands, same-sex couples had 11.5 times higher odds of relationship dissolution than married different-sex couples (Kalmijn et al., 2007). The higher breakup rates of same-sex couples in these samples may be due in part to their inability to formalize their relationships via marriage; as a whole, marriages dissolve less often than do cohabiting or other dating relationships (Teachman, Thomas, & Paasch, 1991). However, cohabiting same-sex couples have shown higher breakup rates than non-married cohabiting different-sex couples in samples from Britain (Lau et al, 2012) and The Netherlands (Kalmijn et al., 2007). Also, same-sex couples with legally recognized unions in Norway and Sweden divorced at higher rates than did married different-sex couples (Andersson, Noack, Seierstad, & Weedon-Fekjær, 2006).

Together, these findings suggest that same-sex couples are likely to remain at risk for relationship dissolution, even as policies shift toward granting them equal access to marriage

and its benefits. As a consequence, same-sex couples and their children are less likely to reap the well-documented mental and physical health benefits of stable romantic relationships, including marriage (Amato, 2000; Waite & Gallagher, 2001). Further, they are vulnerable to experiencing the wide range of negative physical and mental health outcomes associated with the break-up of marriages (Amato, 2000) and unmarried dating relationships (Rhoades, Kamp Dush, Atkins, Stanley, & Markman, 2011). Thus, policies and interventions that promote healthy and stable same-sex relationships, which are likely to thereby support the health of LGB adults and their children, are clearly needed.

To inform such efforts, it is important to identify the risk and protective factors for same-sex relationship instability versus stability. Existing research and theory in this area has been almost exclusively focused on different-sex couples. Although early research on same-sex couples suggests that many of the factors that predict couple outcomes (e.g., relationship quality) are consistent across couple type (e.g., Kurdek, 2005), it is important not to view same-sex relationships through a heteronormative lens. As highlighted by ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Huston, 2000), individuals and their close relationships are influenced by the attitudes and ideologies of broader culture. Sexual minorities in the United States currently live within a broader context of heterosexism that exposes them to significant stress, with negative implications for their individual health (Meyer, 2003) and their relationships (Mohr & Daly, 2008). This social context is likely to affect the constellation of factors that may influence couple stability. Moreover, the limited existent research on same-sex couple stability is largely based on data collected in previous decades (e.g., Balsam, Beauchaine, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2008; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983) or from outside of the United States (e.g.,

Andersson et al., 2006; Lau, 2012) and is focused on comparing break-up rates with those of different-sex couples rather than using within-group data to identify predictors of breakup. Thus, little empirical knowledge exists on risk factors for relationship instability of same-sex couples in contemporary American culture.

To address this gap in the literature, the present study was designed to identify factors associated with relationship instability in same-sex relationships. Consistent with previous theoretical and empirical work, we conceptualized relationship instability as "affective and cognitive states along the related actions that are precedent to terminating a relationship," which occurs within intact couples (Booth, Johnson, & Edwards, 1983). Specifically, in line with evidence that a variety of behaviors and motivational processes precede the actual dissolution of a romantic relationship (Agnew, Arriaga, & Wilson, 2008), level of relationship instability is defined as the extent to which individuals have thought about or taken steps towards ending their relationship (Booth et al., 1983). This definition allowed us to examine correlates of relationship instability within a large, nationally-recruited sample of individuals in intact cohabiting same-sex relationships.

The present study was theoretically grounded in the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model of Marriage (VSA; Karney & Bradbury, 1995) and related models of relationship stability (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003), which categorize risk factors for relationship dissolution into three broad categories: individual factors (i.e., stable personal characteristics or vulnerabilities of each partner), relationship factors (i.e., characteristics of the couple relationship or couple processes), and contextual/external factors (i.e., the social and cultural context in which one's relationship exists; stressful circumstances). Within each category, we

focused on factors particularly relevant to sexual minorities. Furthermore, because individual, relationship, and contextual contributors to relationship stability are often explored in isolation, we sought to examine the unique contribution of these factors in one cohesive model. Specifically, the current study had three primary aims: (1) to test for associations between relevant individual, relationship, and contextual factors and same-sex relationship instability, (2) to test for gender differences in these associations and, (3) to examine these associations while accounting for the effects of relationship satisfaction to better inform practice and intervention science.

Predictors of Relationship Instability

Individual factors. Psychopathology, and *depression* in particular, is a well-documented risk factor for poor relationship outcomes among different-sex couples (see Whisman, 2013). Multiple studies have shown that depression in either partner is associated with relationship distress (see Whisman & Beach, 2001) and dissolution (Kessler, Walters, & Forthofer, 1998). Because sexual minorities experience elevated rates of depression (Meyer, 2003), this individual vulnerability may contribute to the heightened instability of same-sex couples. Two studies have documented a negative association between depressive symptoms and same-sex relationship quality (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Whitton & Kuryluk, 2014). We hypothesized that depressive symptoms would also be positively associated with relationship instability.

Additionally, because LGB individuals in the United States currently live in a social climate characterized by stigmatization and prejudice related to their sexual identities (Meyer, 2003; Miller & Kaiser, 2001), they are likely to experience *sexual identity distress*, which may represent an individual risk factor for relationship instability. Sexual identity distress refers to

the negative feelings that LGB individuals may feel towards their own sexuality as a consequence of internalizing society's negative stereotypes and stigma about non-heterosexuality (Herek, 2004). These feelings may affect the quality and stability of their intimate relationships, as they may produce shame about attractions towards their relationship partner or about the relationship itself (Frost & Meyer, 2006; Mohr & Fassinger, 2006). Several studies have found negative associations between level of sexual identity distress and relationship quality among same-sex couples (Balsam & Syzmanski, 2005; Ross & Rosser, 1996). To date, however, no studies have examined the associations between sexual identity distress and same-sex relationship stability. We hypothesized that sexual identity distress would be positively associated with relationship instability.

Relationship factors. Models of couple functioning (Halford et al., 2013; Karney & Bradbury, 1995) highlight the importance of relationship factors, which include a broad range of dyadic processes and relationship characteristics shown in different studies to predict couple outcomes. As it is impossible to include every known factor in our hypothesized model, we focused on four factors with strong theoretical and empirical bases: satisfaction, perceived quality of alternatives to the relationship, commitment, and destructive couple conflict.

Within this framework**,** exchange-based theories conceptualize the choice of whether to exit or remain in a relationship as a balance between attraction to staying and barriers to leaving the relationship (Levinger, 1965; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). According to exchange-based theory, attractions to staying include pleasant aspects of the relationship, such as companionship, love, emotional support, sex, and affection (Levinger, 1965). Such rewards are often captured by partners' reports of their happiness or *satisfaction* with the relationship

(Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Fincham & Rogge, 2010), as partners who experience high levels of reward from their relationship typically report more satisfaction with it (Previti & Amato, 2003). As such, higher levels of relationship satisfaction are thought to counterbalance the costs (e.g. having to make compromises or spend time together) of remaining in the relationship, thereby motivating relationship continuance (Levinger, 1965; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Indeed, relationship satisfaction is highly predictive of stability in married different-sex couples (see Yeh, Lorenz, Wickrama, Conger, & Elder, 2006; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). The role of satisfaction in relationship stability is likely to generalize to same-sex relationships (Kurdek, 2004); however, to date, this has only been documented in a few studies (e.g., Beals, Impett, & Peplau, 2002; Kurdek, 1992) that measured relationship stability as status (i.e. intact or dissolved) at follow-up. Further, because same-sex couples' equivalent levels of satisfaction to different-sex couples do not appear to translate into equivalent relationship stability (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007), more research examining associations between these two variables in same-sex couples is clearly needed. Given findings from the few previous studies of relationship satisfaction and dissolution status in same-sex couples, we expected relationship satisfaction to be negatively associated with relationship instability in the current study.

In contrast, barriers to leaving a relationship include economic, social, or psychological factors that increase the cost of leaving the relationship or present challenges for doing so. A central aspect of individuals' perceptions of such barriers is their *perceived quality of alternatives to the relationship* (e.g., Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), defined as the extent to which one's needs (e.g., for companionship and intimacy) could be met outside the relationship through relations with other partners, friends, or family members. Poorer perceived quality of

alternatives raises the costs of ending a relationship, thereby creating a barrier to exit (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). As a result of differences in access to legal recognition and social acceptance of the relationship, same-sex partners may perceive fewer economic and social barriers to exiting the relationship (e.g., divorce costs, familial expectations to stay) than different-sex partners. On the other hand, their perceived quality of alternatives may also be poorer due to fewer numbers of available LGB prospective partners, and challenges faced by LGB individuals who are looking to meet these prospective partners (e.g., risk of discrimination, lack of knowledge of prospective partners' sexual orientation). Nevertheless, it is likely that perceived quality of alternatives in same-sex relationships is similarly associated with instability. Indeed, one study found that quality of alternatives was negatively associated with relationship stability (e.g. intact versus dissolved relationship status at follow-up) among female same-sex couples (Beals et al., 2002). We hypothesized that perceived quality of alternatives would be positively associated with relationship instability in the current sample of both male and female same-sex couples.

Additionally, relationships are characterized by level of *commitment*, which captures an individual's sense of allegiance and feelings of psychological attachment to a relationship for the long-term (Rusbult, 1983; Stanley & Markman, 1992). According to the Investment Model (Rusbult, 1980, 1983) and other commitment theories (Stanley & Markman, 1992), commitment is a proximal, potent predictor of relationship persistence versus dissolution; this has been supported in a large body of research on different-sex romantic relationships (Le et al., 2010; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010). While previous research has examined the determinants of commitment among same-sex couples (Kurdek, 2000), few studies have

examined the role of commitment in the relationship stability of same-sex relationships. In fact only one study has demonstrated that commitment may be a similarly strong predictor of same-sex relationship dissolution (Beals et al., 2002); unfortunately, this study focused solely on female same-sex relationships. Building on this research, we hypothesized that commitment would be negatively associated with same-sex relationship instability in the current study.

Lastly, another relationship characteristic associated with relationship instability is *couple conflict*. In fact, destructive, critical, and negative interchanges between partners about areas of conflict are perhaps the most well-documented predictor of different-sex relationship dissatisfaction and instability (Gottman, 1994). These processes appear to be similar in same-sex couples, who have conflicts about the same topics (Kurdek, 1994) and exhibit similar levels of constructive and destructive conflict patterns (Kurdek, 2004; 2005) as different-sex couples, and for whom more destructive conflict is linked with lower satisfaction (Julien, Chartrand, Simard, Bouthillier, & Bégin, 2003; Metz, Rosser, & Strapko, 1994) and stability (Gottman et al., 2003). Therefore, we hypothesized that destructive couple conflict would be positively associated with relationship instability in the current study.

Contextual factors. Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) highlights the important, yet underexamined, influence of broader social and cultural context on close relationships. One way that the current social climate, which still stigmatizes same-sex attractions and behavior, is likely to affect same-sex couples is through their *perceived support for the relationship* (i.e., relationship support; Huston, 2000), defined as the sense that one's larger social network, specifically family and friends, support one's romantic relationship. Research on different-sex couples has demonstrated that lower relationship support,

particularly from members of individuals' families of origin (e.g. parents, siblings), is one of the most significant and robust differences between same- and different-sex couples (e.g., Kurdek, 2005; 2006). Additionally, because sexual minority individuals may compensate for lower levels of family support by establishing closer relationships with friends (i.e., *families of choice*; Carrington, 1999; Oswald, 2002), relationship support from individuals' friendship groups might be especially relevant for same-sex relationship quality and stability (Blair & Holmberg, 2008).

In general, lack of support from social networks is associated with concurrent relationship distress (Sprecher et al., 2006) and decreased relationship quality over time (Karney & Bradbury, 2005) among different-sex couples. Additionally, in a sample of individuals involved in either same-sex or different-sex relationships, less perceived social support for the relationship was associated with later relationship dissolution (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2007). Compared to other couples, same-sex couples generally experience more societal stigma along with less support from their family of origin (Kurdek, 2005; 2006), which has been associated with lower relationship satisfaction among same-sex partners (Blair & Holmberg, 2008; Elizur & Mintzer, 2003; Kurdek, 2004). We proposed that general perceived relationship support (i.e., support from family of origin and friends) would also be negatively associated with relationship instability.

Gender differences

Social research often refers to *sex* as the genetic biology of being male or female, whereas *gender* refers to the social construction and correlates of an individual's sex (see Phillips, 2005). Same-sex couples – defined as couples comprised of two individuals who identify as the same gender - offer a unique opportunity to examine how an individual's

identity as male or female influences the prevalence and predictors of relationship instability. Because both partners share the same gender, they also share similar gender-based developmental socialization histories and are subject to the same societal norms and expectations for gender roles, which may influence couple processes and stability. In contrast, among different-sex couples, couple stability is influenced by both male and female gender roles and other gender-based factors. Additionally, because each different-sex couple includes partners of different genders, gender differences in break-up rates cannot be estimated, and the presence of effects from the different-gendered partner may contaminate estimates of the effects of certain factors on couple instability. To date, few studies have examined gender differences in the instability of same-sex couples and existent studies yield conflicting results; some found lower dissolution rates among female than male same-sex couples (Kalmijn et al., 2007; Lau, 2012) but others reported the opposite pattern (Andersson et al., 2006; Kurdek, 1998). More research is needed to clarify these issues.

Concerning gender differences in predictors of relationship stability, aggregate reviews suggest that the associations between relationship factors and marital outcomes (e.g., divorce, separation) do not significantly differ by gender for different-sex married couples (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). However, a recent meta-analysis of predictors of break-up in non-married different-sex relationships found that gender significantly moderated the effects of several relationship factors (Le et al., 2010). Specifically, relationship satisfaction and ambivalence more strongly predicted dissolution for males, whereas dependence, self-disclosure, closeness, conflict, and network support more strongly predicting dissolution for females. Interestingly, however, gender did not moderate any individual factors' (e.g., attachment style, personality

traits, relationship beliefs) associations with instability (Le et al., 2010). The only study that has examined gender differences in predictors of same-sex relationship instability only tested demographic factors, finding that the effects of age, education, income, and months living together on later relationship dissolution did not differ between male and female couples (Kurdek, 2003). Clearly, more research is needed. Thus, in the current study, we tested whether gender moderated the associations between same-sex relationship instability and the aforementioned individual, relationship, and contextual variables.

Effects beyond satisfaction

In a recent review of relationship education and prevention efforts, Bradbury and Lavner (2012) argued that while most relationship interventions target *relationship satisfaction* as an outcome, several studies indicate that partners' overall level of relationship satisfaction tends to be highly stable over time (e.g., Lavner & Bradbury, 2010; Anderson, Van Ryzin, & Doherty, 2010) and very difficult to target in interventions because it varies as a function of other relationship processes, such as conflict. Thus, while increasing partners' level of relationship satisfaction may contribute to strengthening the relational bond and increasing stability (see Bradbury, Karney, Lafrate, & Donato, 2010; Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008), these findings are limited in their applicability. Further, because satisfaction typically shows moderate to high associations with risk factors for instability, there is difficulty in disentangling the *unique* contribution of these factors beyond satisfaction (Halford et al., 2003). Therefore, a third aim of our study was to explore the individual, relationship, and contextual risk factors for instability of same-sex relationships while *accounting for* the contribution of overall relationship satisfaction.

Method

Participants

Participants were drawn from a larger study of same-sex relationship development. Of the 718 individuals who provided survey data, we excluded 109 individuals whose partners had already completed the survey to retain independence of data. An additional 13 individuals who identified their gender as other than male or female (e.g. genderqueer) were excluded from analyses due to the centrality of binary gender categorization to our hypotheses. This yielded a final sample of 595 participants. Demographic information is displayed in Table 1.

Measures

Dependent variable. *Relationship instability* was assessed using an adapted version of the Marital Instability Index (MII; Booth et al., 1983), a 5-item behaviorally oriented self-report measure designed to assess instability in intact couples. The MII, which asks participants to rate the frequency with which they have thought about or taken steps toward ending their relationship, is a commonly used index of index of instability in married samples (e.g., Whitton, Stanley, Markman, & Johnson, 2013; Yeh, Lorenz, Wickrama, Conger, & Elder, 2006) and is highly predictive of marital dissolution (Booth, Johnson, White, & Edwards, 1985). We developed the 4-item Relationship Instability Index, a modified version of this measure that is appropriate for same-sex couples and does not assume marital status. Specifically, we replaced the word “marriage” with “relationship” and “divorce” with “breaking up or ending my relationship” and deleted one item that asked about consulting an attorney regarding a possible divorce or separation, given that many same-sex couples do not have legal recognition. The final 4 items were: “ I have thought that my relationship might be in trouble,” “The thought

of breaking up or ending the relationship has crossed my mind," "I have discussed ending my relationship with a close friend," and "My partner or I have seriously suggested the idea of ending our relationship". Similar revisions of this measure used with unmarried different-sex cohabitors have demonstrated good psychometric properties (Lannin et al., 2013). Participants responded to each item on a 5-point scale (0 = Never; 4 = Very Often). Scores reflect the mean rating across the four items and higher scores represent greater instability. Internal consistency in the current sample was excellent (α = .87).

Control variables. Participants were asked to report basic *demographic information*, including their sexual orientation, race (coded as White versus non-White due to small numbers of participants in individual minority groups), age, annual income, current relationship status (coded as 0 = non-married, 1 = in a legally recognized relationship), and relationship length. Participants reported their self-identified gender as "male" "female" or "other" (with the ability to type in their preferred gender label, most often "gender-queer"). For analyses, responses were coded as 0 = female, 1 = male; the "other" responses (2%) were excluded due to small numbers and our primary interest in exploring differences between male and female couples.

Individual factors. *Depressive symptoms* were assessed with the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977), which sums participants' ratings of how often they experienced each of 20 symptoms in the past week (e.g., "I felt sad," "I had crying spells") on a 4-point scale (0 = Rarely or none of the time; 3 = Most or all of the time). The CES-D has shown evidence of reliability and validity (e.g., Eaton & Kessler, 1981). In this sample, internal consistency was excellent (α = .91), scores were normally distributed, and there was a wide range of scores (0-55).

Sexual identity distress was measured with 7-item Sexual Identity Distress Scale (SID; Wright & Perry, 2006). Participants rated their agreement with statements describing how they think and feel about their sexual orientation (e.g., "For the most part, I enjoy being gay/lesbian/bisexual") on a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly Agree; 5 = Strongly Disagree). After four items were reverse-scored so that higher scores represented more internalized homophobia, all items were summed to create the total score. The SID has demonstrated good internal consistency and evidence of construct validity as a measure of internalized homophobia in LGBT samples (Wright & Perry, 2006). In this sample, internal consistency was good (α = .85).

Relationship factors. *Relationship satisfaction* was assessed with the 4-item Couple Satisfaction Index (CSI; Funk & Rogge, 2007). Participants provided four global evaluations of their romantic relationship (e.g., "I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner") on Likert-type scales (e.g., 0 = Not at all True, 5 = Completely True). All ratings were summed so that higher scores indicate greater satisfaction. The CSI-4 has demonstrated strong psychometric properties (internal consistency, precision, convergent validity) in previous samples (Funk & Rogge, 2007). Internal consistency in the current sample was excellent (α = .94).

Perceived quality of alternatives was assessed with the Quality of Alternatives subscale of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998), which includes five items measuring the degree to which the participant's needs could be fulfilled in relationships other than that with the current partner (e.g., "If I weren't dating my partner, I would do fine - I would find another appealing person to date") on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Disagree Completely; 7 = Agree Completely). This scale has shown high internal consistency in previous studies with different-

sex couples (e.g., Lennon, Stewart, & Ledermann, 2013; Rusbult et al., 1998). Internal consistency in the current sample was good (α = .80).

Commitment was assessed using a 3-item version of the Commitment Inventory - Dedication subscale (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Scores reflect participants' mean level of agreement with three statements regarding how strongly they are committed to their relationship (e.g., "My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything in my life") on a 7-point scale (1 = Disagree Completely; 7 = Agree Completely). This 3-item scale has demonstrated internal consistency and validity (Stanley, Rhoades, Amato, Markman, & Johnson, 2010). Internal consistency for this sample was acceptable (α = .76).

Destructive couple conflict was assessed with participants' ratings of the frequency of negative couple conflict patterns across four items (e.g., "My partner criticizes or belittles my opinions, feelings, or desires") on a 3-point scale (1 = Never or Almost Never; 3 = Frequently). The subscale has demonstrated high internal consistency in previous studies with different-sex couples (e.g., Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002; Whitton et al., 2013). Scores reflect the average ratings across the four items and higher scores indicate more frequent destructive couple conflict with one's partner. Internal consistency in the current sample was acceptable (α = .67).

Contextual factors. *Relationship Support* was assessed with Sprecher and Felmlee's (1992) 4-item Support for the Relationship Measure, which captures perceived relationship support from both family of origin and friendship networks. Participants rated social network support for their relationship rate their perceived support for their relationship from their own family, their partner's family, their own friends, and their partner's friends (e.g., "To what

degree do you think your friends disapprove or approve of this relationship?") on a 7-point scale (1 =Very Much Disapprove; 7 =Very Much Approve). This scale has demonstrated good internal consistency in previous studies of same-sex couples (Buzzella, Whitton, & Tompson, 2012) and in the current sample (α = .69).

Procedures

Adults in committed cohabiting relationships of at least 6 months with a same-sex partner volunteered to complete online measures of individual and relationship functioning between April and November 2012. Participants were recruited through study advertisements distributed by national, city, and state-level LGBT organizations to their members via email listservs, website postings, and flyers at PRIDE events. The online survey included an informed consent document and several measures of individual, relationship, and contextual characteristics. IP addresses and other identifying information were used to delete multiple responses from the same individual (who typically had re-started the survey after partially completing it).

Analytic Plan

First, we conducted preliminary analyses assessing associations between demographic characteristics and relationship instability to evaluate whether any demographic variables should be included as controls in tests of hypotheses. We also calculated zero-order associations among the key variables to assess if they were consistent with hypotheses and to determine whether examination of the predictors separately was appropriate. To test hypotheses, we used hierarchical multiple regression analyses. Following procedures outlined by Aiken and West (1991), after centering each of the variables to avoid issues of

multicollinearity, we computed multiplicative interaction terms between sex and each predictor (depression, sexual identity distress, relationship satisfaction, quality of alternatives, commitment, destructive conflict, and relationship support). In regression analyses predicting relationship instability, we entered demographic controls at Step 1, gender and the given predictor at Step 2, and the two-way interaction between gender and the given predictor at Step 3. When significant interactions were found, simple slope tests were conducted to decompose the interaction (Aiken & West, 1991).

Second, to rule out that any observed associations could be accounted for by global relationship satisfaction, the hierarchical regressions for all other predictors were re-run including satisfaction as an additional control variable. Finally, towards our aim of examining the unique contribution of individual, relationship, and contextual contributors to relationship stability in one cohesive model, we conducted an additional regression model examining all seven predictors simultaneously. This provides a stringent test of each factor's unique ability to predict concurrent relationship instability. To conserve power while exploring potential gender differences, this final analysis was conducted separately by gender.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Missing data analyses indicated that participants with missing data did not differ from those without missing data on any variable of interest. Preliminary analyses revealed that relationship instability was associated with several demographic variables, including age (r = -.11, p < .01), income (r = -.09, p < .05), race [higher among non-White (M = 4.08, SD = 2.78) than White participants (M = 3.06, SD = 2.66); $F(1,572) = 9.56$, p < .01)], and relationship status

(lower among legally married [*M* = 2.46, *SD* = 1.96] than non-married participants [*M* = 3.46, *SD* = 2.89]; $F(1,572) = 16.08$, $p < .001$). Relationship instability did not differ by gender, $F(1,575) = .41$, $p = .66$. These results indicated the need to control for age, income, race, and relationship status in the primary analyses. Although preliminary analyses did not reveal a significant relationship between relationship length and instability, it was also included as a control variable in the primary analyses due to previous literature documenting a significant association between relationship length and instability (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for variables of interest are presented in Table 2. All variables were associated with relationship instability in the hypothesized direction for both males and females, except for sexual identity distress, which showed the expected association for females only. Specifically, relationship instability was associated with higher depression, quality of alternatives, and destructive couple conflict and with lower relationship commitment, relationship support, and relationship satisfaction. Sexual identity distress was positively associated with relationship instability for females, but not for males. Intercorrelations between the risk factors were low to moderate, supporting the decision to examine them separately in primary analyses.

Primary Analyses

Results of the hierarchical regression analyses are displayed in Table 3. Results indicated that both of the hypothesized individual factors were predictive of relationship instability. Controlling for demographic variables, depressive symptoms was positively associated with relationship instability, $\beta = .25$, $t(586) = 5.99$, $p < .001$. The interaction between gender and depressive symptoms was not significant, indicating that this association was

consistent across males and females. For sexual identity distress, however, there was a significant moderating effect of gender, β = -.10, $t(586) = 5.99$, $t(586) = -1.99$, $\Delta R^2 = .007$, $p < .05$. Simple slopes analysis indicated that sexual identity distress was significantly associated with relationship instability for females, $\beta = .20$, $p < .001$, but not for males, $\beta = .03$, $p = .67$ (see Figure 1a).

The relationship factors were examined next. An interaction between gender and satisfaction was observed, $\beta = .51$, $t(586) = 2.64$, $\Delta R^2 = .009$, $p < .01$. Simple slopes analysis indicated that the relationship between satisfaction and instability was present across gender, but stronger for females, $\beta = -.60$, $p < .001$, than for males, $\beta = -.40$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 1b). Similarly, there was an interaction between sex and quality of alternatives, $\beta = -.16$, $t(586) = 2.90$, $\Delta R^2 = .014$, $p < .01$. Simple slopes analysis indicated that quality of alternatives was significantly associated with relationship instability for females, $\beta = .35$, $p < .001$, but not for males, $\beta = .10$, $p = .14$ (see Figure 1c). Gender also moderated the relationship between commitment and relationship instability, $\beta = .13$, $t(586) = 2.47$, $\Delta R^2 = .009$, $p < .001$. Simple slopes analysis indicated that commitment was significantly associated with relationship instability for females, $\beta = -.48$, $p < .001$, but not for males, $\beta = .01$, $p = .92$ (see Figure 1d). In contrast to the other relationship variables, there was no two-way interaction between gender and destructive couple conflict: across gender, destructive couple conflict was significantly positively associated with relationship instability, $\beta = .47$, $t(586) = 12.31$, $p < .001$.

Lastly, consistent with hypotheses, the contextual factor of social support for the relationship was negatively associated with relationship instability, $\beta = -.09$, $t(586) = -2.25$, $p < .05$. No two-way interaction between gender and relationship support was found, suggesting

that lower support was associated with higher relationship instability for both males and females.

Testing hypothesized associations, controlling for relationship satisfaction. To address the possibility that observed associations between the various predictors of interest and relationship instability may be accounted for by relationship satisfaction, we repeated the hierarchical regression analyses, adding relationship satisfaction as an additional control variable. The pattern of findings was virtually identical, with one exception: controlling for relationship satisfaction, depressive symptoms was no longer associated with relationship instability, $\beta = .07$, $t(586) = 1.67$, $p = .10$. Specifically, relationship instability was predicted by higher destructive couple conflict, $\beta = .27$, $t(586) = 6.64$, $p < .001$, and lower social support for the relationship, $\beta = -.13$, $t(586) = -2.25$, $p < .05$; these association did not differ by gender. In addition, significant gender interactions were observed for sexual identity distress, commitment, and quality of alternatives. Simple slopes analysis indicated that females' (but not males') relationship stability was predicted by sexual identity distress, $\beta = -.12$, $p < .001$, commitment, $\beta = -.22$, $p < .001$, and quality of alternatives, $\beta = .17$, $p < .001$.

Simultaneous regression. Finally, a single simultaneous regression was used to examine the unique associations between relationship instability and each predictor variable while controlling the other predictor variables. The moderating effects of gender observed in the hierarchical regression analyses (presented earlier) suggested the importance of exploring gender differences in the hypothesized association. However, including interaction terms by gender for each predictor would have led to too many independent variables in the regression equation. Therefore, we conducted these simultaneous regressions separately for males and

females. Results are displayed in Table 4. Consistent with the earlier analyses, for males, relationship satisfaction and destructive couple conflict were significantly associated with relationship instability, controlling for the other variables in the model. For females, sexual identity distress, relationship satisfaction, commitment, and destructive couple conflict were all significant predictors of relationship instability, controlling for all other variables. Contrary to previous analyses, the coefficients for relationship support (for both males and females) and quality of alternatives (for females) were no longer significant, though they remained in expected directions. Overall, the full model accounted for 40% of the variance in relationship instability for males, $R^2 = .40$, $F(12, 190) = 11.74$, $p < .001$, and 44% of the variance in relationship instability for females, $R^2 = .44$, $F(12, 313) = 21.31$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

Findings from the present study yield important, novel information about risk factors for instability in same-sex relationships. First, the results identified particular individual, relationship, and contextual factors (namely, depressive symptoms, relationship dissatisfaction, destructive couple conflict, and low social support for the relationship) that are associated with perceived instability in both male and female same-sex couples. In addition, several factors associated with relationship instability for females, but not males, were identified.

Consistent with evidence that depression is a risk factor for dissolution of different-sex relationships (Kessler et al., 1998), participants in our sample with higher, versus lower, depressive symptoms reported greater instability (i.e., more thoughts about and steps taken toward ending their same-sex relationships). This finding extends previous research indicating that, among same-sex couples, an individual's depressive symptoms are associated with lower

relationship satisfaction (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Whitton & Kuryluk, 2014) by linking them with relationship instability as well. It is likely, however, that the links between partners' depressive symptoms and relationship instability are largely due to lower relationship satisfaction, as this association became non-significant when relationship satisfaction was included in the model. Although these cross-sectional data cannot speak to the direction of effects, it may be that the tendency of depressed individuals to think and behave in ways that create relationship distress (e.g., Davila et al., 1997) is present in same-sex couples, raising risk for break-up. Broadly, these findings are suggestive that the high rates of depression experienced by sexual minorities (e.g., Meyer, 2013) may place them at risk for relationship instability and its numerous negative consequences.

The relationship characteristics of low satisfaction and destructive couple conflict were also associated with relationship instability in same-sex couples of both genders, echoing findings from different-sex couples (see Halford et al., 2003). It is noteworthy that couple conflict was uniquely associated with relationship instability, even in models that controlled for satisfaction and all other proposed risk factors. Together with similar findings in a previous study of same-sex couples (Gottman et al., 2003), this result may speak to a universal, potent effect of destructive conflict on couple outcomes that are consistent across couple type (i.e., different-sex and same-sex) and gender. Indeed, we did not observe a gender difference in the strength of the association between couple conflict and same-sex instability, although one might be expected given that males (relative to females) take longer to physiologically recover from relationship stressors (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001), are more likely to withdraw during relationship conflicts (Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995), and are less likely to identify

areas of concern and solutions for problem in their relationship (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). Rather, destructive conflict appears to be linked with instability equally in couples comprised of two males and those comprised of two females.

Consistent with socio-ecological perspectives (Huston, 2000) and models of relationship functioning that highlight the importance of external, contextual factors to couple outcomes (e.g., Karney and Bradbury, 1995), we observed negative associations between perceived social support for the relationship and same-sex relationship instability across gender. This finding extends previous evidence that perceived social support for one's relationship is associated with relationship satisfaction among same-sex partners (Kurdek, 2004; Blair & Holmberg, 2008). Together, these findings highlight the importance of social network support to same-sex couple outcomes. Individuals who do not feel that their friends and family approve of and support their same-sex relationship may be at risk for distress and break-up, which is particularly concerning in light of the generally lower levels of support that same-sex couples experience compared to different-sex couples (e.g., Kurdek, 2004). However, because this association became non-significant when all risk factors were included in the model, it is possible that any effects of social support for the relationship on instability can be attributed to the influence of the individual and relationship risk factors. Further, the cross-sectional data cannot rule out that some participants' social networks were more supportive *because* the individuals were in healthier, more stable relationships. Moreover, it is important to note that our measure of relationship support combined perceived relationship support from friends and family members to produce a general assessment of perceived relationship support. Because sexual minority individuals may compensate for low family support by establishing close-knit

friendship support networks (i.e., *families of choice*; Carrington, 1999; Oswald, 2002), it might be more informative to assess support from each domain separately. Relationship support from friendship groups might have a greater effect on same-sex relationship stability than support from families of origin (Blair & Holmberg, 2008), or might buffer couples from negative consequences of family rejection. Additionally, it is possible that other social networks (e.g., membership in LGB-oriented organizations, access to community resources, size of local LGB community) may play an important role in the well-being and stability of same-sex couples' relationships. Future studies should examine the associations between these and other relevant contextual factors and same-sex relationship stability, given the limitations of the current study.

Interestingly, study findings reveal an overall pattern in which several individual and relationship factors appear to be more relevant to instability in female versus male same-sex relationships. Specifically, sexual identity distress, perceived quality of alternatives to the relationship, and commitment were each associated with same-sex relationship instability for females but not males. Further, although satisfaction was associated with instability across gender, it was more strongly associated for females than males. The findings regarding sexual identity distress compliment those of Todosijevic and colleagues (2005), who found a positive correlation between stress specific to sexual orientation and relationship quality for lesbian women, but not for gay men. Sexual identity distress may be a particularly salient predictor of relationship instability for females, in line with theories that sexual minority females may experience sexual identity distress as more threatening than males due to a more relational (versus autonomous) developmental socialization (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987; Peplau, Padesky, & Hamilton, 1982). Similarly, we found that relationship factors, including satisfaction,

commitment, and quality of alternatives, were more strongly associated with same-sex relationship instability for females than males. This suggests that females may be more likely than males to begin taking steps toward ending their same-sex relationship in the face of low satisfaction, low commitment, or high quality of alternatives to the relationship. As such, the finding is consistent with evidence that women in different-sex marriages are more likely than men to file for divorce (Brinig & Allen, 2000). Importantly, both commitment and quality of alternatives were significantly associated with females' relationship instability even when satisfaction was controlled, suggesting that female partners' level of commitment and quality of alternatives may independently contribute to increased thoughts about and steps toward relationship dissolution, and represent important targets for interventions to promote female same-sex couple stability.

Limitations and Strengths

This research has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting results. First, these data are cross-sectional and therefore causal associations cannot be determined. Longitudinal research is needed to clarify whether the individual, relationship, and contextual variables lead to, or are a consequence of, relationship instability. Also, the present study did not compare same-sex couples to different-sex couples, which precludes the ability to determine whether particular factors are more or less potent predictors of relationship instability in same-sex versus different-sex couples. However, in contrast to between-groups designs comparing same-sex to different-sex couples, the study's within-group design allows for an examination of correlates of relationship instability *within sexual minority adults.* This is advantageous because it informs our understanding of the factors that place some same-sex

couples at greater risk than others for instability and therefore represent appropriate targets for interventions to promote same-sex relationship stability and health. Such information is essential to researchers interested in understanding same-sex couple processes outside of a hetero-normative framework and clinicians interested in developing or delivering culturally-sensitive interventions to promote relationship health and stability among same-sex couples (e.g., Whitton, 2014).

As with much of the research on sexual minority groups, this was a convenience sample that was composed of mostly White, middle- to high-income, unmarried LGB individuals who reported relatively high relationship satisfaction. Therefore, findings can not be presumed to generalize to all same-sex couples, particularly those who are ethnic minorities, in less satisfying relationships, or less connected to the LGBT community. As legal marriage becomes more widely available to same-sex couples in the United States, recruitment of married same-sex couples via public records will become an increasingly feasible method for capturing more representative samples; it will be important for future research to evaluate if the present findings are replicated in such samples. Additionally, the operationalization of gender as binary did not capture the identity of all individuals, such as those who identify as “gender neutral” or “genderqueer” rather than male or female. Although the present study utilized psychometrically validated measures of individual, relationship, and contextual factors, many of these measures were relatively brief and included few items. Future studies might incorporate lengthier measures of these factors to examine more nuanced relationships among these factors and relationship instability. It is also important to note that significantly more females than males provided data in the current study. Consequently, the lower number of factors

associated with relationship instability for males than females may be attributable, in part, to smaller sample size and consequent lower power to detect associations. Lastly, the present study utilized reports from only one member of the relationship. Future studies that incorporate reports from both partners are needed to explore actor and partner effects on same-sex relationship instability.

Despite these limitations, results from the present study extend previous research by using recent data (from 2012) collected from a nationally-recruited sample with representation from 47 states rather than a sample exclusively from gay-friendly urban settings or from outside of the United States. Consequently, the findings are likely to reflect the current experiences of many same-sex couples in the U.S. today, maximizing their relevance to policy and interventions. In addition, the findings that certain individual, relationship, and contextual factors show unique associations with same-sex relationship instability beyond what can be accounted for by relationship satisfaction suggest the viability of these factors as targets for intervention. Lastly, in contrast to previous studies that examined predictors of same-sex relationship health and stability in samples of exclusively gay men or lesbian women (e.g., Beals, Impett, & Peplau, 2002) or that only examined differences between same-sex versus different-sex couples (e.g. Kurdek 1998; Lau, 2012), the present study was able to powerfully test for gender differences in the factors associated with instability in same-sex relationships.

Implications of Study Findings

The present findings have clear implications for policy and clinical practice. Overall, they identify several particular factors – including depressive symptoms of partners, relationship conflict, and low social support for the relationship— that are associated with same-sex

relationship instability. As such, findings preliminarily suggest that the elevated rates of depression (Meyer, 2003) and the lack of social support (Kurdek, 2004) experienced by sexual minorities may contribute to the heightened instability of same-sex couples. Efforts to reduce disparities in LGBT mental health (e.g. Institute of Medicine, 2011) and create a social environment that is more accepting and supportive of same-sex relationships may therefore promote same-sex couple stability. Further, the robust associations observed between destructive conflict and relationship instability support the use of skills-based relationship education (which targets destructive couple conflict) with same-sex couples (Buzzella, Whitton, & Tompson, 2012; Whitton, 2014). Gender differences in the present findings, which indicate that relationship commitment constructs and sexual identity distress may play a more significant role in the stability of female than male same-sex relationships, suggest the potential value of tailoring same-sex couple interventions to address gender-specific needs. Specifically, female couples may be more likely to benefit from content focused on cultivating commitment (Rhoades et al., 2006), including efforts to improve relationship novelty and decrease the value of relationship alternatives, as well as content designed to reduce sexual identity distress (see Szymanski, 2005; Kashubeck-West, Szymanski, & Meyer, 2008). Together with qualitative data that lesbians (Scott & Rhoades, 2014) and gay men (Buzzella et al., 2012) prefer relationship education in groups comprised solely of same-sex couples of their own gender, these findings suggest that culturally-sensitive adaptations of relationship education be developed separately for male and female same-sex couples.

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Table 1. Participant characteristics and demographics

	Males		Females		Total	
	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
Sexual Orientation						
Gay	99.1	215	-	-	37.1	215
Lesbian	-	-	86.5	313	54.1	313
Bisexual	.9	2	13.5	49	8.8	51
Race						
White	87.6	191	87.5	328	87.5	519
African-American	2.8	6	.8	3	1.5	9
Asian	1.8	4	1.1	4	1.3	8
American Indian/Alaska Native	2.3	5	2.4	9	2.4	14
Mixed race	3.7	8	5.3	20	4.7	28
Other	1.8	4	2.9	11	2.5	15
Annual Individual Income						
<$5,000	1.8	4	6.7	25	4.9	29
$5,000-$10,000	1.4	3	4.6	17	3.4	20
$10,000-$15,000	2.3	5	3.5	13	3.0	18
$15,000-$20,000	4.1	9	2.4	9	3.0	18
$20,000-$30,000	8.7	19	12.1	45	10.8	64
$30,000-$40,000	16.0	35	13.7	51	14.5	86
$40,000-$50,000	13.2	29	15.0	56	14.4	85
$50,000-$60,000	8.7	19	13.4	50	11.7	69
$60,000-$70,000	7.8	17	7.2	27	7.4	44
>$70,000	36.1	79	21.4	80	26.9	159
Age (years)	*M* = 43.1	*SD* = 12.6	*M* = 39.6	*SD* = 11.5	*M* = 40.9	*SD* = 12.0
Marital Status						
Not legally married	76.1	166	69.2	258	71.7	424
Legally married	23.9	52	30.8	115	28.3	167
Relationship Length						
<1 year	4.6	10	4.8	18	4.7	28
1-2 years	13.7	30	13.1	49	13.3	79
3-4 years	12.8	28	16.8	63	15.3	91
5-6 years	11.0	24	12.6	47	12.0	71
7-8 years	10.5	23	10.4	39	10.5	62
≥9 years	47.5	104	42.2	158	44.2	262

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables

									Males (*n* = 219)			Females (*n* = 376)		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	M	SD	Range	M	SD	Range
1. Depressive Symptoms	-	.09	-.38**	.12	-.17*	.37**	-.14*	.30**	9.12	8.60	0-55	8.99	8.62	0-55
2. Sexual Identity Distress	.20**	-	-.15*	-.04	-.12	.06	-.20**	.01	11.36	4.43	7-35	11.24	4.45	7-35
3. Satisfaction	-.37**	-.11*	-	-.31**	.58**	-.46**	.37**	-.51**	16.59	3.15	0-21	17.19	3.31	0-21
4. Quality of Alternatives	.18**	.07	-.36**	-	-.40**	.12	-.14*	.20**	3.05	1.21	1-7	2.46	1.15	1-7
5. Commitment	-.24**	-.08	.60**	-.44**	-	-.24**	.39**	-.35**	6.26	.88	1-7	6.26	.98	1-7
6. Destructive Conflict	.41**	.11*	-.55**	.24**	-.33**	-	-.22**	.56**	1.46	.39	1-3	1.51	.43	1-3
7. Relationship Support	-.29**	-.17**	.31**	-.20**	.25**	-.33**	-	-.23**	5.92	1.10	1-7	5.83	1.07	1-7
8. Relationship Instability	.33**	.20**	-.59**	.38**	-.50**	.51**	-.29**	-	3.05	2.24	0-16	3.25	2.94	0-16

Note. Correlations for males are reported above the diagonal; females are below the diagonal.

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

Table 3. Summary of hierarchical regression predicting relationship instability, controlling for demographic correlates

	Individual Factors				Relationship Factors								Contextual Factors	
	Depressive Symptoms		Sexual Identity Distress		Satisfaction		Quality of Alternatives		Commitment		Destructive Conflict		Relationship Support	
	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2
Step 1		.08***		.08***		.08***		.08***		.08***		.08***		.08***
Race	-.07		-.11*		-.11**		-.08†		-.06		-.07†		-.10*	
Gender	-.01		-.01		-.55**		-.06		-.01		-.00		-.00	
Age	-.13**		-.11*		-.16***		-.13*		-.15**		-.08†		-.13**	
Income	-.07		-.12*		-.11**		-.09†		-.12**		-.05		-.09†	
Relationship Status	-.16***		-.16***		-.07*		-.15***		-.11**		-.11**		-.15***	
Relationship Length	.21***		.20***		.20***		.22***		.27***		.15**		.25***	
Step 2		.06***		.02**		.27***		.05***		.16***		.21***		.06***
Factor	.27***		-.20***		-.60***		.35***		-.48***		.48***		-.28***	

Step 3		.00		.01*		.01**		.01**		.01*		.00		.00
Gender X Factor	-.03		-.10*		-.51**		-.16**		.16*		-.01		.04	

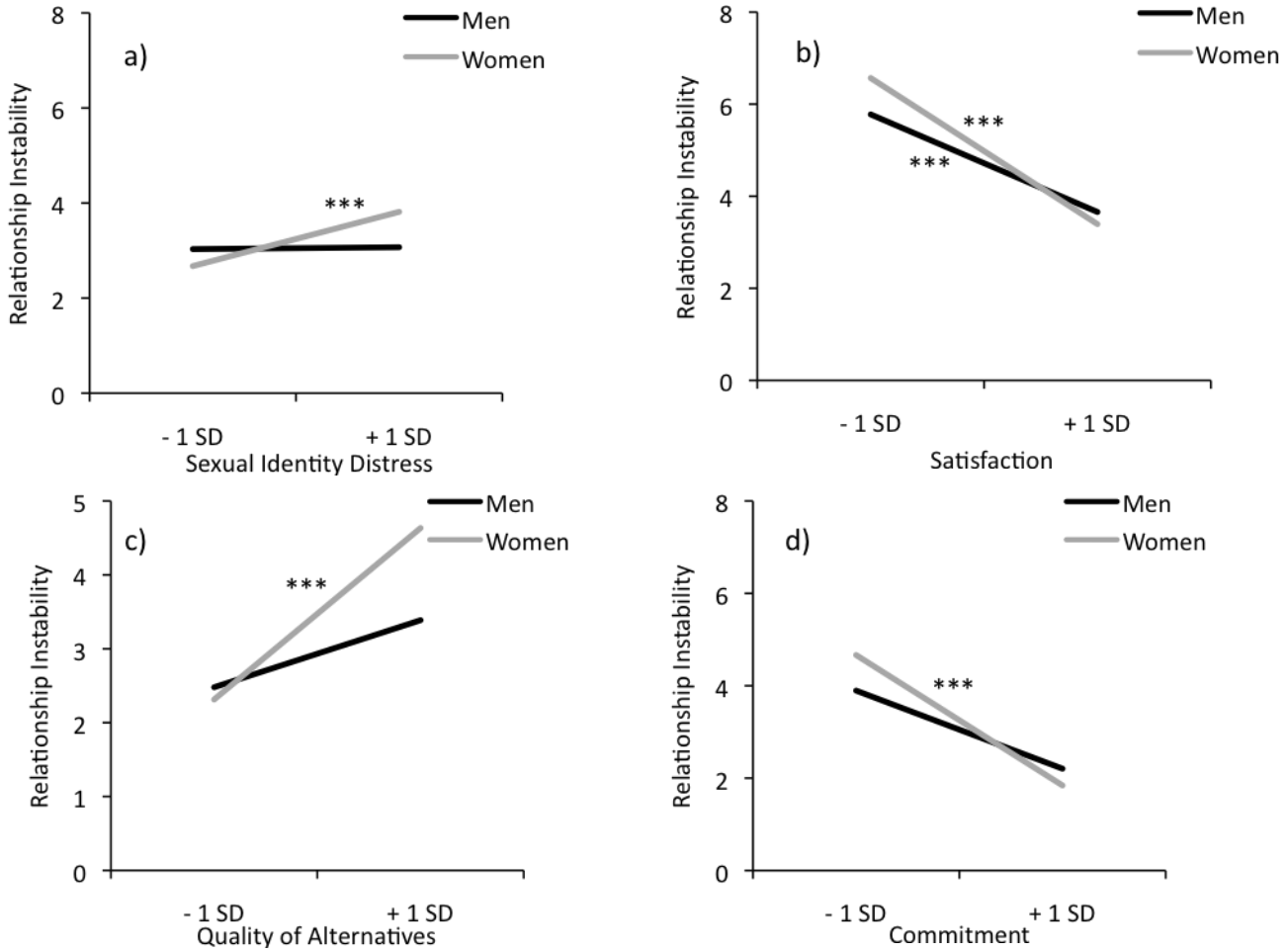
Note. Betas presented for each predictor are from the final models. Gender was coded as 0 = female, 1 = male. Relationship status was coded as 0 = non-married, 1 = in a legally recognized relationship.
*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001, †p = .05-.08.

Table 4. Summary of simultaneous regression predicting relationship instability, separately by gender.

	Males				Females			
	B	SE	β	*t*(206)	B	SE	β	*t*(363)
Depressive Symptoms	.00	.02	.01	.20	-.00	.02	-.00	-.06
Sexual Identity Distress	-.03	.03	-.06	-1.04	.07	.03	.11	2.51*
Satisfaction	-.16	.06	-.23	-2.79**	-.26	.06	-.29	-4.58***
Quality of Alternatives	.01	.11	.01	.12	.21	.12	.08	1.72†
Commitment	-.20	.19	-.08	-1.02	-.52	.17	-.17	-2.99**
Destructive Conflict	2.27	.35	.42	6.40***	1.26	.38	.18	3.27***
Relationship Support	-.15	.13	-.08	-1.15	-.13	.13	-.05	-1.00

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001, †p = .05-.07.

Figure 1. Significant interaction effects of each factor and gender predicting relationship instability, controlling for demographic correlates



Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.