

# Outness, Big Five personality traits, and same-sex relationship quality

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ABSTRACT

This report examined the extent to which individuals from 60 same-sex romantic couples (30 gay male and 30 lesbian dyads) who disclosed their same-sex attractions to the world and family (i.e., were 'out') were more likely than their relatively closeted counterparts to share higher quality relationships. Using a multimethod approach that included the 'Big Five' personality dimensions as covariates, participants completed questionnaires about their relationships and discussed a disagreement in their relationship while being videotaped. Individuals who were out to the world – and individuals who had partners that reported being out – tended to (i) report greater relational satisfaction and (ii) display more positive relative to negative affect during dyadic interactions. Associations generally held controlling for personality traits among both gay male and lesbian couples.

KEY WORDS: five factor personality • observational • relationship satisfaction • same-sex couples • self-disclosure

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Research documenting the myriad forms and functions of same-sex romantic relationships has grown substantially in the past quarter century. Indeed, there is now a sizable empirical literature addressing many aspects of lesbian and gay male romantic relationships (see Kurdek, 2003, 2004, 2005; Peplau & Spaulding, 2000 for reviews), from the landmark longitudinal American

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Couples study (Blumenstein & Schwartz, 1983), the substantial body of research by Kurdek on same- versus opposite-sex couples (see Kurdek, 2004, for a review), to the recent work focused on the growth of lesbian and gay male head of household families (see Patterson, 2000; Peplau & Beals, 2004, for reviews).

The expansion of empirical research on the lives of lesbian and gay male couples has been especially important for interpersonal relationships research. As Peplau and Spalding (2000, p. 112) highlight, ‘studies of gay and lesbian samples provide valuable information about the generalizability of relationship theories, most of which have been developed and tested on heterosexual couples.’ Research on same-sex couples also has broader societal implications with respect to addressing questions about the extent to which these relationships foster individual development (Roisman, Clausell, Holland, Fortuna, & Elieff, 2008).

One area of same-sex relationship scholarship that has not received much empirical attention is the extent to which outness to the world (for example, to friends and colleagues) and outness to family are associated with the quality of same-sex relationships. The challenges associated with sampling same-sex romantic couples is one reason for such a gap. Lesbian and gay male individuals who are not open about their same-sex thoughts, feelings, and attractions – and perhaps especially their romantic relationships – may be reluctant to participate in research. On the other hand, those who are willing to participate in studies about same-sex relationships may be more out than not and, by definition, may feel more comfortable, happy, and secure with their relationships (Gates & Sell, 2007; Peplau & Beals, 2000). Despite these methodological stumbling blocks, there is a small body of research that has accumulated focused on the salience of self-disclosure of one’s same-sex attractions in the lives of lesbian and gay male individuals. In general, ‘coming out,’ or sexual orientation self-disclosure to family and others, has been suggested to facilitate more positive relationship experiences – despite considerable stigma and societal devaluation of same-sex attractions (e.g., Jordan & Deluty, 1998; LaSala, 2000).

Although important contextual factors can provide valid justifications for same-sex couples to not disclose their same-sex thoughts, feelings, and attractions to others (e.g., employment, housing, safety concerns, the protection of children), nondisclosure may place stress on individuals that, in turn, produces stress on the individual’s relationships. An example of how individual nondisclosure may create dyadic stress on same-sex relationships is within-couple ‘asynchrony’. In this scenario, different levels of outness may be viewed by the more out member of the dyad as the less out partner’s denial of the relationship (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). Moreover, families of origin acceptance of the disclosure may serve to bolster bonds for partners in same-sex relationships. Alternatively, rejection may serve to rupture presumed emotional ties and support from families that can serve as a buffer against homophobia and heterosexism for same-sex couples (Weston, 1991). The goal of the present study is to extend the literature by examining whether individuals who disclose their same-sex attractions are more likely

than their relatively closeted counterparts to share higher quality relationships with their same-sex partners using a state-of-the-art dyadic research design and assessments of interpersonal processes.

### **The coming out process**

The coming out process for lesbian and gay men is thought to be a developmental imperative in Western societies (Cass, 1996). In the United States, this is apparent with events such as National Coming Out Day and Gay Pride Day celebrations that take place annually in nearly every major city in the country (Beals & Peplau, 2001). In psychology, the coming out process has been conceptualized as a multidimensional dialectic process by which an individual progresses from a 'third-person' view of homosexuality and presumed heterosexuality to an integrated 'first-person' awareness and acceptance of the self as a lesbian or gay male (Cass, 1996).

Arguably, the two hallmark features associated with successful coming out are, first, coming out to self, and, second, coming out to the world (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996). McDonald (1982, p. 82) noted that 'achieving a positive gay identity appears to be contingent upon disclosing one's sexual orientation to non-gay others.' Another salient aspect of the coming out process is the added awareness of moving from an assumed heterosexual identity into the stigmatized and marginalized identity of a sexual minority. Central to achieving an integrated lesbian or gay male identity is stigma management, or the development of coping strategies to negotiate this new, often anxiety-provoking marginalized identity (Cain, 1991; de Monteflores, 1986; Troiden, 1989).

In his study of 38 gay males, Cain (1991) reasoned that the motivation to disclose same-sex thoughts, feelings, and attractions to others serves several functions depending on the context and rationale for the disclosures. Most relevant to our discussion, Cain identified facilitating relationship building as one goal of disclosure. Cain theorized that relationship-building disclosures reflect a desire to foster more authentic relationships with significant others and acknowledged that 'this applies to both gay men and lesbian women' (p. 69). In contrast to Cain's view of the benefits of disclosure, 'closeting' (Caron & Ulin, 1997) and 'passing' (Berger, 1990) might be associated with deleterious consequences for same-sex romantic couples' ability to achieve authentic and close relationships with significant others (i.e., with friends and family).

On the surface, closeting and passing seems antithetical to authentic and close relationship building identified by Cain (1991). These same processes may place a burden on individuals in same-sex romantic relationships, and in turn, impact relationship satisfaction. For example, Caron and Ulin (1997) noted that closeting 'greatly limits the amount of social support available to lesbians as they develop as individuals' (p. 414). Berger (1990) described 'passing' as the process by which men and women in same-sex romantic relationships feign heterosexuality due to the inability to disclose their

sexual orientation to others. It is somewhat surprising that, despite a sizeable literature on same-sex couple functioning, there are relatively few quantitative studies that have specifically examined whether self-disclosure or outness is associated with higher quality same-sex partnerships. The current study systematically addresses this question.

### **Self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction**

For gay and lesbian individuals, same-sex feelings and attractions is arguably the most personal information that can be shared with others. Research has identified both costs and benefits to such self disclosures (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996; Herek, 2003). For example, Jordan and DeLuty (1998) reported that lesbians who self-disclosed their sexual orientation to more people (e.g., gay/lesbian friends, straight friends, family, and coworkers) reported greater relationship satisfaction. Caron and Ulin (1997) found that lesbians in romantic relationships who reported disclosing their sexual orientation to family members and friends also tended to report more satisfaction. Murphy (1989) studied 20 lesbians and found that disclosing their lesbian identity to parents likewise had a positive impact on their relationships, despite parental disapproval for some participants. Finally, Berger's (1990) study on passing revealed that respondents (20% lesbian and 80% gay male) who had disclosed to significant others reported greater relationship satisfaction.

Although the studies cited above provide support for the association between sexual orientation disclosure and relationship satisfaction, this literature is limited in a number of crucial respects. First, a few studies have produced null results regarding the link between outness and satisfaction. For example, Eldridge and Gilbert's (1990) study of 275 lesbian couples found that degree of disclosure about lesbian identity was not significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction. This sample was unique, however, in that greater than 75% of the women in this study had not disclosed their sexual orientation to significant others in their lives. Typically, in same-sex couples studies most participants have disclosed their sexual orientation to significant others in their lives.

Similarly, a secondary analysis of the 1979 American Couples Study sample (Blumenstein & Schwartz, 1983) conducted by Beals and Peplau (2001) also failed to identify a significant association between self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction. In this study disclosure was limited to five possible individuals: Mother, father, best male and female heterosexual friends, and supervisor. Importantly, this disclosure measure appears to conflate outness to world and outness to family, which may explain their null findings.

A second major limitation of the literature is that even those studies demonstrating significant correlations between outness and relationship quality have almost exclusively focused on measures of outness and relationship quality (e.g., satisfaction) that derive from the same method (i.e., questionnaire) and informant (i.e., self-report), thereby potentially artificially

inflating the correlations between variables. Third, studies in this literature have not routinely controlled for third variables that may strongly predict both self-disclosure and relationships satisfaction. In particular, personality characteristics that individuals bring to relationships have been well-documented as having an impact on relationship satisfaction, at least in heterosexual relationships (e.g. Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2000, 2002; Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000).

Given the well established links between personality traits and relationship satisfaction, as well as the potential for outness to be confounded to some degree with elements of personality (e.g., extroversion), it is somewhat surprising that personality traits are not routinely included as possible covariates in same-sex relationship satisfaction research. For example, according to the 'Big Five' taxonomy of personality traits (McCrae & Costa, 1997), individuals high on extraversion are typically described as outgoing and lively. In contrast, individuals low on extraversion are typically quiet, submissive, and inhibited. This trait may lead individuals high on extraversion to disclose their same-sex attractions to others more than those low on this trait. Therefore, it is important for researchers to routinely assess personality traits in studies of outness. The current study addresses the above noted gaps in the literature.

### **The current study**

To examine the theorized benefits of self-disclosure for relationship quality, we conducted a multimethod, multi-informant investigation of the association between self-disclosure and relationship quality employing reports of outness to family and the world, self-reported relationship satisfaction, and an interaction task to assess observed relationship quality. In addition, we also included a measure of the 'Big Five' personality traits (McCrae & Costa, 1997), which were used as covariates in analyses. We hypothesized that: (i) Outness to family and the world would be positively correlated with relationship satisfaction; (ii) outness to family and the world would be positively correlated with observed relationship quality in a laboratory interaction task; and (iii) the predictive significance of outness would hold even after controlling for personality traits as assessed by the NEO-Five Factor Personality Inventory (NEO-FFI; McCrae & Costa, 1997). We also explored whether associations held among both lesbian and gay male couples.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

The participants sampled for this study were drawn from a small Mid-western community. Specifically, 60 same-sex romantic couples (30 same-sex male and 30 same-sex female dyads) who were 18 years old or older

participated. The mean age for gay men was 33 years ( $SD = 10.5$ ; range = 19–54), and 35 years ( $SD = 11.5$ ; range = 20–61) for lesbian participants. All couples were mutually committed, which we operationalized as having been together for 12 months or longer and both partners indicating that they were committed to the relationship. Mean length of relationships was 85 months ( $SD = 85.3$ ; range = 13–324) for gay male couples and 71 months ( $SD = 57.1$ ; range = 12–232) for lesbian couples. All participants were recruited via advertisements across campus as well as local outlets, such as bookstores, cafes, internet listservs, and community organizations. At the time of the study, 85% (51/60) of couples were cohabitating, and 2 additional couples reported that they were temporarily living together. The sample was 87% White (including 83% of gay men and 90% of lesbian participants). All participants received \$25 each (\$50 per couple) for their participation in the study (for additional details see Roisman et al., 2008).

## **Apparatus**

**Video equipment.** High-resolution color video cameras recorded the couples' interactions. The video cameras were embedded within a bookshelf located across the room from the participants seated on a couch. Lavalier microphones were clipped to the participants' clothing and were used to record the conversation during the interactions.

## **Procedures**

Prior to coming in to the laboratory for interviews, all participants were mailed a packet of self-report questionnaires, including measures of relationship satisfaction, personality, and outness, with a letter instructing them to separately complete the questionnaires and not to discuss its contents with their partner prior to coming to the laboratory. Upon arrival to the laboratory, after separately completing a set of intake interviews, both partners were administered additional self-report measures including a problem inventory scale that required them to rate current problem areas in their relationship. Each participant described the degree to which each domain listed (e.g., friends, in-laws, money) was currently a problem area in his or her relationship on a scale that was anchored from 1 = not a problem to 10 = is a serious problem. Participants were informed that this would be the only form that their partner would see when the two were reunited.

After completing the current relationship problem questionnaire, participants were reunited to complete the last part of the session, a standard relationship interaction task (Kline et al., 2005) that was administered in a comfortable living room environment in the laboratory. A research assistant entered the room with the problem inventories participants had completed previously and instructed couples to identify a problem area (i.e., disagreement) in their relationship that they argue about the most. After deciding on an issue using the problem inventories, the couples were given 10 minutes to discuss and attempt to resolve this problem. Following the disagreement

portion of the laboratory task, couples were instructed to take 5 minutes to talk about areas of agreement in their relationship. The couple interactions were videotaped and a research assistant was present in the living room environment only long enough to give directions to the participants and answer any questions they might have.

## Measures

**Outness.** We employed the 10 item Outness Inventory (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000) to assess the degree to which participants described being 'out' to the world and family. For this study we used the primary subscales, *Out to World* (4 items) and *Out to Family* (4 items; 2 items assessing *Out to Religion* were not included in the current study). Questions for these two scales included: 'My new straight friends, my work peers, my work supervisors, and strangers' and 'mother, father, siblings, and extended family/relatives' respectively, anchored from 1 = definitely does not know about my sexual orientation status to 7 = definitely knows about my sexual orientation status, and it is openly talked about. For both scales, each point on the scale describes a different level of outness, for example, 4 = probably knows about my sexual orientation, but it is rarely talked about. The sample mean for *Out to World* was 4.35 ( $SD = 1.36$ ; range = 1–7), and for *Out to Family* 5.27 ( $SD = 1.24$ ; range = 2.25–7). In this sample, the alphas for the two subscales were .78 and .79 for *Out to World* and *Out to Family*, respectively.

**Relationship adjustment/satisfaction.** Participants completed the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) to assess participants' perceived relationship adjustment (e.g., 'In general, how often do you think things between you and your partner are going well?'). Although originally developed for opposite-sex dyads, previous research has demonstrated that the DAS is a reliable measure of relationship adjustment/satisfaction for both opposite-sex as well as same-sex couples (Kurdek, 1992). All 32 DAS items were summed to create a total *Dyadic Adjustment* score. In this sample, mean DAS score was 114.75 ( $SD = 10.7$ ; range = 83–141). The average Cronbach's standardized alpha for the full scale was .87.

**Observed relationship quality.** We operationalized observed relationship quality in terms of the balance of positive to negative emotions exhibited by each participant during his or her interaction (e.g., Roisman et al., 2008). Accordingly, emotional tone was coded by trained graduate research assistants from videotapes of the couple's interactions. The positive and negative affect ratings scales were drawn from the Interactional Dimensions Coding System (IDCS; Kline et al., 2004). Positive affect was used to describe how positive the participants' face, voice, and body was while interacting with their partner. Negative affect consisted of negative face, voice, and body while interacting with their partner. Both affect ratings scales were coded separately along a 9-point scale for each partner. In order to create a measure of emotional tone, *negative affect* scores were subtracted from



positive affect ratings to create an index of *observed emotional tone*. As such, the range of possible values for this variable is  $-9 =$  affectively negative behaviors, to  $+9 =$  affectively positive behaviors. In this sample, the mean for observed emotional tone was 1.31 ( $SD = 2.72$ ; range =  $-6$  to  $+6$ ). Intraclass reliabilities were acceptable (.65 and .90 for positive affect and negative affect, respectively) based on a sample of 15% of couples that were randomly selected to be rated by two coders. Note that, as in Roisman et al. (2008), we elected to base observational intercoder reliabilities on one quasi-randomly selected participant from each reliability dyad (in all cases this was participant 'B,' who received this designation because he or she sat down on the right side of the couch at the beginning of the laboratory session). We did not include both members of the dyad in these reliability calculations because this would result in using data drawn not only from nonindependent participants but as rated by the same coder.

**Personality.** The NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; McCrae & Costa, 1997), a well-validated measurement of the Big Five personality traits of extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience, was employed in this study. The NEO-FFI contains 60 items and each personality trait was derived by computing the mean of 12 items. In this sample, the average Cronbach's standardized alpha across the five personality dimensions was .80 (range = .70 to .86).

## Results

### Analytic plan

For this study, we examined whether outness was correlated with relationship outcomes, whether such effects were accounted for by personality traits, and finally whether associations between outness and relationship outcomes were moderated by lesbian or gay male couple type. Two statistical hurdles resulting from the nature of the study design (i.e., involving same-sex dyads) were to take into consideration in analyses: (i) The nonindependence of observations within dyads and (ii) the nondistinguishable nature of individuals within same-sex dyads. In light of these challenges, we used the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Campbell & Kashy, 2002; Kashy & Kenny, 2000), an application of Hierarchical Linear Modeling well suited for analyzing data drawn from dyads. In APIM, the association between an individual's characteristic (i.e., outness) and his or her outcome (e.g., relationship satisfaction) is referred to as an *actor* effect. In contrast, the association between partner's characteristics and the actor's outcome is known as a *partner* effect. One computationally straightforward and flexible approach for estimating actor and partner effects involves multilevel modeling (for details see Campbell & Kashy, 2002), which we implemented in HLM 6.02 (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992). In Level I regression equations, APIM estimates both actor and partner effects. In addition, variables that vary across dyads can be examined in Level II regression equations as



potential moderators of slopes identified at Level I. Note that all independent and dependent variables were standardized prior to analysis so that coefficients approximate standardized effects.

**Outness and relationship satisfaction.** APIM analyses at Level I presented in Model 1 of Table 1 show that individuals' reported outness to the world significantly predicted relationship satisfaction on the DAS for both actor and partner. More specifically, individuals who were relatively out to the world were significantly more likely to report being satisfied with their relationships. In addition, individuals who had partners who were out to the world also were more satisfied.

We wanted to assess the extent to which any significant effects of outness might be accounted for by the personality traits of both partners. To accomplish this we conducted a second analysis, presented as Model II in Table 1, which included all five personality traits for both actor and partner in the model. Controlling for personality variables, actor and partner outness still significantly predicted relationship satisfaction. Also, none of the Big 5 factors (i.e. both actor and partner effects) significantly predicted DAS

**TABLE 1**  
**Results of Level I APIM analyses in HLM predicting self-reported relationship satisfaction with outness to world and personality variables**

Predictor	Approx.				
	b	SE	t-ratio	df	p
<i>Model I: Out to World</i>					
Out to World (A)	0.254	0.085	2.98	117	.004
Out to World (P)	0.227	0.085	2.68	117	.009
<i>Model II: Out to World with Big 5 personality controls</i>					
Out to World (A)	0.233	0.092	2.54	107	.013
Out to World (P)	0.195	0.092	2.13	107	.036
Neuroticism (A)	-0.185	0.098	-1.90	107	.060
Neuroticism (P)	-0.037	0.097	-0.38	107	.71
Extraversion (A)	0.112	0.105	1.07	107	.29
Extraversion (P)	-0.066	0.105	-0.63	107	.53
Openness (A)	-0.023	0.091	-0.25	107	.81
Openness (P)	0.084	0.091	0.91	107	.36
Agreeableness (A)	0.047	0.097	0.49	107	.62
Agreeableness (P)	-0.009	0.097	-0.09	107	.93
Conscientiousness (A)	0.002	0.096	0.02	107	.99
Conscientiousness (P)	-0.063	0.096	-0.66	107	.51

*Note.* Actor effects reflect the association between participants' outness/personality traits and their own behavior/reports of relationship quality. Partner effects reflect the association between partners' outness/personality traits and participants' behavior/reports of relationship quality. APIM = Actor-Partner Interdependence Model; HLM = Hierarchical Linear Model; A = Actor Effect; P = Partner Effect.

scores. In terms of whether outness to *family* predicted relationship satisfaction (see Model I of Table 2), outness to family significantly predicted relationship satisfaction on the DAS (actor effect only). However, when personality characteristics were controlled in Model II, outness to family was no longer associated with relationship satisfaction.

**Outness and observed emotional tone.** Trained coder ratings of emotional tone (i.e., more positive than negative emotions observed in the interaction task) were significantly associated with outness to the world for actor and partner (see Model I of Table 3). As with relationship satisfaction, we assessed the extent to which observed emotional tone and outness to the world were a function of personality characteristics in Model II. When personality variables were controlled for, the partner effect remained a marginally significant predictor ( $p = .055$ ) but the actor effect was attenuated to nonsignificance (see Table 3). No significant effects were observed for outness to family on observed emotional tone. Also, none of the other Big 5 factors significantly predicted observed emotional tone, with the exception of extraversion (actor effect only) and agreeableness (partner effect only) (see Models I and II in Table 4).

**TABLE 2**  
**Results of Level I APIM analyses in HLM predicting relationship satisfaction with outness to family and personality variables**

Predictor	Approx.				
	b	SE	t-ratio	df	p
<i>Model I: Out to Family</i>					
Out to Family (A)	0.204	0.089	2.30	117	.023
Out to Family (P)	0.105	0.089	1.18	117	.24
<i>Model II: Out to Family with Big 5 personality controls</i>					
Out to Family (A)	0.082	0.096	0.86	107	.39
Out to Family (P)	0.100	0.100	0.99	107	.32
Neuroticism (A)	-0.187	0.121	-1.54	107	.13
Neuroticism (P)	-0.036	0.123	-0.29	107	.77
Extraversion (A)	0.087	0.102	0.85	107	.40
Extraversion (P)	-0.097	0.114	-0.85	107	.40
Openness (A)	0.006	0.072	0.09	107	.93
Openness (P)	0.104	0.080	1.29	107	.20
Agreeableness (A)	0.104	0.095	1.09	107	.28
Agreeableness (P)	0.043	0.096	0.45	107	.66
Conscientiousness (A)	0.040	0.098	0.41	107	.69
Conscientiousness (P)	-0.028	0.083	-0.34	107	.74

*Note.* Actor effects reflect the association between participants' outness/personality traits and their own behavior/reports of relationship quality. Partner effects reflect the association between partners' outness/personality traits and participants' behavior/reports of relationship quality. APIM = Actor-Partner Interdependence Model; HLM = Hierarchical Linear Model; A = Actor Effect; P = Partner Effect.

**TABLE 3**  
**Results of Level I APIM analyses in HLM predicting observed emotional tone with outness to world and personality variables**

Predictor	Approx.				
	b	SE	t-ratio	df	p
<i>Model I: Out to World</i>					
Out to World (A)	0.173	0.087	1.98	117	.049
Out to World (P)	0.211	0.087	2.43	117	.017
<i>Model II: Out to World with Big 5 personality controls</i>					
Out to World (A)	0.131	0.095	1.38	107	.17
Out to World (P)	0.184	0.095	1.94	107	.055
Neuroticism (A)	0.047	0.101	0.46	107	.64
Neuroticism (P)	-0.049	0.101	-0.49	107	.63
Extraversion (A)	-0.029	0.108	-0.27	107	.79
Extraversion (P)	-0.195	0.108	-1.80	107	.074
Openness (A)	0.072	0.095	0.76	107	.45
Openness (P)	0.051	0.095	0.53	107	.59
Agreeableness (A)	0.177	0.100	1.77	107	.079
Agreeableness (P)	-0.029	0.100	-0.29	107	.77
Conscientiousness (A)	0.056	0.099	0.56	107	.57
Conscientiousness (P)	-0.049	0.099	-0.50	107	.62

*Note.* Actor effects reflect the association between participants' outness/personality traits and their own behavior/reports of relationship quality. Partner effects reflect the association between partners' outness/personality traits and participants' behavior/reports of relationship quality. APIM = Actor-Partner Interdependence Model; HLM = Hierarchical Linear Model; A = Actor Effect; P = Partner Effect.

**Couple type as moderator.** Conducting APIM analyses using HLM is flexible because it allows for tests of potential moderator effects both within as well as between dyads. As stated earlier, moderator variables that vary across couple type are examined at Level II. More specifically, we estimated models where ratings from individual partners (Level I) are nested in couples (Level II) to identify whether any significant results in Model I varied by couple type (i.e., gay male or lesbian). Given empirical support in the literature that lesbian and gay male couples may have more in common than not (see Kurdek, 2003, for a review), we had no a priori expectations that couple type would moderate the effects identified in this report. Nonetheless, we chose to conduct a liberal test in Model I for possible conditional effects of couple type. The goal of this strategy was to conduct a test with enough power to detect any couple type differences that might exist before testing the more complex model that included all of the personality variables (both actor and partner) in Model II. We ran posthoc analyses for all significant independent variables in Model I at Level I. Of the five analyses conducted, only one significant Level II effect was identified. More specifically, the association between outness to family and self-reported satisfaction was stronger for lesbians compared to gay males,

**TABLE 4**  
**Results of Level I APIM analyses in HLM predicting observed emotional tone with outness to family and personality variables**

Predictor	Approx.				
	b	SE	t-ratio	df	p
<i>Model I: Out to Family</i>					
Out to Family (A)	0.137	0.090	1.52	117	.13
Out to Family (P)	0.080	0.090	0.89	117	.38
<i>Model II: Out to Family with Big 5 personality controls</i>					
Out to Family (A)	0.040	0.102	0.40	107	.69
Out to Family (P)	0.073	0.102	0.71	107	.48
Neuroticism (A)	0.042	0.106	0.39	107	.69
Neuroticism (P)	-0.051	0.106	-0.48	107	.63
Extraversion (A)	-0.045	0.114	-0.40	107	.69
Extraversion (P)	-0.225	0.114	-1.98	107	.050
Openness (A)	0.088	0.096	0.92	107	.36
Openness (P)	0.073	0.096	0.76	107	.45
Agreeableness (A)	0.222	0.102	2.19	107	.031
Agreeableness (P)	0.012	0.102	0.11	107	.92
Conscientiousness (A)	0.084	0.101	0.83	107	.41
Conscientiousness (P)	-0.024	0.101	-0.24	107	.81

*Note.* Actor effects reflect the association between participants' outness/personality traits and their own behavior/reports of relationship quality. Partner effects reflect the association between partners' outness/personality traits and participants' behavior/reports of relationship quality. APIM = Actor-Partner Interdependence Model; HLM = Hierarchical Linear Model; A = Actor Effect; P = Partner Effect.

$t = 4.06$  (117),  $p < 0.001$ . We also examined whether nonsignificant results were moderated by couples type and no significant couple type effects emerged.

### Discussion

The goal of this study was to more fully explore how self-disclosure of same-sex feelings and attractions are associated with relationship satisfaction and observed romantic relationship quality. Findings from this study supported several of our hypotheses, including that individuals who were more out to nonfamily members with whom they regularly interact (i.e., out to the world), or who have partners who were out in this way: (i) Were more satisfied in their relationships and (ii) tended to display more positive and less negative affect during an interaction task where they were asked to discuss a relationship problem area in their relationship. Significant effects of outness on relationship satisfaction and observed relationship quality held in some instances – though not all – when controlling for the Big Five personality traits. Additionally, all but one significant effect of outness identified

held for both lesbian and gay male couples. Interestingly, this moderated effect was the only significant association identified in this study of being out to family members.

This report contributes to the field's understanding of the implications of outness for relationship satisfaction and observed quality among same-sex couples utilizing state-of-the-art methodological tools in interpersonal research. In particular, the use of a dyadic design as well as observational data provides a more nuanced assessment of how self-disclosure may benefit same-sex romantic couples who are out to the world and to their families than has to date been unavailable in the literature. This study is also unique because it goes beyond much past research on the benefits of self-disclosure by including personality traits as covariates. Importantly, in a number of instances outness to the world continued to predict interpersonal functioning even after controlling for the Big 5 personality traits. Given the well documented findings in the literature supporting the impact of personality traits on romantic relationship quality – and satisfaction in particular (e.g. Robins et al., 2000; but see Holland & Roisman, 2008) – the fact that outness is associated with interpersonal functioning over and above personality in this study is notable.

The results of this investigation suggest that being out to the world (i.e., with people that respondents interact with on a frequent basis, such as friends) – and having a partner who is out in this way – might provide a helpful support for same-sex romantic relationships, possibly by providing individuals with a sense of belonging and validation. This interpretation is in line with Cain's (1991) theory of self-disclosures as a means of facilitating relationship building. In contrast, however, outness to family members tended to be inconsistently associated with interpersonal functioning. For example, after controlling for personality characteristics, outness to family was no longer a significant predictor of satisfaction. Family dynamics can be complicated for lesbian and gay male individuals and couples around the topic of outness (Oswald, 2002; Patterson, 2000; Rostosky et al., 2004), and, as such, may not offer added benefit once individual differences in personality are taken into account. In particular, the results of this study would seem consistent with previous evidence that lesbian and gay male individuals and couples may be forced to intentionally derive more satisfaction in relationships from more supportive networks of choice (also referred to as families of choice) rather than families of origin (Oswald, 2002; Weston, 1991).

This study has several limitations that should be noted. First, the cross-sectional nature of this work only allowed us to examine satisfaction and overall quality at one time point, and, as such, does not allow us to disambiguate direction-of-effects in the association between outness and indicators of relationship satisfaction and quality. For example, it could be the case that relationship satisfaction leads individuals to feel more secure about coming out to family and the world. In particular, longitudinal designs would allow researchers to begin addressing questions related to the direction-of-effect in the association between outness and relationship

quality (Karney & Bradbury, 1997). Second, this study provides merely a snap-shot of the coming out process. We acknowledge that the coming-out for many can be a long and difficult process. Thus, it could well be that any positive interpersonal effects of doing so may not be realized immediately. Third, there may be some instances where being closeted is intended to promote one's relationship (e.g., being a member of the military and remaining closeted in order to keep one's pension to support a same-sex spouse). As such, future studies in this area would do well to systematically examine participants' motives for closeting as a potential moderator of the potential effects of outness on relationship-related outcomes.

Fourth, our sample is relatively homogeneous on several demographic variables (e.g., race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status), thus limiting the extent to which we can generalize our results to the broader lesbian and gay male community. Finally, the semirural community from which this study was sampled also limits generalizability to more urban settings where more densely populated enclaves of lesbians and gay males reside more openly. However, given the traditional focus on urban populations in lesbian and gay male relationship research, this study extends our knowledge about same-sex couples outside of metropolitan centers. We view this as an important contribution of our study.

In addition to incrementally advancing our knowledge of the apparently positive link between self-disclosures of sexual orientation and interpersonal functioning in same-sex relationships, this line of research is particularly relevant in the United States today as political pundits and gay rights advocates debate the merits of social policies such as 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell.' Such policies, of course, speak fundamentally to societal proscriptions against self-disclosure of same-sex feelings and attractions by lesbians and gay males. Whereas these debates are typically framed in terms of upholding the sanctity of societal institutions whose integrity and value is expected to be tarnished by openly lesbian and gay individuals via self disclosures, our findings contrastively suggest that outness could actually have benefits for lesbians and gay males in terms of enhancing the overall quality of their relationships.

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