

Making a commitment: Methodological challenges in longitudinal research with same-sex and heterosexual couples

Research on lesbian, gay, and bisexual people generally, and same-sex couples specifically, has burgeoned over the past decade along with the increased visibility, acceptance, and legal recognition that has become available in parts of the U.S. and internationally. However, most of the data that have been collected have been cross-sectional, single method (quantitative or qualitative), and with small, relatively homogeneous samples. The CUPPLES study is an innovative project that began in 2002, when we recruited a large sample of couples who obtained civil unions in Vermont during the first year of that new legislation (2000-2001). Index couples also recruited (a) a same-sex couple (friends) who did not have a civil union, and (b) a heterosexual sibling and his/her spouse. We followed up with all participants in 2005 in one of the first longitudinal studies of same-sex couples. In 2012, we obtained funding from NICHD to conduct a 10-year follow up using mixed methods to examine legal status, stigma, and well-being.

This presentation will review the methodological challenges that arise when “making a commitment” to follow same-sex and heterosexual couples over time, focusing on recruitment and instrumentation. We will present data from our 10-year follow up experience of tracking and finding these couples. Social and cultural changes over the past decade, including legislation regarding same-sex couples, the growth of the internet and social media, and the burgeoning of other research on LGB populations will be discussed in light of both opportunities and roadblocks to successfully maintaining a research cohort. We will provide preliminary data on factors that make research participants relatively easy or difficult to track down, and suggest tools for future longitudinal research. We will also discuss instrumentation concerns that arise in this research the context of social, cultural, and institutional change.