

New research examines health behavior in long-term relationships

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Women bear the brunt of being the health police in heterosexual marriages, but gay and lesbian couples are more likely to mutually influence each other's health habits – for better or for worse. The findings are reported in the June issue of the journal, *Social Science & Medicine*.

Researchers Corinne Reczek, a University of Cincinnati assistant professor of sociology, and Debra Umberson, professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, followed 20 long-term heterosexual marriages as well as 15 long-term gay and 15 long-term lesbian partnerships in the United States. Their findings reflected previous research that in heterosexual marriages, women put more effort into encouraging good [health](#) habits for their spouses.

Sociologists have theorized that from early childhood, the socialization of women into caretaker roles has led to health benefits for husbands. Reczek says this newest study is among the first of its kind to explore how gay and lesbian [couples](#) affect each other's health habits.

The researchers examined what they called "health work" – defined as any activity or dialogue concerned with enhancing another's health. The researchers conducted 100 in-depth interviews with couples involved in 50 long-term relationships – couples who were involved for at least eight years or longer.

The study found that at least one partner in over three-quarters of the

heterosexual, gay and [lesbian couples](#) did some form of health work as a result of two reasons: the other partner had bad [health habits](#), or one partner was considered the "health expert."

Nearly half of the respondents – heterosexual, gay or lesbian – blamed a partner's unhealthy habits for the other partner's attempts at intervention. Among heterosexual couples, men were typically identified as needing the prodding toward healthier lifestyles.

For couples identifying a "health expert," the researchers say that straight women were almost exclusively identified, while gay and lesbian couples identified one partner as the health expert, regardless of gender.

For better or for worse, couples mutually reinforcing health behaviors were more prominent in gay (80 percent) and lesbian (86 percent) couples versus straight couples (10 percent).

"The social and institutional conditions within which gay and lesbian couples live – including a heteronormative and homophobic culture at large, and a non-institutionalized nonheterosexual union – structure a unique relational context for cooperative, more egalitarian health work processes to emerge," write the authors.

The authors state that the findings suggest that gendered relational context of an intimate partnership shapes the dynamics and explanations for health behavior work.

The research was supported in part by a grant from the National Institute on Aging as well as the Mentoring Program of The Center for Population Research in LGBT Health, under the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Demographic Description

In the survey sample, 80 percent of the straight respondents were white, 15 percent were African-American, one Asian-American and one Latina. Gay and lesbian respondents included 63 percent whites, 27 percent who identified as Hispanics, Latinos or Latinas, one African-American, one Native-American/Hispanic, and one South American.

The average age for the straight couples was 45 years – 49 years for gay respondents and 43 years for lesbian respondents.

The average relationship duration for straight couples was 17 years, 21 years for [gay](#) couples and 14 years for lesbian couples. Household income averaged \$60,000.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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