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Lesbian and Gay Relationships

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Public awareness of lesbian and gay couples is growing; attention to homosexuality in the popular media *is* increasing. Social scientists have also begun to describe and analyze the nature of gay and lesbian relationships. The new scholarship on homosexual relationships is important both to the scientific community and to the general public.

For the emerging science of close relationships (Kelley et al., 1983), research on homosexual couples broadens the existing knowledge base by increasing the diversity of types of relationships studied to include same-sex partnerships. In the past, virtually all research on adult love relationships has focused on heterosexual dating and marriage. New studies of homosexual couples expand the range and generality of scientific knowledge about intimate relationships.

For the growing research literature on homosexuality, studies of gay and lesbian relationships also represent a new direction. Until recently, scholarship on homosexuality focused primarily on questions of pathology, individual psychological adjustment, and etiology. For example, a recent annotated bibliography included close to 5,000 citations from the social sciences, humanities, and popular press (Dynes, 1987). Only 36 of these entries were classified as dealing with gay or lesbian " couples/' In contrast, there were 207 entries on psychiatry, psychotherapy, "cures/' and related topics, and another 155 entries on the experiences of lesbians and gay men in prison or with the police.

For the general public, accurate information about gay and lesbian relationships is also useful. Scientific research can replace biased stereotype$ with factual descriptions of the nature and diversity of homosexual couples. Research can also inform the discussion of new legal and

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public policy issues that arise as gay men and lesbians become a more visible and vocal part of society. This point is illustrated in the following case descriptions, based on recent legal cases. (For a detailed review of the legal status of lesbian and gay couples, see the chapter by Rivera in this volume.)

Case One: Emotional pain and suffering. A man in a long-term gay relationship was killed by a reckless driver. The surviving partner sued the driver for damages resulting from the grief and psychological distress of losing a spouse-equivalent. The driver's lawyer countered that gay men's relationships bear little resemblance to marriage, and that it would be ridiculous to provide such payment. This case hinges on fundamental questions about the nature of gay men's relationships. How similar are long-term gay partnerships to heterosexual marriage? What is the intensity of love and attachment experienced in enduring gay relationships, and what is the depth of grief that accompanies bereavement?

Case Two: A lesbian motlicr. A young woman married her college sweetheart, had two daughters, divorced her husband, and retained custody of the children. Some time later, she began a lesbian relationship and set up a joint household with her female partner. At this point, her former husband sued to gain custody of the children, claiming that the mother was an "unfit" parent. It was proposed that she might retain custody if she promised to end her lesbian relationship. At issue here are basic questions about the ability of a lesbian mother to provide a healthy family life, the role models provided by partners in a lesbian relationship, and the impact of a lesbian couple on children in the household.

Case Three: The crime of passion defense. During a heated argument, a young man bludgeoned his lover to death with a fire iron. The defense acknowledged that the man had committed the murder, but pleaded that the act was committed in a moment of passion—a defense that could potentially lead to a lesser charge than premeditated homicide. The defendant's case rested on showing that gay relationships are as emotionally intense as heterosexual ones, perhaps even more so. The lawyer argued that a threat to a relationship could send a gay man "over the edge" psychologically. In addition, since both partners were recent immigrants from a culture that is highly intolerant of homosexuality, the defense attorney argued that his client was denied the kinds of social support that might have enabled him to cope more effectively with the crisis in his relationship. The case raises questions about the nature of love, passion and jealousy in gay relationships, and the social support experienced by homosexuals.

Although existing research does not definitively resolve the questions raised by these cases, it does provide beginning answers. This chapter reviews social science research on gay and lesbian relationships. It begins by summarizing major research findings relevant to four common stereotypes about gay and lesbian relationships in America. Then, theoretical issues raised by the study of lesbian and gay couples are considered. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the variation and diversity that exists among same-sex relationships.

It is important to emphasize at the outset that most of the available studies of homosexual relationships are based on samples of younger, urban, primarily white individuals. Occasionally, studies have involved fairly large samples (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983) or have included ethnic samples (e.g., Bell & Weinbcrg, 1978, surveyed both black and white respondents), but none has been completely representative of either lesbians or gay men. So it is essential to acknowledge this limitation in our newly accumulating body of research.

DEBUNKING STEREOTYPES ABOUT LESBIAN AND GAY RELATIONSHIPS

Empirical social science research on gay and lesbian relationships dates mainly from the mid-1970s. To date, the work has been largely descriptive—seeking to test the accuracy of prevailing social stereotypes about gay and lesbian relationships and to provide more reliable information. (For other reviews, see De Cecco, 1988; Harry, 1983c; Larson, 1982; Peplau & Amaro, 1982; Peplau & Cochran, 1990; Peplau & Gordon, 1983; Risman & Schwartz, 1988.)

Myth #1: Homosexuals don't want enduring relationships—and can't achieve them anyway.

Homosexuals are often depicted in the media as unhappy individuals who are unsuccessful in developing enduring same-sex ties. Drifting from one sexual liaison to another, they end up old and alone. Existing data sharply counter this stereotype.

Studies of homosexuals' attitudes about relationships find that most lesbians and gay men say they very much want to have enduring close relationships (e.g., Bell & Weinberg, 1978). Other studies have investigated the extent to which lesbians and gay men are successful in establishing intimate relationships. In surveys of gay men, between *40%* and 60% of the men questioned were currently involved in a steady relationship (e.gv Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Harry, 1983c; Jay & Young, 1977;

Peplau & Cochran, 1981; Spada, 1979). These figures may actually wttdt'rrepresent the true frequency of enduring relationships because men in long-term relationships tend to be somewhat older and less likely to go to bars—both factors that would reduce the chances of these men being included in current studies (Harry, 1983c). In studies of lesbians, between 45% and 80% of women surveyed were currently in a steady relationship (e.g., Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Jay & Young, 1977; Peplau, Cochran, Rook & Padesky, 1978; Raphael & Robinson, 1980; Schafer, 1977). In most studies, the proportion of lesbians in an ongoing relationship was close to 75%.

These estimates are not completely representative of all lesbians and gay men in the United States. They do indicate, however, that a large proportion of homosexuals have stable close relationships. Research also suggests that a slightly higher proportion of lesbians than gay men may be in steady relationships.

Given that substantial proportions of lesbians and gay men are involved in intimate relationships, a next question concerns the longevity of these partnerships. Lacking marriage records and representative samples, it is hard to make judgments about how long "typical" homosexual relationships last. Most studies have been of younger adults, whose relationships have lasted for a few years—as would be true for heterosexuals in their 20s. The few studies that have included older gay men and lesbians have found that relationships lasting 20 years or more are not uncommon (e.g., McWhirter & Mattison, 1984; Raphael & Robinson, 1980; Silverstein, 1981).

In a short longitudinal study, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) followed a large sample of lesbian, gay male, cohabiting heterosexual, and married couples over an 18-month period. At the time of initial testing, lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals were about equal in predicting that their current relationship would continue, although both lesbians and gay men speculated that gay men usually have less stable relationships than lesbians. At the 18-month follow-up, most couples were still together. Breakups were rare among couples who had already been together for more than ten years: 6% for lesbians, 4% for gay men, 4% for married couples. (None of the heterosexual cohabiting couples had been together for more than 10 years.) Among couples who had been together for 2 years or less, the breakup rate was also fairly low—less than one relationship in five ended during the 18 month period. Minor differences were found in rates of breakup among the different types of couples: 22% for lesbian couples, 16% for gay male couples, 17% for cohabiting couples, and 4% for married couples. Although these group differences are quite small, they do run counter to the suggestion that lesbians are more likely to have enduring partnerships. More important,

however, is the general pattern of relationship continuity found for all groups.

The basic point to draw from these studies is that gay and lesbian relationships are very much a reality in contemporary life.

Myth #2: Gay relationships are unhappy, abnormal, dysfunctional, and deviant.

It is often believed that gay and lesbian relationships are inferior to those of heterosexuals. For example, a study of heterosexual college students found that they expected gay and lesbian relationships to be less satisfying, more prone to discord, and "less in love" than heterosexual relationships (Testa, Kinder, & Ironson, 1987). To investigate this stereotype scientifically, researchers have assessed the psychological adjustment of homosexual dyads, and have often used a research strategy of comparing the relationship functioning of matched samples of homosexual and heterosexual couples. The central question has been how well gay and lesbian relationships fare on standard measures of relationship satisfaction, dyadic adjustment, or love.

Illustrative of this research is a study that Susan Cochran and I conducted (Peplau & Cochran, 1980). We selected matched samples of 50 lesbians, 50 gay men, 50 heterosexual women, and 50 heterosexual men—all currently involved in "romantic/sexual relationships." Participants were matched on age, education, ethnicity, and length of relationship, and all completed a detailed questionnaire about their current relationship.

Among this sample of young adults, about 60% said they were "in love" with their partner; most of the rest indicated they were "uncertain." On Rubin's standardized Love and Liking Scales, lesbians and gay men generally reported very positive feelings for their partners. Lesbians and gay men also rated their current relationships as highly satisfying and very close. No significant differences were found among lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals on any of these measures of relationship satisfaction.

We also asked lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals to describe in their own words the "best things" and "worst things" about their relationships. Responses included such comments as these: "The best thing is having someone to be with when you wake up," or "We like each other. We both seem to be getting what we want and need. We have wonderful sex together." Worst things included "My partner is too dependent emotionally," or "Her aunt lives with us!" Systematic content analyses (Cochran, 1978) found no significant differences in the responses of lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals—all of whom

reported a similar range of joys and problems. To search for more subtle differences among groups that may not have been captured by the coding scheme, the "best things" and "worst things" statements were typed on cards in a standard format, with information about gender and sexual orientation removed. Panels of judges were asked to sort the cards, separating men and women, or separating heterosexuals and homosexuals. The judges were not able to identify correctly the responses of lesbians, gay men, or heterosexual women and men. (Indeed, judges may have been misled by their own preconceptions; they tended, for instance, to assume incorrectly that statements involving jealousy were more likely to be made by homosexuals than heterosexuals.)

Other studies have portrayed similar findings, and have extended the range of relationship measures used. In general, most gay men and lesbians perceive their relationships as satisfying. Homosexual and heterosexual couples who are matched on age and other relevant background characteristics do not usually differ in levels of love and satisfaction, nor in their scores on standardized measures such as the Locke-Wallace Scale or Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale. (See Cardell, Finn, & Marecek, 1981; Dailey, 1979; Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986a, 1986b, 1987a; Peplau, Cochran, & Mays, 1986; Peplau, Padesky, & Hamilton, 1982.)

None of this is to say that *all* gay and lesbian couples are happy and problem-free. Rather the point is that homosexual couples are not necessarily any more prone to relationship dissatisfactions and difficulties than are heterosexuals. However, although the likelihood of relationship problems may be similar regardless of sexual orientation, there may nonetheless be differences in the types of problems most commonly faced by gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples. For example, therapists have suggested that issues of dependency and individuation may be especially salient in lesbian relationships (e.g., Roth, 1985; Sang, 1985; Smalley, 1987). Recently, psychotherapists have begun to develop new programs of couples counseling geared specifically for gay or lesbian couples (e.g., Berzon, 1988; Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective, 1987; Gonsiorek, 1985; Stein & Cohen, 1986).

In summary, research findings indicate that it is no longer useful or appropriate to describe homosexual relationships in the value-laden language of "abnormal relationships" or "deviance." There is growing recognition of the wide diversity of "families" today—single parent families, "recombinant families" incorporating children from two previous marriages, and so on. Lesbian and gay partnerships should be included among this diverse array of family types.

There is also increasing evidence from historians (e.g., Bos well, 1980) and anthropologists (e.g., Herdt, 1981) that our own culture's negative evaluation of homosexual couples has not been shared universally. In other times and places, human culture has recognized and approved of gay partnerships. Interesting, too, are recent efforts by sociobiologists to consider ways in which homosexual relationships might be functional rather than dysfunctional for individuals, in the sense of enhancing their reproductive success and causing their genes to influence the direction of evolutionary change. A detailed discussion of this perspective is presented by Weinrich (1987b).

Myth #3: "Husband" and "wife" roles are universal in intimate relationships.

C. A. Tripp notes that "when people who are not familiar with homosexual relationships try to picture one, they almost invariably resort to a heterosexual frame of reference, raising questions about which partner is 'the man' and which 'the woman'" (1975, p. 152). This issue has generated a good deal of empirical research (see reviews by Harry, 1983c; Peplau & Gordon, 1983; Risman & Schwartz, 1988).

Historical accounts of gay life in the United States suggest that masculine-feminine roles have sometimes been important. For example, Wolf (1979) described lesbian experiences in the 1950s in these terms:

> The old gay world divided up into "butch" and "femmes." . . . Dutches were tough, presented themselves as being as masculine as possible ... and they assumed the traditional male role of taking care of their partners, even fighting over them if necessary. . . . Femmes, by contrast, were protected, ladylike. . . . They cooked, cleaned house, and took care of their "butch." (p. 40)

More recently, there has been a sharp decline in the occurrence of gender-linked roles in gay and lesbian relationships. Some have attributed this change to the effects of the feminist and gay rights movements and to the general loosening of traditional gender norms in American society (Marecek, Finn, & Cardell, 1982; Risman & Schwartz, 1988; Ross, 1983).

[1] Today, however, research shows that most lesbians and gay men actively reject traditional husband-wife or masculine-feminine roles as a model for enduring relationships. (See Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Harry, 1983c, 1984; Jay & Young, 1977; Lynch & Reilly, 1986; Marecek, Finn, & Cardell, 1982; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984; Peplau & Amaro, 1982; Saghir & Robins, 1973.) Currently, most lesbians and gay men are

in "dual-worker" relationships, so that neither partner is the exclusive "breadwinner" and each partner has some measure of economic independence. Further, examination of the division of household tasks, sexual behavior, and decision making in homosexual couples finds that clear-cut and consistent husband-wife roles are uncommon. In many relationships, there is some specialization of activities with one partner doing more of some jobs and less of others. But it is rare for one partner to perform most of the "feminine" activities and the other to perform most of the "masculine" tasks. That is, the partner who usually does the cooking does not necessarily also perform other feminine tasks such as shopping or cleaning. Specialization seems to be based on more individualistic factors such as skills or interests.

Nonetheless, a small minority of lesbians and gay men do incorporate elements of husband-wife roles into their relationships. This may affect the division of labor, the dominance structure, sexual interactions, the way partners dress, and other aspects of their relationship. In some cases, these role patterns seemed to be linked to temporary situations, such as one partner's unemployment or illness. For other couples, however, masculine-feminine roles may provide a model of choice.

Given that traditional husband-wife roles are not the template for most contemporary homosexual couples, researchers have sought to identify other models or relationship patterns. One model might be based on differences in *age,* with an older partner acting in part as a mentor or leader. In his studies of gay male relationships, Harry (1982, 1984) found that the age-difference pattern characterized only a minority of gay male couples. When it did occur, the actual differences in age tended to be relatively small, perhaps five to ten years. Harry also found that in these couples, the older partner often had more power in decision making. McWhirter and Mattison (1984) also observed age differences among some of the male couples they studied, and reported that age differences of five years or more were characteristic of couples who had been together for 30 years or more.

Finally, another pattern is based *on friendship* or peer relations, with partners being similar in age and emphasizing companionship, sharing, and equality in the relationship (e.g., Harry, 1982,1983c; Peplau, et al., 1978; Peplau & Cochran, 1981). A friendship script typically fosters equality in relationships. In contrast to marriage, the norms for friendship assume that partners are relatively equal in status and power. Friends also tend to be similar in interests, resources, and skills. Available evidence suggests that most American lesbians and gay men have a relationship script that most closely approximates best friendship.

In summary, contemporary homosexual relationships follow a variety of patterns or models. Most common are relationships patterned after friendship. Among both lesbians and gay men, a minority of couples may incorporate elements of traditional masculine-feminine roles into their relationships. For others, age differences may be central to role patterns. We currently know little about the causal factors responsible for these different patterns. The fact that many lesbians and gay men are able to create satisfying love relationships that are not based on complementary, gender-linked role differentiation challenges the popular view that such masculine-feminine differences are essential to adult love relationships.

Myth #4: Gays and lesbians have impoverished social support networks.

Although there is growing public awareness of the existence of gay and lesbian communities, stereotypes continue to depict homosexuals as'socially isolated and lacking in social support. It is certainly true that in a homophobic society, gays and lesbians may suffer from social alienation and estrangement. We should not minimize the psychological stress that results from social rejection and stigma. What is noteworthy, however, is the extent to which contemporary lesbians and gay men seem able to overcome these obstacles and to create satisfying social networks. This is especially important because of growing evidence that emotional support, guidance, assistance, and other forms of social support contribute to mental and physical health.

Illustrative of research on social support is a comparative study of lesbian and heterosexual women conducted by Aura (1985). She compared the social support experiences of 50 lesbians and 50 heterosexual women. All women were currently in a primary relationship and were matched for age, education, and length of their relationship. None had children in their household. Women filled out detailed questionnaires about many specific types of social support. Results showed that both groups of women held very similar values about the importance of social support. In addition, women reported receiving similar total amounts of support from their personal relationships. However, lesbians and heterosexuals often received support from *different sources.* In particular, many lesbians depended somewhat less on relatives and more on their partner or friends than did heterosexuals. For example, lesbians and heterosexuals reported receiving similar amounts of material assistance such as help in moving or getting a ride to the airport, but lesbians relied more on friends and heterosexuals relied more on family.

Research by Lewin investigated the social support experiences of lesbian and heterosexual divorced mothers raising children (Lewin, 1981; Lewin & Lyons, 1982). Lewin found that both lesbian and

heterosexual mothers were equally likely to turn to their parents or other family members for support. About 84% of the lesbian mothers said that most or all of their relatives were aware of their homosexuality. Although this initially created stress for many lesbians and their families, over time the families seemed to come to terms with the situation. One woman who had been estranged from her family reported that she now sees her mother daily because her son stays with his grandmother after school. For both lesbian and heterosexual mothers, kinship ties were often of central importance for child care and "to offer a sense of stability, an opportunity to continue family tradition, and emotional comfort" (in Lewin & Lyons, 1982, p. 262). Results suggest that the presence of children may increase the similarity in social support experiences of lesbian and heterosexual women.

Kurdek (1988) studied social support among gay men and lesbians in couples. When asked who provided social support, virtually everyone listed not only their partner but also other friends. In addition, 81% of the gay men and 86% of the lesbians cited a family member as a source of support—most often their mother or a sister. Using the standardized Social Support Questionnaire developed by Sarason and his associates (1983), Kurdek found no differences between gay men and lesbians in the source of support or in satisfaction with support. Overall levels of support received by gays and lesbians were similar to and slightly higher than those reported by Sarason for a college student sample. (See also D'Augelli, 1987; D'Augelli & Hart, 1987; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987b).

In summary, despite potential obstacles to the establishment of meaningful social relations, many lesbians and gay men are able to create supportive social networks.

THEORETICAL ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF GAY AND LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

To date, much of the work on gay and lesbian relationships has been descriptive, designed to fill gaps in the existing data base. But newer research has had a stronger theoretical or conceptual focus. Three approaches can be distinguished: (1) work that seeks to test the general applicability of relationship theories initially developed with heterosexuals, (2) work that uses comparative studies of gay, lesbian, and heterosexual relationships to test ideas about the impact of gender on interaction, and (3) work that seeks to create new theories about same-sex relationships.

The General Applicability of Theory: Social Exchange Theory

Most social science concepts, models, and theories of relationships have been based explicitly or implicitly on heterosexual experiences. Efforts to investigate the applicability of such theories to new populations of lesbians and gay men are important to the development of a science of relationships. Evidence that existing theories can usefully be applied to homosexual relationships would also have practical significance, suggesting that work on same-sex couples can build on the existing literature rather than start anew.

Social exchange theory (Burgess & Huston, 1979; Kclley & Thibaut, 1978) has been one of the most influential theoretical perspectives on relationships. Several studies have now tested predictions derived from exchange theory among lesbian and gay male couples. In general, research has confirmed the generalizability of exchange theory to this new population and has shown the usefulness of exchange concepts in understanding relationship processes.

For example, Mayta Caldwell and I (1984) investigated the balance of power in lesbian relationships. In our sample of young adults, 61% of lesbians said that their current relationship was equal in power. We explored two factors that might tip the balance of power away from equality. First, we considered the "principle of least interest"—the prediction that when one person is more dependent, involved, or interested in continuing a relationship, that person is at a power disadvantage. We found strong support for this prediction.

We also investigated the impact of personal resources on power. The prediction here is that when a person has substantially more resources than the partner, he or she will have a power advantage. In our sample, differences in both income and education were significantly related to imbalances of power, with greater power accruing to the lesbian partner who was relatively better educated or earned more money. Studies of gay male relationships by Harry (1984) have also shown that a power advantage can accrue to the partner who has a higher income and who is older. However, work by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) raises the possibility that the importance of specific resources such as money may differ across groups. In their large-scale study, Blumstein and Schwartz found that money was related to power in heterosexual relationships atfd was "an extremely important force" in determining dominance in gay male relationships. But for lesbians, income was *unrelated* to power. This is a good illustration of the notion that personal resources are not universal, but rather depend on the values of the partners in a relationship.

Another way in which research has drawn on exchange principles concerns commitment in gay and lesbian relationships. The question here is whether the forces affecting commitment might be different in homosexual versus heterosexual relationships. As Levinger (1979) and others have pointed out, commitment and permanence in a relationship are affected by two separate types of factors. The first concerns the strength of the positive attractions that make us want to stay in a relationship. Although stereotypes depict gays and lesbians as having weaker attractions to their partners than do heterosexuals, we have already seen that research does not support this view. In general, homosexuals do not appear to differ from heterosexuals in the level of satisfaction and love they feel for their primary partner.

The second factor maintaining the stability of relationships are barriers that make the ending of the relationship costly, in either psychological or material terms. For heterosexuals, marriage usually creates many barriers to dissolution including the cost of divorce, the wife's financial dependence on her husband, joint investments in property, concerns about children, and so on. Such factors may encourage married couples to "work" to improve a declining relationship, rather than end it. In contrast, gay and lesbian couples may be less likely to experience comparable barriers to the ending of a relationship—they cannot marry legally, their relatives may prefer that they end their relationship, they are less likely to have children in common, and so on. Another barrier to ending a relationship might be the lack of alternative partners or resources. To the extent that a current partner is the "best available/[7] we are less likely to leave.

This exchange theory analysis suggests that for all types of relationships, the level of commitment should be related to attractions, barriers, and alternatives. Because of differences in the social context of homosexual and heterosexual relationships, lesbian and gay male couples may tend to have fewer barriers than heterosexuals. As a result, possible differences in commitment between heterosexual and homosexual couples may result from barriers to dissolution rather than from attractions to the partner.

Empirical research has investigated these predictions. Kurdek and Schmitt (1986a) compared self-reported attractions, barriers, and alternatives in gay, lesbian, heterosexual cohabiting, and married couples. They found no differences across the groups in attractions. All groups were equally likely to report feelings of love and satisfaction. However, barriers—assessed by statements such as "many things would prevent me from leaving my partner even if I were unhappy"—did differ. Married couples reported significantly more barriers than either gays or lesbians, and cohabiting heterosexual couples reported the fewest barriers of all. In answering questions about available alternatives to the current relationship, lesbians and married couples reported the fewest alternatives; gay men and heterosexual cohabitors reported the most alternatives. For all groups, love for the partner was significantly related to perceiving many barriers to leaving, few alternatives, and many attractions. In summary, differences between gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples were found in the barriers they perceived to ending a relationship, not in the quality of the relationship itself. Kurdek and Schmitt did not relate these factors to commitment.

Rusbult (1988) investigated the dynamics of commitment more directly, testing what she calls an "investment model" of commitment based on social exchange principles. After initial tests of her model with heterosexuals, Duffy and Rusbult (1986) conducted a comparative study of homosexual and heterosexual relationships to test the generalizability of her findings. This research found that lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals all generally described their relationships in quite similar ways. All groups reported strong attraction to their partner (that is, high rewards and low costs from the relationship and high satisfaction), moderately high investments in the relationship, and moderately poor alternatives. All types of couples also reported strong commitment. Consistent with exchange theory principles, commitment was predicted by satisfaction, investments, and alternatives for lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals.

These studies found somewhat different patterns of results, with Kurdek and Schmitt reporting that sexual orientation was related to differences in barriers and alternatives, and Duffy and Rusbult finding no effects of sexual orientation. Further research will be needed to explore these issues more fully. Nonetheless, available evidence does clearly suggest the usefulness of applying principles from social exchange theory to homosexual relationships. This is an important demonstration of the generalizability of the theory. Equally important, it suggests that those interested in understanding the dynamics of gay and lesbian relationships can at least sometimes take existing theory as a starting point.

The Impact of Gender on Relationships: Contrasting Gender Versus Power Interpretations

Comparative studies of same-sex and cross-sex couples provide a new approach to investigating how gender affects close relationships. For example, by comparing how women behave with male versus

female partners, we can begin to disentangle the effects on social interaction of an individual's own sex and the sex of their partner. This comparative research strategy is not identical to an experiment in which participants are randomly assigned to interact with a male or female partner. In real life, individuals are obviously not randomly assigned to have heterosexual or homosexual relationships. Nonetheless, strategically planned comparisons can be informative. This point is illustrated by studies investigating gender versus power interpretations of social interaction patterns.

It has been observed that when trying to influence a partner, women and men tend to use somewhat different tactics. Women may be more likely to use tears and less likely to use logical arguments. Why? One interpretation views this sex difference as resulting from differential gender socialization—women have learned to express emotion, men to use logic. But a second interpretation is also plausible: in male-female relationships, men often have the upper hand in power. Influence tactics may stem from the partner's relative dominance in the relationship, not from male-female differences in dispositions to use particular influence tactics. Several studies have used comparisons of gay, lesbian, and heterosexual relationships to investigate these compelling interpretations. In a study of influence strategies in intimate relationships, Toni Falbo and I (1980) compared the tactics that lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals reported using to influence a romantic partner. We also asked questions about the balance of power in the relationship. Our results led to two major conclusions. First, gender affected power tactics, but only among heterosexuals. Whereas heterosexual women were more likely to withdraw or express negative emotions, heterosexual men were more likely to use bargaining or reasoning. But this sex difference did *not* emerge in comparisons of lesbians and gay men influencing their same-sex partner. Second, consistent with the dominance interpretation, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, individuals who perceived themselves as relatively more powerful in the relationship tended to use persuasion and bargaining. In contrast, partners low in power tended to use withdrawal and emotion.

Howard, Blumstein, and Schwartz (1986) also compared influence tactics in the intimate relationships of homosexuals and heterosexuals. They found that dependent (lower-power) partners in all three types of couples used different influence tactics than did the more powerful. Regardless of sexual orientation, a partner with relatively less power tended to use "weak" strategies such as supplication and manipulation. Those in positions of strength were more likely to use autocratic and bullying tactics, both "strong strategies." Further, individuals with male partners (i.e., heterosexual women and homosexual men) were more likely to use supplication and manipulation. Similarly, KolJock, Blumstein, and Schwartz (1985) found that signs of conversational dominance, such as interrupting a partner in the middle of a conversation, were linked to the balance of power. Although interruption has sometimes been viewed as a "male" behavior, it was in fact more often engaged in by the more powerful person in the relationship, regardless of gender. Taken together, the results of these studies provide considerable support for the dominance interpretation of sex differences in male-female interaction. These studies demonstrate the potential benefits *of* using strategic comparisons of same-sex and cross-sex couples to help understand the causes of sex differences in personal relationships. (For an illustration of using comparisons of homosexual and heterosexual couples to test social versus evolutionary theories of partner selection, see Howard, Blumstein, and Schwartz, 1987.)

New Theories: Stage Models of the Development of Gay Relationships

There have been several attempts to create models of stages in the development of relationships among gay men (e.g., Harry & Lovely, 1979; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984) and lesbians (e.g., Clunis & Green, 1988). These models have typically been empirically based efforts to generate theory from clinical observations or from research studies of same-sex couples. The goal has been to capture patterns unique to gay or lesbian relationships.

For example, an early model of gay male relationships was proposed by Harry and Lovely (1979), well before the current AIDS epidemic. Observing that sexual exclusivity was uncommon in the relationships of gay men, Harry and Lovely proposed a two-stage model of gay male relationship development. Initially, they hypothesized, there is a relatively brief "honeymoon" phase of sexual monogamy. Over time, there is a "transformation of relationships from sexually closed to open ones" (pp. 193-194). Indeed, they suggested that sexual openness may be necessary for the survival of gay relationships over time.

In 1980, David Blasband and I tested this two-stage model with a sample of 40 gay male couples (Blasband & Peplau, 1985). Our data provided little support for the generality of this model. Of the 40 couplesj only 20% indicated that their relationship was initially closed and later became sexually open. The rest reported other patterns. Roughly 20% indicated that their relationship had always been sexually open, 30% said it had always been closed, and the rest followed other patterns. Two couples said that they had once had a sexually open relationship but decided to become dosed because of problems they were experiencing.

We were not surprised to find such a wide variety of patterns. As research on heterosexual courtship and couple development has shown (Levinger, 1983), it is exceedingly difficult to find universal, invariant stages in the development of relationships. Efforts to identify fixed and invariant stages are probably only successful when cultural scripts are rigid and widely accepted. Left to their own devices, humans are more creative in the range of relationship patterns they construct.

More recently, detailed stage models of gay and lesbian relationships have been presented. Based on a study of 156 male couples, McWhirter and Mattison (1984) proposed a six-stage model of development. Their stages, roughly linked to the length of the relationship, are: blending, nesting, maintaining, building, releasing, and renewing. Partly building on the McWhirter and Mattison work, Clunis and Green (1988) proposed a six-stage model for the development of lesbian relationships including these stages: prerelationship, romance, conflict, acceptance, commitment, and collaboration. These stage theorists have acknowledged variation among couples. As Clunis and Green comment, "Not every couple starts with the first stage. Some couples never go through all the stages, and certainly not in the order they are presented'[7] (p. 10). Similarly, McWhirter and Mattison caution that "characteristics from one stage also are present in other stages, and they overlap. Remember, too, that not all male couples fit this model" (p. 16). These stage models represent innovative attempts to characterize the unique relationship progression of contemporary gay and lesbian relationships. Further research will be needed to assess how well these models apply to other samples of lesbian and gay male couples (e.g., Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986c).

In summary, a good deal has been learned about gay and lesbian couples during the past decade. The field has begun to move beyond basic descriptive studies in the direction of theory development and testing. The use of strategic comparisons of same-sex and cross-sex dyads appears to be a useful way to shed light on the impact of sexual orientation and gender on couples. New concepts and models based on lesbian and gay experiences need to be tested and refined, and their possible contribution to more general analyses of human relationships should be explored.

DIVERSITY AMONG GAY AND LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

Having debunked old stereotypes about homosexual relationships, we must continue to avoid the tendency to characterize the "typical lesbian couple" or the "typical gay male relationship." There are enormous variations among lesbian couples, as there are among gay male couples. To understand this diversity, two goals are important: First, we need to describe major ways in which homosexual couples differ from each other, for instance in dominance, or patterns of communication, or modes of conflict resolution, or degree of commitment (cf. Bell & Weinberg, 1978). Second, we need to identify factors that produce these variations or, more technically, to identify the causal conditions affecting interaction patterns.

Variation Based on Gender

A major source of variation in same-sex relationships appears to be gender. In the 1950s and 1960s, discussions of homosexuality often assumed that there were many commonalities among the experiences of gay men and lesbians—based on their "deviant'[7] status or "abnormal" sexual orientation. Empirical research has seriously challenged this notion. Gagnon and Simon (1973) first articulated the opposite view, that it is one's socialization as male or female that most profoundly structures one's life experiences. Gagnon and Simon contended that the "female homosexual follows conventional feminine patterns in developing her commitment to sexuality and in conducting not only her sexual career but her nonsexual career as well" (p. 180). Focusing on sexuality, they suggested that lesbian sexuality would tend "to resemble closely" that of heterosexual women, and to differ radically from the sexual activity patterns of both heterosexual men and gay men. Current research clearly supports this assertion.

Although gender differences are evident in many aspects of gay and lesbian relationships, they are perhaps seen most easily in the area of sexuality (cf. Schafer, 1977). Results of comparative studies of lesbians, gay male, and heterosexual relationships—including our own work at UCLA and the large-scale study of Blumstein and Schwartz (1983)—converge on three trends.

First, in all three types of relationships, *sexual frequency* declines with the duration of the relationship. In relationships of comparable duration, the frequency of sex with the primary partner is greatest among gay men, intermediate among heterosexuals, and lowest among lesbians.

Second, *sexual exclusivity versus openness* is an issue for all couples. In general, heterosexuals and lesbians are more supportive of sexual monogamy in relationships than are gay men. Their behavior corresponds. Sexual exclusivity in relationships is least common among gay men at all stages in their relationship. For example, Blumstein and Schwartz reported that among couples together for two to ten years or more, 79% of gay men have had sex with another partner in the previous

year, compared with only 11% of husbands and 9% of wives. For lesbians, the comparable figure was 19%.

Third, levels of *sexual satisfaction* are similar across lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual couples, suggesting that couples in each group find their sexual relations equally gratifying on average (e.g., Masters & Johnson, 1979).

The gender differences in these data are large and support the view that men want sex more often than women do and that men more highly value sexual novelty. Heterosexual relationships are, on some measure, a compromise between the preferences of the man and the woman (cf. Symons, 1979). In contrast, same-sex partnerships are more extreme—men with male partners have sex more often and are less inclined toward sexual exclusivity. Women with female partners have sex least often, and differ sharply from gay men in their rates of nonmonogamy. Further explorations of the way in which gender affects the relationship experiences of gay and lesbian couples would be useful. (These generalizations are based on research conducted before the AIDS crisis. It remains to be seen how AIDS may alter patterns of sexual behavior.)

Variation Based on Personal Values

Another source of differences among same-sex couples concerns the personal values about intimacy that individuals bring to their relationship. We have begun to explore individual differences in values about the nature of love relationships (Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978; Peplau & Cochran, 1980,1981). Consistent with discussions in the relationship literature, we have found two basic value dimensions for relationships. These dimensions have sometimes been called intimacy and independence, attachment and autonomy, or closeness and separation. We have conceptualized these distinctions as value orientations and have developed two independent scales, one to assess each orientation.

We have called the first of these orientations *dyadic attachment.* It concerns the value placed on having an emotionally close and relatively secure love relationship. As one gay man described what he wants in a love relationship: "The most important thing … is the knowledge that someone loves and needs me. … It would be a stabilizing force in my life, and give me a sense of security" (cited in Spada, 1979, p. 198). On our measure, a person who scores high on attachment strongly values permanence, security, shared activities, sexual exclusivity, and "togetherness."

The second theme we have called *personal autonomy,* and it concerns the boundaries that exist between an individual and his or her partner. While some individuals wish to immerse themselves entirely in a relationship to the exclusion of outside interests and activities, others prefer to maintain personal independence. On our measure, a person who scores high on personal autonomy emphasizes the importance of having separate interests and friendships apart from a primary relationship and preserving independence within the relationship by dividing finances equally and making decisions in an egalitarian manner.

Our research has shown that these same two value themes are relevant to the experiences of lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals. In all samples, the two measures are independent—not polar opposites. Some individuals may want to combine a high degree of togetherness with a high level of independence, others prefer a high degree of togetherness and low independence, and so on. These relationship values are predictive of variations among relationships in such factors as love and satisfaction, perceived commitment, types of problems experienced, and sexual behavior, although these linkages are not always very strong.

An important direction for future research will be to identify other sources of diversity among lesbian and gay male relationships. Other factors worth exploring include the impact of age (or cohort), ethnicity (e.g., Peplau, Cochran, & Mays, 1980), length of a relationship, or degree of integration in a lesbian or gay community. Ultimately, we will want to develop a fuller picture of how interaction in gay and lesbian couples is affected by characteristics of the individual partners, by features of the dyad itself, and by social and cultural conditions.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has reviewed a growing body of scientific research on gay and lesbian relationships. Research has shown that most lesbians and gay men want intimate relationships and are successful in creating them. Homosexual partnerships appear no more vulnerable to problems and dissatisfactions than their heterosexual counterparts, although the specific problems encountered may differ for same-sex and cross-sex couples. Characterizations of gay and lesbian relationships as "abnormal" or "dysfunctional" are not justifiable. Another myth that has been disconfirmed is the belief that most homosexual couples adopt "husband" and "wife" roles. Finally, new work has found that gay men and lesbians do not typically have impoverished social support networks. It is important that mental health practitioners, educators, and the general public become more informed about the realities of same-sex relationships, so that misconception can be replaced with up-to-date scientific knowledge.

Scholars are increasingly emphasizing the rich diversity that exists among gay and lesbian couples. Much needed research remains to be done to describe the varieties of same-sex partnerships, and to understand how such factors as ethnicity, social class, openness about one's sexual orientation, and participation in gay or lesbian communities influence the experiences of lesbian and gay male couples. The debunking of derogatory social stereotypes about homosexual relationships should also clear the way for an open discussion of the special problems that do affect contemporary gay and lesbian couples. The enormous impact of the AIDS epidemic on homosexual relationships is just beginning to receive the attention it deserves (e.g., Carl, 1986; Risman & Schwartz, 1988). New research investigating the effects on relationships of alcohol abuse (e.g., Weinberg, 1986) and physical violence (Leeder, 1988; Renzetti, 1988; Waterman, Dawson, & Bologna, 1989) is also important, and illustrates some of the many useful new directions for future research.

Studies of lesbian and gay couples can contribute to the emerging science of close relationships. The applicability of general theories, such as social exchange theory, to homosexual couples has now been demonstrated in several studies, and further research of this sort would be useful. This work suggests the possibility of developing general theories capable of explaining a wide variety of relationship types. Studies of same-sex partnerships can also provide a new perspective on the impact of gender on close relationships. Comparisons of same-sex and cross-sex couples provide a new research strategy for testing competing interpretations of sex differences in interaction. New theories based on the distinctive experiences of gay and lesbian couples are an important new direction for future work.