

## SOCIAL INVOLVEMENT, DISCLOSURE OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION, AND THE QUALITY OF LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

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Gay and lesbian political activists encourage lesbians to “come out” and get involved. Is this good advice for lesbian couples? In these secondary analyses of data collected from 784 lesbian couples in 1979 for the American Couples Study (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983), we examined whether social involvement and disclosure of sexual orientation were systematically associated with the quality of women’s relationships. We predicted and found that partners matched on level of social involvement were happier than mismatched couples. The extent of women’s social involvement had a curvilinear association with relationship quality: moderately involved couples were the most satisfied. Contrary to predictions, lesbians who had disclosed to a greater number of important others did not have more satisfying romantic relationships, nor did partner matching on self-disclosure enhance relationship quality.

In trying to create satisfying and long-lasting love relationships, lesbian couples face many of the same problems as heterosexual couples, such as finding a partner with similar interests, coordinating activities, and resolving conflicts (Peplau & Spalding, 2000). Because lesbian couples are confronted with antigay prejudice and discrimination, a unique challenge concerns revealing or concealing their sexual orientation to family members, friends, and coworkers (Herek, 1993; Kite, 1994). A second issue concerns the extent to which couples participate in lesbian social activities such as attending lesbian bars, community centers, or coffeehouses. In the present study, we investigated whether lesbian partners’ decisions about these two issues affect the quality of their intimate relationships and, if they do, in what ways.

Gay activists recognize the potential social and political benefits of a large and visible gay community and, therefore, encourage lesbians and gay men to be as open as pos-

sible about their sexual orientation in their daily lives. National Coming Out Week events and gay pride marches encourage lesbians and gays to disclose their sexual orientation and become involved in the community. Gay leaders recognize that these activities enhance the cohesiveness, visibility, and political power of the community. In the 1970s, Harvey Milk, the first openly gay supervisor in San Francisco, explained, “I would like to see every gay lawyer, every gay architect come out, stand up and let the world know. That would do more to end prejudice overnight than anybody could imagine” (cited in Herek, 1996, p. 213). Advocates of disclosure argue that the increased visibility of gay and lesbian communities and the willingness of more individuals to disclose their minority sexual orientation to heterosexuals have contributed to improving gay civil liberties and reducing homophobia in the last 30 years. Based on research showing that contact with homosexuals reduces prejudice among heterosexuals, Herek (1986) observed, “one principal recommendation to lesbians and gay men: come out” (p. 934). Although coming out has clear benefits for the gay and lesbian community as a whole, its impact on individuals and their intimate relationships is less certain (Herek & Capitanio, 1996). In the present study, we investigated two main questions. First, is there an association between participation in the social life of a gay or lesbian community and the satisfaction of a lesbian couple? Second, is the quality of a lesbian relationship influenced by the extent to which each partner discloses her minority sexual orientation to heterosexual family members and friends?

This research used the *American Couples*, 1975–1978, data set (made accessible in 1992, computer data). These data were collected by Pepper Schwartz and Philip Blumstein and are available through the archive of the Henry A. Murray Research Center of Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts (Producer and Distributor). This study was funded by a grant to Letitia A. Peplau from the UCLA Academic Senate Committee on Research.

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### Social Involvement and Relationship Quality

A potentially important influence on intimate lesbian relationships is involvement in gay and lesbian communities. In many areas, especially urban centers, lesbians have the option of becoming involved in lesbian or gay social groups, going to lesbian or mixed gay bars or clubs, playing women's sports, or socializing with a circle of lesbian and gay friends. Troiden (1993) hypothesized that having a network of friends within the gay or lesbian community is crucial to the development of an integrated self-identity. According to Esterberg (1996), communities "offer a set of shared meanings for interpreting the experiences of those who desire same-sex lovers and . . . provide a set of positive, prideful images that offset heterosexist images of lesbians and gay men" (p. 389). Similarly, D'Augelli and Garnets (1995) suggested that involvement in a gay or lesbian community can enhance self-esteem and lower stress.

How might involvement in the social life of a gay/lesbian community affect lesbian relationships? Communities can provide a safe and accepting environment for same-sex couples. Partners may benefit from being able to attend events and gatherings as a couple without fear of rejection or hostility. However, Schreurs and Buunk (1996) hypothesized that involvement in a lesbian subculture can have mixed consequences for couples: "Although a supportive lesbian subculture may contribute positively to satisfaction in lesbian relationships, it is also possible that such a subculture diminishes satisfaction by undermining the cohesion of such a relationship" (p. 580). In a study of heterosexual married couples, Holman (1981) found that moderate community involvement was beneficial to couples, but a very high level of involvement was not. He noted that "at some point, the time commitment will outweigh the reward" (p. 146) and will result in dissatisfaction. In other words, there may be a trade-off between time devoted to community activities and time available for the couple itself. Consequently, we tested two predictions. First, we hypothesized that there would be a curvilinear association between social involvement in gay or lesbian social activities and relationship quality, with moderately involved couples reporting greater satisfaction than couples with either low or high levels of involvement. Second, we predicted a positive correlation between the amount of time partners spend with each other and the quality of their relationship.

### Disclosure and Relationship Quality

Is there a systematic association between a woman's openness about her minority sexual orientation to family members, friends, and coworkers and the quality of her intimate relationship with a female partner? Researchers who studied heterosexual individuals documented both the benefits and the potential risks of self-disclosure (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). The act of revealing

personal information to others has often been associated with better mental and physical health (Derlega et al., 1993; Pennebaker, 1995, Pennebaker & Francis, 1996). For example, Pennebaker and O'Heeron (1984) found that recently bereaved individuals who confided in others coped better and had fewer health problems than bereaved individuals who did not disclose their emotions to others. According to Pennebaker (1995) "disclosure of one's deepest thoughts and feelings is a powerful social phenomenon" (p. 7) that can result in benefits for the discloser. Self-disclosure can also entail risks. Omarzu (2000) identified several possible costs of self-disclosure, including social rejection, the loss of control over personal information, betrayal if confidences are broken, and the possibility of hurting or embarrassing the listener.

Empirical research on the effects that disclosure of a minority sexual orientation has on one's own romantic relationship is limited. However, many researchers have examined the consequences of disclosure for lesbian and gay individuals. Disclosing their sexual orientation can sometimes be harmful to lesbians. In extreme cases, such disclosure can lead to being a target of homophobic violence, being alienated from parents and siblings, or losing custody of one's children (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996; Rubenstein, 1996). Decisions about revealing a socially stigmatized status often entail weighing the potential risks and benefits. For this reason, L. D. Garnets (personal communication, May, 1998) has emphasized the value of "rational outness" defined as "being as out as possible, but as closeted as necessary."

Turning to the possible advantages of disclosure for the individual lesbian, several researchers have found an association between measures of psychological health and disclosure of sexual orientation (e.g., Kahn, 1991; Miranda & Storms, 1989). For example, in one study of 499 lesbians it was found that disclosure of sexual orientation to family members, friends, and coworkers was associated with less anxiety, higher self-esteem, and more positive emotions such as happiness and love (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). Health psychologists studying gay men with HIV provide even stronger evidence of the potential benefits of disclosure. In one study, gay men who were open about their homosexuality had a lower risk of cancer and other infectious diseases than gay men who concealed their homosexual identity, even after controlling for age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, repressive coping style, health-relevant behavior patterns, and depression (Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, & Visscher, 1996). In another study of gay men with HIV, the rate of progression of HIV was related to disclosure of homosexuality (Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, Visscher, & Fahey, 1996): the more a man disclosed his sexual orientation compared to other gay men he knew, the more slowly he progressed toward AIDS.

Three studies have investigated the possible effects that disclosing sexual orientation to family members, friends,

and coworkers has on the discloser's intimate relationships. Murphy (1989) studied 20 lesbians who were in committed relationships. In response to an open-ended questionnaire, 50% of the women reported that their intimate relationship improved as a result of disclosure to their parents. This was true despite the fact that 70% of the disclosing women said that one or both of their parents disapproved of their lesbianism. In another study, Caron and Ulin (1997) studied 124 lesbians who were in an ongoing relationship. Being open to family members and friends about their sexual orientation, having a partner who was open, and having their romantic relationship known to others were all correlated with greater relationship quality. Similar associations between disclosure and relationship quality have been found for gay men (Berger, 1990). Thus, we predicted a positive correlation between a lesbian's disclosure and her relationship quality.

Two interpersonal factors may contribute to the association between disclosure of sexual orientation to third parties and relationship quality for same-sex couples. First, a woman may benefit when family members and friends acknowledge her sexual orientation and recognize that she has a loved partner in her life, even if the emotional reaction of these significant others is negative. Lesbians in Murphy's (1989) study often reported that this type of recognition increased satisfaction in their relationship, even if it was accompanied by disapproval. This possibility is consistent with self-verification theory (Swann, 1983), which asserts the importance of having significant others validate one's identity. Second, when disclosure is met by acceptance, significant others can be a valuable source of social support for both the woman and her relationship. Although the initial reaction of the people receiving disclosure about a lesbian identity may be shock, disbelief, or disapproval, their responses often become more positive and accepting over time (Savin-Williams, 1996; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). Jordan and Deluty (1998) reported that higher levels of disclosure by lesbians were associated with greater social support. In two studies it was shown that perceived social support is beneficial for the quality of same-sex relationships. In a first study, Kurdek (1988) found that reported satisfaction with social support from others was correlated positively with lesbian relationship satisfaction. In a more recent study with gay male couples, Smith and Brown (1997) found that 22% of the variance in relationship quality was explained by social support. In addition, support from family members accounted for a greater proportion of the variance in relationship quality than did support from heterosexual friends, gay friends, and other couples. Smith and Brown speculated that acceptance from family members can substitute for acceptance from society. We predicted that acknowledgement of the relationship and perceived social support from parents would be positively associated with relationship quality among lesbian couples.

### Partners' Matching on Social Involvement and Disclosure

Another important determinant of relationship quality may be the similarity or matching of partners' attitudes and personal attributes. Researchers have shown that heterosexual couples matched on important characteristics (i.e., attitudes, education level, personality) tend to have happier and more stable relationships (Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Brehm, 1992). For example, based on a study of new marriages, Huston and Houts (1998) concluded:

The less well-matched partners are, the more negativity they are likely to express toward each other, the more ambivalence they are likely to feel about their relationship, and the more turbulent their relationship is likely to be. Couples who are well matched, in contrast, presumably will be more affectionate and engaged in the relationship. (p. 120)

Over time, shared interests and values may be the building blocks of a successful relationship. Further, Kurdek and Schmitt (1987) examined partner homogamy in heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples and found that matching on relationship values was associated with relationship quality for all couple types.

In the case of lesbian couples, partner matching on social involvement and self-disclosure may be important to relationship quality. Problems may arise if same-sex partners differ markedly in their interest in gay- or lesbian-oriented activities. In a study of 54 lesbian couples, Stearns and Sabini (1997) found that large differences in social involvement were associated with greater "conflict in matters of sex and affection" (p. 17). Conflict may occur because couples with different involvement levels have divergent relationship values or goals, different levels of self-esteem or social skills, or because one partner's greater exposure to romantic alternatives creates jealousy. For lesbian couples, matching on disclosure of sexual orientation may also be important. Similar levels of disclosure between partners may indicate similar attitudes about sexual orientation or similar levels of accepting a lesbian identity. Thus, we expected that matching on social involvement levels and disclosure levels would correlate positively with indicators of relationship quality.

### Goals of the Present Study

In the present study, we assessed the extent of disclosure and social involvement in a large sample of lesbian couples. Our first goal was to examine the association between involvement in the lesbian and gay social community and the quality of lesbian relationships. Based on previous research, a curvilinear association was predicted. In other words, couples with moderate social involvement were expected to report the most satisfaction and the least conflict. We also predicted that partner matching on social

involvement would be associated with higher relationship quality. In addition, to further our understanding of the impact of social involvement, we examined the amount of time couples socialized together (e.g., were together when out with friends) and spent alone together (e.g., had dinner together). We expected that the more time couples spent together, the greater their relationship quality would be.

Our second goal was to examine the association between levels of disclosure and relationship quality. We predicted that higher levels of disclosure by lesbian women would be associated with greater relationship quality. We also hypothesized that relationship quality would be higher among couples who were matched in the extent to which they had disclosed their sexual orientation. Finally, because it has been suggested that the benefits of self-disclosure include increased social support and validation from others, we examined correlations among these factors and relationship quality.

## METHOD

The current study entailed secondary analyses of data collected by sociologists Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz (1983) as part of the American Couples Study. Lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples were recruited nationwide in 1978 and 1979 through television, radio, newspaper, and magazine advertisements. Volunteers were mailed two copies of a questionnaire, one for each partner. Only couples who returned both questionnaires were included in the study (46% of couples returned both questionnaires). A further eligibility requirement was that couples lived together at least 4 days a week, had a sexual relationship at some point, and considered themselves “a couple not just roommates” (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983, p. 7). In the present study, we analyzed data from lesbian couples only. For further details about recruitment and data collection, see Blumstein and Schwartz (1983).

### Participants

The 784 lesbian couples came from all regions of the country, with greatest representation from the Pacific Northwest, California, and Hawaii. Most participants (95%) were White. Participants varied considerably in age, education, and religion. The modal participant was 32 years old (range 18–71 years), had a college degree (59%), and worked full-time (69%). Half of the participants reported no “current religious preference” and only 13% of the women went to a place of worship once a month or more. The modal couple had been together for 2 to 3 years, but relationship length varied from less than a year to 33 years ( $M = 3.7$  years,  $SD = 4.5$ ).

### Measures

Participants were asked to fill out the questionnaires separately and not to discuss their responses until they had

returned the questionnaires by mail. The 40-page questionnaire contained questions about the individual and the relationship. We used questionnaire items to create scales of relationship satisfaction, relationship conflict, social involvement in gay and lesbian communities, level of disclosure of sexual orientation, parental social support, and parental acknowledgement of the relationship.

*Relationship satisfaction.* One section of the questionnaire asked, “How satisfied are you with these parts of your relationship?” The questionnaire listed 13 topics, including “how we communicate,” “our social life,” and “our sex life.” We omitted two items about children because very few of the lesbian women had children (86% did not have any children and 92% did not have children living in their home). We created a relationship satisfaction scale based on the remaining 11 items. Responses were made on a 9-point scale from *extremely satisfied* to *not at all satisfied*. Scores were reversed so that higher scores indicated greater satisfaction. The satisfaction scale had a Cronbach alpha of .78. Partners tended to give similar reports of relationship satisfaction ( $r = .48$ ,  $p < .00$ ). Consequently, to simplify data analysis, partners’ scores were averaged to create a couple measure of relationship satisfaction that was used in all subsequent analyses.

*Relationship conflict.* Another section of the questionnaire asked, “How often do you and she have open disagreements or fights in the following areas?” Seventeen topics were included such as “relationship with my relatives,” “the amount of money coming in,” and “how the house is kept.” We again omitted two items about children and created a relationship conflict scale from the remaining 15 items. Responses were made on a 9-point scale from *daily or almost every day* to *never*; all items were reverse-scored so that higher numbers represented greater relationship conflict. The relationship conflict scale had a Cronbach alpha of .87. Partners tended to give similar reports of relationship conflict ( $r = .54$ ,  $p < .00$ ). Consequently, to simplify data analysis, partners’ scores were averaged to create a couple measure of relationship conflict that was used for all analyses.

*Social involvement.* Three questions asked “How often do you go” to: “primarily lesbian bar or club,” “primarily male or mixed gay bar or club,” and “excluding bars, to public places where gay men and/or lesbians socialize, such as a coffeehouse, gay or lesbian center, dance, etc.” Responses were made on a 9-point scale from *daily or almost every day* to *never*. All items were reverse-scored so that higher numbers represented greater involvement. Responses to the three items were summed to create a social involvement scale. The scale was designed to be an index of the amount of involvement in these specific social activities and accomplished this despite a relatively modest alpha of .55.

Lacking any objective way to group participants, individual respondents were classified into three groups of approximately equal size: low involvement (for scores ranging from 3 to 9), moderate involvement (for scores ranging from 10 to 12), and high involvement (for scores ranging from 13 to 27). Then couples were coded as *low involvement* if both partners had low involvement, *moderate involvement* if both partners had moderate involvement, and *high involvement* if both partners had high involvement. When partners were in different categories, the couple was labeled as *mildly discrepant* if partners differed by only one category (i.e., low involvement to moderate involvement) or as *extremely discrepant* if one partner was high involvement and the other was low involvement.

*Couple time together.* Two items assessed how much time the woman spent with her partner. The first question asked, "When you socialize with friends, how often is your partner with you?" Women responded on a 9-point scale from *always* to *never*. The item was reverse-scored so that high numbers represented more frequent socializing with partner present. Then the partner scores were averaged together to form a dyadic measure of how often the couple socialized together. The second question assessed another aspect of time together: "During a typical week, how many days a week do you and your partner have dinner together?" Scores ranged from 0 to 7 days. Again, the partner scores were averaged together to create a dyadic measure of time spent with partner. These two measures (socializing as couple and time with partner) were used separately to predict relationship quality.

*Self-disclosure of sexual orientation.* The questionnaire contained the question: "Do the following people know that you are gay?" The people included were mother, father, best heterosexual female friend, best heterosexual male friend, and supervisor. Each person was rated on a 4-point scale from *definitely knows and we have talked about it* to *does not know or suspect*. As a conservative measure, each item was recoded so that only a response of 4 (*definitely knows and we have talked about it*) was scored as disclosure, and scores of 1 through 3 were all coded as nondisclosure. The five items were then summed to create a disclosure scale, which could range from 0 to 5. The self-disclosure scale had a Cronbach alpha of .74. Next, each person was coded as either low self-disclosure for scale scores from 0 to 2 or high self-disclosure for scale scores from 3 to 5. Then couples were coded as *low self-disclosure* if both partners were low on self-disclosure, *high self-disclosure* if both partners were high on self-disclosure, and *discrepant self-disclosure* if one partner had high self-disclosure and the other had low self-disclosure. In less than 1% of couples, one or both partners failed to report disclosure of sexual orientation; these couples were omitted from disclosure analyses.

*Parental acknowledgement of the relationship.* To assess the general climate of acceptance for each lesbian couple by their families, we created a couple measure of parental acknowledgement of the relationship. This was based on answers to the question, "Do your parents think of you and your partner as a couple?" This was assessed separately for each parent on a 5-point scale from *yes, I am certain he/she does* to *no, I am certain he/she does not*. Items were reverse-scored so that higher numbers represented greater acknowledgement. These four items (two from each partner) were averaged into a single acknowledgement score for the couple. This couple score of parental acknowledgement of the relationship was used for all analyses. The Cronbach alpha for these four items was .70.

*Personal support from parents.* Several questions concerned the respondent's relationship with her parents. Three questions were asked separately for mother and father: "How often do you and your parents visit?" "Overall, how often do you have any kind of contact with your parents?" and "How satisfied are you with your relationship with your parents?" All items were assessed on a 9-point scale. The first two questions were on a scale from *daily* to *never*, and the final question was assessed on a scale from *very satisfied* to *not at all satisfied*. All items were reverse-scored so that high scores indicated greater social support. These six items were averaged to create a parental support score for each respondent. The Cronbach alpha for the scale was .79.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In general, the lesbian couples were very satisfied with their relationships. The mean score on the couple satisfaction scale was 6.95 on a 9-point scale. Nonetheless, there was considerable variation, with scores ranging from 3.1 to 9.0 ( $SD = 1.11$ ). Participants reported low levels of conflict in their relationships: the mean score on the couple conflict scale was 2.77 on a 9-point scale. Conflict scores ranged from 1.0 to 6.5 ( $SD = 1.06$ ). Satisfaction and conflict capture somewhat different aspects of relationship quality and were only moderately correlated ( $r = -.54$ ,  $p < .000$ ). Our finding that most lesbian couples reported high satisfaction and little conflict is consistent with prior research demonstrating that lesbians can form satisfying romantic attachments (Peplau & Spalding, 2000). The high levels of satisfaction in this sample may also reflect a volunteer bias: people who are content in their romantic relationships may be more likely to volunteer to have their relationship scrutinized than people who are having difficulties in their relationship.

### Social Involvement and Relationship Quality

One of our goals was to assess the extent of the women's social involvement and its association with relationship

quality. Participants were asked how frequently they attended lesbian or gay bars and clubs, as well as coffeehouses, gay and lesbian centers, and other places that lesbians socialize together. On average, lesbians reported going to an activity between "once every few months" and "once a year." These activities included going to bars and dance clubs but also to gay and lesbian community centers and gay coffeehouses. Some lesbians rarely took part in the lesbian social community: Twenty-two percent went once every few months or less. Others went frequently: For example, 26% of lesbians went to a lesbian bar or club more than once a week. Using the criteria explained in the Method section, 24% of couples were classified as low in social involvement, 16% as moderate, and 25% as high. In addition, 34% of couples had discrepant levels of social involvement (4% extremely discrepant and 30% mildly discrepant).

*Matched couples.* We predicted that among couples matched in involvement, there would be a curvilinear association between amount of involvement and relationship quality, with moderately involved couples reporting greater satisfaction and lower conflict. To test this curvilinear pattern, we used curve estimation within simultaneous regression (see Norusis, 1998). Specifically, we entered both the linear function and the quadratic function of social involvement into two regression equations, one for satisfaction and the other for conflict. A curvilinear trend is demonstrated if the linear function is non-significant, but the quadratic function is significant. Results showed a curvilinear pattern for both measures of relationship quality. The linear function of social involvement predicting satisfaction was not significant, but the quadratic function of social involvement was significant ( $B = -.29$ ,  $SE B = .10$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Similarly, the linear function of social involvement predicting conflict was not significant, but the quadratic function of social involvement was significant ( $B = -.26$ ,  $SE B = .10$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Table 1 contains the mean couple satisfaction and conflict scores for the three matched groups of couples. Inspection of these means shows that the curvilinear pattern is clear for satisfaction. For conflict, the curvilinear trend was significant, but the mean difference was small. In summary, couples with moderate involvement reported greater satisfaction and less conflict than either high or low involvement couples.

*Comparing matched and discrepant couples.* On average, the lesbian couples who were matched in social involvement had significantly greater satisfaction than couples with discrepant social involvement ( $t = 3.62$ ,  $p = .00$ ). Matched couples also reported less conflict on average than did discrepant couples ( $t = 3.16$ ,  $p = .00$ ). Among mismatched couples, the degree of discrepancy in social involvement mattered: Couples with mildly discrepant involvement had greater satisfaction ( $t = 2.19$ ,

$p = .03$ ) and less conflict ( $t = 2.57$ ,  $p = .01$ ) than couples with extremely discrepant social involvement. As expected, the greatest difference was between matched couples reporting moderate involvement and extremely discrepant couples. The mean satisfaction score for matched moderate involvement couples was 7.3, and the mean satisfaction score for extremely discrepant couples was 6.5 ( $t = 3.92$ ,  $p = .00$ ). Similarly, the mean conflict score for matched moderately involved couples was 2.5 compared to a mean of 3.3 for extremely discrepant couples ( $t = 3.77$ ,  $p = .000$ ).

Why might lesbians who differ from their partner on social involvement report lower relationship satisfaction and more conflict? One explanation may be that the mismatch amplifies the potential risks that couples incur as a result of social involvement. If only one partner socializes at bars or clubs with potential romantic alternatives, the other partner may feel resentment, jealousy, or anger. Another plausible explanation is that discrepant partners may have different priorities or interests. One partner may enjoy the gay and lesbian social scene, whereas the other may prefer staying home. If one partner goes to gay and lesbian social activities alone or with friends instead of with her partner, relationship satisfaction may be jeopardized (Stearns & Sabini, 1997).

To clarify the involvement-satisfaction link, we examined whether respondents were together with their own partner when socializing with friends. We predicted that couples who socialized together as a couple would report greater satisfaction and less conflict than lesbians who did not. On average, couples socialized as a couple a high percentage of the time (mean of 7.5 on a 9-point scale). The range, however, included couples who were never together when socializing with friends. Controlling for total social involvement, socializing as a couple with friends correlated positively with relationship satisfaction ( $r = .21$ ,  $p < .00$ ) and negatively with relationship conflict ( $r = -.19$ ,  $p < .00$ ). Additionally, we examined how often partners had dinner together. On average, partners had dinner together almost 6 nights a week. Having dinner together correlated positively with relationship satisfaction ( $r = .16$ ,  $p < .00$ ) and negatively with relationship conflict ( $r = -.15$ ,  $p < .00$ ). In summary, partners who spent more time with each other, whether they socialized with others or not, reported higher levels of satisfaction and less conflict than couples who spent less time together.

#### Disclosure of Sexual Orientation and Relationship Quality

Disclosure was assessed by questions that asked whether the woman had disclosed her sexual orientation to her mother, father, best heterosexual female friend, best heterosexual male friend, and supervisor. Women had disclosed to an average of two out of the five people ( $M = 2.05$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ), although great individual variation was evident. Approximately 15% had not disclosed to any of

**Table 1**  
Comparing Mean Dyadic Satisfaction and Conflict Scores of Couples Classified by Social Involvement Levels

	<i>Partners' Social Involvement</i>		
	<i>Both Low</i> (24%)	<i>Both Moderate</i> (16%)	<i>Both High</i> (25%)
Satisfaction	7.04	7.25	6.88
Conflict	2.57	2.52	3.00

**Note:** These analyses included the 475 couples who were matched on involvement.

the five people listed. Lesbians who had revealed their sexual orientation were most likely to disclose to their best heterosexual female friend (77%), followed by their best heterosexual male friend (53%). After best friends, lesbians were more likely to disclose to their mother (43%) than their father (23%). This is consistent with previous research finding that lesbians tend to disclose to their friends more than to their family members (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). Women in our sample were least likely to disclose to a supervisor (18%). There was a small but significant correlation ( $r = .20, p = .000$ ) between disclosure and social involvement.

In most lesbian couples (63%), partners were matched on disclosure. Approximately 44% of all couples were classified as low disclosers and 19% as high disclosers. In 37% of couples, partners were discrepant in the extent of their self-disclosure. To examine the association between couple disclosure and relationship quality, two one-way ANOVAs compared mean couple satisfaction and conflict scale scores for couples classified as high disclosers, low disclosers, and discrepant disclosers. As shown in Table 2, no significant differences among groups were found.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to our prediction, disclosure of sexual orientation was not significantly associated with relationship quality.

Two plausible explanations for this lack of association merit consideration. First, our measure of disclosure may have been inadequate. It did not include a full range of possible recipients of disclosure, such as siblings, neighbors, or coworkers, nor did it necessarily capture disclosure that occurs in ways other than verbal declaration. It may be important to broaden the definition of disclosure to include nonverbal mechanisms of disclosure such as bringing a same-sex partner to a family function or choices in activities and clothing. To obtain a comprehensive assessment of disclosure of sexual orientation, future studies might ask participants to list the people who play significant roles in their lives and then indicate the extent of their disclosure to each one.

A second explanation is that disclosure per se may be less important than the reactions of those who are told about one's sexual orientation. Caron and Ulin (1997)

found an association between lesbians' disclosure and relationship quality with the aid of a comprehensive survey that measured not only the extent of a woman's disclosure but also the reactions of the recipients of the disclosures. One reaction to self-disclosure may be to acknowledge and accept the existence of the discloser's relationship. We found that disclosure of sexual orientation to parents was associated with the perception that parents acknowledged the relationship (mother  $r = .45, p < .00$ ; father  $r = .52, p < .00$ ). However, contrary to our prediction, our measure of parental acknowledgment did not correlate with either relationship satisfaction or relationship conflict. Although lesbians did receive acknowledgement from disclosure, this acknowledgement was not associated with better relationship quality. Another possible result of self-disclosure is receiving social support. Contrary to expectations, disclosure of sexual orientation to parents was not significantly associated with parental support. Nonetheless, parental support was correlated positively with relationship satisfaction for each partner ( $r = .11, p < .01$  for partner 1;  $r = .09, p < .05$  for partner 2). Though the same pattern was evident for relationship conflict, the correlations were weaker and significant for only one partner ( $r = .08, p < .05$ , for partner 1;  $r = .03, p > .05$ , for partner 2). Our results suggest that for some lesbians, concealing one's identity may be a way to ensure the continuation of support from parents and significant others. Future studies are needed to understand the causal links among relationship quality, parental social support, and acknowledgement of couple.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Several strengths and limitations of the current study deserve mention. The large size of the sample was unusual and permitted comparisons of specific subsets of couples, such as those who were low, moderate, and high in social involvement. The lesbians who participated in this research were relatively diverse in region of the country, age, and religion, and the sample included a broader spectrum of lesbians than is typical of research on homosexuals

**Table 2**  
Comparing Mean Dyadic Satisfaction and Conflict Scores of Couples Classified by Disclosure Levels

	<i>Partners' Disclosure Level</i>		
	<i>Both Low</i> (44%)	<i>Discrepant</i> (37%)	<i>Both High</i> (19%)
Satisfaction	6.95	6.96	6.93
Conflict	2.73	2.75	2.91

**Note:** Satisfaction and Conflict scale scores ranged from 1 to 9. Means did not differ at  $p < .05$  in the Tukey honestly significant difference comparison. Three couples were omitted from these analyses because one or both partners did not respond to disclosure questions.  $n = 781$  couples.

(Morris & Rothblum, 1999). Nonetheless, the sample was predominantly White. Further, the women who volunteered for this research may have been more open about their sexual orientation, more involved in gay/lesbian activities, and more satisfied with their relationship than women who did not participate.

A further strength of the study was the richness of the data available for analysis, which included many questions detailing the lesbians' lives and their relationships. Nonetheless, the data were collected two decades ago by other researchers. The base rates for disclosure, social involvement, and other measures found in this study may not generalize to lesbians today. Nevertheless, it is plausible that the associations we documented among variables are applicable today. As in all secondary analyses of large datasets, we were constrained in creating our measures by the original questions and the way in which they were asked. For example, our disclosure measure was restricted to five possible recipients of disclosure and did not include siblings, coworkers, or other friends. It is possible that a more comprehensive measure of disclosure might have demonstrated the expected association between disclosure and the quality of lesbian relationships. Limitations of the measures available to us may also have contributed to the relatively small size of some of the significant associations we found. These small correlations should be interpreted cautiously, and future research will be needed to determine the robustness of our findings. A final caveat is that the data were correlational in nature, and therefore, causal links cannot be demonstrated definitively.

Several important findings from this study deserve comment. First, involvement in the gay and lesbian community was significantly associated with the quality of lesbian relationships. As predicted by the matching hypothesis, partners who were similar in their level of social involvement were more satisfied with their relationship and reported less conflict than did mismatched partners. This finding is consistent with a large body of research documenting higher marital satisfaction among heterosexual spouses who are matched in values and interests

(Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Brehm, 1992). We do not know precisely why lesbians with differing patterns of social involvement were less happy. One possibility is that it reflects basic differences in interests and values that may detract from the relationship. Another possibility is that more-involved women, who spend more time in lesbian social circles than their partners do, have increased opportunities to meet and perhaps become attracted to alternative partners. It is also possible that the less-involved women, who spend less time in lesbian circles, regret the absence of their more-involved partner and worry about her activities. Research specifically aimed at understanding the reasons for dissatisfaction among mismatched partners would be valuable.

Second, results indicated a curvilinear association between a couple's level of social involvement and relationship quality. Couples with moderate social involvement were more satisfied and had less conflict than couples with either high or low involvement levels. This is consistent with research showing that for heterosexual couples, marital satisfaction is associated with moderate involvement in community activities (Holman, 1981). Spending a moderate amount of time in lesbian/gay social activities may allow a couple to interact with other people in a safe and accepting environment. Too little participation in such activities may disadvantage couples by depriving them of social support and affirmation. In contrast, too much involvement may detract from the opportunities partners have to spend important quality time with each other. Individuals and couples who are highly involved may neglect the needs of their relationships.

In the two decades since these data were collected, there have been many changes in the number and types of opportunities available for lesbians to connect with lesbian/gay social institutions. Today, especially in metropolitan centers, lesbians have access to gay/lesbian community centers; gay and lesbian owned bars, restaurants and other businesses; gay/lesbian religious groups; women's sports teams and music festivals; lesbian-oriented tourism; gay-affirmative professional organizations; and many other



opportunities that did not exist 20 years ago. We do not know how these changing social circumstances have altered the patterns of social involvement among lesbian couples. One possibility is that women today are simply more active, given more opportunities. Another possibility is that women are able to be more selective in their social engagements, attending events and organizations most compatible with their individual interests and values. Nonetheless, we would still predict that our general findings would persist: Partners who are matched on social involvement will be happier than mismatched couples, and moderately involved couples will report greater satisfaction than those with more extreme levels of involvement.

A third and unexpected result was that neither the woman's own level of disclosure of her sexual orientation nor partner matching on disclosure was significantly associated with the quality of a lesbian relationship. This finding differs from two other studies with much smaller samples of lesbians (Caron & Ulin, 1997,  $N = 124$ ; Murphy, 1989,  $N = 20$ ). Both of these studies reported that disclosure was beneficial to relationship quality. We believe the explanation for these contradictory findings is that the disclosure of sexual orientation can have mixed consequences, ranging from acknowledgement of a lesbian relationship and increased social support at one extreme to rejection and estrangement from family and friends at the other extreme. If some lesbians benefit from disclosure but others incur costs, the overall effects of disclosure may appear superficially to be unimportant or may vary depending on characteristics of the sample studied. Small samples like those studied by Caron and Ulin (1997) and by Murphy (1989) may be especially vulnerable to the effects of sampling bias.

It will be important for future research to assess more systematically both the positive and negative consequences of disclosure for lesbians and their relationships. A further issue meriting study is the possibility that, in a homophobic society, some women may decide to conceal a minority sexual orientation from family members or friends in order to maintain a supportive and positive relationship with them. If a woman believes that revealing her sexual orientation will lead to estrangement from loved ones, she may resort to concealment in order to preserve her long-standing social ties. This may not be an ideal course of action, but may nonetheless be seen as crucial to the maintenance of valued social relations. Hence, the reasons for concealment may be essential, especially in understanding women's relationships with family members. It is also possible that the reasons for concealment will be influenced by the cultural values of women's ethnic communities.

Additionally, we can ask whether the increasing visibility and disclosure of sexual orientation among lesbians and gay men during the two decades since these data were collected would make a difference. Although there are more visible lesbian and gay individuals in the media today than

in the past, it is not obvious that this directly affects the experiences of individual lesbians deciding whether to conceal or reveal their sexual identity to their mother, college roommate, or employer. Most heterosexual Americans continue to disapprove of homosexuality, and so disclosure continues to be a difficult issue, entailing both potential costs and benefits. Future research needs to move beyond simplistic notions, for instance, that disclosure is invariably good, toward a more fine-grained analysis of the consequences of disclosure for lesbians and their partners. A particularly valuable direction would be longitudinal studies that track over time the links among women's patterns of disclosure to significant others, the responses of these people, and the quality of women's intimate relationships with a romantic partner.

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#### NOTE

1. We also examined whether a lesbian's own disclosure was correlated with her own ratings of relationship satisfaction and conflict. No significant correlations were found.

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