

Lesbians in Love: Why Some Relationships Endure and Others End

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SUMMARY. Lesbians often begin romantic relationships with high hopes that their relationships will be satisfying and long-lasting. Why do some women maintain committed and stable relationships while others do not? This article considers factors that affect commitment and stability among lesbian couples. We begin by reviewing previous empirical research on the topic. Next, we test a leading model of commitment using survey data from 301 lesbian couples who participated in the American Couples Study (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). According to Caryl Rusbult's model (1983), an individual's commitment to a relationship is affected by three general factors: satisfaction, the quality of alternatives to the current relationship, and investments made in the relationship. In turn, a woman's degree of commitment influences relationship stability. Path analysis provided strong support for Rusbult's model. Nonetheless, this model did not fully explain the sources of commitment and stability in lesbian relationships. Consequently, we consider unique aspects of the social environment that may affect commitment and stability in lesbian relationships. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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Successful love relationships are a core ingredient for personal happiness and psychological well-being (Myers, 1993). Yet intimate relationships begun with high hopes sometimes end in painful disappointment. Why do some lesbians maintain committed and long-lasting intimate relationships while others do not? Relationship researchers have identified three general factors that affect relationship commitment and stability.

A first factor concerns positive attraction forces that make partners want to stay together. In general, a relationship is satisfying when it provides many rewards, such as a partner's great sense of humor, enjoyment of joint activities, or feeling loved. A relationship is also satisfying if it entails relatively few costs, such as conflict or a partner's annoying habits (Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Kurdek, 1994). Research shows that lesbians in a couple relationship typically report very positive feelings for their partners and rate their current relationship as highly satisfying and close (see review by Peplau & Spalding, 2000). Researchers have begun to identify factors that enhance or detract from satis-

faction in lesbian relationships. Lesbian couples tend to be happier when the partners are similar in attitudes and values (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987), and perceive their relationship as fair and equal in power or decision making (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Kurdek, 1998; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Peplau, Padesky, & Hamilton, 1982; Schreurs & Buunk, 1996). Individual characteristics including values about relationships (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978) and neuroticism can also make a difference (Kurdek, 1997).

A second factor affecting the longevity of a relationship is the availability of alternatives. These could include another potential romantic partner, but also having more time to devote to friends or work or, for some people, enjoyment of time alone. Research has found that lesbians who perceive more available alternatives are less committed (Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986). In contrast, the lack of desirable alternatives can be an obstacle to ending a lesbian relationship. This finding helps to explain why some women remain in relatively unhappy partnerships.

Finally, commitment is also affected by barriers that make it difficult for a person to leave a relationship (Kurdek, 1998). Barriers include anything that increases the psychological, emotional, or financial costs of ending a relationship. Examples would include pooling financial resources, sharing a loved pet, developing a network of mutual friends, or time already spent in the relationship. Of particular importance are those investments of time, money, or other resources that would be lost if a relationship ended. In a longitudinal study of lesbian relationships, Kurdek (1998) found that barriers to leaving the relationship were a significant predictor of relationship stability over a 5-year period.

In a useful analysis of relationship commitment, Caryl Rusbult (1983) has integrated these three factors. According to her model, an individual's personal commitment to maintain a relationship is strong when the relationship is highly satisfying, when alternatives are few or unattractive, and when partners have invested many resources in the relationship. Commitment influences whether couples stay together or break up. The goal of the current study was to test Rusbult's model of relationship commitment in a large sample of lesbians who were living with a romantic partner. A further goal was to test whether lesbians' initial level of commitment to their relationships predicted which couples stayed together and which terminated their relationships over an 18-month period.

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 (ACS). Participants were recruited nationwide in 1978 and 1979 through television, radio, newspapers, and magazines. Volunteers were mailed two copies of a questionnaire, one for each partner, although the current study analyzed data from only one partner. Eighteen months after the women completed the initial questionnaire, a follow-up questionnaire was mailed to a randomly chosen subsample (59%) of lesbian couples. Seventy-five percent of these lesbian couples completed the follow-up. To be included in the original ACS sample lesbian couples had to live together at least four days a week, have had a sexual relationship at some point, and “consider themselves a couple not just roommates” (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983, p. 7). Only those women who completed the 18-month follow-up were included in the current analyses. For further details of recruitment and data collection, see Blumstein and Schwartz (1983).

Participants

The 301 lesbian women in cohabiting relationships came from all regions of the country, with greatest representation from the Middle Atlantic, North Central U.S., California, and Hawaii. Most participants (95%) were White. Participants varied considerably in age, education, and religion. The modal participant was a 32-year-old with a college degree who worked full-time. The modal couple had been together for 2-3 years, although relationship length varied from less than a year to 33 years.

Measures

Participants were instructed to complete the questionnaires separately and not to discuss their responses until they had returned the surveys. The 40-page questionnaire contained questions about each woman, her partner, and aspects of their relationship. The questionnaire contained items that were conceptually similar to measures of commitment, satisfaction, investments and quality of alternatives used by Rusbult (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). In constructing measures of these variables, we followed Rusbult’s general strategy of creating indexes with multiple items whenever possible.

Satisfaction. Participants rated how satisfied they were with their relationship in general on a 9-point scale (1 = extremely satisfied to 9 = not at all satisfied). They also indicated their satisfaction with four more specific aspects of their relationship: “how we express our affection,” “my amount of influence in decision making,” “our social life” and “our sex life.” Scores were reversed so that higher scores indicated greater satisfaction. The reliability coefficient for the 5 items was high ($\alpha = .82$).

Quality of alternatives. Participants were asked, "If something were to happen to your partner and you were forced to live without her, how difficult would it be for you to find another partner?" and "If something were to happen to your partner and you were forced to live without her, how difficult would it be for you to avoid loneliness?" on 9-point scales (1 = extremely difficult to 9 = not at all difficult). The reliability coefficient for these two items was $\alpha = .47$.

Investments. Two items assessed the investment of money: "Do you and your partner have a joint checking account?" and "Do you and your partner have a joint savings account?" (1 = yes and 2 = no). Two items assessed time already spent in the relationship: the number of years the partners had dated and the number of years they had lived together. A final question asked, "What proportion of your close friends are also your partner's friends?" (1 = all, 5 = half, 9 = none). Scores were reversed so that high scores represented more investments in the relationship; the alpha was $.71$.

Commitment. A single item captured each woman's commitment to her relationship. Participants answered the question, "How likely is it that you and your partner will still be together five years from now?" on a 9-point scale (1 = extremely likely to 9 = not at all likely). Scores were reversed so that high scores represented more commitment to the relationship.

Relationship stability. Assessment of relationship stability was based on a question included in the follow-up questionnaire mailed 18 months after completion of the first questionnaire. Participants were asked if they were still living with their partner (full-time, part-time, or not). Responses to this question were recoded to create a dichotomous measure of stability (1 = do not live together and 2 = live together either full-time or part-time).

Strategy for Data Analysis

We used path analysis in the EQS computer program (Bentler, 1995) to test the hypothesized associations among variables, as well as the overall fit of the model.¹

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The lesbian women in this sample were very satisfied with their relationships; the mean satisfaction score was 7.5 on a 9-point scale ($SD = 1.04$). The women also reported low levels of alternatives; their mean scale score of 2.8 on a 9-point scale ($SD = 1.90$) indicated that the women thought they would have considerable difficulty finding a new partner or avoiding loneliness if the relationship ended. Further, women indicated relatively high levels of invest-

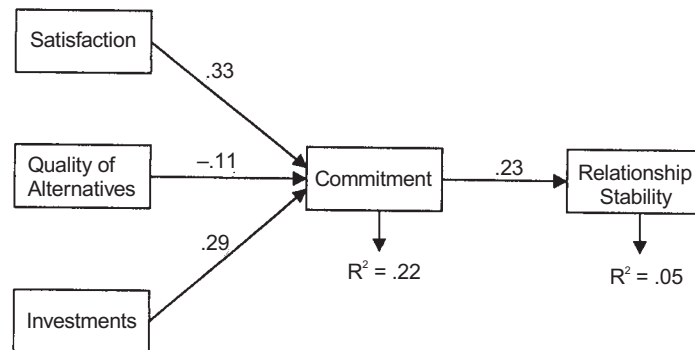
ment. Forty percent of partners had a joint checking account and 47% had a joint savings account. In addition, 88% of the women reported that more than half of their friends were also friends of their partner and 24% of women indicated that all of their friends were also friends with their partner. Finally, most women were strongly committed to maintaining their relationship at the time of the first questionnaire; the mean commitment score was 7.8 on a 9-point scale ($SD = 1.77$). In short, consistent with prior research (Peplau & Spalding, 2000), most lesbian women in this sample reported being in happy, committed relationships. Further, during the 18-month follow-up period, only 12% of the lesbian couples broke up. Would Rusbult's model help us to understand which couples remained together and which did not?

Testing Rusbult's Model of Commitment and Stability

The primary goal of this study was to test the adequacy of Rusbult's model in a sample of cohabiting lesbian women. Results of the path analysis are shown in Figure 1. As anticipated, the model fit the data quite well, and all indices of the adequacy of the fit were in acceptable ranges, $\chi^2(3, N = 301) = 5.13, p = .16, CFI = .98, RCFI = .98, RMSEA = .06$.

In addition to testing the fit of the model, we also tested theory-based predictions about factors that increase commitment in women's relationships. As ex-

FIGURE 1. Testing the fit of Rusbult's model using path analysis.



Note: The independent variables (i.e., satisfaction, alternatives and investments) were allowed to freely covary; for ease of reading, however, the correlations are not shown in this figure. All path coefficients represented were significantly different from zero ($p < .05$). Standardized path coefficients are presented.

pected, we found that satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and investments each were statistically significant and unique predictors of lesbians' commitment to a relationship. As depicted in Figure 1, all paths were significant, although satisfaction was a much stronger predictor of commitment than either alternatives or investments. As in previous research with heterosexuals, we found that a lesbian's commitment to a partner depended not only on satisfaction, but also on the quality of alternatives and the extent to which the woman had already invested in her relationship. In combination, these three variables predicted 22% of the variance in commitment. We also tested the hypothesized causal link between commitment at initial testing and whether or not the couple stayed together 18 months later. As shown in Figure 1, lesbians' initial commitment significantly predicted relationship outcomes, accounting for 5% of the variance in stability.

Taken together, these results provide solid support for the value of Rusbult's model in understanding factors that influence both commitment and stability in lesbian relationships. In addition, these findings extend the generalizability of the theoretical model by demonstrating its applicability to same-sex relationships. There are commonalities in the ingredients that contribute to committed and enduring love relationships regardless of partners' sexual orientation.

Understanding Commitment and Permanence in Lesbian Relationships

It is also clear that factors other than those identified by Rusbult affect lesbian couples. In our analyses, Rusbult's model accounted for only 22% of the variance in commitment and 5% of the variance in stability. In contrast, an earlier study using path analysis to test Rusbult's model among heterosexual couples, satisfaction, investments and alternatives predicted 48% of the variance of commitment and commitment accounted for 20% of the variance in stability (Bui, Peplau, & Hill, 1996). Both methodological and conceptual factors may have limited our ability to predict commitment and stability in lesbian relationships. As in all secondary data analysis, we relied on measures constructed for other purposes that may not have adequately assessed our key variables. Stronger results might be found using more detailed measures. Further, relatively few of the lesbian couples (12%) broke up during the 18-month follow-up time period. This is not surprising since couples had been together for an average of 3.7 years at initial testing. In contrast, the Bui et al. study of heterosexuals began within the first year of dating, and followed participants for 15 years. Stronger results for lesbians might have been found had we initially surveyed women just forming relationships and followed them for a longer time period.

Conceptual limitations to Rusbult's model may be equally important. In particular, Rusbult's model does not consider the environmental context

within which lesbian intimate relationships exist. In America today, prejudice against sexual minorities represents a unique aspect of the social environment that can color many aspects of lesbian (and gay male) relationships. It is understandable that a model developed initially to understand heterosexual relationships might not give prominence to contextual influences. Most heterosexual couples navigate in a social environment that typically ranges from benign to positively supportive. In contrast, efforts to understand same-sex relationships may require an explicit examination of the social context. Three examples illustrate how this approach might be useful.

A stressful environment caused by unemployment, illness or other life problems can take its toll on any couple. Because of their sexual orientation, lesbians and gay men are at risk for additional types of stress, sometimes called "minority stress." For example, lesbians are vulnerable to major stressful life events, including hate crimes and discrimination (DiPlacido, 1998; Gillows & Davis, 1987). In addition, lesbians may also experience minor but persistent stress from such daily hassles as having to conceal their sexual identity or hearing insulting jokes or comments about homosexuality. Research investigating the impact on lesbian relationships of these and other types of minority stress would be valuable, and might enhance our understanding of forces that can undermine the longevity of same-sex partnerships.

A second example concerns the management of a stigmatized lesbian identity. Because of widespread prejudice toward sexual minorities, lesbians must carefully manage when and how to reveal versus conceal their sexual orientation to others. One study found that issues about disclosure were a source of conflict in some lesbian couples (Murphy, 1989). We know very little about how lesbian couples negotiate the management of their individual and couple identity or about the impact of these decisions on relationship quality.

A third contextual factor concerns the social and legal institution of marriage. For heterosexuals, marriage provides special rights and privileges for partners that can strengthen relationships. Marriage also erects barriers to the ending of relationships, such as the costs of divorce, investments in joint property, concerns about children, or a wife's financial dependence on her husband. Further, marriage is a symbol of a couple's commitment and pledge to stay together "for better or for worse." As a result, marriage may strengthen commitment and stability. Currently lesbian couples cannot marry legally, are less likely than heterosexuals to have children or property in common, and are usually dual-earner couples. Lesbians experience neither the special benefits of marriage nor the obstacles to dissolution that marriage often entails. As a result, lesbians may be less likely to become trapped in a hopelessly miserable and deteriorating relationship, but may also be more inclined to end a relationship that might have improved if given more time and effort. In recent years, les-

bians and gay men have initiated activities to provide some of the privileges and protections of heterosexual marriage, for instance, through policies extending domestic partnership benefits to same-sex couples, by the use of formal commitment ceremonies, and by efforts to legalize same-sex marriage. Information about the impact of these changes on lesbian relationships is lacking.

Finally, research on the social context of lesbian relationships should consider not only the effects of sexual prejudice and discrimination, but also the impact of efforts by lesbians and gay men to create their own supportive social environments. Lesbian and gay communities and institutions can offer support and validation for same-sex couples. Some lesbians create extended networks of friends or a “family of choice” to provide the sense of acceptance that may not always be available from their family of origin. Research about the creative ways in which lesbians construct positive and supportive social environments for themselves and their relationships would be valuable.

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NOTE

1. Parameter estimates were based on maximum likelihood estimation using a covariance matrix. Four indices of model fit were used. The chi-square statistic tests whether the hypothesized model adequately explains the observed pattern of data. A non-significant chi-square indicates good model fit, although it is directly related to sample size. In contrast, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Robust Comparative Fit Index (RCFI) and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) are computed independent of sample size. The CFI ranges from 0 to 1.0, with values greater than .90 considered acceptable (Bentler, 1990). Because many of the variables were skewed, we will also report the Robust Comparative Fit Index (RCFI), an alternative estimation method commonly used when multivariate normality does not hold. Finally, the RMSEA index measures the amount of residual between the observed and predicted covariance structure and compensates for the effect of model complexity (Steiger & Lind, 1980). RMSEA values less than .08 are considered acceptable (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). For comparable analyses testing Rusbult's model among married couples from the American Couples Study, see Impett, Beals, & Peplau (2001-02).

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