

# VALUE ORIENTATIONS IN HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

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It is often suggested that men and women have divergent orientations toward love relationships. A questionnaire study of 130 university students demonstrated that their values about romantic relationships comprise two distinct, orthogonal dimensions reflecting concerns with intimacy and with independence. However, results challenge the stereotype that whereas women are more concerned with close-knit attachments, men are more eager to maintain personal autonomy. In actuality, no sex differences were found in attachment values, and women gave significantly more importance than did men to equal sharing and maintaining their personal autonomy. Also examined were individual and dyadic correlates of these value dimensions. Results suggest that dimensions of attachment and egalitarian autonomy provide a useful way to conceptualize individual differences in orientations toward love relationships.

Cultural stereotypes depict men and women as having different orientations toward love and romance (Rubin, Peplau, & Hill, 1981). Women are seen as wanting an emotionally close, exclusive, and permanent relationship. Men are viewed as resisting long-term, exclusive commitments and as trying to preserve their independence once in a relationship. Shulamith Firestone (1971) commented that "women live for love and men live for work" (p. 126). More recently, Lillian Rubin (1983) has described men and women as "intimate strangers" who struggle to reconcile men's desire for separation and women's desire for union. Common to such analyses is the belief that men and women approach love relationships in fundamentally different ways (Hatfield, 1983).

Discussions of this topic have frequently suffered from a failure to specify whether the presumed differences between the sexes occur at the level of conscious personal values, psychological (and perhaps unconscious) needs,

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interpersonal behaviors, or social roles. Our understanding of women and men in love will benefit from greater precision in conceptualizing the nature of possible gender differences. In this paper, we are concerned with people's values about relationships—the importance individuals give to various characteristics of a love relationship, such as permanence and exclusivity. In our view, there is reason to question whether major, dichotomous differences exist between the relationship values of today's young men and women.

Three themes seem especially pertinent to the relationship values of young adults. The first concerns *dyadic attachment*, the value a person places on having a close and relatively secure love relationship. An emphasis on dyadic attachment is reflected in seeking security and permanence in a relationship, wanting to have many joint activities with a partner, valuing sexual exclusivity, and wanting to share personal feelings. Stereotypically, women are viewed as valuing attachment more than men. Yet most young people, regardless of gender, seek stable love relationships and expect to marry at some point in their lives (Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976). Studies asking married people to rank relationship goals (e.g., Levinger, 1964) find that both sexes give highest priority to companionship and affection. Hence it seems an open question whether or not young men and women actually differ in the value they place on dyadic attachment.

A second theme concerns *personal autonomy*, the boundaries that exist between the individual and her or his close relationships. While some people prefer to immerse themselves entirely in a relationship to the exclusion of outside interests and activities, others prefer to maintain greater personal independence. Autonomy values are reflected in wanting to have separate interests or friendships or a career apart from a primary relationship. Traditionally, personal autonomy has been largely a male prerogative (Degler, 1980). Women were discouraged from pursuing an independent career and were expected to channel their energies largely into their family. During the 20th century, however, women have increasingly joined the paid labor force (Bane, 1976). In addition, the women's movement has articulated an ideology of independence and self-development for women. Whereas women may once have rejected the value of personal autonomy, it seems likely that many young women today give considerable importance to maintaining independent activities and friendships in the context of love relationships. Indeed, some women, especially those with career aspirations and feminist sympathies, may give greater emphasis to autonomy than do men, for whom independence may be a taken-for-granted feature of relationships.

A third value theme in contemporary relationships concerns the importance given to *equality*. Traditionally, it was considered appropriate for the man to be the leader and prime decision maker in a romantic relationship. Bernard (1972) observed that young women were trained to want to "look up to" the man they married, a situation that was facilitated by the male's being taller, older, better educated, and the sole wage-earner. Today, many

young adults prefer a pattern of shared decision making and shared financial responsibility. In one study of college dating couples, for example, 95% of women and 87% of men said that ideally both partners should have exactly equal say in their relationship (Peplau, 1979). It is likely, then, that many young adults endorse the value of equality in relationships. However, women may be stronger proponents of this view than men.

The present study investigated the relationship values of young, unmarried adults. We examined whether themes of attachment, autonomy, and equality are distinct dimensions in the relationship values of heterosexuals, and whether men and women differ in the importance given to these features of relationships. A further goal of the study was to examine the correlates of relationship values for women and men. We expected that individual differences in relationship values would be linked to such factors as sex role attitudes, beliefs about the nature of love, religiousness, and age. We were also interested in possible associations between a person's values and features of his or her current dating relationship.

## METHOD

### Recruitment

University students were recruited for a study of "romantic relationships" during the academic year 1977–1978. Participants were unpaid volunteers drawn from a variety of academic departments at the University of California, Los Angeles. Some were psychology students fulfilling course requirements and others responded to flyers posted on campus. Participants spent approximately 1 hour completing a detailed questionnaire. Most completed the questionnaire in a group setting; some participated individually. All responses were completely anonymous.

### Participants

*Men.* The 54 men in the sample ranged in age from 17 to 27, with a median age of 20 years. All were unmarried, white university students. Twenty-six percent were in graduate school and the rest were undergraduates. Overall, the median level of men's education corresponded to junior year in college. Fifty percent of the men were employed at least part-time; the rest did not work for pay. Participants reported diverse religious backgrounds: 38% were raised as Protestants, 25% as Catholics, and 21% as Jews. Only 13% of the men attended religious services weekly; 46% said that they went to religious services less than once per year.

At the time of the study, 48% of the men reported being involved in an ongoing "romantic/sexual relationship," and the others had previously had

at least one such relationship with a woman. The length of the men's current or most recent relationship ranged from less than one month to approximately five years, with a median length of just over 12 months.

*Women.* The 76 women in the study ranged in age from 17 to 35, with a median of just over 21 years. All were unmarried, white university students. Only 8% were in graduate school; the rest were undergraduates. The median level of women's education was slightly higher than junior year in college (i.e., 3.4 on a scale where 3 = junior and 4 = senior). Two thirds were employed at least part-time; the other third did not work for pay. Like the men in the sample, women reported diverse religious backgrounds: 32% were raised as Protestants, 24% as Catholics, and 26% as Jews. Only 16% of the women attended religious services at least weekly; 47% reported that they attended services less than once per year.

Fifty-eight percent of the women reported that they were currently in an ongoing "romantic/sexual relationship," and the others had previously had at least one such relationship with a man. The length of women's current or most recent relationship ranged from 1 month to 7 years, with a median length of 18 months.

## The Questionnaire

Participants completed a 20-page questionnaire. Development of the questionnaire benefited from previous research with college-age dating couples (Hill et al., 1976; Rubin et al., 1981), with lesbians (Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978) and with gay men (Peplau & Cochran, 1981).

The first part of the questionnaire concerned participants' backgrounds and attitudes about romantic relationships. Specific questions inquired about the participants' age, year in school, religious affiliation, and frequency of religious participation. A 10-item Sex-Role Traditionalism Scale (Peplau, 1973) assessed attitudes about proper roles for men and women. A six-item Romanticism Scale (adapted from Rubin, 1969) assessed whether the person's beliefs about love were romantic versus cynical. To assess relationship values, participants rated the importance of 22 features of romantic relationships. Specific instructions asked, "for you personally, how important is each of the following factors in a romantic/sexual relationship?" Statements included such things as self-disclosure, joint activities, similarity of attitudes, permanence, and sexual compatibility. Each individual item was rated on a 9-point scale ranging from "not important at all" to "extremely important."

The second part of the questionnaire focused on a specific "romantic/sexual relationship." For those in a current relationship, questions asked participants to rate their feelings of love, commitment, and satisfaction with their relationship, their expectations that the relationship would continue in the future, and their perceptions of the balance of power in the relationship.

Respondents not currently in an ongoing relationship answered similar questions about their most recent past relationship. Finally, participants in a current relationship completed Rubin's (1970) scales measuring love and liking for the partner.

## RESULTS

Data analyses addressed three issues. First, factor analysis was used to investigate the patterning of men's and women's relationship values. Next, comparisons were made of the relationship values of women and men. Finally, the personal and dyadic correlates of relationship values were examined.

### Relationship Values

To identify the major dimensions organizing participants' ratings of the importance of 22 features of a romantic relationship, responses to these items were factor analyzed. An orthogonal, two-factor solution provided the best fit to the data.<sup>1</sup> Table 1 presents the items loading above .35 on each of the two factors.

One of the factors clearly reflected Dyadic Attachment values of having a close-knit, sexually exclusive, and relatively permanent relationship. Emphasis was given to spending as much time together as possible and to sharing many activities. This factor accounted for 53% of the variance. A second factor combined the themes of personal autonomy and egalitarianism. Items loading on this factor stressed autonomy values of partners having independent careers, interests, and friendship groups. Also represented were values of equal power between partners and equally shared financial responsibilities. It appears that in the thinking of these young adults, issues of independence and equality were closely linked, reflecting, perhaps, themes in feminist ideology which stress the achievement of autonomous concerns via the establishment of equal rights for women. We have called this an Egalitarian Autonomy factor. It accounted for 46% of the variance.

Somewhat unexpected was the finding that the two items concerning attitude similarity loaded on the egalitarian autonomy factor rather than the dyadic attachment factor. It may be that in the context of this questionnaire, participants interpreted these items as referring to having similar attitudes about partners' roles in a relationship or about feminist issues (not about air pollution or nuclear weapons). Individuals who want an egalitarian relationship may be concerned that their partner shares these same attitudes. Given the nature of the questionnaire, this interpretation seems plausible, but the ambiguity of the items themselves leaves this a matter of speculation.

Based on the factor analysis, separate scales of Dyadic Attachment and

TABLE 1  
The Egalitarian Autonomy and Dyadic Attachment scales

	<i>Factor Loadings</i>	<i>Mean Scores</i>	
		<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
Egalitarian Autonomy (Factor 1)			
Both of us having similar attitudes	.73	5.24	6.70*
Having an egalitarian (equal power) relationship	.65	6.65	7.91*
Each of us being able to have our own career	.61	7.45	8.45*
Sharing financial responsibilities equally	.55	5.98	6.75
Having a supportive group of friends as well as my romantic/sexual partner	.52	7.17	8.20*
Having major interests of my own outside the relationship	.50	7.37	8.39*
Both of us having similar political attitudes	.47	3.48	4.55
Being able to laugh easily with each other	.36	7.61	8.24*
Dyadic Attachment (Factor 2)			
Spending as much time together as possible	.73	6.35	6.20
Knowing that the relationship will last a long time	.71	5.74	6.10
Sharing as many activities with my partner as possible	.60	6.54	6.20
Sexual fidelity in the relationship	.56	7.06	7.17
Being able to talk about my most intimate feelings	.43	7.98	8.34
Being able to have sexual relations with people other than my partner	-.42	3.44	2.89
Knowing that my partner depends on me	.41	5.62	4.96
Living together	.41	4.70	4.32

Note: Significance of mean difference evaluated by *t*-tests.

\* $p < .001$ .

Egalitarian Autonomy were constructed. The items on each scale are shown in Table 1. Each participant was assigned scale scores based on the unweighted total of his or her responses to the eight items on each factor. Thus, for each scale, scores ranged from 8 to 72.

### Gender Differences

A second goal of the research was to compare the relationship values of women and men. Before undertaking such a comparison, it was important to investigate whether there were major differences in the background characteristics of men and women that might be confounded with gender.

On the whole, men and women in the sample were quite similar in their backgrounds. No significant differences between the sexes were found in age, employment status, religious affiliation or self-rated religiousness, or

whether or not the person was currently in a romantic relationship. Although all participants were university students, women were slightly more advanced (median of 3.4 for women versus 3.0 for men on a scale where 3 = junior and 4 = senior). This difference was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(4, n = 130) = 20.9, p < .001$ . Women were also more pro-feminist in their responses to a 10-item Sex-Role Traditionalism Scale (Peplau, 1973),  $t(128) = 5.42, p < .001$ , assessing beliefs about proper roles for men and women such as whether men should do the driving for a couple and whether wives should have major responsibility for child care. No sex difference was found in scores on a 6-item Romanticism Scale (adapted from Rubin, 1969) assessing beliefs such as that true love lasts forever or that love can overcome barriers of race, religion, and economics. In general, then, men and women in the sample were fairly similar in background.

Of central interest was whether the sexes differed in their values for romantic relationships. Men and women did not differ significantly in their scores on the Dyadic Attachment scale,  $t(124) = -0.20$ . Both sexes were equally likely to value or to devalue the more traditional aspects of close relationships such as sexual exclusivity, spending time together, and knowing that the relationship will endure. The sexes did differ, however, in their scores on the Egalitarian Autonomy Scale, with women scoring significantly higher (mean = 59.2) than men (mean = 50.9),  $t(128) = -5.74, p < .001$ . Since women were less traditional in their sex role attitudes, were slightly better educated, and were reporting on relationships of significantly greater duration ( $t(128) = -3.61, p < .001$ ) than men, additional male-female comparisons were made controlling for the effects of these three variables. These analyses continued to show women giving significantly more importance to egalitarian autonomy values.

To explore these gender differences in greater detail, comparisons were made between men's and women's responses to the 22 individual value items. Significant differences were found on 9 items. Women gave greater importance than did men to seven of the eight items on the Egalitarian Autonomy Scale (see Table 1). Differences were also found in two items that did not load on either scale. Women cared more than men did about "agreeing on how openly affectionate to be in public,"  $t(128) = 2.09, p < .05$ . Finally, consistent with women's greater emphasis on having an egalitarian relationship, women gave significantly less importance than did men to "having more influence than my partner in our joint decision-making,"  $t(128) = 2.84, p < .01$ . It should be noted, however, that both men and women rated decision-making dominance as relatively unimportant (mean of 3.3 for men and 2.3 for women on a 9-point scale).

Thus, our examination of the relationship values of young adults found no evidence of women's allegedly greater concern with having a secure, committed, sexually exclusive relationship. Most men and women in our sample valued equally these features of intimacy in a relationship. On the other

hand, we did find greater concern with egalitarianism and autonomy among women than men. Whereas men may take their rights to independent action for granted, women may be more aware of the difficulties in reconciling the pull toward close attachments with the desire for individual development.

It should be noted that although sex differences in relationship values were found, they were typically small in magnitude. There was much commonality in the values of the two sexes. In particular, the relative rankings of individual values were highly similar for women and men (Kendall's  $\tau = .74, p < .001$ ). That is, features that women endorsed strongly were also endorsed strongly by men.

### Correlates of Relationship Values

Further analyses examined the association between participants' relationship values and their personal characteristics and descriptions of their love relationships. Since men and women differed in the level of their endorsement of egalitarian autonomy values, data were analyzed separately for each sex.

*Background Characteristics.* In general, relationship values were not strongly associated with individuals' background characteristics. Scores on the Attachment Scale were unrelated to age, year in school, religious affiliation, or extent of religious participation for either men or women. Attachment values cut across the demographic categories represented in our sample. In contrast, scores on the Egalitarian Autonomy Scale were positively associated with age for both sexes ( $r = .24, p < .05$  for women;  $r = .40, p < .001$  for men). Older participants gave greater emphasis to maintaining separate interests and activities in addition to a romantic relationship. For women only, Egalitarian Autonomy scores were also significantly related to year in school and religious participation. Women scoring high on Egalitarian Autonomy (above the median) were somewhat more educated,  $\chi^2(4, n = 130) = 10.6, p < .05$ , and less religious,  $t(73) = -2.1, p < .05$ , than women scoring low on this scale.

*Attitudes.* Analyses also examined whether relationship values were associated with more general attitudes about love relationships. It was expected that an emphasis on equality values would be associated with less romantic, less traditional views about relationships. As can be seen in Table 2, partial support for this prediction was found.

Egalitarian Autonomy scores were negatively correlated with scores on the Romanticism Scale, but only for women. Women with romantic beliefs about love gave significantly less importance to personal independence and equality. For both sexes, scores on the Egalitarian Autonomy Scale were negatively correlated with Sex-Role Traditionalism scores. Individuals who endorsed pro-feminist ideas about women's and men's roles were more likely to have values emphasizing equality and autonomy in relationships.

**TABLE 2**  
Correlates of the Egalitarian Autonomy and Dyadic Attachment scales

	Men		Women	
	Egalitarian Autonomy	Dyadic Attachment	Egalitarian Autonomy	Dyadic Attachment
Sex role traditionalism	-.48*	-.05	-.56*	.13
Romanticism	-.10	.31**	-.33**	.16
Rubin's Love Scale	.05	.40***	-.01	.37**
Rubin's Liking Scale	.18	.34***	.10	.24***

Note: For men,  $n = 54$  for all scales except the Love and Liking scales, where  $n = 29$ . For women,  $n = 76$  for all scales except the Love and Liking scales, where  $n = 51$ .

\* $p < .05$     \*\* $p < .01$     \*\*\* $p < .001$

Attachment values were not strongly related to sex role traditionalism or to romanticism (see Table 2). Once again, the endorsement of attachment values cut across variations in attitudes as it had with variations in background characteristics. The exception to this pattern was that for men, attachment scores were significantly correlated with romanticism. Men with a romantic love ideology gave greater emphasis to attachment values.

*Love and Intimacy.* It was expected that individuals who valued dyadic attachment would report greater closeness and love for their romantic partner. Clear support for this prediction was found for both sexes. Men who scored high on attachment (above the median) reported seeing their current partner significantly more often than did low scorers,  $t(49) = 2.49, p < .05$ . Attachments scores were also correlated with men's reporting greater closeness ( $r = .23, p < .05$ ) and somewhat greater satisfaction ( $r = .20, p < .05$ ) in the current relationship. For women, attachment values were positively related to perceiving greater closeness ( $r = .23, p < .05$ ) in the relationship.

The questionnaire also contained Rubin's (1970) Love and Liking scales. (These were administered only to respondents currently in a romantic relationship.) The 9-item Love Scale assesses feelings of attachment, caring, and intimacy toward one's partner. The 9-item Liking Scale measures respect and affection for the partner. As shown in Table 2, men and women who strongly valued dyadic attachment reported significantly greater love and liking for their partner than did individuals who deemphasized attachment values. These data indicate that those who value having an emotionally close and relatively secure relationship actually do report greater intimacy with their romantic partner. Since the data are correlational in nature, the direction of causality is ambiguous. It may be that individuals who value attachment tend to idealize their partner and so report greater closeness and love. Or it may be that the experience of being in a close and loving relationship strengthens one's belief in the importance of attachment values.

No association was predicted between scores on the Egalitarian Autonomy Scale and measures of love or intimacy. The items on the Egalitarian Autonomy Scale have little to do with closeness in a relationship. Instead they focus on whether the person wants separate interests outside the relationship and on equality between partners. As anticipated, scores on the Egalitarian Autonomy Scale were not significantly related to any measures of love, closeness, or satisfaction for either women or men. Individuals who strongly valued personal independence were no less likely than other individuals to find their current relationship intimate and personally rewarding.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study shed light on the relationship values of young adults. We found that relationship values clustered into two major factors, one reflecting themes of dyadic attachment and the second combining concerns for equality and personal autonomy. Family theorists (e.g., Levinger, 1977; Raush, 1977) have proposed that the desire for intimacy and for autonomy are important issues in relationships and that these themes are best conceptualized as independent dimensions rather than polar opposites or mutually exclusive alternatives. Our findings provide empirical confirmation of this view and underscore the existence of differences among individuals in the personal importance given to these value clusters. The generalizability of our findings is enhanced by similar research conducted with lesbians (Peplau et al., 1978) and gay men (Peplau & Cochran, 1981). In these studies of same-sex partnerships, relationship values also formed independent factors corresponding roughly to attachment and egalitarian autonomy. Although minor variations occurred in the specific items loading most highly on each factor, the basic content of the attachment and the egalitarian autonomy scales was remarkably similar for heterosexuals, lesbians, and gay men.

This study also provides a beginning understanding of the individual and dyadic correlates of these relationship values. In our sample of university students, attachment values cut across variations in age, year in school, religion, and sex role attitudes. In contrast, as might be expected, egalitarian autonomy values were stronger among individuals who were older and who endorsed pro-feminist attitudes about sex roles. Results also indicated that whereas autonomy values were not related to love and satisfaction in a romantic relationship, attachment values were. Individuals who valued having a close-knit and relatively secure relationship reported greater closeness and love for their partner than did individuals who de-emphasized attachment values.

Finally, the results of this study shed light on the impact of gender on values in love relationships. As anticipated, much commonality was found in the relationship values of women and men. Nevertheless, women gave

greater importance than did men to the values of equality and personal independence. We believe that this gender difference is largely a result of differences in the life experiences of men and women. Historians (e.g., Degler, 1980; Kraditor, 1968) have documented that whereas men have long been members of both family and society, women have traditionally been confined to the family arena. During the last century, women have been struggling to gain both parity of power within relationships and individual autonomy outside their relationships with men. Today, young men may continue to view their love relationships as separate from or complementary to the rest of their lives at work or with friends (e.g., Angrist & Almquist, 1975; Peplau, 1976). Thus issues of egalitarian autonomy may not seem very important for young men. In contrast, young women may more often experience difficulty in reconciling a desire for an intimate partnership with a desire for self-development and individual interests. This issue may be especially salient for the white, middle-class students in our sample. Among these young adults, gender differences in egalitarian autonomy values may be a personal reflection of a difference in the social realities of contemporary life for individuals presumably seeking both careers and close romantic relationships. The extent to which this sex difference permeates the romantic relationships of individuals from other class, cultural, or ethnic backgrounds is a question warranting further study.

#### NOTE

1. Factors were derived according to the procedures suggested by Comrey (1973, p. 188). A minimum residual solution was first obtained. Of the ten factors so derived, two were dropped from further analysis due to the lack of loadings greater than .25. The remaining eight factors were then rotated orthogonally by Criterion I of the Tandem Criteria Method. An additional two factors were dropped due to the lack of more than one loading in each factor greater than .45 (on both factors, the other loadings were substantially below .30). Criterion II was then utilized with varying combinations of factors. Factors that distorted with rotation, failed to build up, or split the variance on larger factors were dropped from further rotations. As a result, a two-factor orthogonal solution proved to be the best fit to the data.

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