

# WHAT HOMOSEXUALS WANT

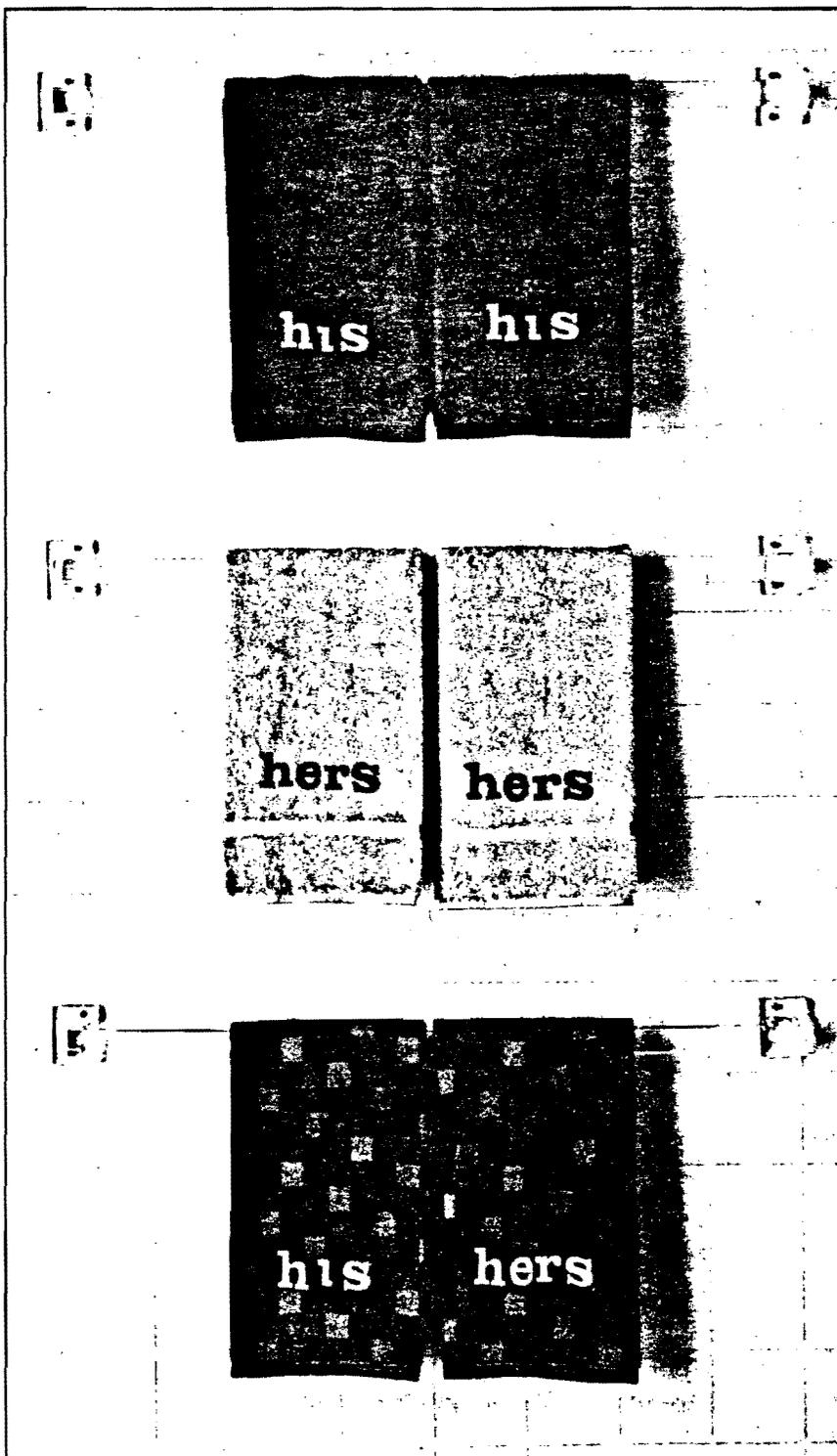
BY LETITIA ANNE PEPLAU

In the past decade, research on love moved into the mainstream of psychological investigation. But researchers have focused on heterosexual couples and ignored the millions of Americans who love partners of the same sex.

What are homosexual love relationships like? Do homosexuals take heterosexual marriage as an ideal model for love relationships? Is there a "homosexual ethos"—a distinctive set of values about relationships unique to the gay world? Do lesbians and gay men want long-term relationships with a single partner, or do they prefer to live pretty much in the present? Do they feel emotionally close to their partners? Is their view of love cynical or romantic? Are homosexual relationships satisfying or disappointing?

It was in the hope of answering such questions that my colleagues and I decided to investigate the romantic and sexual relationships of lesbians and gay men. Trained as a social psychologist, I had spent several years studying heterosexual dating couples. What would I find if I used similar research methods and questions to study lesbians and gay men? What follows is a report of our findings, developed during the past four years from studies of 127 lesbians, 128 gay men, and 130 **heterosexuals**—65 women and 65 men. Fortunately, other researchers are now beginning to study homosexual relationships, and their findings generally support our own.

We have learned, among other things, that the values and experiences of homosexual couples are similar to those of heterosexuals in many ways. Whatever their sexual preferences, most people strongly desire a close and loving relationship with one special person. For both homosexuals and heterosexuals, intimate relationships can—and often do—provide love and **satisfaction**. But neither group is immune to the perils of relation-



# IN RELATIONSHIPS

ships—conflict and possible breakup. Whatever their sexual preferences, people in intimate relationships today struggle to reconcile a longing for closeness with a desire for independence and self-realization.

We have learned that gender—the fact of being a man or a woman—often exerts greater influence on relationships than does sexual orientation. Women's goals in intimate relationships are similar whether the partner is male or female. The same is true of men. Thus the character of a particular relationship may depend less on whether the partners are homosexual or heterosexual than on whether they are men or women.

This finding brings to mind a comment by Donald Symons, the sociobiologist, that "in homosexuality, we see male and female sexuality in their pure, uncompromised forms." (See "Eros and Alley Oop," *Psychology Today*, February 1981.) Symons is referring to the fact that heterosexual relationships are, in some measure, a compromise between the goals and desires of the male and female partners—a compromise that can obscure sex differences. With same-sex partners, individuals may be able to express their personal preferences in relationships more fully. Symons attributes sex differences in orientations toward love to the genes; my colleagues and I ascribe them largely to gender-role socialization, that is, to the lessons boys and girls learn about love while growing up.

We have found one major difference between heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Heterosexual couples—whether they are dating casually, living together, or married—are powerfully influenced by the model of traditional marriage, a social institution that prescribes very different roles for men and women. In contrast, most homosexual couples reject husband/wife roles as a basis for love rela-

tionships. Instead, gay relationships resemble "best friendships," with the added component of romantic and erotic attraction.

Feminists have long argued that heterosexual couples should abandon gender-based roles in marriage. Modern gay partnerships that are successful demonstrate that love relationships can be built on models other than traditional marriage. Thus studies of gay couples can provide insights into many of the issues encountered by those heterosexual couples who also reject traditional marital patterns and who are trying to work out more egalitarian relationships.

## Methodology

Recruiting research participants—our first task—wasn't always easy. Many lesbians and gay men distrust psychologists and feel maligned by a profession that only recently removed homosexuality from its catalog of mental disorders. To recruit as diverse a sample as possible, we spread word of our research throughout the Los Angeles area. We got in touch with homosexual organizations in the community and at universities, ran advertisements in homosexual publications, and used informal social networks. Ultimately, 127 lesbians and 128 gay men took part in our study in 1976 and 1977. We then recruited 65 heterosexual men and 65 heterosexual women for comparison purposes.

All participants completed long questionnaires that probed their backgrounds and their attitudes toward romantic relationships. A series of questions assessed love and satisfaction in a specific current or past romantic/sexual relationship. We explored living arrangements, the balance of power, sexual activities, and commitment to the relationship. Lesbians and gay men were asked additional questions about their involvement in the homo-

sexual community. We discovered, incidentally, that most of our respondents disliked the term "homosexual," usually preferring "gay" (for both sexes) or "lesbian" (for women).

We have analyzed our extensive data bank in several different ways. To test some predictions, we examined only the data from lesbians, or only the responses of gay men. In other instances we compared men with women, or homosexuals with heterosexuals. For the cross-group comparisons, we selected four subsamples: 50 lesbians, 50 gay men, 50 heterosexual women, and 50 heterosexual men, all white students, all carefully matched for age, educational level, and length of their romantic relationships.

The lesbians in our sample were a fairly diverse group. They ranged in age from 18 to 59, with a median of 26 years. The sample was fairly equally divided between women who worked full time (46 percent) and women who were students in college or graduate school (41 percent). Participants came from various religious backgrounds: 38 percent were raised as Protestants, 35 percent as Catholics, and 17 percent as Jews. Most rated themselves toward the low end of a 9-point scale of religiousness. Only 43 percent said that they attended religious services weekly, and 63 percent said that they went to services less than once a year.

At the time of our study, 61 percent of the women reported being in an ongoing romantic/sexual relationship with a woman. Most women had had several previous lesbian relationships: 37 percent had had six or more, 46 percent had had two to five, and 17 percent had had only one. The length of the longest lesbian relationship ranged from one month to 25 years, with a median of two and a half years. Age at the time the first lesbian relationship began ranged from 13 to 47, with a median age of just past 20.

More than 95 percent of the women

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## Homosexuals often cite the absence of rigid husband/wife roles as a major advantage of their relationships.

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had dated a man at some time, and 84 percent had had one or more **romantic/sexual** relationships with a man. About 80 percent of the women had had sex with a male partner; the median number of partners was five.

The gay men in our study ranged *in* age from 18 to 65, with a median of 25 years. Most were white, and half were college or graduate students. Of the 128 men, 33 percent had been brought up as Protestants, 39 percent as Catholics, and 16 percent as Jews. Like the women, they said they were not very religious: 17 percent went to religious services every week; 54 percent reported going less than once a year.

At the time of our study, 41 percent of the gay men were involved in a **romantic/sexual** relationship with a particular partner. The median number of previous homosexual relationships for the men was three; 21 percent of them had had six or more such relationships during their lifetime. The length of the men's longest **same-sex** relationship ranged from two months to 11 years, with a **median** of 15 months. The men's age when their first same-sex relationship began ranged from 12 to 38 years, with a median age of 20.

The gay men in our sample had had somewhat less heterosexual experience than the lesbians. More than 92 percent of the gay men had dated a woman at some time, two-thirds had had sexual intercourse with a woman, and the median number of **opposite-sex** partners was three.

A note of warning is in order. It is imperative that the results of our research be interpreted cautiously. First, our questionnaire addressed a limited set of relationship values and characteristics. Although we found only a few differences between homosexuals and heterosexuals, there are undoubtedly many important differences that we did not examine. Moreover, when people fill in questionnaires, they are not always honest

with researchers or with themselves, even if they mean to be so. Finally, and most important, there is no such thing as a representative sample of members of a hidden population such as homosexuals. Volunteers are never typical of the group they come from. Our sample was fairly diverse in religion, occupation, and income, but **overrepresented** young, **well-educated**, middle-class whites, and those who were open about sexual preference.

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### Rejecting the Marriage Model

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There are many myths and misconceptions about homosexual relationships. None is more persistent—or wrong—than the belief that in gay relationships one partner adopts the role of "husband" and the other the role of "wife." According to the stereotype, same-sex partners "make believe," in some sense, that one of them is male and the other female. One partner is the breadwinner, takes the initiative in sex, and generally assumes the conventional role of dominant male, the other partner keeps house and acts the part of submissive female.

Several studies discredit the stereotype. Far from embracing traditional marital roles, most lesbians and gay men actively reject marriage as a model for love relationships. Although an examination of "role playing" was not a major focus of our own research, the issue is basic to understanding the nature of gay relationships.

Karla Jay and Allen Young, authors of *The Gay Report*, asked several thousand homosexuals how they felt about role playing in relationships. Most of the women and half of the men disliked role playing. Indeed, lesbians and gay men often cite the absence of rigid role playing as a major advantage of the homosexual lifestyle. One lesbian told Jay and Young, "My lover and I have constantly shifting roles, depending on the needs of

the moment. **If ever I felt we were getting locked into any roles, especially those of butch/femme, I would run to escape this relationship.**" Another lesbian told them, "I don't like role playing because it copies the traditional **male/female** relationship. I'm proud to be a woman. And I love women, not pseudomen."

A gay man told Jay and Young, "Role playing seems to me by nature to involve dominance and control, both of which make me feel uncomfortable." Another gay man informed psychiatrists Marcel Saghir and Eli Robins, "Whenever I am asked who is the husband and who is the wife, I say, 'we're just a couple of happily married husbands.'"

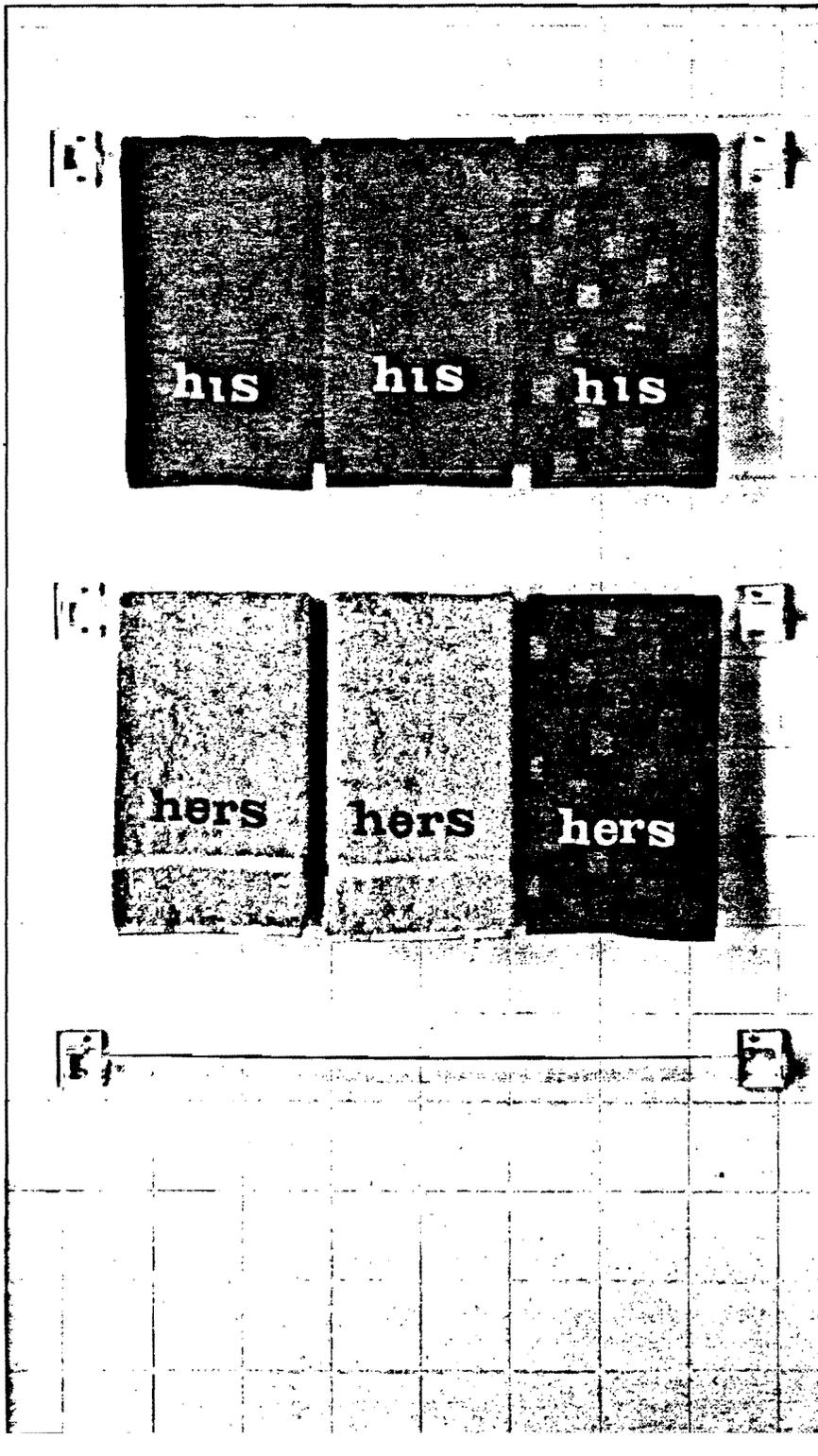
In our own research, we found few signs of **masculine/feminine** role playing. The lesbians and gay men we studied espoused an ideal of egalitarianism for their relationships, wanting partners to share power and responsibilities equally. It was unusual for one partner to support the other financially, more often, both were employed full time or both were struggling students. A high percentage of our respondents reported that they shared cooking, decorating, cleaning, and the like more or less equally. Asked "How did you and your partner decide who would do various household tasks?" one man wrote: "Whoever was available at the time the work needed to be accomplished did it." A lesbian answered: "We play it by ear. It works out about equal. I'll cook a while, then she'll cook. We give each other a rest. Both of us do our fair share, so we don't feel burdened down or resentful."

Such attitudes, of course, are precisely those that feminists have been trying to work out in heterosexual relationships for the past 20 years. Today, sex-typed role playing is much more characteristic of heterosexual couples than of homosexual ones. The women's movement may have **chal-**

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Whether one is a man or a woman has more to do with attitudes toward intimacy than sexual orientation does.

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lenged traditional sex roles in heterosexual partnerships, but it has not yet come close to wiping them out.

For a minority of homosexuals, though, some elements of role playing are an important and comfortable part of relationships. A lesbian in the study by Jay and Young described her experience in these words: "When I am with a younger girl, I like to act 'male,' that is, protect her, and I like it very much if she lets me buy drinks, etc. What I like best about the 'male' or 'butch' role is the protective angle, even though I realize intellectually that it is a lot of sexist **crap**."

A male proponent of role playing, also a subject in the Jay and Young study, had this to say: "I put a strong emphasis on roles, more sexually than nonsexually. I can feel perfectly comfortable in either role. But I like to keep roles clearly defined with any given person. I like the stability and clarity of it, the ease of prediction and minimal conflict; communications are so much easier, more familiar."

Role playing occurs more often in some groups and situations than in others. It may occur among newcomers to the gay community; a young woman who has just "come out" may initially dress in "butch" fashion because she wants other lesbians to recognize her. In general, role playing is commonest among older homosexuals of both sexes, in people at lower socioeconomic levels, and in men. These three groups **are** least influenced by gay liberation and lesbian feminism, which both argue that homosexual relationships should not be patterned after heterosexual ones.

Why does the **role-playing** stereotype persist? One reason is that, like other common stereotypes, it is seldom subjected to scientific scrutiny. In **addition**, the minority of homosexuals who do engage in role playing may be more visible than the majority who do not, partly because the minority attracts more attention from the

## In the same-sex couples we studied, relationships often resembled best friendships, with erotic attraction added.

media. Finally, traditional heterosexual marriage remains so powerful a model for love relationships that many people find it difficult to **imagine** an intimate relationship not made up of a "husband" and a "wife."

The fact that so few homosexual relationships follow the pattern of traditional marriage means that many same-sex couples have had to find or create other ways of relating to each other. Among the gay men and lesbians we studied, relationships often resembled best friendships. A friendship model promotes equality in love relationships. As children, we learn that the husband should be the "boss" at

home, but that friends "share and share alike." Same-sex friends often have similar interests, skills, and resources—in part because they are exposed to the same gender-role socialization in growing up. It is easier to share responsibilities in a relationship when both partners are equally **skilled—or inept**—at cooking, making money, disclosing feelings, or whatever.

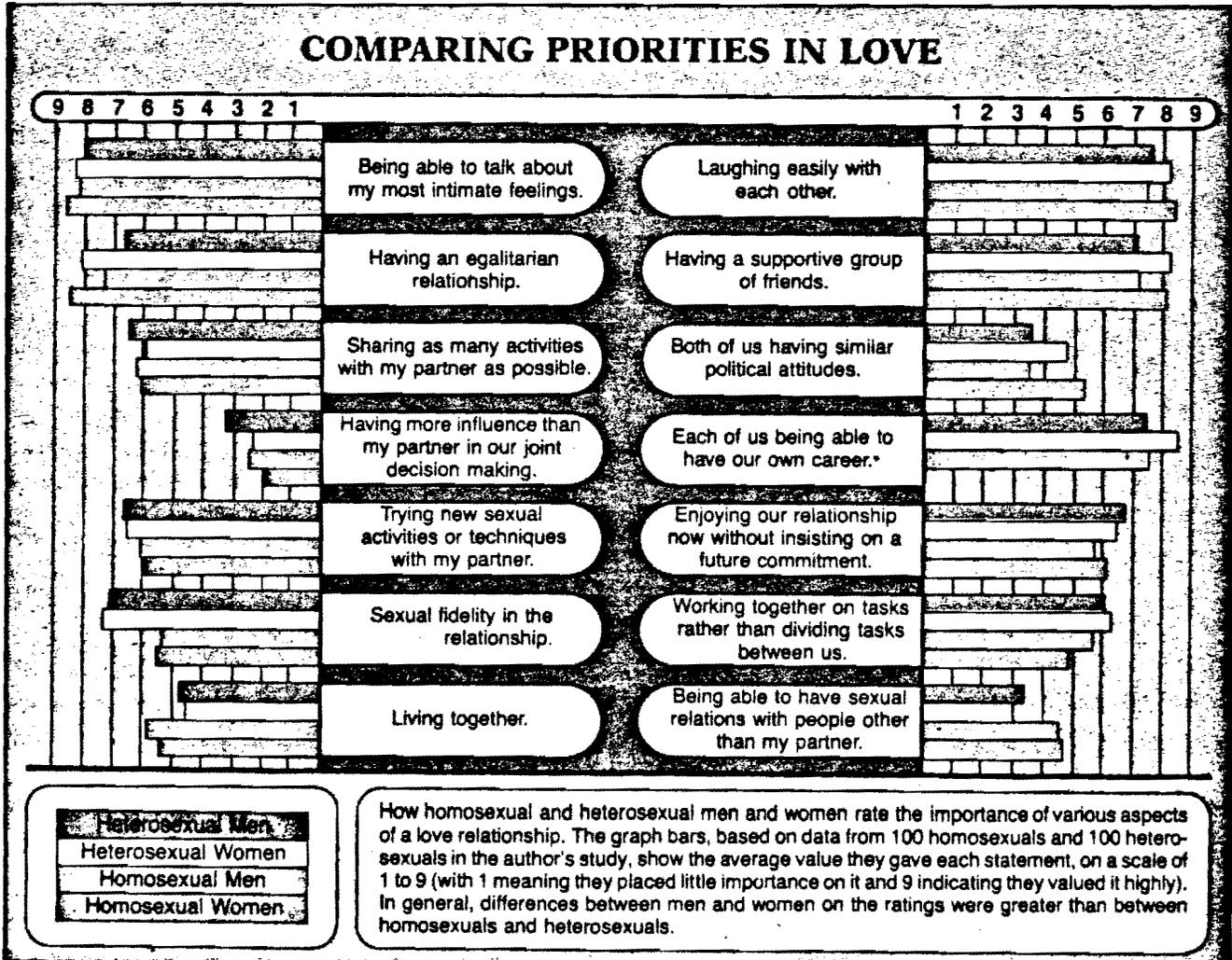
Even when heterosexual couples strive for equality in marriage, **gender-based** differences in interests and abilities make it hard to break out of traditional **male/female** patterns. For homosexual couples, however, neces-

sity provides added stimulus to development of new relationship patterns.

### Balancing Togetherness and Independence

What characteristics do lesbians and gay men value in an intimate relationship? We asked our respondents to rate, on a 9-point scale, the importance of about 20 features a relationship might have. These included issues such as spending time together, revealing intimate feelings, having similar attitudes, having an **equal-power** relationship, and sexual **fidelity**. **Participants gave** varied answers.

### COMPARING PRIORITIES IN LOVE



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## Homosexuals rated sexual fidelity at about 5 on a 9-point scale of importance; heterosexuals rated it at just over 7.

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For example, while some considered it essential to share many activities with a partner, others viewed joint activities as unimportant.

When we performed a statistical procedure called factor analysis on these answers, we found that people's relationship values clustered around two basic themes. One theme, which we have called "dyadic attachment," reflects the value placed on having an emotionally close and secure relationship versus having a more open, less permanent relationship. Individuals who scored high on attachment valued togetherness, emphasizing factors such as "sharing as many activities with my partner as possible," "knowing the relationship will endure for a long time," and "knowing my partner depends on me." A gay man, explaining to James Spada, author of *The Spada Report*, a survey of gay male sexuality, why he wanted a love relationship, illustrates this theme. "The most important thing," he said, "is the knowledge that someone loves and needs me as I would love and need him. It would be a stabilizing force in my life and give me a sense of security."

The second theme we identified concerns the desire for personal autonomy. The quest for independence was manifested in assigning a high value to "having major interests of my own outside the relationship" and "having a supportive group of friends as well as my **romantic/sexual** partner." A gay man explaining his views about relationships to Spada shows a high concern for autonomy: "I have my own lifestyle and am sufficiently crotchety to be happy in my independence. I recognize the pleasures of living with another man from previous relationships . . . having the other guy to lean on emotionally, sometimes financially, etc. However, the loss of my own freedom is too high a price to **pay**."

The twin themes of attachment and autonomy appeared in separate analyses of the responses of lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals—leading us to believe that they are central to all love relationships today. Although it might appear that the desire for togetherness and for independence are polar opposites, we have found that the two are not necessarily incompatible. We found no association between an individual's scores on attachment and autonomy. People who gave great importance to attachment were just as likely to value or to devalue autonomy. Some people wanted both a secure love relationship and the opportunity for self-realization in other spheres. The evidence is clear that regardless of sexual orientation, all partners in close relationships must somehow deal with how much intimacy and independence are desirable and how the two are to be reconciled.

Despite the commonalities among lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals, we wondered whether they might differ in the importance they gave to specific features of relationships. To make such comparisons, we turned to our matched subsamples of 50 lesbians, 50 gay men, 50 heterosexual **women**, and 50 heterosexual men. All four groups, we found, were remarkably similar in the priorities they set for relationships. For example, all participants gave the greatest importance to "being able to talk about my most intimate feelings" with a partner. (See chart at left.)

One major difference between homosexuals and heterosexuals did emerge, however. Sexual exclusivity was much more important to heterosexuals than to homosexuals. Gay men and lesbians gave sexual fidelity a rating of somewhat more than 5, compared with a rating of just over 7 for the heterosexuals (the highest possible importance rating was 9). Our guess is that the sources of sexual per-

missiveness may differ for lesbians and gay men. Among gay men, valuing openness may stem from the traditional male gender-role socialization, emphasizing sexual expression. For lesbians, acceptance of sexual openness may be tied to feminist critiques of monogamy.

Overall, differences between the sexes were much greater than differences between homosexuals and heterosexuals. Whatever their sexual preference, women gave greater importance than men did to emotional expressiveness (discussing feelings, laughing together). Women cared more than men about having an **egalitarian** relationship and about having similar attitudes and political beliefs; that was most true of the lesbians and reflected, we think, their ties to the feminist movement.

We have found little evidence for a distinctive homosexual "ethos" or orientation toward love relationships. There are many commonalities in the values most people bring to intimate relationships. Individual differences in values are more closely linked to gender and to background characteristics than to sexual orientation.

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### Intimate Relationships.

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One of our principal **objectives** was to find out what the relationships of lesbians and gay men are actually like. Although stereotypes often portray gays as unable to develop enduring partnerships, empirical evidence refutes that view. In our study, most participants were young adults in their mid-20s. About 61 percent of the lesbians and 41 percent of the gay men were involved in a **romantic/sexual** relationship when we conducted the study; the rest had all been **part** of a couple at least once in the past. Other studies of somewhat older **homosexuals** have often found about **three-quarters** of the lesbians and half of the

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## As many starry-eyed romantics and cold-hearted cynics were found among homosexuals as among heterosexuals.

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gay men to be involved in steady relationships. The lesbians and gay men who are unattached are a diverse group. Like unmarried heterosexuals, they include people still suffering from the recent ending of a relationship, people eagerly seeking a relationship, and others who prefer to avoid a committed partnership.

We wondered whether the gays in our study would be romantic or cynical in their view of love. To find out, we administered a six-item "romanticism" scale. Participants were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with statements about love, such as: "To be truly in love is to be in love forever" and "Lovers ought to expect a certain amount of disillusionment after they have been together for a while." We found no differences among the responses of our matched subsamples of lesbians, gay men, heterosexual women, and heterosexual men. In general, most people took a middle-of-the-road position. Homosexuals and heterosexuals were equally likely to be starry-eyed romantics or cold-hearted cynics.

Our investigation of the nature of gay relationships focused on those lesbians and gay men who were part of a couple at the time of the study. About 62 percent of these lesbians and 51 percent of these gay men lived with their partners. Of those not living together, most saw their partners at least three times a week.

The lesbians and gay men we studied were generally very satisfied with their relationships. Lesbians reported considerable closeness in the relationship, with a mean rating of 7.7 on a 9-point scale, and a high degree of satisfaction, with a mean of 7.1. Gay men rated their relationship as being just as close (a mean of 7.7) and very satisfying (a mean of 7.7). These ratings are almost identical to those of our heterosexual respondents rating their dating relationships.

Most of the people in our study said that they and their partners were "in love." About 75 percent of the lesbians said they were in love, 17 percent said they were not in love, and 8 percent said they were unsure. Among gay men, 83 percent were in love, 9 percent were not, and 8 percent were uncertain. When we compared our subsamples, matched for age and length of relationship, we again found no differences between lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals in the likelihood of being in love with a partner.

Love research was advanced some years ago when psychologist Zick Rubin developed scales to measure love and liking for a romantic partner. In our study, both lesbians and gay men scored high on Rubin's love scale, indicating intense feelings of attachment, caring, and intimacy for their partners. They also scored high on the liking scale, reflecting strong feelings of respect and affection. No differences were found in the depth of love or liking felt by lesbians, gay men, or heterosexuals in our study.

Further evidence that gay relationships can be psychologically rewarding comes from other studies that have used standardized measures of couple functioning, such as the Locke-Wallace scale of marital adjustment. When researchers compared matched samples of homosexual and heterosexual couples on these measures, all scored in the "well-adjusted" range; homosexuals were indistinguishable from heterosexuals.

Contrary to the popular notion that homosexuals move rapidly from partner to partner, most of the gays we surveyed showed signs of commitment to their relationship. When asked to estimate the likelihood that it would last, about 44 percent of the lesbians were sure that it would last for six months, 37 percent were sure that it would last a year, and 26 percent thought it would last for more

than five years. Gay men showed a similar pattern, with 50 percent sure that their partnership would last for six months, 49 percent sure that it would last a year, and 28 percent sure it would last for more than five years.

Another index of commitment is a person's willingness to make sacrifices to ensure that a relationship endures. We asked participants to imagine that their partners had decided to move to another city to pursue an attractive job or educational opportunity. About 28 percent of the lesbians said they would definitely move in order to continue the relationship. Another 13 percent said they would probably move, while 30 percent were uncertain, and 30 percent said they would not move. About half the gay men said they would either definitely (25 percent) or probably (23 percent) move; 19 percent were uncertain, and 33 percent said they would not move.

We do not really know how long the average same-sex couple stays together. In most studies of gay men and lesbians in their 20s, relationships last for two or three years. Studies of older homosexuals have found relationships lasting for decades. The lesbians we surveyed had been with their partners from one month to 11 years, with a median of 13 months. The gay men had known their partners from one month to seven years, with a median of 16 months.

Sadly, love does not guarantee that a relationship lasts forever. For homosexuals as for heterosexuals, partnerships begun hopefully and lovingly can and do fall apart. If same-sex relationships are generally briefer than heterosexual relationships one reason may be that gays encounter fewer barriers to calling it quits. There are rarely legal formalities to negotiate, children to worry about, or as much encouragement from family and friends to work out differences. There is also less likelihood that one partner is financially

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## Only 13 percent of lesbians had recently had sex outside their relationship; for gay men, the figure was 54 percent.

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dependent on the other. The social cement that binds married partners together, sometimes even after love has dwindled, is weaker for homosexuals.

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### Sexuality

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One goal of our research was to examine sexuality in same-sex relationships. In sexual interactions with a steady partner, homosexuals showed many similarities to heterosexuals.

The lesbians we surveyed generally found sex an enjoyable part of their relationship, with a mean satisfaction rating of **5.9** on a 7-point scale. Nearly three-quarters said they found it "extremely satisfying"; only **4** percent reported that sex was not at all satisfying. More than **70** percent of the lesbians said they almost always experienced orgasm, **14** percent said they usually did, and **4** percent said they never did. Most women said they had sex with their partners about two or three times a week. About **45** percent expressed a desire for more sex than they actually had, and only **5** percent preferred a lower frequency.

We found that lesbians had sex with their partners about as often as did heterosexual women of their age in steady relationships. Other comparative studies suggest, however, that lesbians may have orgasms more regularly than heterosexual women do. When Kinsey researchers compared heterosexual women who had been married for five years with lesbians who had been sexually active for the same length of time, they found that 17 percent of the heterosexuals had never had an orgasm, compared with only 7 percent of the lesbians. And only 40 percent of the heterosexuals had orgasms easily (on 90 to **100** percent of the occasions when they had sex), compared with **68** percent of the lesbians. Kinsey believed that these findings reflected differences in the knowledge and sexual techniques of

the women's partners. We suspect differences in the emotional aspects of lovemaking may be as important.

Turning to gay men's sexual behavior with a steady partner, we again found high levels of satisfaction, with a mean rating of **5.8** on a 7-point scale. Gay male couples had sex an average of two or three times a week. About **37** percent of men wished they had sex more often than they actually did, and 21 percent preferred a lower frequency.

When we looked at sex inside homosexual love relationships, we found both lesbians and gay men reporting considerable satisfaction. Comparisons with the heterosexuals we surveyed showed remarkable similarity in both the frequency and enjoyment of sex among all groups.

One way in which lesbians and gay men did differ, however, was in the extent to which they associated sex with love. In a survey by Jay and Young, **97** percent of lesbians said that emotional involvement was important in sex, and **92** percent said that in their personal experience, emotional involvement always or very frequently accompanied sexual involvement. By way of comparison, **83** percent of the gay men surveyed saw emotional involvement as important in sex, but only **45** percent said that they always or usually experienced the combination. In our research, most lesbians developed emotional intimacy with their partners before first having sex. Gay men were more variable in their behavior. Although **46** percent said that they and their partners had become friends before they first had sex, 27 percent said they had been casual acquaintances, and 27 percent said they had just met. Compared with lesbians, gay men more often separate love and sex, and enjoy casual sex for its own sake.

Once people establish a steady relationship, should monogamy or sexual openness be the rule? The question of

sexual values is a controversial issue now. Proponents of open marriage view sexual exclusivity as an antiquated relic of a traditional morality; others believe that sexual fidelity is the cornerstone of a stable love relationship. We noted earlier that the homosexuals in our study were generally more favorable to sexual openness than were heterosexuals. Are these differences reflected in actual behavior?

We found that gay men were much more likely than lesbians or heterosexuals to have sex with people other than their steady partners. When asked if they had had sex with someone other than their primary partner during the preceding two months, 54 percent of the gay men said they had, compared with only **13** percent of the lesbians, 14 percent of the heterosexual men, and **14** percent of the heterosexual women. Other studies confirm this general pattern.

Why is sexual openness so common among gay men? Gender-role socialization, with its emphasis on greater sexual expressiveness for men, is part of the answer. In addition, the gay male **community** provides more opportunities and greater social support for sexual openness than lesbians or heterosexuals have.

Is it better for homosexual relationships to be sexually **open** or exclusive? Our research provides no clear guidelines. In our original study, we found no association between sexual **exclusivity** and relationship satisfaction for **lesbians**, but some evidence that gay men in exclusive relationships were happier. However, a new study I just completed with one of my students, David Blasband, took a closer look at sexual openness in 40 male couples who had been together for three years or longer. In some of those couples, both partners had agreed to have a **sexually open** relationship; other couples had agreed to be sexually closed. We could detect no differences between

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the two types on any measure of intimacy, satisfaction, security, or commitment. For gays as for heterosexuals, that a relationship be sexually open or closed is probably less important than why and how the partners arrive at the particular pattern. Sometimes a secure and rewarding primary relationship may be enhanced by the novelty and excitement of an outside liaison. But sexual exploration may also stem from dissatisfaction with the primary partner, and sexual liaisons can create new difficulties.

To now, our comparisons of homosexuals and heterosexuals have been based on statistical analyses of questionnaire data. Further evidence emerged from the open-ended responses of participants when we asked them to describe the "best things" and "worst things" about their relationships. Take these two

descriptions according to sexual orientation. People who cling to the idea that homosexuals are utterly different from the rest of humanity may be surprised we found so few differences.

It would be misleading, though, not to observe that lesbians and gay men do in fact have unique experiences. Some of them stem from membership in a socially stigmatized group. One gay man reported dismay because his partner had "occasional relapses," induced by his psychiatrist, wherein he decides that he should not be gay." One lesbian complained of "having to lead two lives," and another regretted the need for "changing the 'she's' to 'he's'" when she speaks of her partner to friends at work.

The picture that emerges from these findings is that homosexual relationships are often emotionally close and personally gratifying. Does

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## We have found little evidence for a distinctive "homosexual ethos" or gay orientation toward love relationships.

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observations by people listing the best aspects of a relationship: "We like each other. We both seem to be getting what we want and need. We have wonderful sex together." And, "The best thing is having someone to be with when you wake up."

Can you guess the sexual preference of the writers? Almost certainly not. And what about one person's statement that the worst thing in her relationship was "my partner is too dependent emotionally," and another's lament: "Her aunt lives with us!" While both remarks could have been made by heterosexuals, the responses are actually those of lesbians.

To investigate these apparent similarities more systematically, Susan Cochran, a doctoral candidate in psychology at UCLA, had judges blind to the gender and sexual orientation of respondents code the content of these descriptions. No differences were found in the best and worst things mentioned by lesbians, gay men, heterosexual women, and heterosexual men. In another test, Cochran found that judges could not accurately sort

the rosy image fit all homosexual relationships? Probably not. For whatever their sexual preferences, people who are dissatisfied with a relationship are not likely to volunteer for couple research. What is informative is that our homosexual and heterosexual volunteers are so similar in the satisfactions they derive from their love relationships—and in the issues of commitment, intimacy, and personal freedom that confront them. □

Letitia Anne Peplau is associate professor of social psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles. For their research on gay relationships, Peplau and her colleagues received the Evelyn Hooker research award of the Gay Academic Union and the Mark Freedman Award from the Association of Gay Psychologists.

For further information, read:

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