

RESEARCH ON HOMOSEXUAL COUPLES: AN OVERVIEW

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During the past decade, a research literature describing the intimate relationships of lesbians and gay men has slowly emerged. Several books devoted to homosexual couples have recently been published, including those by Mendola (1980), Silverstein (1981), and Tanner (1978) reviewed in this issue. Other empirical studies of homosexuality increasingly include investigations of personal relationships. Examples are found in the recent Kinsey Institute study (Bell & Weinberg, 1978) and in other research-based books (e.g., Harry & DeVall, 1978; Jay & Young, 1977; Spada, 1979; Wolf, 1979) published in the last five years. Empirical articles on couples have also begun to appear with increasing frequency in this and in other scholarly journals. Indeed, sufficient empirical research has accumulated to permit the publication of four comprehensive review articles on gay male and lesbian relationships (i.e., Harry, in press; Larson, 1982; Peplau & Amaro, 1982; Peplau & Gordon, 1982). This Symposium is intended to call attention to the growing research focus on couples and to encourage its expansion.

The origins of increased interest in homosexual couples are diverse. Harry (in press) has suggested that the rise in the study of gay and lesbian relationships in the 1970s is closely tied to the rise of the Gay and Women's Movements which emphasized the need to examine the full spectrum of lesbians' and gay men's experiences. Publications such as *Positively Gay* (Berzon & Leighton, 1979) and *Our Right to Love* (Vida, 1978) include discussions of relationship issues. Changes within the social sciences have also been important. Gay and feminist caucuses within professional organizations have drawn attention to homosexual issues and have provided forums for the presentation of research findings. In the field of sociology, a growing recognition of the diversity of contemporary life-styles has broadened the traditional focus on "marriage and the family" to a concern for more varied forms of relationships. Thus, there has been a shift in sociology from studying homosexuality exclusively from the perspective of "deviance" toward studying homosexuality as part of work on "alternative life-styles" or sex roles. Similar trends can be found in psychology,

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where a shift has occurred from studying etiology and psychopathology toward viewing homosexuality in the context of intimacy and close relationships. The result of such changes has been to broaden the nature of scientific research on homosexuality. Today, empirical work on lesbian and gay male couples is well underway.

The current literature on homosexual couples has focused on several aspects of gay and lesbian relationships. As Reece suggests later in this issue, a major accomplishment may have been simply to document that lesbians and gay men often *do* develop lasting relationships—a fact that runs counter to prevailing stereotypes of homosexuals as involved only in fleeting encounters. But research has gone well beyond this observation. It is worth highlighting some of the prominent issues that are being addressed in current work and identifying some of the directions for needed future research.

Relationship Models. Of the fallacious myths about homosexual couples, none is more persistent than the belief that gay and lesbian partnerships always mimic heterosexual marriage, with one partner playing the traditional "feminine" role of wife and the other assuming the "masculine" role of husband. According to this view, rigid butch-femme roleplaying pervades many aspects of homosexual relationships including the pattern of couple decision-making, the division of household tasks, and sexual behavior in the relationship. Empirical studies (see reviews by Harry, in press; Larson, 1982; Peplau & Gordon, 1982) have consistently debunked this myth. Most contemporary gay relationships do not conform to traditional "masculine" and "feminine" roles; instead, role flexibility and turn-taking are more common patterns. Only a small minority of homosexual couples engage in *clearcut* butch-femme roleplaying. In this sense, traditional heterosexual marriage is not the predominant model or script for current homosexual couples.

This finding has led to several questions about homosexual couples. First, if homosexual partnerships are not based on a model of traditional heterosexual marriage, what pattern do they follow? It has been suggested (e.g., Harry & DeVall, 1978; Peplau, 1981) that many gay and lesbian relationships more closely resemble a model of best friendship, with the added element of romantic attraction. Second, if gender and traditional sex roles do not provide the basis for structuring homosexual relationships, what factors do determine the balance of power or the division of activities in a couple? Later in this issue, Harry presents data indicating that age may be a *significant* factor in the pattern of decision-making in gay male couples. (For a discussion of factors affecting power in lesbian relationships, see Caldwell & Peplau, in press.) Finally, why is it that a minority of gay male and lesbian couples do engage in *masculine-feminine* roleplaying? This question is addressed in the article by Marecek, Finn, and Cardell in this issue.

Relationship Values and Goals. Research is beginning to document the diverse goals and desires that lesbians and gay men bring to their primary

relationships. Evidence (e.g., Bell & Weinberg, 1978) indicates that most homosexuals want to have a steady love relationship and find this preferable to having only casual liaisons. Research also shows that lesbians and gay men look to their relationships primarily for affection and companionship—goals much like those of matched groups of heterosexuals (e.g., Peplau & Cochran, Note 1; Ramsey, Latham, & Lindquist, Note 2). Beyond these areas of commonality, important individual differences have been found in the relationship values of homosexual women and men. In particular, several writers (e.g., Peplau & Cochran, 1981; Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978; Sang, Note 3; Silverstein, 1981) have suggested that important individual differences exist in the value placed on two themes, conceptualized as intimacy, togetherness or dyadic attachment versus independence, separateness, or personal autonomy. This topic is examined in the article by Jones and De Cecco in this issue.

The Quality of Homosexual Relationships. An important line of research concerns the nature and quality of homosexual partnerships (e.g., Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Mendola, 1980; Silverstein, 1981). Just as some early studies of homosexual individuals examined personal psychological adjustment, so recent studies of homosexual partnerships have examined the "adjustment" of lesbian and gay male couples. Two studies (Cardell, Finn, & Marecek, 1981; Ramsey et al., Note 2) compared lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual couples on measures of relationship adjustment. In both studies, the homosexual couples scored in the "well-adjusted range and were indistinguishable on this basis from the heterosexuals. Peplau and Cochran (Note 1) compared matched samples of lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals on measures of love and liking for their primary partner; again, no significant differences were found among groups. Other research has begun to look at factors that contribute to the quality of homosexual relationships. The article by Peplau, Padesky, and Hamilton in this issue presents data on correlates of satisfaction in lesbian relationships. Currently, research on the quality of gay partnerships is in its infancy. In the future, studies are needed that examine a broader range of factors that contribute to the quality and stability of homosexual couples. We have little research on the issues and problems faced by homosexual couples, and on the solutions that couples create in building successful relationships.

Sexuality. Scientific research refutes the myth that sex is the sole basis for gay and lesbian relationships. While not discounting the significance of sexuality, studies are beginning to put sex in its place alongside other basic components of enduring relationships such as love, commitment, and companionship. One current controversy concerns the impact of sexual exclusivity versus openness on homosexual couples. Although in popular thinking "infidelity" is often construed as a sign of serious problems in a relationship, the causes and consequences of sexual openness in homosexual couples may be more varied. For example, one study (Peplau et al., 1978) found that whether lesbians have

sex outside their primary relationship depends on their personal values, not on their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the relationship itself. Some (e.g., Harry & DeVall, 1978) have suggested that for homosexuals, perhaps especially for gay men, a desire for sexual exclusivity may actually inhibit the development of a long-term relationship. In this view, exclusivity may be part of the early stage of a relationship, but sexual openness may be more compatible with enduring homosexual commitments. We need to know more about this basic issue.

Gender Differences. The literature has also begun to identify gender differences in the relationship experiences of lesbians and gay men (see reviews by Harry, in press; Peplau & Gordon, 1982). For example, research suggests that lesbians are more likely than gay men to live with their primary partner; lesbians may also be more likely than gay men to be in a steady relationship. The relationships of lesbians are more likely than those of gay men to be sexually exclusive. In addition, lesbians may place greater importance on emotional intimacy and equality in relationships than do gay men. The most common explanations for such sex differences focus on cultural sex-role socialization, possible differences in the norms of the gay male and lesbian communities, and the impact of feminism on lesbian relationships. Further research is needed to clarify whether such gender differences are "real" rather than artifacts of biases in the recruitment of lesbians and gay men for research studies and, assuming the differences are genuine, to identify their origins.

Limitations of Existing Research. Existing empirical studies provide a good beginning toward describing and understanding homosexual couples. While many of the findings, such as the general absence of butch-femme roleplaying, may hardly be surprising to those familiar with the gay community, empirical results provide a scientific basis for debunking common stereotypes and provide empirical validation for more impressionistic depictions of homosexual relationships. Nonetheless, existing research has several major limitations.

One limitation is that most studies are based on small samples of younger, white, middle class individuals. While it may never be possible to obtain a truly representative sample of homosexual couples, studies could be designed to sample a broader spectrum of lesbians and gay men. Second, research has largely relied on questionnaires and surveys, methods that assume that respondents are aware of and can accurately report about issues in their relationships. Although surveys have proved extremely useful, the effects of social desirability pressures on survey responses in homosexual samples are unknown. There is a need for a greater range of research techniques, including ethnographies, in-depth interviews, and observational studies. Greater confidence could be placed in findings that were replicated in different studies using different methods. Third, most studies of homosexual relationships have involved only one member of the couple. While this is a convenient recruitment strategy, studies obtaining independent information from both partners in a couple will enhance the research literature.

Finally, research has of necessity addressed only a limited range of topics. There is need for research on a variety of issues. We know little about the long-term relationships of older lesbians and gay men. It would be useful to determine how relationships may vary across the life cycle of the individual, and to learn whether there are predictable stages in the developmental course of homosexual relationships. It will be important for researchers to be sensitive to individual differences among lesbians and among gay men in the nature of their relationships; the development of relationship typologies may be one approach to this issue. Most of the research to date has been "basic research"; it would be helpful to have more applied studies of the problems encountered by homosexual couples and their varied solutions. In this vein, studies of approaches to couples counseling would also be valuable.

Research on homosexual couples promises to inform several audiences. Studies of gay male and lesbian couples serve to discredit myths about homosexuals that have been prevalent in both professional and folk thinking and provide the basis for a factual depiction of homosexual relationships. For members of the gay and lesbian communities, such studies provide an opportunity to put one's own relationship experiences in the context of the spectrum of possible relationships. Studies of homosexual couples also provide an opportunity to test the generality of social science theories of "human behavior" which have been derived almost exclusively from heterosexual models and tested on heterosexual samples. In this way, research on lesbian and gay male couples contributes not only to our knowledge about homosexuality but also to our more general knowledge about close human relationships.

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