

# Gender, Families, and Close Relationships

Feminist Research Journeys

Donna L Sollie Leigh  
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# *Men and Women in Love*

LETITIA ANNE PEPLAU

There are two perspectives on love. Lovers focus on the uniqueness of their feelings for each other and on their joy at having found one special person. Researchers trying to understand men and women in love seek common themes and general principles that apply to many relationships. In this chapter I chronicle my efforts, now spanning more than 20 years, to understand some of the many ways that gender affects romantic relationships.

I have approached this topic as a feminist social psychologist. Shulamit Reinharz (1992) aptly characterizes feminist social scientists as working at the intersection of two different worlds, each with its own values and conventions—the world of their discipline and the world of feminist scholarship. For me social psychology has provided a particularly congenial disciplinary home. Social psychologists are trained to look for social influences on human experience and have long valued research on social issues. Both of these emphases are compatible with a feminist perspective on social life. My involvement in the world of feminism has changed over time, as the women's liberation movement of the 1960s led to the rich feminist scholarship of the 1990s.

In 1968 I entered an interdisciplinary doctoral program in social relations at Harvard University to study social psychology. Many talented women were among my cohorts, a very recent change from the long his-

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tory of discrimination against women in graduate education. In the late 1800s, for instance, a lone woman, Mary Calkins, was permitted to attend graduate psychology courses at Harvard, but only if she sat behind a curtain. Despite such obstacles, Mary completed a doctoral dissertation and in 1905 was elected president of the American Psychological Association. Regardless of her distinguished work, Harvard University denied Mary Calkins a Ph.D. because of her gender (Scarborough & Furumoto, 1987). My own experiences as a graduate student were mercifully different and included financial support from fellowships and intellectual support from progressive male professors in social psychology.

As I began graduate school, the Vietnam War, civil rights struggles at home, and sexual freedom were topics of the day, as was the emerging women's liberation movement. Among my friends, conversations often turned to the latest feminist speaker on campus or to a provocative new book. We were interested in "consciousness raising," which meant looking at our life experiences in new ways. I was part of a generation of middle-class girls who were taught in school to be traditional homemakers. In junior high we learned to cook and sew and spent months on our "Dream Home" report. In high school we were required to take part in the national Betty Crocker "Homemaker of the Future" contest, testing our knowledge about correct wash temperatures and baking techniques. (In fairness I should add that the test also included an essay on a controversial new topic: mothers with paying jobs outside the home.) In college I learned the finer points of pouring afternoon tea as part of Gracious Living and had my posture checked during Freshman Fundamentals, a physical education course for women in which we also learned the proper way to lift vacuum cleaners. But as a graduate student the feminist insight that "the personal is political" urged a reexamination of the meaning of such seemingly mundane activities as washing dishes or shaving legs. Male-female relationships were an important topic for feminist analysis. In *Sexual Politics*, for example, Kate Millett (1970) argued that the ideology of romantic love hides the reality of women's subordination and economic dependence on men. Society, she suggested, uses "love" as a means of emotional manipulation that justifies household drudgery and women's deference to men.

As a graduate teaching associate at Harvard, I had the opportunity to develop an interdisciplinary seminar on sex roles. In 1970 a dozen bright Harvard undergraduates and I spent an exciting year reading and debating all of the materials on gender we could find from anthropology, psychology, and sociology. Because my own education predated the creation of

women's studies, I learned alongside my students as we worked together to separate fact from fiction about women's lives and to find useful analytic frameworks. Two years later I was invited to write a chapter on sex roles for an introductory psychology textbook produced by *Psychology Today* (Peplau, 1972). Also during this time, Matina Horner arrived at Harvard as the first woman faculty member in psychology. She already had gained national visibility for her research on women's "fear of success." Matina's presence and her graduate seminar on the psychology of women gave further intellectual legitimacy to the study of women's issues.

My research interest in close relationships developed largely by chance. About the time I began graduate school, a new assistant professor named Zick Rubin was hired at Harvard. Zick was part of a gutsy group of social psychologists who recently had begun to study love and romance. In the early 1960s, Ellen Berscheid, Elaine Hatfield, and others used the creative experimental approaches of the day to study interpersonal attraction (Berscheid, 1992). At the University of Michigan, Zick Rubin (1969) had conducted an innovative doctoral project designed to put love on a 9-point scale—that is, to assess romantic love systematically and to distinguish love from liking. At Harvard, Zick created new courses on interpersonal attraction that piqued my research interest in relationships—a topic that never had been part of my undergraduate training in experimental psychology. When Zick asked me to work with him on a study of dating couples, I readily agreed.

The Boston Couples Study was designed to follow a large sample of dating couples for a 2-year period to learn about the early stages of romantic attraction, the ways relationships develop over time, and the factors that lead some couples to stay together and others to end their relationship. With funding to Zick from the National Science Foundation, the study was to combine use of extensive questionnaires with laboratory experiments and intensive interviews. My involvement in the Boston Couples Study began an unusually congenial and productive collaboration with Zick and a fellow graduate student, Charles T. (Chuck) Hill, that has continued ever since.

For me the Boston Couples Study offered an opportunity to combine my growing interests in women's issues and in close relationships. For all of us the research provided an empirical look at issues of importance in our personal lives: love, power, commitment, and other facets of male-female relationships. At the time we were all in our late 20s, not really so much older than the college students we learned from. And we were all in

love: Zick and Chuck were recently married, and I was dating a classmate. Feminist scholarship was in its infancy, as was the social psychological study of close relationships.

In this chapter I describe the Boston Couples Study in some detail, highlighting findings most pertinent to gender. Then I present subsequent studies of the relationships of lesbians and gay men. Finally I discuss a 15-year follow-up of the participants in the Boston Couples Study. Throughout I consider ways in which feminist values have influenced my work on close relationships.

### *The Boston Couples Study*

When the Boston Couples Study began in 1972, our investigation of gender focused on three broad issues. First, we were interested in comparing systematically the experiences of men and women in dating relationships. At the time, psychological research was being justly criticized for relying on biased samples that underrepresented women. Family studies sometimes showed an opposite tendency, relying on descriptions of marriages provided by wives rather than husbands. We wanted to give equal emphasis to men's and women's experiences in relationships. Jessie Bernard (1972) had argued persuasively that in every male-female relationship there are at least two relationships: "his" and "hers." We were eager to describe both men's and women's experiences. Because relatively little was known about dating couples, we often found ourselves testing the accuracy of cultural stereotypes about men and women in love relationships.

Second, we were interested in contrasting traditional male-female relations with newly emerging patterns. In the 1970s a beginning men's movement (Pleck & Sawyer, 1974) urged men to be more emotionally expressive. Advocates of sexual freedom discussed cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, as well as open marriage and group sex. Young couples were exposed to many contradictory messages about male-female relations, and we wanted to know how they reconciled conventional norms with newer ideas.

Third, we wanted to understand the role of gender ideology in shaping dating relationships. As social psychologists we cast this issue in terms of individual differences in sex role attitudes. Because standardized measures of sex role attitudes were not available at the time, we created our own 10-item Sex-Role Traditionalism Scale (Peplau, Hill, & Rubin,

1993). The measure asked respondents to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with such statements as "When a couple is going somewhere by car, it's better for the man to do most of the driving" and "If both husband and wife work full-time, her career should be just as important as his in determining where the family lives."

The young adults we studied varied considerably in their attitudes. Some endorsed traditional rules for male-female relationships, viewing men as the primary decision makers and breadwinners, and women as the primary homemakers and childrearers. Paul and Peggy were a traditional college couple. Both lived at home with their parents. When they went out, Paul usually picked up Peggy, suggested the evening's activity, and unless he was broke, paid for both of them. "I feel it's my place to pay if I have the money," he explained. Although both had cars, Paul did virtually all of the driving. Both envisioned marriage in traditional terms. After graduation Peggy would teach for a while and then devote herself full-time to raising children. Paul wanted to put off marriage until he had a good job, but he looked forward to starting a family. He hoped his first child would be a boy because he "can't wait to get a baseball glove on my own kid."

Other participants had more egalitarian views, believing that men and women should share equally in all decisions and that women's careers should be just as important as men's. About 15% of women were members of a women's consciousness-raising or discussion group. Ross and Betsy were an egalitarian couple. They lived together and shared expenses as equally as possible. They believed it was essential to divide household chores in a fair and non-sex-typed way. Although they were strongly committed to their relationship, they planned to postpone marriage until they had launched professional careers—he as a microbiologist, and she as a lawyer. They believed that neither his job nor hers should take precedence in decisions about where to live or how to divide homemaking and childrearing.

In the sections that follow, I describe the participants in the Boston Couples Study and present some of our findings about gender issues as they apply to specific features of relationships, including love, self-disclosure, power, sexuality, and intellectual competition.

### The Sample

The participants in the Boston Couples Study were members of 231 college-age dating couples. To maximize the potential diversity of the

sample, we recruited from four colleges in Boston: a small "elite" private college, a large private university, a Catholic university, and a state college for commuter students. In the spring of 1972, we sent an initial recruiting letter to a random sample of 5,000 sophomores and juniors at these colleges; half were women, and half were men. The demographic background of participants reflected the student composition of Boston colleges at the time. Nearly half (44%) were Catholic, 26% were Protestant, and 25% were Jewish. Virtually all participants (97%) were white. The participants' socioeconomic origins were predominantly middle class, but they spanned the range of this broad category from working-class residents of Somerville and South Boston to affluent suburbanites. When the study began, the modal couple was a 20-year-old sophomore woman and a 21-year-old junior man who had been dating for 8 months. (Further details of sampling procedures and characteristics of the sample can be found in Hill, Rubin, Peplau, & Willard, 1979.)

In the spring of 1972, both members of each couple independently completed identical versions of a 38-page questionnaire about their background, attitudes, and dating relationships. Follow-up questionnaires were administered 6 months, 1 year, and 2 years later. A subset of couples participated in a series of experiments during the summer of 1972, and other couples participated in personal interviews. These repeated contacts with participants plus project newsletters helped foster a sense of identification with the research. Throughout the study we paid our participants for their help, at rates reflecting inflationary trends: \$2 per person for the initial 2-hour questionnaire session and somewhat more for subsequent sessions.

### **Loving and Leaving**

In popular lore women often are depicted as the more sentimental gender, the ones more likely to fall in love at first sight and to stick by their partners no matter what. Men are cast as the hard-hearted and rational gender, in control of their emotions and able to fall out of love quickly if a more desirable prospect comes along. Our research found that these cultural stereotypes were not only wrong but opposite to actual sex differences in romantic relationships (Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976; Rubin, Peplau, & Hill, 1981).

Men in our sample scored higher than women on measures of romantic ideology, endorsing such beliefs as that love conquers all and that love overcomes barriers of religion and economics. Men also gave greater im-

portance than did women to "the desire to fall in love" as a reason for entering their current relationship. The woman's feelings toward her boyfriend were better predictors of whether the couple would break up over a 2-year period than were the man's feelings. When a breakup was not mutual, it was more often the woman (51%) than the man (42%) whom both partners identified as the person more interested in ending the relationship. Perhaps our most interesting finding concerned links between who initiated the breakup and the relative involvement of partners in the relationship. The general tendency was for the partner who was least interested in continuing a relationship to initiate the breakup. But in a minority of cases, the more involved person, seeing that the relationship was not working out as hoped, precipitated a breakup. In these asymmetrical situations in which one's own love was not reciprocated, women were more likely than men to relinquish their love and to end the relationship. Finally, former dating partners were more likely to remain friends when the man had initiated the breakup. Women appeared better able than men to put aside feelings of rejection and to redefine their relationship as friendship.

We considered several possible explanations for these patterns. We suggested that women might be more skilled than men at managing their emotions—in this case, their feelings of romantic attraction and of hurt at the ending of a relationship. We also suggested that women's economic dependency on men might play a part. As family sociologist Willard Waller proposed in the 1930s, "There is this difference between men and women in the pattern of bourgeois family life. A man, when he marries, chooses a companion and perhaps a helpmate, but a woman chooses a companion and at the same time a standard of living. It is necessary for a woman to be mercenary" (1938, p. 243).

### **Self-Disclosure**

We believed that young adults in the 1970s were confronted with two contrasting sets of social expectations about self-disclosure (Rubin, Hill, Peplau, & Dunkel-Schetter, 1980). Traditional norms dictated that men should be emotionally restrained and inexpressive, even in their closest love relationships. At the same time, there was an emerging norm of "full disclosure" in intimate relationships—an ethic of openness spawned by the counterculture of the 1960s, the encounter group movement, and new forms of therapy. Joseph Pleck (1976a) proposed that among middle-class Americans the traditional male role was being replaced by a "modern



male" role that encouraged intimate disclosure so long as it was confined to a close heterosexual relationship.

We asked our subjects how much they had revealed to each other in 17 different topic areas such as "my religious views" and "my feelings about our sexual relationship." Most couples had engaged in full and equal disclosure. Ross explained that loving Betsy meant that "I'm never going to hide or hold things from you, that you are the person I'm going to be totally open with and I hope will be totally open with me," When disclosure was not equal, however, women usually revealed more. Gwen told us that Gil never talked about his worries concerning finding a job: "I guess he feels that he shouldn't have any worries or that if he doesn't talk about them, they won't be there." Couples such as Gwen and Gil followed the traditional norm of male emotional restraint. The tendency also was for men and women to reveal most about somewhat different topics. Women revealed more than men about their fears and feelings concerning their parents. Men revealed more about their political views and the things about which they were proudest. Sex role attitudes affected boyfriends' disclosure but not girlfriends'. Men with traditional sex role attitudes tended to disclose less than men with egalitarian attitudes, although half of the most traditional men reported full disclosure. Finally, to test a possible power explanation of sex differences in self-disclosure, we examined whether more powerful partners tended to receive more information than they gave in return. We found no support for this prediction.

### **The Balance of Power**

In the early 1970s, young adults were confronted with contrasting ideologies about power. Many had grown up in what they perceived to be father-dominant households. A majority (53%) of our participants said their father had been more influential, 29% said their mother had been more influential, and only 18% said their parents shared equally in power. At the same time, young people also were exposed to newer ideas about equality in relationships. What type of power relationship would our young couples want? Fully 95% of women and 87% of men endorsed an equal-power ideal for their current dating relationship. In actuality, however, only about half of the students believed they had achieved equal power in their dating relationship. When relations were not equal, male dominance was the most common pattern (Peplau, 1979; Peplau, Rubin, & Hill, 1976).

We considered several factors that might tip the balance of power away from equality. First, we found, not surprisingly, that male dominance was more common among sex role traditionalists than among students with egalitarian beliefs. Second, we tested the "principle of least interest," the hypothesis that when one partner is less interested in continuing a relationship, he or she will have relatively more power (Waller, 1938). The possibility that lopsided love can set the stage for power inequality received strong support in our study. Third, drawing on social exchange theory, we found that a person who had more interpersonal assets than the partner tended to have greater influence. For instance, a person who was more physically attractive (as assessed from full-length color photos taken by our research team) than his or her partner tended to have greater say in the relationship.

The impact of women's educational and career goals on power was also of interest. We reasoned that women with high career aspirations would be relatively less dependent on a romantic relationship than other women and so might be better able to achieve power equality. We found that as women's educational plans increased, the likelihood of male dominance decreased significantly. In discussing these results, we emphasized the differing social expectations for men and women about paid employment and advanced education. Because all men are expected to work for pay, their own educational and career aspirations were not related to their degree of involvement in a dating relationship or to the balance of power. In contrast, paid employment for women still was seen as optional. Consequently those women who sought higher education and full-time careers tended to have nontraditional attitudes about sex roles, were somewhat less involved in their dating relationship, and were less likely to report male dominance.

A final issue was whether the balance of power affected the level of satisfaction and closeness in these young couples. We found that egalitarian and male-dominant relationships did not differ on measures of satisfaction, closeness, or breaking up over a 2-year period. Both men and women in relationships perceived as female-dominant, however, reported lower satisfaction.

### Sexuality

Traditional sex roles prescribe that men should be the ones to initiate increasing sexual intimacy in dating and that women should set limits on a couple's progress toward intercourse. A study of premarital couples in

the 1950s had documented this pattern (Ehrmann, 1959). Would a similar pattern emerge in the much more sexually permissive climate of the 1970s?

We found evidence of the persistence of traditional sexual roles (Peplau, Rubin, & Hill, 1977). When our study began, 42 couples had not had sexual intercourse with each other. Most of the men in these couples wanted to have sex and cited their girlfriend's desire not to have sex as a major reason for their abstinence. In contrast, most women said they were abstaining from intercourse for religious reasons or because it was too early in the relationship; only 11% cited their boyfriend's reluctance to have sex as a reason. Whether a couple eventually had intercourse was more closely linked to the woman's sexual attitudes and prior experience than to the man's. Abstinence was more likely when the woman was Catholic, had traditional sex role attitudes, and was a virgin.

Another indication of female limit-setting was the woman's role in determining the timing of first intercourse in a relationship. Many couples (41% of total sample) had intercourse within the first month after they started dating. Others waited until later. Characteristics of the woman (but not of the man) were significant predictors of when a couple had intercourse. Intercourse occurred later when women were more religious, had more traditional sex role attitudes, and had less previous sexual experience. Despite the sexual permissiveness of many couples, a traditional pattern of male initiation and female limit-setting was apparent. We speculated that the traditional pattern provides a familiar and well-rehearsed script that enables partners to interact comfortably. We suggested that women might be reluctant to violate this script for fear they would be seen by their partner as unfeminine, demanding, or "over-sexed."

### **Intellectual Competition**

In an early analysis of the family, sociologist Talcott Parsons (1954) argued that if husbands and wives both had paid jobs, competition for status might weaken the solidarity of their marriage. In 1969, when the administration at Wellesley College considered admitting men to the all-female school, several women students voiced similar concerns: "For many capable girls, a school primarily for women helps solve another big problem: how can a girl maintain her role as a woman when she is in intense academic competition with men, especially if she is excelling?" ("Must Wellesley," 1969, p. 3). For many young people in the 1970s, con-

cerns about the impact of women's careers on dating and marriage were of intense personal interest.

At the time, one popular perspective on women's intellectual achievement was Horner's (1970) concept of fear of success. She proposed that many women are in conflict about intellectual and professional achievement. Success—especially in competitive settings—can be a mixed blessing for women. Although such success brings the attainment of a desired goal, it may also lead to negative outcomes such as social rejection or loss of femininity. As a result some bright women actually may have a motive to "avoid success." To test her ideas, Horner developed a projective measure assessing individual differences in fear of success. Many people found the idea of fear of success persuasive, but I was skeptical. I believed that intrapsychic conflict might be much less important in women's reactions to competition with a boyfriend than conformity to traditional sex role norms. In other words the impact of intellectual competition on women's achievement behavior might be influenced more strongly by individual differences in sex role attitudes than by fear of success.

To examine this issue, 91 couples from the Boston Couples Study participated in a two-part experiment (Peplau, 1976b). Although both partners took part, I focused on women's reactions to intellectual competition with a boyfriend. At a first session each person worked alone on a verbal task (unscrambling such words as KROC and NUDROG). Although the verbal tasks were described as measures of ability, they were strongly influenced by effort or motivation. Women's fear of success also was measured. At a later session partners worked individually on another verbal task in one of two conditions that varied the feedback they would receive. Half of the women were assigned to compete against their boyfriend and told they would learn whether they or their boyfriend did better on the intellectual test. Half were assigned to work cooperatively with their boyfriend as part of a "couple team" and told they would receive only a combined couple score. (In fact, students never received feedback on their performance.)

Our results were clear-cut. Scores on our measure of fear of success were unrelated to women's performance in the competitive achievement conditions. Nor was fear of success generally related to women's sex role attitudes, grades in college, career plans, or characteristics of their dating relationship (Peplau, 1976a). Whether because of conceptual or measurement problems, other researchers also have found the effects of fear of success to be elusive, and the concept is no longer prominent

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with boyfriends, the use of contraceptives (Hill, Peplau, & Rubin, 1983), and living together before marriage (Risman, Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1981). We put men and women on an equal footing in the study and sought to understand both "his" and "her" perspectives on their relationship (Hill, Peplau, & Rubin, 1981). We considered diversity among men and women, primarily in terms of adherence to traditional versus egalitarian sex role ideology.

Our work predated feminist discussions of research ethics, but we were deeply concerned about the impact of our research on the young people who participated. In 1976 Zick wrote what may be the first paper to discuss the ethics of couples research, raising questions about the extent to which our inquiries might have had unintended consequences (Rubin & Mitchell, 1976). Ethical issues also arose about the publication of our research. I was invited to write a book chapter about power in dating couples for an edited volume on feminist research (Peplau, 1979). When I submitted the paper—with Zick and Chuck Hill as coauthors—I was informed by the editor that it was not acceptable to have male coauthors for this anthology. Zick and Chuck graciously agreed not to be listed as coauthors, in deference to the importance of publication for me as an untenured assistant professor. In retrospect I think we should have withdrawn the paper, rather than deny the contribution of my male colleagues. More generally, I think there is much value in encouraging men to study gender issues and to embrace feminist perspectives.

### *From Boston to Los Angeles*

After finishing graduate school, I moved to California to begin my first academic job as an assistant professor at UCLA. The job seemed tailor-made for me: UCLA wanted a social psychologist who could teach a course on the psychology of sex differences. What I could not know in advance was that UCLA would turn out to provide me with an unusually stimulating and supportive intellectual community.

Among my new colleagues in social psychology was Harold Kelley, a major contributor to social psychological analyses of personal relationships. I confess that I was not fully aware of the significance of Kelley's work when I accepted the UCLA position. At Harvard we had studied George Homans's work on social exchange, rather than John Thibaut and Harold Kelley's analysis of interdependence. So my first exposure to Kelley's keen intellect and his relentlessly dyadic perspective on relation-

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wanted to use my professional skills to help in some small way to combat homophobia.

In college and graduate school, I watched as faculty and friends suffered from bigotry. I had only one woman professor at Brown University in the 1960s, a woman I liked and greatly admired. After I graduated, she confided to me about the difficulties of her life as a token woman and a closeted lesbian in a male-dominated environment. She ultimately left teaching. At Harvard, a graduate student friend was grappling with what it meant for her to be lesbian. As a scientist, Ellen wanted to know what research had to say about homosexuality, but she was dismayed by both the lack of research and the biased and flawed nature of virtually all of the studies then available. Some of the most informative materials she found were in newsletters of the Daughters of Bilitis, a lesbian organization that conducted surveys of readers' experiences and that published first-person accounts. When Ellen and I took Matina Homer's graduate seminar, *Psychology of Women*, we both wrote term papers on homosexuality. At this point I learned about heterosexual privilege. As a heterosexual I felt "safe" writing a paper about lesbians; after all, couldn't researchers study anything of interest? In contrast, Ellen was extremely worried that if faculty learned about her paper, it might jeopardize her academic standing. To allay some of her fears, Ellen turned in the paper with a title ("A Lavender Herring") but without her name so that anyone who happened to see the paper would not associate it with her. To make matters worse, Ellen was also the target of persistent sexual advances from a senior male professor in her program. Ultimately Ellen dropped out of graduate school. I was very troubled by experiences such as these and by the awareness that psychology, the field I had chosen, and the academy, where I hoped to spend my professional life, could be so hostile to lesbians and gay men.

In 1976 I began a series of questionnaire studies of lesbian and gay male relationships. This research differed from the Boston Couples Study in several ways. First, the work was prompted by a request from lesbian students that I use my professional training to help illuminate their life experiences and especially their romantic relationships. Lesbians were involved actively in developing the questionnaire used in our research. Second, unlike for the Boston Couples Study, we did not seek outside funding. At the time, government agencies were advised not to fund "social" research, and we doubted that our project would be looked on with favor. I did, however, receive several years of support from the modest faculty research funds available at UCLA.

Another unconventional aspect of this research was my relationship to the women who participated in our first study. In recruiting volunteers from the Los Angeles community, I sometimes had to overcome justifiable mistrust about psychologists. (Remember that until 1975, the American Psychological Association endorsed the position that homosexuality is a form of mental disorder.) I did my best to convince women that our project, with a focus on relationships, was worthwhile and ultimately might benefit the lesbian community. To this end I met with groups of lesbians at community locations and in homes to discuss the goals of our research and to answer questions. Some women wanted to know why a heterosexual was conducting this study—a question never asked by students in the Boston Couples Study. I urged women who were uncertain about the research to read the questionnaire before volunteering, so that they could see the kinds of issues we were investigating. Much to my relief, the response to the study was usually one of enthusiastic support. After completing questionnaires, many women volunteered to help us recruit other participants.

This research would not have been possible without the collaboration of talented graduate students. In research meetings, we considered not only typical issues about writing questionnaires or analyzing data but also the politics of our work. For instance, we believed it was important to shift the agenda for psychological studies of lesbians away from such traditional topics as etiology and psychopathology and toward the study of intimate relationships. We debated the pros and cons of research designs that explicitly compare lesbian and heterosexual couples and decided that our initial publications should focus exclusively on lesbians. We thought carefully about where to publish our studies; for example, we avoided publishing in sexuality journals because we wanted to emphasize that there is more to lesbian relationships than sex.

### **Lesbian Relationships**

One goal of our research was to counter stereotypes that lesbians have trouble establishing satisfying relationships and end up alone and lonely. We knew these images were false, but we wanted to use the scientific methods of psychology to demonstrate our point. In one study, for instance, Christine Padesky, Mykol Hamilton, and I surveyed 127 lesbians recruited from both UCLA and the larger lesbian community in Los Angeles (Peplau, Padesky, & Hamilton, 1982). The women ranged in age from 18 to 59, with a median age of 26 years. All but two women were



white. A majority of women (61%) were currently in a "romantic/sexual relationship" with a woman, and the rest had been in at least one relationship in the past. Current relationships ranged in length from 1 month to 25 years. Consistent with the young age of many participants, the median length of the current relationship was 2.5 years. In response to questions about satisfaction and closeness in their relationship, most women described their relationships in very positive terms. On standardized measures such as Rubin's (1970) Love and Liking scales, most women reported high levels of love and liking for their partner. Although the women in this study were not representative of lesbians in general, they clearly demonstrated that lesbians are capable of establishing happy and enduring love relationships.

In another paper, Mayta Caldwell and I (1984) investigated the balance of power in lesbian relationships. In a sample of 77 lesbians currently in a relationship, a majority of women (61%) said their current relationship was equal in power. We explored two factors that might tip the balance of power away from equality. We found strong support for the principle of least interest—the prediction that when one person is more dependent, involved, or interested in continuing a relationship, that person is at a power disadvantage. We also investigated the impact of personal resources on power. In our sample both income and education were significantly related to imbalances of power, with greater power accruing to the lesbian partner who had more education and earned more money. In this sample of younger women with relatively feminist attitudes, unequal power was associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction, closeness, and commitment.

Another goal was to find meaningful ways to characterize the diversity of women's experiences in lesbian relationships. Susan Cochran and I chose to study variations in women's values about relationships, and the impact of these values on their relationships. The available literature suggested that two value orientations might be especially important, value dimensions we called attachment and autonomy.

The theme of *attachment* concerns the relative emphasis a woman gives to establishing an emotionally close and relatively secure relationship. Heterosexual women often have been depicted as emphasizing closeness and security in marriage. Social scientists also had characterized lesbians in these terms (e.g., Gagnon & Simon, 1973). Attachment values include wanting to spend a significant amount of time with a partner, wanting a sexually exclusive relationship, and wanting the relationship to last for a long time.

The theme of *autonomy* concerns the extent to which a person values individual pursuits apart from an intimate relationship. Although some people want to immerse themselves entirely in a relationship to the exclusion of outside interests and activities, others prefer to maintain greater personal independence. Abbott and Love (1972) suggested that lesbians, unlike heterosexual women, are not afraid to develop qualities of independence, self-actualization, and strength. Cassell (1977) postulated that women who become lesbians "seek autonomy and independence, and define the self by activity rather than relationships" (p. 75). We suspected that an emphasis on autonomy also might lead women to emphasize equality in a relationship as a way of preserving their independence within the relationship.

To study these issues, we developed separate multi-item scales of Attachment and Autonomy (Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978). We found considerable variation in women's values. Some women gave great emphasis to togetherness and exclusivity; others did not. Some women strongly valued having their own friends and interests outside the relationship; others did not. Factor analyses suggested that rather than being opposite ends of a single continuum, attachment and autonomy are best conceptualized as two separate dimensions.

Lesbians who strongly valued attachment were more religious than other women but did not differ in age, education, income, or parental income. They were significantly more likely to endorse a romantic love-conquers-all view of love, had somewhat more traditional sex role attitudes, were less involved in feminist activities, and were less politically radical about lesbian concerns. Women who scored high on attachment reported seeing their current partner more often, feeling greater love and liking for her, and anticipating that the relationship would be long-lived. They expressed greater willingness to move to another city to preserve the relationship and worried less that personal independence would create problems in their relationship.

Lesbians who scored high on autonomy tended to be younger, better educated, and less religious than low scorers. They had a less romantic view of love, had more egalitarian sex role attitudes, and were more involved in feminist activities and in lesbian work collectives, publications, or women's centers. Women who scored high on autonomy were less likely to live with their partner or to see her daily and expressed less willingness to maintain the relationship at the expense of work or education. They were also more likely to have a sexually open (rather than exclusive) relationship. Of considerable importance, however, values of

autonomy were not related to any measures of closeness, satisfaction, love, or liking for their partner. Women who valued autonomy were no more likely than women who de-emphasized autonomy to have close and loving relationships.

### Gay Men's Relationships

In our first questionnaire study of gay men, a primary goal was to show that gay men can establish successful partnerships (Peplau & Cochran, 1981). We also investigated whether the dimensions of attachment and autonomy would characterize the values of gay men. We recruited a sample of 128 gay men both from UCLA and from the larger gay community in Los Angeles. The men ranged in age from 18 to 65, with a median of 25 years. At the time of the study, 41% of the men reported being in a "romantic/sexual relationship" with a man, and the rest had had at least one relationship in the past. About half of the men currently in a relationship were living with their partner. As in the lesbian samples, gay men reported high levels of closeness and satisfaction in their relationships and strong feelings of love and liking for their partner.

The value dimensions of attachment and autonomy also were identified in this sample of gay men, and considerable variation was found in men's values. Unlike in the lesbian sample, however, only the attachment dimension was related to characteristics of gay men's relationships. Men who scored high on the Attachment Scale were relatively more conservative in their attitudes and behaviors. They believed more strongly in a romantic conception of love and were less likely to frequent gay bars and baths. When high-attachment men first had sex with their current partner, they were more likely to have been friends and knew each other longer than low-attachment men. Men who valued attachment saw their partner more often, reported greater closeness and love, and expressed greater certainty that their relationship would continue in the future. High-attachment men also reported greater sexual satisfaction and were more likely to have a sexually exclusive relationship. In reflecting on past relationships, high-attachment men reported greater distress following breakups than did low-attachment men.

We were puzzled that autonomy values had no discernible impact on gay men's relationships. We speculated that all men in our culture learn that they should maintain an independent life and identity apart from a primary intimate relationship. If men assume that a high degree of independence is expected in love relationships, then individual differences in

autonomy values may have little impact on the nature of their relationships (see Cochran & Peplau, 1985, for comparable analyses of heterosexuals).

Another finding from this study was that 54% of the gay men had had sex with someone other than their primary partner during the past 2 months. In 1980 David Blasband and I pursued the question of sexual exclusivity in a study of 40 gay male couples (Blasband & Peplau, 1985). (It is important to emphasize that this work was conducted before public awareness of the current AIDS crisis, which has affected so powerfully the lives of gay men.) In particular we wanted to test a model of the development of gay male relationships proposed by Harry and Lovely (1979). They hypothesized that in gay men's relationships, there is an initial "honeymoon" phase of sexual monogamy. Over time, there is a "transformation of relationships from sexually closed to open ones" (pp. 193-194). They went so far as to suggest that sexual openness may be necessary for the survival of a gay relationship over time.

We found little support for the generality of the two-stage model. Of the 40 couples, only 20% indicated their relationship was initially closed and later became sexually open. The majority of men reported other patterns: 30% said they always had been sexually exclusive, 20% said they always had been sexually open, and the rest showed more complicated patterns. Men's reasons for having an open or closed relationship were diverse. Men in open relationships emphasized the benefits of sexual variety and personal independence. One man wrote, "It gives us both freedom and variety. . . . He is *not* my property nor I, his." Men in closed relationships emphasized their personal beliefs that loving couples should be monogamous and their desire to avoid jealousy. They emphasized the benefits of "peace of mind" and a "sense of security." Men in open versus closed relationships did not differ in their feelings of love and liking for their partner or in their reports of satisfaction and commitment. Both styles of relating could be equally rewarding.

### **Comparative Studies**

We did not initially design our research to compare the relationships of lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals. Such an approach may seem to take heterosexuals as a "standard" against which all other relationships should be judged, and we rejected this idea. Over time, however, we recognized that comparisons of matched samples might prove especially effective in refuting negative stereotypes. Our approach drew on the pioneering work

of Evelyn Hooker (1957), who had used a comparative design to debunk the idea that homosexuals are mentally disturbed. In the 1950s, psychotherapists were using their clinical impressions of patients to support the view that gay men suffer from poor mental health and/or have distinctive personality patterns. Hooker's research took a more scientific approach, recruiting nonclinical samples of gay and heterosexual men matched on education and other background characteristics. All participants were given the best standardized tests of the day. The results showed no significant differences in the test scores of the homosexual and heterosexual men, nor were trained clinicians able to identify a man's sexual orientation on the basis of his test results. Hooker's study and others that followed ultimately contributed to removing homosexuality from the taxonomy of mental disorders prepared by the American Psychiatric Association.

In our relationship research, Susan Cochran and I selected from the database of our prior studies matched samples of 50 lesbians, 50 gay men, 50 heterosexual women, and 50 heterosexual men—all currently involved in a "romantic/sexual relationship" (Peplau & Cochran, 1980). Participants were matched on age, education, ethnicity, and length of relationship. Most participants rated their relationship as highly satisfying, and no significant differences were found among the four groups on measures of love, liking, or satisfaction. We also had asked respondents to describe in their own words the "best things" and "worst things" about their relationships. Responses included such comments as "We like each other. We both seem to be getting what we want and need. We have wonderful sex together." and "My partner is too dependent emotionally." Systematic content analyses (Cochran, 1978) found no significant differences in the responses of lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals—all of whom reported a similar range of joys and problems. To search for more subtle differences between groups than a coding scheme might capture, the "best things" and "worst things" statements were typed on cards in a standard format with information about gender and sexual orientation removed. Panels of student judges were asked to sort the cards, separating men from women or heterosexuals from homosexuals. The judges were unable to identify correctly the responses of the four groups.

In another paper, Toni Falbo and I (1980) used this same matched sample to compare the power tactics that lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals reported using to influence a romantic partner. We also investigated links between the balance of power in the relationship and the choice of influence strategies. We found that gender affected power tactics but only

among heterosexuals. Whereas heterosexual women were more likely to withdraw and express negative emotions to influence a partner, heterosexual men were more likely to use bargaining or reasoning. However, this sex difference did not emerge in comparisons of lesbians and gay men influencing a same-sex partner. We also found evidence that supported a dominance interpretation of the choice of influence tactics. Regardless of gender or sexual orientation, individuals who perceived themselves as relatively more powerful in the relationship tended to use persuasion and bargaining. In contrast, partners low in power tended to use withdrawal and emotion.

### Comments

The originality of our lesbian and gay research was primarily in the topic of inquiry. Previously investigators interested in interpersonal attraction and close relationships focused exclusively on heterosexual relationships. Researchers studying homosexuals typically studied gay men and addressed questions of etiology and personal adjustment. Our goal was to introduce new research questions that emphasized the importance of relationships for lesbians and gay men, that could combat negative stereotypes, and that might provide useful information about homosexual partnerships. During the 1980s, research on gay and lesbian relationships increased dramatically, and we now have a much richer picture of life among same-sex couples (see reviews by Kurdek, *in press*; Peplau, 1991; Peplau & Cochran, 1990). In general, theories about relationships originally developed with heterosexuals in mind, such as interdependence theory, appear to be applicable to lesbian and gay relationships. I am encouraged that we may be able to construct general theories of relationships that are relevant to many types of close relationships. At the same time, as Kurdek (*in press*) notes, although abstract concepts such as rewards, investments, and alternatives may be useful in understanding all relationships, the specific content of these concepts may differ greatly among lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals. In addition some psychologists now are suggesting that we may need to develop new paradigms that begin with the experiences of lesbians and gay men, rather than with the experiences of heterosexuals. Thus Laura Brown (1989) asks what it would mean for psychology "if the experiences of being lesbian and/or gay male . . . are taken as core and central to definitions of reality rather than as a special topic tangential to basic understandings of human . . . interaction" (pp. 445-446).

A question raised by research on lesbian and gay relationships concerns who can or should conduct certain types of research. When our studies began, there were advantages to my being a heterosexual studying lesbian relationships. My work could not be immediately discounted as "self-interested" or as designed to serve a "political agenda." In recent years a change has occurred as more researchers who are openly gay and lesbian are electing to study gay and lesbian issues. This is a valuable change, and one that is likely to alter the focus of research—just as increasing numbers of women researchers have changed the research agenda in other areas. Nonetheless I think we all have a stake in asserting that membership in a group is not a necessary criterion for studying that group. There is value in studying relationships from many perspectives. Relationship researchers have found repeatedly that partners can have different views of their relationship and that the couple's perspective may differ from that of an outside observer. I think feminist research benefits from encouraging multiple perspectives or starting points in our analyses.

Relationship research often has implications for public policy, and this is a potentially useful contribution of studies of lesbian and gay couples (Peplau, 1991). For example, legal cases may raise questions about gay and lesbian relationships. In one case a man in a long-term gay relationship was killed by a reckless driver. His surviving partner sued the driver for damages from the grief and psychological distress of losing a spouse-equivalent. The driver's lawyer countered that gay relationships bear little resemblance to heterosexual marriage and that it would be ridiculous to provide such payments. Research about the strength of love and attachment in gay couples is pertinent to reaching a reasonable decision in this case.

Other policy issues concern the implications of psychological research for the education and professional practice of psychotherapists. Combating homophobia among psychologists is a goal now endorsed by the American Psychological Association (APA). I recently served on an APA task force that investigated possible bias in psychotherapy with lesbian and gay clients. Our task force surveyed a large sample of psychologists to identify ways in which psychotherapists sometimes provide biased and insensitive services to lesbian and gay clients (Garnets, Hancock, Cochran, Goodchilds, & Peplau, 1991). Among the many recommendations we made was the suggestion that therapists receive more adequate education about the nature and diversity of gay and lesbian relationships and consider the potential value of couples' therapy for some gay and lesbian clients.

*The Boston Couples Revisited*

Recently Chuck Hill and I conducted a 15-year follow-up of the women and men who had participated in the Boston Couples Study. We were eager to see what directions their lives had taken over the years. Our own lives have changed considerably. Zick and Carol Rubin now have two teenage sons, and Zick has added a law degree to his professional credentials. Chuck and Pam Hill also have two teenagers, and Chuck is chair of the Psychology Department at Whittier College. I am approaching my 20th anniversary of teaching at UCLA. My husband, Steve Gordon, is a sociologist who has written about love and other emotions. Our collaborations include our son David, now 11, and two coauthored papers on relationships (Peplau & Gordon, 1983, 1985).

In 1987 Chuck and I mailed a short questionnaire to former Boston Couples Study participants. The response rate was high (70%), suggesting that participants remembered us warmly and still were willing to contribute to our research. A key question we examined was how the sex role attitudes young adults held during college affected their lives 15 years later (Peplau, Hill, & Rubin, 1993). Did the feminists of the 1970s follow different life paths than the traditionalists? During college, sex role traditionalists and egalitarians held different attitudes about marriage and careers. Although most students expected eventually to marry, traditionalists were more confident they would marry, expected to marry at a younger age, felt more strongly that a wife should take her husband's name, preferred a traditional to a dual-earner marriage, and wanted to have a larger number of children.

By the time of the follow-up, three fourths of the participants currently were married, either to their college sweetheart or to someone else. But college sex role attitudes were not related to their marital histories. No association was found between sex role attitudes and whether a person married, age at first marriage, or likelihood of divorce. Although traditionalists had indicated in college that they wanted to have larger families than other students, they did not differ in the number of children, the timing of the birth of a first child, or their plans for having more children in the future. During college, sex role attitudes were linked to women's educational plans, but not to men's. Traditional women were less likely than egalitarians to plan to attend graduate school and to seek a doctoral degree and were more likely to major in a "feminine" field in college. At the time of our follow-up, 93% of participants had finished college and a



third of both sexes had a master's degree or higher. For men sex role attitudes were unrelated to educational attainment or employment history. Among women, those with traditional sex role attitudes were less likely than other women to obtain a college or graduate degree. Half of all women had been employed full-time since completing school, and most had been in the labor force to some degree. However, variations in the extent of women's labor force participation were unaffected by sex role attitudes.

When our study began in the 1970s, most couples were matched on their sex role attitudes ( $r = .46$ ), and sex role attitudes were unrelated to measures of relationship satisfaction, closeness, and love or to breakups over a 2-year period. Sex role traditionalism, however, did play a significant role in the ultimate fate of the person's college dating relationship. Of the original 231 dating couples, 73 eventually married each other, and 50 of these couples were still married in 1987. Women in the most traditional third of the sample were more likely than other women to marry their college sweetheart and to stay married to him. Fully 43% of traditionalists married their college boyfriend, and not a single one of these marriages ended in divorce! In contrast, only 26% of women in the most egalitarian third of the sample married their boyfriend, and half of these marriages ended in divorce. Similar but weaker trends were found for men.

We can only speculate about the reasons for this pattern. In college traditional women were oriented toward marriage and typically did not have plans for graduate education or a full-time career. So if a traditional woman found a suitable partner in college, she had no reason to look further. In contrast, although egalitarian women expected to marry, their immediate plans after college often included graduate school or launching a career. Consequently they were less likely to marry their college boyfriend but not less likely to marry someone else during a 15-year period. Although gender ideology did not affect the marital status of our sample as a whole, women's attitudes had significant effects on the long-term outcome of relationships begun in college.

Currently Chuck and I are continuing analyses of our follow-up data. With Khanh-Van Bui we are testing Caryl Rusbult's (1983) investment model of commitment and stability in relationships, both during college and over a 15-year period. With Paula Vincent we are investigating ways women have combined commitments to work and to family. We also are toying with the possibility of conducting another follow-up, perhaps using in-depth telephone interviews as well as a mailed survey.

### *Reflections*

I began this chapter by suggesting that feminist social scientists work at the intersection of two worlds—the world of their discipline and the world of feminist scholarship. Most of the time, I have found the interaction between these two perspectives on research to be mutually enriching. In my experience, social psychologists have been supportive of feminist concerns and analyses. My experiences with feminist scholars outside of psychology have been more mixed.

I was attracted to feminism for fairly simple reasons. Feminist perspectives helped me understand my own life experiences and relationships in new and more insightful ways. Feminist analyses challenged traditional ideas and showed how patriarchal social arrangements constrain the life choices of women and men. Feminist activism sought to improve the lives of women and to work toward a more just society that places a high value on women as well as men. Feminist values have added a sense of passion and purpose to my research. I have found feminist scholarship nourishing when it has inspired me by examples of creative studies, raised new research questions, and offered provocative analyses and interpretations.

After 20 years as a feminist academic, however, I am concerned that students and researchers sometimes perceive feminism not as a source of inspiration, but as a set of rules. Undergraduates ask me earnestly whether feminists can wear makeup or stay home full-time to raise young children. Behind such questions is a view of feminism as a set of prescriptions—do this, don't do that. As a teacher I try hard to combat this view, suggesting that feminists should think critically about the choices they make but that feminism does not provide "correct" answers.

Analogous questions sometimes arise among feminist researchers. A few years ago I taught a graduate seminar on the psychology of gender. Most of the students in the class proudly identified themselves as feminists. These students' research projects addressed such important issues as acquaintance rape, power in male-female relationships, depression among women, and sexism in language. Hoping to broaden students' understanding of feminist scholarship, we read many feminist critiques of traditional psychology, of research methods, and of science. To my horror, the impact of this exposure to women's studies was to cause some students to question their feminism. Like most psychologists, these graduate students were committed to rigorous empirical research, trained in using quantitative methods, and proud of their sophisticated statistical skills. Like the college students worrying that feminism proscribes wear-

ing short skirts or dyeing one's hair, these young researchers worried that they were violating feminist principles by using questionnaires or analyses of covariance in their research. Again I found myself arguing that feminism urges us to be critical of traditional theories and research methods but does not dictate "proper" thinking or methods. I was so perplexed by this experience that I ultimately wrote a paper arguing that all methods, both qualitative and quantitative, are potentially appropriate for feminist research in psychology (Peplau & Conrad, 1989). The unproductive feminist debate over research methods appears to be ending. A consensus seems to be emerging among feminist social scientists that feminists should encourage the widest possible variety of research methods (Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991). Reinharz (1992) concludes that feminism is a perspective, not a method, and she documents that, in practice, feminist research is using increasingly diverse methods. In our own work, we have varied the choice of method, depending on our goals. In the Boston Couples Study, we had the resources to use a variety of methods geared to specific purposes. To survey the experiences of 462 young adults, we used questionnaires. To provide a richer picture of the lives of individual couples, we used in-depth interviews. To test specific hypotheses about fear of success or male threat from female competence, we used laboratory experiments. Similarly in our studies of gay and lesbian relationships, a primary goal was to refute harmful stereotypes that same-sex relationships are inferior to heterosexual ones. To make this point convincingly, we found it helpful to use fairly large samples and standardized measures of relationship functioning, to conduct statistical analyses, and to make comparisons among gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples.

Today feminist scholars are taking the lead in emphasizing the importance of cultural and ethnic diversity in human life. As a resident of Los Angeles, one of the most multicultural cities on the planet, this is a particularly salient issue for me. In retrospect, one of the striking features of the research described in this chapter is that it is based on white, middle-class samples. My more recent research has begun to broaden. A collaborative project with Vickie Mays and Susan Cochran studies the relationships of African American lesbians. A study of how college students influence dating partners to use a condom includes students from several ethnic groups. I also am trying to incorporate a broad range of diversity issues into all of the courses I teach. Recently Zick and I completed a new project together—an introductory psychology textbook (Rubin, Peplau, & Salovey, 1993). We have made a concerted effort to incorporate gender and cultural diversity into this text. These important

changes in my work have been inspired in large part by feminist critiques of current research and teaching.

Yet as important as I believe it is to encourage greater diversity in our research, I worry that feminists now may perceive new and unrealistic standards for feminist research. Reinharz (1992) gives poignant examples of feminist researchers castigating themselves because their work fails to fully encompass one type of diversity or another. In truth, no single study and no individual researcher can address all of humankind or all types of relationships at once. As researchers, our studies are always constrained by the opportunities and resources available to us and by our particular intellectual talents and limitations. Our goal should be to move the field of family studies toward a more inclusive understanding of diverse relationships, not to require individual studies to meet a diversity litmus test.

I recently met a senior male professor from another university and asked him about a graduate school classmate who teaches in his department. "Oh," he replied, "blondie is still into that women's studies stuff." His sexist remark is a reminder of the many feminist challenges that lie ahead. But it is also a reminder that many scholars have made a long-term commitment to feminist research and teaching. I have enjoyed watching and participating in the development of feminist studies of close relationships during the past 20 years. I am also fascinated by the ways in which the feminist movement actually has changed the nature of the relationships we study, enabling us all to lead lives less constrained by arbitrary convention.

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