

by society's need to promote the **family**. This question is addressed in other chapters in this volume. Here I will note only that the cost in human suffering and productivity should be entered into the equation; equal treatment would only result in more social cohesion **as** sources of alienation are removed. The fuller participation of gay citizens in the political, economic, and social life of the nation is a benefit not to be ignored. Such participation should, of course, include attempts to portray more accurate images of gay relationships in the media.

These considerations are suggestive rather than exhaustive. They may seem unrealistically optimistic in a period of social retrenchment. But any movement for social justice must be persistent despite changes in political or social currents. Gay male relationships are in a period of flux due to the changes in the sexual attitudes of many Americans. Despite the lack of full opportunity, there has never been **as** favorable a **climate** in America for the growth of a strong, positive, and healthy gay identity. The continuance of this climate is essential if society wants the maximum possible from its gay citizens.

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Understanding Lesbian Relationships

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Although **love** may not "make the world go 'round", the lives of most adults are powerfully affected by their experiences in intimate **relationships**. It is commonly believed that the psychologically healthy adult must have the capacity for work and love. The importance of intimate relationships is no less great for lesbians than for heterosexuals. Yet, whereas heterosexual women can readily find information about the joys and problems of relationships with men in advice columns, scholarly books, and college courses on marriage and family, lesbians have few comparable sources of accurate information. For anyone interested in understanding lesbian lifestyles, factual information is essential.

In this chapter we review scientific knowledge about lesbian love relationships. Although fiction, biographies, the impressions of therapists, and other sources (e.g., Berzon & Leighton, 1979; Vida, 1978) can provide useful insights into lesbian relationships, we have restricted our review to empirical research. We are acutely aware of the **methodological** problems of conducting research in the gay community—or among members of any partially hidden group (Morin, 1977; see Gonsiorek's introduction, Chapter 5). The most **serious** problem in this area has been the impossibility of obtaining representative samples of lesbians. **As** a result, it is imperative that research results be interpreted cautiously.

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In attempting to portray lesbian relationships, it is important to curb the impulse to oversimplify the complexities of women's experiences. There is no such thing as the "typical lesbian couple." Most empirical research has concentrated on a limited segment of the lesbian population: Typical respondents have been younger, educated, middle-class white women. Unfortunately, **very** little is known about lesbians from other backgrounds. Existing research contributes little to our understanding of the role of such factors **as** age, education, social class, religion, ethnicity and culture in lesbian relationships.

With these cautions in mind, we reviewed the available empirical research. **We** began with the question of how many lesbians are currently involved in steady relationships. Seven studies¹ provide information on this issue. Among these studies, the proportion of women who were currently in a steady relationship ranged from 45 to 80 percent. In most studies, the proportion of women in ongoing relationships was close to 75 percent. Furthermore, the same studies indicate that many lesbians are living with their partners; estimates range from 42 to 63 percent of all lesbians surveyed living with their partners.

Although these figures should not be taken **as** representative of all lesbians, they do suggest that at any particular point in time many lesbians are involved in an intimate relationship. What these statistics do not tell us, of course, is what these relationships are like—whether or not lesbian couples are happy, loving, or committed. Later in the chapter we probe more deeply into the quality of lesbian relationships. It is important to recognize that those lesbians who are not currently in a steady relationship are a diverse group. They include women who have recently ended a relationship through breakup or through the death of a partner, women who are eager to begin a new relationship, and others who do not want a steady relationship.

A related question concerns the average length of lesbian relationships. Do most lesbians have fairly short-lived affairs or longer-term relationships? This is a difficult question to answer. For an adolescent—whether lesbian or heterosexual—a relationship of three months may seem "**long**"; for a 50-year old person, a relationship of 15 years may be long. In other words, a person's age determines to some extent the length of time that a relationship can have endured and subjective perceptions of whether or not a relationship has lasted a "long" time.

A recent study by Bell and **Weinberg** (1978) of 283 lesbians living in San Francisco inquired about the length of **women's first** lesbian relationship. On the average, women in this sample were 22 years old when they had their first "relatively steady relationship." Nearly 90 percent said they had been "in love" with this first partner, and the **typical** first relationship lasted for a

median of one to three years. For less than 8 percent of the women did this first relationship end in three months or less. This pattern of establishing relatively enduring relationships characterizes not only lesbians' first intimate relationships but also their subsequent relationships.

Several studies² have asked lesbians to describe the length of their current love relationship. In these studies, most participants have been young lesbians in their 20s. The typical length of their relationships was two to three years. Studies of older lesbians would be especially useful in understanding the length of relationships, but such research is strikingly absent from the existing literature. Studies that have included small numbers of older lesbians³ document that relationships of 20 years or more are not unusual.

The relative **stability** of most lesbians' relationships is further reflected in data on the total number of different partners lesbians have had. In the Bell and **Weinberg** (1978) study, in which nearly half the white lesbians sampled were over age 35, the majority of women had had fewer than 10 different lesbian sexual partners during their lifetimes. One-time or brief sexual liaisons occurred but were uncommon.

Thus, the picture that tentatively emerges from these statistics is that the majority of lesbians experience relatively stable, long-term relationships. Important exceptions to this pattern should be noted, however. **A** minority of lesbians have shorter relationships and a greater number of different partners. For example, in two studies (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Jay & Young, 1977), 15 percent of respondents reported that they had had sexual relations with 25 or more lesbian partners. It seems likely that for some lesbians this reflects a pattern of choice—a rejection of committed relationships as a personal goal. For other lesbians, casual sexual affairs may occur concurrently with a committed relationship. For still others, a pattern of many partners may reflect difficulties in establishing intimate bonds; such problems might be based on the internalization and acting out of the culture's rejection of lesbian relationships and of stereotypes that lesbians are unable to develop long-term relationships (compare **Ettore**, 1980).

Having seen that most lesbians spend much of their adult lives in intimate love relationships, we next turn to findings about the nature of lesbian relationships. We begin with an examination of lesbians' attitudes and values about relationships, and look at issues of commitment and permanence in lesbian couples. In a later section we investigate role-playing in lesbian relationships and present **findings** debunking the myth that lesbian couples adopt characteristically "masculine" and "feminine" roles. This is followed by a discussion of research on power in lesbian relationships and an examination of the sexual lives of lesbian couples.

ATTITUDES ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

For most lesbians, love relationships are important. Bell and Weinberg (1978) asked lesbians how important it was to them to have a "permanent living arrangement with a homosexual partner." One-quarter of lesbians said that this was "the most important thing in life" and another 35 percent said it was "very important." **Less** than one woman in four said that a permanent living arrangement was not important to her. So, again, we see a range of views, with a couple orientation being most common.

It has frequently been speculated that lesbian relationships are more "romantic" than those of heterosexuals. For example, Hyde and Rosenberg (1976) suggest that "homosexual women live almost an idyllic love relationship with their partner, with more intense emotion and imagination than the typical heterosexual relationship" (p. 176). Only one study has examined this issue empirically. Peplau et al. (1978) administered a six-item romanticism scale to a sample of 127 lesbians in Los Angeles. Items assessed adherence to the belief that "love conquers all." Included were statements about true love lasting forever and love overcoming barriers of race, religion, and economics. **As** a whole, lesbians in **this** sample were not strongly romantic in their beliefs. Further, when **lesbians'** romanticism scores were compared to those of matched samples of heterosexual women, gay men, and heterosexual men, no significant differences were found among any of the groups (Cochran & Peplau, 1979). So, while some lesbians may indeed have a highly romanticized or idealized view of love relationships, this orientation does not appear to be any more common among lesbians than among other adults.

Given that most lesbians want a steady relationship, what are the characteristics they seek in such partnerships? The single most consistent theme to emerge from empirical research is the strong importance most lesbians place on emotional intimacy and expressiveness. In this regard, lesbians are quite similar to heterosexual women. For example, Ramsey, Latham and Lindquist (1978) asked members of lesbian and heterosexual couples to rank the importance of 11 possible relationship goals. Lesbians ranked the sharing of affection as most important, with personal development and companionship next. The same three goals topped the list of heterosexual women. Further, women in both groups gave least importance to economic security, community standing, and religious sharing. In another study (Peplau et al., 1978; Cochran & Peplau, 1979), 127 lesbians rated the importance they personally gave to 16 features of love relationships. Again, lesbians gave greatest importance to "being able to talk about my most intimate feelings" and "laughing **easily** with each other." These same features were also given greatest importance by a matched group of heterosexual women.

A second theme that recurs is the value lesbians place on equality in relationships. In one study (Peplau et al., 1978), lesbians strongly endorsed the importance of "having an egalitarian (equal-power) relationship" and strongly rejected the idea of "having more influence than my partner in our joint decision-making." Similar findings have been reported in ethnographic studies of lesbian communities in California (Wolf, 1979) and Oregon (Barnhart, 1975). For many lesbians, an emphasis on egalitarianism is linked to a more general endorsement of feminist values. Feminist lesbians may be more conscious of the power dimension in close relationships and more concerned about equality as a goal than are nonfeminist lesbians.

There is more diversity of opinion among lesbians about the desirability of other features of love relationships. Two important dimensions along which the relationship values of lesbians differ have been identified by Peplau et al. (1978). A dimension of "dyadic attachment" concerns the importance women give to having a close-knit, exclusive, relatively permanent relationship. Some women are strong proponents of attachment who want to spend most of their free time with their partner, share many activities, preserve sexual exclusivity, and know that the relationship will endure. Other women reject many of these goals, preferring instead to have a lesser degree of togetherness in their relationship. A second dimension, "personal autonomy," concerns boundaries between the individual and her relationship. While some individuals prefer to immerse themselves in a relationship to the exclusion of outside interests and activities, other women prefer to maintain greater personal independence.

Lesbians' attitudes about relationships are affected not only by their personal histories but **also** by the social context in which they live. Ethnographic studies of particular lesbian communities illustrate how group norms can affect relationship values. For example, in the early 1970s Barnhart (1975) studied intensively a counterculture community of lesbian women in Oregon. Among women in this group, an ideology had developed emphasizing that the individual's first loyalty should be to the community; couple relationships should be secondary. The community further encouraged women to reject the idea of sexual exclusivity **because**, in their analysis, it conflicted with norms of equality and sisterhood. **As** Barnhart points out, many women experienced some difficulty in reconciling their preexisting beliefs about monogamous relationships with the newer attitudes endorsed by their social group. Further research on variations among different lesbian groups and communities in relationship values would be useful.

Satisfaction. Love. and Commitment

Given that many lesbians would like to establish a satisfying, close relationship, how successful are they in achieving this goal? Unfortunately,

information about satisfaction, love, and commitment in lesbian relationships comes from a few studies based on fairly small samples and using self-report measures. So the following results are presented cautiously. They suggest that most lesbians find their relationships to be highly satisfying.

One study (Cardell, Finn, & Marecek, in press) compared a small Pennsylvania sample of lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals on a measure of couple adjustment. They found that lesbians did not differ from the other two groups in adjustment; most couples were very satisfied with their relationship. Another recent study (Ramsey et al., 1978) compared 26 lesbian couples to 27 gay male couples and 25 heterosexual couples. All couples had lived together for at least six months; the average length of cohabitation for lesbian couples was over six years. Relationship satisfaction was measured by the widely used **Locke-Wallace** marital adjustment scale. The lesbian couples scored in the "well-adjusted" range and did not differ significantly from couples in the other two groups.

Only recently have social psychologists attempted to measure love systematically, spurred by **Zick Rubin's** development of scales to measure "love" and "liking" for a romantic partner. Cochran and Peplau (1979) compared matched samples of younger lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals, all of whom were in steady relationships. On **Rubin's** measures, lesbians reported high love for their partner, indicating strong feelings of attachment, caring, and intimacy. They also scored high on the liking scale, reflecting feelings of respect and affection toward the partner. On other measures, lesbians rated their current relationship as highly satisfying and very **close**. When comparisons were made among lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals on these measures, no significant differences were found. Also included in this research were open-ended questions asking participants to describe in their own words the "best things" and "worst things" about their current relationship. Systematic analyses (Cochran, 1978) found no significant differences in the responses of lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals, all of whom reported similar types of joys and problems. To examine the possibility that more subtle differences existed among groups that were not captured by the coding scheme, the statements were typed on cards in a standard format with information about gender and sexual orientation removed. Panels of judges were asked to sort the cards, separating men and women and heterosexuals and homosexuals. Judges were not able to distinguish correctly the responses of lesbians from those of heterosexual women, heterosexual men, or gay men.

Taken together, these findings suggest that many lesbian relationships are highly satisfying. Lesbian couples appear, on standardized measures, to be as well-adjusted as heterosexual couples. This does not, of course, mean that lesbians have no difficulties in their relationships. They undoubtedly

have some of the same problems as heterosexuals — for example, in coordinating joint goals and resolving interpersonal conflicts. Lesbian couples may also have special problems arising from the hostile and rejecting attitudes of many people toward lesbians. Overall, however, existing research suggests that lesbian relationships are as likely to be personally satisfying as are heterosexual ones.

Correlates of Satisfaction

Researchers are only beginning to examine factors that promote personal feelings of love and satisfaction in lesbian relationships. A study by Peplau, Padesky, and Hamilton (1982) is a first step in this direction. They found that among a group of relatively young lesbians from Los Angeles, satisfaction was strongly related to equality of involvement in the relationship. Those relationships in which partners were equally committed and equally "in love" tended to be the happiest. In contrast, lopsided relationships in which one partner was much more involved than the other were less satisfying. This pattern is quite similar to results of studies of heterosexual relationships (e.g., Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976).

A second factor contributing to satisfaction in the lesbian relationships in this study was equality of power. We saw earlier that most lesbians are strong proponents of egalitarianism in relationships. Perhaps not surprisingly, those women who perceived their current relationship as egalitarian were significantly more satisfied than were women who thought their relationship was not. Third, evidence was also found indicating that similarity of attitudes and backgrounds facilitated successful relationships. This is consistent with the widely replicated finding among heterosexuals that similarity increases attraction.

It is also interesting to note factors that were not related to satisfaction in lesbian relationships. In the Peplau, Padesky, and Hamilton (1982) study, satisfaction was not related to the extent of involvement in lesbian or feminist groups and activities; nor was it related to the degree to which women were open versus closeted about being lesbian. Finally, the three studies that have examined satisfaction have looked for age-related differences. Results indicated, however, that older and younger lesbians are equally likely to have satisfying relationships.

The Ending of Relationships

Why do lesbian relationships **break up**? Probably for many of the same reasons that heterosexual relationships end (see Levinger & Moles, 1979). Permanence and commitment are affected by two major factors. First, relationship bonds are strengthened by the positive, rewarding features of rela-

tionships. The complex set of ingredients that makes a particular partner and relationship appealing—whether it be sexual attraction, feelings of compatibility, or shared goals and **activities—contributes** to the stability of the relationship. It is possible in any relationship that attractions wither and that passions and interests subside; lesbians have no special immunity to falling out of love.

A **second** set of factors affecting the permanence of relationships consists of barriers that make the termination of the relationship costly, either psychologically or materially. For heterosexuals, marriage usually creates many barriers to the dissolution of a relationship—including the cost of divorce, the wife's financial dependence on her husband, joint investments in property, children, and so on. Such factors may encourage married couples to work on improving a declining relationship, rather than to end it. In some **cases**, they may also keep partners trapped in an empty relationship. Lesbians probably encounter fewer barriers to the termination of their relationships. Lesbian relationships are not, for example, typically formalized by legal contracts, and lesbians are less likely to be financially dependent on a partner. Whereas **family and** friends often encourage heterosexual spouses to work out their relationship problems, lesbians may have less social support for their relationships. Because of these lower barriers to breaking up, **lesbians** are less likely to become trapped in hopelessly unhappy relationships. But they may **also** be less motivated to rescue deteriorating relationships. All of these speculations about commitment in lesbian relationships are in need of empirical verification.

ROLE-PLAYING

A false stereotype of lesbian relationships is that they mimic traditional sex-typed heterosexual patterns, with one partner adopting a "masculine" role and the other a "feminine" role. Such role-playing is supposedly manifested in the division of household tasks, style of dress, patterns of dominance-submission, and preferences about sexual behavior. In popular thinking, such role-playing is seen as reflecting a desire by some lesbians to be men. Research dearly discredits all of these common beliefs.

Research indicates that sex-typed role-playing is rare in contemporary lesbian life. Most lesbians say they dislike such categories as "butch" and "femme," and reject the idea of role-playing (Barnhart, 1975; Jay & Young, 1977; Tanner, 1978). For example, one lesbian wrote:

I strive to eliminate all vestiges of role-playing in my relationship with women, as the opportunity to do so is one of the major reasons I am a lesbian. My lover and I have constantly shifting roles . . . depending on the needs of the mo-

ment. If ever I felt we were getting locked into any roles, especially those of butch/femme, I would run . . . to escape from this relationship [Jay & Young, 1977, p. 320].

The theme reflected in this quotation and in other anecdotal accounts is that lesbian relationships permit women to avoid limitations imposed by traditional male-female role-playing that occurs in many heterosexual relationships.

Several studies⁵ have examined role-playing patterns in the division of household tasks, style of dress, and sexual conduct of lesbians. The consistent finding is that most lesbians do not conform to rigid masculine-feminine roles. Instead, role shifting and role flexibility are the predominant pattern. A reasonable estimate would be that only about 10 percent of lesbians today engage in clear-cut role-playing. One lesbian explained her participation in role-playing:

When I am with a younger girl, I like to . . . 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 this is a lot of sexist shit [Jay & Young, 1977, p. 322].

It appears that role-playing was more prevalent in the "old gay life" (Wolf, 1979), a period before the 1950s evolution of homophile organizations and the more recent effects of feminism in the lesbian community. Cultural stereotypes about lesbian role-playing may have developed during this earlier period, when the straight community's knowledge of lesbian life was largely derived from behavioral patterns observed in gay bars. We do not know how prevalent role-playing used to be, since most research is of recent vintage. Two studies based on data collected before 1969 (Bass-Hass, 1968; Jensen, 1974) reported that a majority of respondents engaged in role-playing. Ethnographic accounts (e.g., Wolf, 1979) contain descriptions by lesbians of the old bar scene in major cities. It appears that there has been a historical decline in role-playing among American lesbians.

Nevertheless, let us examine factors that may foster the adoption of these sex-typed patterns. Four **possibilities** are suggested by existing studies. First, role-playing may be more common among older women who were or continue to be part of the old gay life. Second, role-playing may be more common among lesbians from lower socioeconomic levels (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Wolf, 1979). Although virtually no data exist on blue-collar and working-class lesbians, research has suggested that lower-income heterosexuals have more sex-typed behavior patterns than do higher-income heterosexuals (e.g., Komarovsky, 1967). It may **be** that stronger adherence to masculine-feminine roles is found among women who have traditional

values, perhaps based on religious and cultural socialization. Third, role-playing may be related to the coming-out experiences of some lesbians (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Saghir & Robins, 1973). For example, a young woman who is new to the lesbian community may initially dress in a stereotypically butch manner in order to be more easily identified as lesbian and to conform to her perception of group expectations about behavior. Fourth, in some cases, role-playing may result from temporary situational factors. Saghir and Robins (1973) found that 12 percent of their lesbian respondents had engaged in role-playing; the majority had developed such roles because one partner was temporarily unemployed or attending school.

In summary, masculine-feminine role-playing is another area in which variations among lesbians have been found. While the great majority of lesbians rejects role-playing, a minority continues to behave in sex-typed ways. What should be remembered, of course, is that the greatest amount of role-playing has always been and continues to be found among heterosexual couples.

POWER

In the earlier discussion of lesbians' attitudes about relationships, we saw that most gay women consider equality an important relationship goal. How successful are women in achieving this egalitarian ideal? There has been only one empirical investigation of power in lesbian relationships (Caldwell & Peplau, in press), based on questionnaire responses from a sample of 77 younger Los Angeles lesbians who were in a steady relationship. When asked directly who they thought should have more power in their relationship, 97 percent of these women said that both partners should have "exactly equal" say in their relationship. Not all women believed that their relationship attained this ideal, however. When asked to describe the overall balance of power in their current relationship, 64 percent reported equal power, but a sizable 36 percent minority reported that one partner had greater influence than the other.

Caldwell and Peplau investigated factors that tip the balance of power away from equality in lesbian relationships. Some years ago sociologist Willard Waller (1938) proposed the "principle of least interest"—suggesting that when one partner in a relationship is relatively less interested or committed, *she/he* will have greater power. Clear evidence was found for such a link between imbalances of involvement and imbalances of power in lesbian relationships. Social psychological theory also suggests that power is likely to accrue to the partner who has greater personal resources, in terms of greater education or income or other desirable characteristics. In this study, women who had relatively greater income and education than their partner

tended to have relatively greater power. Thus, both relative dependency and personal resources affected the balance of power. Further research is needed to confirm these findings about power in lesbian relationships.

SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

A cultural stereotype depicts lesbians as highly sexual people. Perhaps because of this myth, much of the research on lesbians has investigated their sexuality. Yet research suggests many commonalities—and a few differences—between the sexual attitudes and experiences of lesbians and of heterosexual women.

Studies of physiological aspects of sexuality (Kinsey et al., 1953; Masters & Johnson, 1979) have found no differences in the pattern of sexual response of lesbians and heterosexual women. It is hardly surprising that the physiological mechanics of sexual arousal and orgasm are similar for all women, **regardless** of sexual orientation.

It may also be useful in this context to recognize that the majority of lesbians have had sexual relations **with** men as well as with women. In one study of 151 lesbians (Schaefer, 1976), 55 percent of respondents had had heterosexual coitus prior to their first lesbian experience. Studies⁶ suggest that close to 80 percent of lesbians have had sex with men at **some** point in their lives. For many lesbians, these heterosexual experiences occurred in the context of dating or marital relationships. One study found that a majority of lesbians had dated men (Peplau et al., 1978). A significant minority of lesbians (perhaps 25 percent) has been heterosexually married.¹

Lesbians' evaluations of their sexual relationships with men **vary** considerably. Jay and Young (1977) found that 23 percent of lesbians rated their past heterosexual experiences as positive, 21 percent as neutral, and 55 percent as negative. One factor contributing to this may be that for some lesbians, sexual activities with men did not lead to orgasm (e.g., for 33 percent of lesbians in Bell and Weinberg's study). Equally important, however, may be differences in the emotional tone of sexual experiences with female and male partners. Schaefer (1976) asked the 57 lesbians in her sample who had had sexual relations during the past year with both women and men to compare **these** experiences. Major differences were reported. Most women said that compared to sex with men, sex with women was more tender (94 percent), intimate (91 percent), considerate (88 percent), partner-related (73 percent), exciting (66 percent), diversified (52 percent), and less aggressive (71 percent).

Studies of lesbians' sexual experiences with women have identified two patterns. First, for many lesbians, sex and love are closely linked. In a survey of 962 lesbians (Jay & Young, 1977), 97 percent of women said that **emo-**

tional involvement was important to sex, and 92 percent said that in their **own** personal experiences, emotional involvement always or very frequently accompanied sex. Consistent with this emphasis on affection, Bell and **Weinberg** (1978) found that 62 percent of lesbians had never had sex with a stranger, and 81 percent said that they had felt affection toward most of their sexual partners. Gundlach and **Reiss** (1968) found that equal proportions of lesbians and heterosexual women—64 percent—said they could have sex only if they were in love with the partner. So, whereas a minority of lesbians enjoys casual or "recreational" sex, the majority prefers to limit sexual activities to partners toward whom they feel at least affection. Given this pattern, it is not surprising that many lesbians draw their sexual partners from people they already **know** as friends (**Peplau et al.**, 1978; **Schaefer**, 1977; **Tanner**, 1978), and that the incidence of cruising—meeting casual partners in bars and other **settings**—is quite low (Jay & Young, 1977).

Research also shows that most lesbians find their sexual interactions with women highly satisfying. Lesbian love-making typically leads to **orgasm**.⁸ For example, lesbians in one study said that they seldom had difficulty achieving orgasm during sex (Jay & Young, 1977). Only 4 percent said they never had an orgasm and 5 percent said they had orgasms infrequently. Comparative studies suggest that lesbians achieve orgasm more often during love-making than do heterosexual women. **Kinsey et al.** (1953) compared heterosexual women who had been married for five years with lesbians who had been sexually active for an equal number of years. Among these women, 17 percent of the heterosexuals compared to only 7 percent of the lesbians never had an orgasm. And only 40 percent of heterosexuals had orgasm easily (*i.e.*, 90-100 percent of the time they had sex), compared to 68 percent of lesbians. These differences may, as Kinsey suggested, reflect differences in the knowledge and sexual techniques of women's partners. But differences in the emotional quality of sexual experiences may be equally important.

Studies examining sexual behavior in steady lesbian relationships find that for most women, sex is an enjoyable part of such relationships. In one study (**Peplau et al.**, 1978), three-quarters of lesbians said that sex with their steady partner was "extremely satisfying," and only **4 percent** said that it was not at all satisfying.

Available data⁹ suggest that lesbian couples have sex about as often as do heterosexual couples. Among the younger lesbians typically studied by researchers, the average frequency of sex is about two to three times per week. This figure varies widely from couple to couple, however. Among the lesbians studied by Jay and Young, only 5 percent reported having sex daily. Most women (57 percent) had sex **two** to five times per week, 25 percent had sex once a week, and 8 percent had sex less often with their partner.

Little is known about the factors that influence the actual or desired frequency of sex in lesbian relationships.

Sexual exclusivity is a controversial issue for many American couples, both lesbian and heterosexual, as discussed above. The predominant pattern reported in available studies¹⁰ of lesbians is serial **monogamy—women** participate in a series of sexually exclusive relationships. But other patterns are also common. Commenting on sexual openness, a lesbian explained, "I have sex outside the relationship, and we talk about it openly. So far it has had a positive effect. We both agree to be nonmonogamous" (Jay & Young, 1977, p. 326). One study (**Peplau et al.**, 1978) found that sexual openness was not related to dissatisfaction within women's primary relationship. Women in sexually open relationships were just as satisfied with their steady partner as were women in monogamous relationships. More needs to be known about how different lesbian couples handle this contemporary issue.

Finally, it is important to note that although many lesbians are happy with sex in their relationships, some lesbians do have sexual difficulties. The myth that all lesbians have perfect sex can be quite harmful to women who experience problems. No systematic research exists on sexual difficulties faced by lesbians, but observations by clinicians offer a few speculative clues. **Toder** (1978) suggested that lesbians share some of the same sexual problems as heterosexual women, including orgasmic dysfunction and differences in the desired sexual frequency of partners. But **lesbians** may also have some special problems, such as discomfort in taking the initiative in making love to a partner or sexual inhibitions about such activities as oral sex. More research on lesbian sexuality is needed to understand this aspect of lesbian relationships, and to provide information for counselors who seek to help lesbian clients.

CONCLUSIONS

Our review of research on lesbian relationships has found wide variations in the experiences of individual lesbians. For every general pattern that can be identified, there are many exceptions.

When possible, we have compared the attitudes and experiences of lesbians and heterosexual women. It is important to understand why such comparisons are useful. We do not assume that heterosexuality or heterosexual marriage is an ideal pattern to be used as the standard in analyses of lesbian relationships. Rather, such comparisons highlight similarities in the values and experiences of all women. For example, childhood socialization experiences of girls in this culture often emphasize emotional expressiveness and love as central to close relationships, and these themes can be seen in

the adult relationships of both lesbians and heterosexuals (Cochran & Peplau, 1979; Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Schaefer, 1976; for similar issues in male homosexuality, see Peplau & Gordon, in press). Second, comparisons of lesbian and heterosexual relationships point to basic issues that confront all intimate couples, regardless of sexual orientation. For instance, imbalances of dependency can tip the balance of power away from equality in lesbian and heterosexual relationships alike. Finally, such comparisons help to identify those unique qualities of lesbian relationships that make them a positive and desirable lifestyle for women.

There is a long list of needed research about lesbian relationships. Because virtually all of the research we have reviewed is based on white women (exceptions are Bell & Weinberg, 1978 and Hidalgo & Hidalgo-Christensen, 1976), findings cannot be generalized to ethnic lesbians. Existing research says little about the impact of cultural, ethnic, economic, and religious factors on values and behavior in lesbian relationships. Yet it is obvious that relationships reflect both the personal experiences of the partners and the social context in which the relationship exists. The nature of satisfaction, commitment, sexuality, or power may differ for a Hispanic couple living in the *barrio*, a Black professional couple, a first-generation Asian couple, and the white respondents typically studied in previous research. Ethnic lesbians find themselves part of two minorities, each of which may reject the other. In ethnic communities, traditional values often result in hostility toward lesbian relationships (Hidalgo & Hidalgo-Christensen, 1976; Mays, 1980). Similarly, within the lesbian community, cultural insensitivity—or worse, racism—may lead to the exclusion of ethnic couples. Clearly, investigations of the relationships of minority lesbians are needed (Mays, 1980).

Many questions about lesbian relationships remain unanswered. For example, what impact do children have on lesbian relationships? How do the social support networks of lesbians affect the development of love relationships, and how do these networks respond when relationships end? What role do family ties play in lesbian relationships, especially for women from cultures where familial bonds are strong? What issues arise in lesbian couples where partners differ in race, religion, class, or age? What impact does social oppression have on lesbian relationships? What factors foster happiness and commitment in lesbian couples?

Most studies of lesbians have not focused specifically on relationships, and so we have had to gather relevant pieces of information as best we could. Research directly investigating lesbian relationships would be useful to lesbians themselves, and to relatives, friends, counselors, and others who want to understand lesbians' lives. We hope this review will soon become outdated as better research provides a more complete picture of the diversity of lesbian relationships.

NOTES

1. The percentage of lesbians currently in a steady relationship varies across studies: Bell and Weinberg (1978), 72 percent; Cotton (1975), 83 percent; Jay and Young (1977), 80 percent; Oberstone and Sukoneck (1977), 80 percent; Peplau et al. (1978), 61 percent; Raphael and Robinson (1980), 45 percent; and Schaefer (1976), 72 percent. These variations reflect differences in the wording of questions, the sampling procedures, the date of the research, and the lesbian populations themselves.

2. The average or median length of lesbians' current relationship varies across studies: Bell and Weinberg (1978), 1-3 years; Oberstone and Sukoneck (1977), 22 months; Peplau et al. (1978), 2.5 years; and Gundlach and Reiss (1968), 1-9 years.

3. Several studies have included a small proportion of older lesbians (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Jay & Young, 1977; Saghir & Robins, 1973). Only one study (Raphael & Robinson, 1980) has explicitly focused on older lesbians.

4. An emphasis on emotional bonds in relationships is described by Bell and Weinberg (1978), Cotton (1975), Hidalgo and Hidalgo-Christensen (1976), Peplau et al. (1978), and Ramsey et al. (1978).

5. Studies investigating role-playing include Bass-Hass (1968), Bell and Weinberg (1978), Caldwell and Peplau (in press), Cardell et al. (in press), Cotton (1975), Gagnon and Simon (1973), Jay and Young (1977), Jensen (1974), Ponce (1980), Saghir and Robins (1973), Tanner (1978), and Wolf (1979).

6. Studies of sexual behavior include Bell and Weinberg (1978), Jay and Young (1977), Gundlach and Reiss (1968), Peplau et al. (1978), and Schaefer (1976).

7. The proportion of lesbians who have been heterosexually married varies across studies: Bell and Weinberg (1978), 35 percent; Gundlach and Reiss (1968), 29 percent; Saghir and Robins (1973), 25 percent; Schaefer (1976), 14 percent.

8. Data on orgasms are found in Bell and Weinberg (1978), Gundlach and Reiss (1968), Jay and Young (1977), Kinsey et al. (1953), and Masters and Johnson (1979).

9. Data on sexual frequency in lesbian relationships are found in Jay and Young (1977), Peplau et al. (1978), and Schaefer (1976).

10. Serial monogamy has been described by Cotton (1975), Peplau et al. (1978), Saghir and Robins (1973), Tanner (1978), and Wolf (1979). Exceptions to this pattern are discussed by Barnhart (1975), Bell and Weinberg (1978), Ettore (1980), Jay and Young (1977), and Peplau et al. (1978).