

Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals in Relationships

Letitia Anne Peplau

Kristin P. Beals

University of California, Los Angeles

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Glossary

Affirmative therapies New approaches to individual and couples' counseling that are based on knowledge about and acceptance of the life experiences of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals.

Commitment to a relationship An individual's desire to continue a relationship into the future.

Sexual identity An individual's self-definition as heterosexual, homosexual (gay man, lesbian woman), or bisexual.

Sexual orientation The extent to which an individual is emotionally and sexually attracted to other-sex partners (heterosexual), same-sex partners (homosexual), or both (bisexual).

Sexual prejudice Negative attitudes toward lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and other members of sexual minority groups.

THE INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS OF CONTEMPORARY LESBIANS AND GAY MEN are described and analyzed in a small but growing body of empirical research. This article reviews this literature and shows that contrary to stereotypes, these relationships do not typically mimic the gender-based roles of provider and homemaker found among heterosexual couples. Same-sex couples are often able to create satisfying, long-lasting relationships. Factors that enhance happiness and commitment in same-sex and heterosexual relationships tend to be similar. Researchers have also investigated specific types of interaction in same-sex couples, including sexuality and conflict. Therapists who counsel lesbians and gay men are increasingly aware of the special issues facing same-sex couples. Researchers are just beginning to investigate the intimate relationships of bisexual individuals.

In a 1993 study, Lawrence A. Kurdek looked at the division of household chores such as cooking, shopping, and cleaning in couples without children. Among heterosexual married couples, the wives typically did the bulk of the housework. In contrast, gay and lesbian couples were likely to split tasks so that each partner performed an equal number of activities. Gay men tended to arrive at equality by each partner specializing in certain tasks; lesbian partners were more likely to share tasks. Furthermore, among couples raising children, lesbian couples shared child care much more evenly than did heterosexual couples. Little is known about how gay male couples divide family work when children are present. In summary, although the equal sharing of household labor is not inevitable in same-sex couples, it is much more common than among heterosexuals.

B. POWER AND DECISION MAKING

Another area in which same-sex couples reject traditional marriage as a model concerns power and decision making. Lesbians and gay men are strong proponents of equality (equal power) in their relationships, although lesbians often endorse the value of equality even more highly than do gay men. Not all couples who strive for equality achieve this ideal. The percentage of lesbians and gay men describing their relationship as equal in power has varied across studies, but an estimate of roughly 60% is reasonable.

Researchers are beginning to identify factors that tip the balance of power away from equality. One hypothesis is that greater power accrues to the partner who has relatively greater personal resources, such as greater education, money, or social standing. Several studies have confirmed this prediction, with the clearest evidence being found for gay male couples. In their 1983 American Couples Study, Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz considered several thousand gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples. They found that income was an extremely important force in determining which partner was dominant in gay male couples. For lesbians, research findings on personal resources and power are less clear-cut. Two studies have found that partner differences in income were significantly related to power. In contrast, Blumstein and Schwartz concluded from their research that lesbians do not use income to establish dominance in their relationship but rather use it to avoid having one woman dependent on the other. Additional research on the balance of power among les-

bian couples is needed to clarify these inconsistent results.

A further aspect of power concerns the specific tactics that partners use to influence each other. In a 1980 study, Toni Falbo and Letitia A. Peplau asked lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals to describe how they influence their romantic partner to do what they want. Analyses of responses led to two major results. First, gender affected power tactics, but only among heterosexuals. Whereas heterosexual women were more likely to withdraw or express negative emotions, heterosexual men were more likely to use bargaining or reasoning. This sex difference did *not* emerge in comparisons of lesbians and gay men influencing their same-sex partner. Second, 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 negative emotions. These results suggest that although some influence strategies have been stereotyped as masculine (e.g., bargaining) or feminine (e.g., withdrawal), their use may be understood more correctly as a reflection of power rather than gender. [See POWER.]

In summary, research shows that most contemporary lesbians and gay men reject "masculine" and "feminine" roles as the basis for organizing their lives together. Instead they create a more egalitarian pattern of shared responsibilities and decision making.

C. MODELS FOR SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

In historical and cross-cultural perspective, men's and women's same-sex relationships are remarkable for their diversity. At least three distinctive patterns have been identified. The peer or friendship model that typifies many lesbian and gay male relationships in the United States today is not the only model for same-sex relationships. A second pattern is based on age differences between partners. In a 1984 study of gay male couples, Joseph Harry found that most partners were relatively similar in age, but a minority of couples involved a man over age 40 in a relationship with a man under 30. In such cases, the man who was older usually had greater income and tended to be more influential in couple decision making.

Finally, although not the predominant pattern in the United States today, same-sex relationships based

and lesbian relationships, as it does in heterosexual couples. Although individual differences in attachment style have been studied extensively among heterosexuals, little is known about the possible attachment issues among lesbians and gay men. In a **1998** study by Stacy R. Ridge and Judith A. Feeney, lesbian and gay adults did not differ from heterosexuals in the likelihood of reporting secure versus insecure attachment. For all groups, secure attachment was significantly associated with higher relationship satisfaction.

Finally, researchers are beginning to examine how the social stigma of homosexuality may affect same-sex relationships. It has been suggested that the stress associated with concealing one's homosexuality can diminish relationship satisfaction. Some studies have found that more extensive disclosure to parents, friends, and employers is associated with greater relationship satisfaction among gay men and lesbians. In contrast, other studies have found no association between the extent of disclosure of sexual orientation and relationship satisfaction. The explanation for these contradictory findings may be that disclosure can have mixed consequences, ranging from rejection and estrangement from family and friends at one extreme to acceptance and increased social support at the other. If some gay men and lesbians suffer from disclosure but others benefit, the overall effects of disclosure may appear to be minimal. A better understanding of this issue, including studies of ethnic minority lesbians and gay men, is needed.

IV. Relationship Commitment and Stability

Several factors affect an individual's commitment to the relationship, that is, the desire to continue a relationship into the future. One factor concerns positive attractions that make individuals want to stay with a partner, such as feelings of love and satisfaction with the relationship. As noted earlier, research shows that same-sex and male-female couples typically report comparable levels of happiness (or misery) in their relationships.

Second, commitment is affected by barriers that make it difficult to leave a relationship. Barriers include anything that increases the psychological, emotional, or financial costs of ending a relationship. Heterosexual marriage can create many barriers such as the cost of divorce, investments in joint property,

concerns about children, and a wife's possible financial dependence on her husband. These obstacles may encourage married couples to work toward improving a declining relationship, rather than ending it. In contrast, gay and lesbian couples are less likely to experience comparable barriers: they cannot marry legally and are less likely to own property jointly, to have children in common, or to receive support from their families of origin. Researchers have systematically compared the attractions and barriers experienced by partners in gay, lesbian, heterosexual cohabiting, and married couples. In general, all types of couples report comparable feelings of love and satisfaction. However, married couples report significantly more barriers than either gays or lesbians, and cohabiting heterosexual couples report the fewest barriers of all.

A third important factor concerns the availability of alternatives to the current relationship, including other possible partners or the prospect of being without a partner. The lack of desirable alternatives can be a major obstacle to ending a relationship. Several studies have demonstrated that each of these three factors — attractions, barriers, and alternatives — is significantly associated with feelings of commitment to lesbian and gay relationships.

A. STAYING TOGETHER OVER TIME

How likely are lesbians and gay men to maintain enduring intimate relationships? We know relatively little about the longevity of same-sex partnerships. Several small-scale studies have documented the existence of gay and lesbian couples who have been together for 20 years or longer. The large American Couples Study conducted by Blumstein and Schwartz compared the stability of gay, lesbian, and heterosexual relationships over an 18-month period. During this time, less than 6% of couples who had already been together for at least 10 years broke up. Among couples together for only two years or less, breakups were more common: 22% for lesbian couples, **16%** for gay male couples, 17% for heterosexual cohabiting couples, and 4% for married couples. Note that the biggest difference among these short-term couples was not between heterosexual and homosexual couples, but rather between legally married couples and other couples, both heterosexual and homosexual, who were not married. In a **1998** five-year longitudinal study, Kurdek found that the majority of cohabiting gay, lesbian, and married heterosexual couples stayed together. Nonetheless,

gal documents, may have no claim to the estate of a long-term partner that they contributed to building. Some researchers have speculated that the stress of bereavement may be increased if the surviving partner has concealed his or her sexual orientation so that open grieving is not possible.

During the past 20 years, the AIDS epidemic has had a devastating impact on the lives of gay men. The difficulties of bereavement are heightened when AIDS is the cause of death, both because victims tend to die at an untimely young age and because of the social stigma surrounding this disease. A few studies have investigated how losing a relationship partner to AIDS affects a surviving partner who is himself HIV-positive. It has been found that bereavement can impair the immune functioning of the surviving partner. This may be most common if the partner is unable to find positive meaning in the experience of loss. Much remains to be learned about the bereavement experiences of lesbians and gay men.

V. Sexuality

There is a small but growing body of research on sexuality in lesbian and gay relationships. On average, gay male couples have sex more often than heterosexual couples, who in turn have sex more often than lesbian couples. In Blumstein and Schwartz's American Couples Study, for example, 46% of gay male couples reported having "sexual relations" at least three times a week, as compared to 35% of married or cohabiting heterosexual couples, and 20% of lesbian couples.

This lower frequency of sex among lesbian couples has been a topic of debate among researchers. Some have speculated that this pattern reflects women's socialization to be more sexually inhibited than men. Another possibility is that available findings reflect problems about how to conceptualize and measure sexuality in relationships. Feminist researchers have observed that people tend to define sex as penile-vaginal intercourse. Indeed, in a 1999 survey of almost 600 college undergraduates conducted by Stephanie Sanders and June Reinisch, 59% did not consider oral-genital contact to be "having sex" with a partner. These heterosexual definitions of sexuality may be poorly suited for understanding same-sex couples and, in particular, lesbian relationships. We know very little about how lesbians and gay men conceptualize sexuality in their relationships.

Sexual monogamy versus openness is an issue for all intimate couples. In contrast to heterosexual and lesbian couples, gay male couples are distinctive in their likelihood of having a nonmonogamous relationship. In Blumstein and Schwartz' American Couples Study, 82% of the gay male couples reported being nonmonogamous, compared to 28% of lesbian couples, 23% of heterosexual married couples, and 31% of heterosexual cohabiting couples. Unlike gay men, most lesbians characterize their relationships as monogamous.

Many lesbians report that they prefer a sexually exclusive relationship. In contrast, gay men are more likely to view sex outside a primary relationship as acceptable and to have an agreement with their partner that it is permissible. As a result, the impact of nonmonogamy may differ for lesbian and gay male couples. Research has shown that among lesbian couples, nonmonogamy is associated with lower sexual satisfaction with the primary partner and less commitment to their relationship; for gay men, outside sex is often unrelated to satisfaction or commitment to the relationship. [See SEXUALITY AND SEXUAL DESIRE.]

VI. Conflict and Violence

Problems and disagreements seem to be inevitable in close relationships. Available evidence shows that lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual couples are similar in how often and how intensely they report arguing. Similar types of issues are likely to spark conflict in same-sex and heterosexual couples, with concerns about intimacy, power, and the partner's personal flaws being cited frequently. Some differences in the sources of conflict have also been found. For example, gay and lesbian couples report less conflict about money management and income than do heterosexual couples, perhaps because same-sex couples are less likely to merge their funds and more likely to have two incomes. Further, gay and lesbian couples confront special issues, such as revealing versus concealing their sexual orientation and the nature of their intimate relationship to friends or family. Decisions also arise about how actively partners want to participate in gay or lesbian communities, political organizations, and social events. These distinctive concerns can be a source of conflict between partners.

Same-sex couples may also experience unique problems based on their shared gender-role social-

are themselves gay or lesbian are not necessarily invulnerable to bias. For all these reasons, gay men and lesbians may experience greater difficulties than their heterosexual counterparts in getting adequate professional help for relationship problems.

B. AFFIRMATIVE THERAPIES FOR LESBIAN AND GAY COUPLES

Some therapists believe that clinicians should go beyond providing unbiased therapy by developing new approaches to therapy that affirm the value and legitimacy of gay and lesbian lifestyles. These approaches are called affirmative therapies. Affirmative therapists are especially sensitive to the potential impact of societal prejudice in the lives of lesbians and gay men, and to the value of therapeutic approaches that acknowledge the importance of gay and lesbian relationships. For some relationship problems, counseling a couple together may be preferable to seeing one or both partners individually.

Although many gay affirmative therapists are themselves gay or lesbian, an affirmative approach can be used by therapists regardless of their sexual orientation. The key is drawing on knowledge about the personal and relationship experiences of lesbians and gay men, being sensitive to the diversity among lesbians and gay men, and developing expertise in effective treatment approaches. On February 26, 2000, the Council of Representatives of the American Psychological Association adopted "Guidelines for Psychotherapy with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients" designed to improve the education of mental health professionals and the services they provide to sexual-minority clients.

VIII. The Relationships of Bisexual Women and Men

What are relationships like for individuals who report romantic attractions toward both men and women? Scientific research on this topic is virtually nonexistent. One complication is that the term "bisexual" has been defined in widely differing ways. Some use the term to refer to a presumed innate human capacity to respond to partners of both sexes. Others characterize a person as bisexual if his or her lifetime history of sexual attractions or behavior includes partners of both sexes. We will focus on individuals who self-identify as bisexual, as we did in re-

viewing research on the relationships of men and women who self-identify as lesbian or gay.

Heterosexuals sometimes stereotype bisexuals as having poor intimate relationships. In particular, bisexuals are seen as more likely than other people to be sexually unfaithful and to give a sexually transmitted disease to a partner. Lesbians and gay men may also have negative stereotypes of bisexuals, for example, believing that bisexuals are denying their "true" sexual orientation or that bisexuals are likely to desert a same-sex partner for a heterosexual one.

Research on the relationships of bisexuals is extremely limited and largely based on White, urban, well-educated individuals. Some self-identified bisexuals do not idealize monogamy; they may indicate a preference for a primary relationship with one person and secondary sexual or romantic relationships with other partners. Often, the primary partner is of the other sex, and in some cases the partners are married. In contrast, some bisexuals prefer sexual exclusivity in a relationship with one person. Still others prefer casual dating or relationships with several partners rather than having a more committed relationship.

Research on the relationships of bisexuals has barely begun, and many important questions remain unanswered. How does the gender of a bisexual's partner affect their relationship? For example, does the relationship of a bisexual woman differ on such dimensions as power, the division of labor, sexuality, or commitment if her partner is a woman versus a man? A second research direction is to identify issues that may be unique to the relationships of bisexuals. For instance, if lesbians and gay men endorse the stereotype that bisexuals are likely to abandon their same-sex lovers, are jealousy and concerns about commitment frequent problems in the same-sex relationships of bisexuals? Future research on the relationships of bisexual men and women can take many promising directions.

SUGGESTED READING

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