The Handbook of Sexuality in Close Relationships

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LAWRENCE ERLBAUM ASSOCIATES, PUBLISHERS
2004 Mahwah, New Jersey London

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Sexuality in the Relationships of Lesbians and Gay Men

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This chapter presents research on sexuality in the intimate relationships of lesbians J and gay men. It begins with a brief historical perspective on gay and lesbian couples ; and a consideration of the climate of sexual prejudice faced by contemporary lesbians I and gay men. Separate sections review scientific research on sexual frequency; sexual satisfaction, gender-based sexual roles, and sexual exclusivity, first for gay male couples and then for lesbian couples. Attention is also given to the impact of HIV on gay couples and to a controversy about reports of low sexual frequency in lesbian couples. As relevant, comparisons among gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples are provided. I Directions for future research are noted throughout. A concluding section summarizes I key findings, highlights limitations in existing research, and calls attention to topics about sexuality in gay and lesbian relationships that merit further investigation.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter investigates sexuality in the committed relationships of lesbians and gay men, a topic that has received relatively little attention. Relationship researchers have typically focused on such nonsexual aspects of gay and lesbian couples as love, commitment, power and the division of labor, perhaps in reaction to public stereotypes of homosexuals as hypersexual. Sex researchers have studied specific forms of gay and lesbian sexual activity and, more recently, the sexual transmission of HIV, but have largely ignored the relationship context. In contrast, this chapter focuses explicitly on sexuality in lesbian and gay couples.

An important starting point is to recognize that most lesbians and gay men want to have a committed, intimate relationship. In a recent national survey (Kaiser Foundation, 2001), 74% of lesbians and gay men said that if they could legally marry someone of the same sex, they would like to do so some day. Most (68%) lesbians and gay men

rated "legally-sanctioned gay and lesbian marriages" as very important to them. We do not know the exact percentages of lesbians and gay men who are currently ta committed relationships. In an early study conducted in San Francisco, a majority of respondents were currently in a "relatively stable relationship": 51% of White gay men, 58% of Black gay men, 72% of White lesbians, and 70% of Black lesbians (Bell & Weinberg, 1978). In a recent large-scale survey of lesbians, 65% reported currently being in a same-sex primary relationship (Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001). In contrast, a recent survey of more than 2,600 Black lesbians and gay men found that only 41% of women and 20% of men reported being "in a committed relationship" (Battle, Cohen, Warren, Fergerson, & Audam, 2002). The reasons for differences among existing studies in the percentages of lesbians and gay men who report being in a committed relationships are unknown, but may reflect differences in characteristics of the samples (e.g., age, ethnicity, length of relationship), the specific questions asked, or the historical time period.

Information about the percentage of gay and lesbian adults who live together with a same-sex partner has recently become available from the 2000 U.S. Census arid other national surveys (e.g., Black, Gates, Sanders, & Taylor, 2000; Human Rights Campaign, 2001; Kaiser Foundation, 2001). The best estimate is that about 25 to 30% of gay men and lesbians live with a same-sex partner. Statistics on cohabitation do not include lesbians and gay men in committed relationships who maintain separate residences. Taken together, research indicates that personal relationships constitute a context for sexual expression for many lesbians and gay men.

This chapter reviews the available research on sexuality in same-sex relationships. We begin by briefly considering historical trends in same-sex relationships and the contemporary social climate of sexual prejudice and discrimination that today's gay and lesbian couples confront. Then we review empirical studies, first for gay men and then for lesbian women. In a concluding section, we consider useful directions for future research.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

A Historical Perspective on Gay and Lesbian Couples

Same-sex romantic and erotic attractions have been widely documented throughout history and across differing cultures (e.g., Duberman, Vicinus, & Chauncey, 1989). Social historians have provided fascinating chronicles of the varied forms of same-sex love and sexuality that existed in 18th and 19th century America (e.g., Faderman, 1981; Katz, 2001). Noticeably absent from historical accounts, however, is the "homosexual couple" as we know it today—an intimate partnership between two self-identified gay or lesbian partners. Two historical changes were prerequisites for modern gay and lesbian couples: the Decline of marriage as a cornerstone of adult life and the emergence of the homosexual as a distinct type of person.

In most times and places, heterosexual marriage was an essential component of adult status in the community with few exceptions (e.g., nuns and priests). Same-sex relations, therefore, occurred either prior to or in conjunction with marriage. As Murray (2000) recently documented, same-sex relations tended to take one of three forms: age-structured, gender-based, or egalitarian. Many cultures have had age-structured forms of same-sex sexuality. In Melanesia, for example, male youths engaged in socially scripted sexual relations with older males. This same-sex sexual behavior was normative, considered essential for masculine development, and had no implications for the youths' social identity. Once boys matured into men, they were expected to marry a woman (Herdt, 1981). Other cultures have used gender categories

to structure same-sex relations. In Latin America, the "passive" (feminine) male participating in anal sex is considered homosexual. The "active" (masculine) male is not viewed as distinctive or atypical (Carrier, 1995). Murray called the third form of homosexuality "egalitarian" because it occurs among peers who are relatively equal in status. Kendall (1999, p. 169) described a pattern in southern Africa in which "long-term loving, intimate, and erotic relationships between women were normative." The women in these relationships were typically married but also had a special same-sex friendship that was publicly acknowledged and honored. Their social identity was that of a married woman, not of "lesbian."

The growth of industrial capitalism and "labor for wages allowed more and more men, and some women, to detach themselves from a family-based economy and strike | out on their own" (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988, p. 227). In 19th century America, for .example, it became possible for employed women or those with independent means to form long-term same-sex partnerships known in New England as "Boston marriages" (Faderman, 1981). Close same-sex relationships were particularly common among academic women, as seen in the lifelong relationship of Jeannette Mark and Mary Woolley, who met in 1895 at Wellesley College. Woolley eventually became president of Mt. Holyoke College. At that time, women in romantic same-sex relationships expressed their passionate love for each other openly. "Ah, how I love you," President Grover Cleveland's sister, Rose, wrote to her friend Evangeline in 1890. "All my whole being leans out to you— I dare not think of your arms" (cited in Goode, 1999, p. 33). Given prevailing beliefs about women's sexuality, these romantic relationships were not viewed as sexual or socially deviant. "It is probable that many romantic friends, while totally open in expressing and demonstrating emotional and spiritual love, repressed any sexual inclinations... since... women were taught from childhood that only men or bad women were sexually aggressive" (Faderman, 1981, p. 80).

A second historical change was the emergence, in the years before World War I, of the homosexual person as a new personal identity based on the individual's erotic and romantic attractions (Katz, 1995). At the close of the 19th century, early sexologists, psychoanalysts, and physicians began to distinguish between heterosexuals and "sexual inverts" as types of people. At the sarnie time, "some individuals began to interpret their [own] desires as a characteristic that distinguished them from the majority, ... elaborated an underground sexual subculture,... [and created] a social milieu that nurtured their emergent sense of identity***(D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988, p. 227). Migration to urban centers, experiences serving in the military, and many other events contributed to the development of a shared sense of group identity based on sexual orientation—a "gay consciousness." Over time, gay and lesbian communities have grown larger and developed distinctive businesses, organizations, social services, and activities. During the 20th century, men and women who identified as gay and lesbian forged intimate relationships as alternatives to heterosexual marriage. Gradually, gay and lesbian couples have became a more visible part of American society.

Sexual Prejudice and Discrimination

Although public attitudes toward homosexuality are changing, the sexual relationships of lesbians and gay men in the United States continue to develop within a social climate of sexual prejudice (Herek, 2000). Representative national surveys conducted during the past 30 years show that Americans' attitudes about homosexuality have become more tolerant (see review by Loftus, 2001). Currently, a strong majority of Americans (often 75% or more) approves of laws to protect the civil rights of lesbians and gay men in such areas as employment and housing. Further, 76% of Americans "completely agree" with the statement/'Society should not put any restrictions on

sex between consenting adults in the privacy of their own home" (Kaiser Foundation,1 2001). However, public attitudes about the morality of same-sex sexuality are much" more negative. The General Social Survey, a biannual national probability sample of U.S. adults, asked respondents, "What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex—do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?" In 1998, 56% of respondents chose "always wrong" ? and only 31% chose "not wrong at all" (Loftus, 2001). In other recent national surveys (reviewed by Loftus, 2001), about half of Americans agreed that "homosexual behav- • ior is morally wrong" and indicated that "allowing gays and lesbians to legally marry" would undermine the traditional American family."

The lives of lesbians and gay men are colored by these negative social attitudes (Meyer & Dean, 1998). In a telephone survey of 405 gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults from 15 major U.S. cities, 74% of respondents reported that they had experienced some form of prejudice or discrimination because of their sexual orientation, and 32% had been the target of violence against themselves or their property (Kaiser Foundation, 2001). For some gay men and lesbians, simply being seen together as a couple can; lead to insults or physical violence. The brutal beating of actor Trev Broudy, 33, is one example (Musbach, 2002). Shortly after midnight one evening in 2002, Trev embraced and said goodbye to.a male friend on a quiet street in West Hollywood, California. Moments later, three men who had witnessed the embrace jumped out of their car,' armed with a baseball bat and metal pipe, and savagely attacked Trev, sending him to the critical care unit of a local hospital. Fortunately, most lesbians and gay men are not attacked. Yet they are vulnerable to such dangers. This may be why most lesbians^ (73%) in one study (Loulan, 1987) reported that they do not hold hands with a partner in public. A climate of fear must surely affect the intimate relationships of lesbians' and gay men, although research on this important topic is currently lacking.

STUDYING SEXUALITY IN GAY AND LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

Before reviewing research findings about sexuality in the relationships of lesbians and gay men, a few words are in order about the available databases. Many studies that examined gay and lesbian sexuality focused on specific sexual behaviors rather than on relationships (e.g., Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). Current conclusions about sexuality in the committed relationships of lesbians and gay men are based on a few major investigations. These are supplemented by smaller and? more focused studies. None of the studies is representative, and most samples are disproportionately young, White, urban, and relatively well educated., Further, most studies were published 10 or 20 years ago. The key studies used in this review are described (in alphabetical order by first author):

Bell and Weinberg (1978) studied both gay men (575 Whites and 111 Blacks) and lesbians (229 Whites and 64 Blacks). Participants were recruited from bars, personal contacts, gay organizations, gay baths, and advertisements in the San Francisco Bay area. This project included a smaller subset of men and women in couple relationships.

Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) studied both partners from 957 gay male, 772 lesbian, 653 heterosexual cohabiting, and 3,656 married couples recruited in diverse ways including newspaper and media stories in Seattle, San Francisco, New York, and elsewhere. This project is known as the "American Couples Study."

Bryant and Demian (1994) studied 706 lesbians and 560 gay men in couple relationships. Participants were recruited nationwide by advertisements in the gay press and also through gay churches and organizations.

• Harry (1984) collected questionnaire responses from 1,556 gay men about their relationship experiences. Men were recruited through gay organizations, publications, and community locations in Chicago. (Note: In his 1984 book, Harry also reported secondary analyses of data collected by Bell and Weinberg, 1978.)

• Jay and Young (1979) reported survey responses from 250 lesbians and 419 gay men. Among this sample, 80% of the lesbians and 49% of the gay men were part of a couple.

| • Kurdek (1991) studied both partners in 77 gay male, 58 lesbian, 36 heterosexual cohabiting, and 49 married couples. Participants were recruited by ads and personal contacts, largely from the Midwest.

Lever (1995) studied 2,525 lesbian women who responded to a survey published in the Advocate, a national gay and lesbian publication. Among this sample, 68% of women were in a primary relationship.

MeWhirter and Mattison (1984) studied 156 gay male couples from the San Diego area who were recruited through friendship networks and personal contacts.

Peplau, Cochran, Rook, and Padesky (1978) studied 127 lesbians recruited in Los Angeles. In this sample, 61% of women were in an ongoing romantic/sexual relationship with a woman.

In the following sections, we review and discuss research on sexuality in the relationships of gay men and lesbians. Our review is presented separately for men and then for women. There are two main reasons for this approach. First, researchers have asked somewhat different research questions about sexuality in gay and lesbian couples. Second, there is growing evidence that human sexuality takes somewhat different forms in men and women (Peplau, 2003). Analyses that consider men and women together run the risk of taking men's experiences as the norm and missing important aspects of women's sexuality (Peplau & Garnets, 2000). After presenting findings for gay men and lesbians, we discuss comparisons among gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples.

SEXUALITY IN THE RELATIONSHIPS OF GAY MEN

Our knowledge of sexuality in gay men's relationships is necessarily limited to the topics that researchers have investigated. In this section, we review studies of sexual frequency, sexual satisfaction, gender-based sexual roles, sexual exclusivity, and the impact of HIV on gay men's relationships,,

Sexual Frequency

Researchers studying the sexuality of gay couples have often charted the frequency of sexual contact between male partners. (For a comprehensive list of references on gay male relationships from 1958-1992, see Deenen, Gijs, and van Naerssen, 1994a.) In an early study, Jay and Young (1979) asked participants how often they had sex with their current "lover." There was considerable variation in sexual frequency: 2% of men reported having sex more than once per day, 9% once per day, 38% several times per week, 40% once or twice per week, and 11% less than once per week. The median frequency was once or twice a week.

In a more recent study, Deenen, Gijs, arid van Naerssen (1994b) also reported variability in couples' sexual frequency. They used ads in newspapers and gay publications to recruit 320 Dutch men currently in a gay relationship. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 77, and relationship length varied from 10 months to 37 years. In their sample, 2% of the couples had sex 6 or more times per week, 25% three to five times

per week, 43% one to two times per week, and 17% one to three times per month. The remaining 13% of couples had sex with one another less than one to three times per month. Again, the modal couple in this sample had sex once or twice a week. Diverse sexual frequency also characterized a sample of 325 Black gay men studied by Peplau Cochran, and Mays (1997). Asked how often they had sex with their current partner during the past month, 50% of men said one to three times a week, 10% had sex more often, and 41% had sex less often. Because none of these samples is representative of gay men in the population, findings do not provide general base rates for sexual activity among gay male couples. However, they do demonstrate that sexual frequency differs considerably from one couple to another.

Data consistently demonstrate that, on average, the longer a gay male couple is together, the less frequently they engage in sexual activity with each other. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found a steady decline in frequency associated with relationship length. Of the couples who had been together 2 years or less, 67% had sex three or more times per week. This contrasted with 32% of the couples who had been together between 2 to 10 years, and only 11% of the couples together more than 10 years. In this sample, increased age also had a significant independent association with lower sexual frequency, although the effect of age was smaller than the effect for duration of the relationship. Two other studies (Bryant & Demian, 1994; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984) reported a similar temporal pattern: the most sexually active gay couples were those who had been together 1 year or less.

Sexual Satisfaction and Its Correlates

Another topic receiving much attention in research about sexuality in gay male couples is sexual satisfaction and its correlates. McWhirter and Mattison (1984) found that the vast majority of gay couples in their sample were sexually satisfied. Asked to "rate the current quality" of their sexual relationship with their partner, 83% of men said they were "satisfied" and an additional 7% reported being "very satisfied." In a study of younger gay men in relationships (median length of 15 months), the mean rating of sexual satisfaction was 5.8 on a 7-point scale (Peplau & Cochran, 1981). A study of Black gay men also found high ratings of sexual satisfaction, with a mean score of 5.5 on a 7-point scale (Peplau et al., 1997).

It will come as no surprise that sexual satisfaction and sexual frequency are correlated. Data from the American Couples sample clearly demonstrate this pattern: 85% of gay men who had sex three or more times per week were sexually satisfied, as compared with 69% for men having sex between one and three times per week, 45% for men having sex between once a week and once a month, and 26% for those having sex less than once per month. The correlation between sexual frequency and sexual satisfaction for gay men was $r = .50$ (controlling for age and duration of relationship). Similarly, Deenen et al. (1994b) also found a significant association between sexual frequency and satisfaction ($B = .57$). Of course, these associations tell us nothing about the direction of causality. It seems likely that frequent sex can improve general feelings of sexual satisfaction and also that sexual enjoyment can increase the frequency of sexual encounters.

Sexual satisfaction is also associated with global measures of relationship satisfaction among gay men. Deenen et al. (1994b) showed that sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction were significantly correlated ($r = .35$, $p < .001$). Similarly/ Bryant and Demian (1994) reported that a high level of "quality of sexual interaction" was significantly correlated with relationship quality ($r = .26$, $p < .001$). In one of the few studies of Black gay men (Peplau et al., 1997), overall relationship satisfaction was also significantly correlated with sexual satisfaction ($r = .44$, $p < -001$) and with sexual frequency ($r = .19$, $p < .001$). A study of young, White gay men

(Peplau & Cochran, 1981) also found an association between sexual satisfaction and the importance men placed on "dyadic attachment," a measure assessing the impor-I tance of shared activities, sexual exclusivity; and knowing the relationship will endure into the future. Higher scores on dyadic attachment were correlated with greater sexual satisfaction ($r = .25$, $p < .05$). One of the most detailed analyses of sexuality in couples was conducted by Kurdek components of sexuality. These were the importance of fidelity, the importance of trying new sexual techniques and activities/ and beliefs about sexual perfection (e.g., "I get upset if I think I have not completely satisfied my partner sexually"). For gay couples, sexual satisfaction was positively correlated with global relationship satisfaction ($r = .44$, controlling for the effects of income and length of relationship). In contrast, attitudes about sexual fidelity and new sexual techniques were unrelated to gay men's global relationship satisfaction. Finally, beliefs about personal sexual perfection were negatively correlated with global relationship satisfaction. Kurdek (1991) viewed these beliefs as dysfunctional because they establish exaggerated or unrealistic standards for sexual performance.

Gender Roles and Sexual Activity

Given the power that gender roles often have in defining the behavior of men and women in heterosexual relationships, the lay public sometimes wronders how two men in a relationship pattern their interactions. Some people assume that one man adopts the feminine/' passive role, and the other partner adopts the "masculine," dominant role. Do contemporary gay male couples actually adopt these "butch" and "femme" roles? At the outset, it is important to acknowledge that most gay couples; like a growing number of heterosexual couples, are in dual-worker relationships where both partners share financial responsibilities. When gay partners live together, they typically share in homemaking activities as well (e.g., Kurdek, 1993).

Jay and Young (1979) asked gay men, "How often do you 'role-play' (butch/femme/ masculine/feminine, husband/wife, dominant/submissive) in your relationships?" The most common response was "never" (47%), followed by "very infrequently" (23%). Only 2% of men "always" adopted such roles. When asked more specifically about their sexual interactions, only 24% of the gay men stated that they frequently adopted gendered roles; most men did not. Similarly, McWhirter and Mattison (1984, p. 276) noted that the men in their study "do not assume male and female roles in their sex with each other." - v u

Evidence concerning gender roles also comes from investigations of the specific sexual activities of gay male partners, most often concerning anal sex. By analogy to heterosexual couples, is one gay partner typically the "insertor" (husband) and: the other the "insertee" (wife)? Further, do these roles indicate a partner's degree of masculinity within the relationship? In a secondary analysis of data collected by Bell and Weinberg (1978), Harry (1984) found no association between a man's role in anal sex and other measures of masculinity/femininity including performing traditionally gender-typed household chores (e.g., cooking or home repairs) and interviewer ratings of the man's degree of "masculinity versus effeminacy." In the American Couples Study, gay men who took the insertor role in anal sex with their primary partner were generally less emotionally expressive and more rational in problem solving, traits that are traditionally defined as masculine. However, gay men who took the insertor role V were also more likely to back down during an argument, a behavior demonstrating subordinate status. Thus, it is not clear that specific sexual acts are necessarily indicative of general patterns of masculinity or dominance in a gay male relationship. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) concluded that "for both partners, anal intercourse

is associated with being masculine: in couples where both partners are forceful, outgoing, and aggressive, there is more anal sex" (p. 244). Similarly, Harry (1984, p. 43) concluded that "valuing masculinity in the self is quite strongly related to valuing masculinity in erotic partners."

There are problems with efforts to associate specific sexual acts with masculinity or dominance. One problem is that some gay men never engage in anal sex with their partner, preferring other sexual techniques. A second issue is the versatility with which gay men often approach their sexual interactions. Bell and Weinberg (1978) reported that many gay men took both the insertor and insertee roles in sex. Of the gay men in their sample, 80% performed the insertive role in anal sex in the previous year, and 69% received anal sex in the previous year. McWhirter and Mattison (1984) also found that among couples engaging in anal sex, the majority did not adopt strict roles as to who would be the insertor and insertee. Additionally, Lever (1994) found that of those men who said they liked being "on top" during anal intercourse, 72% also liked being on bottom. So, although some men may have distinct preferences for the sexual activities they most enjoy, many gay men are versatile in the sexual roles they assume.

A final issue in regard to gender roles and sexuality concerns which partner typically initiates sexual interaction. In heterosexual couples, both partners sometimes initiate sex, but it is more often the male partner who takes the lead (Impett & Peplau, 2003). The American Couples Study asked participants which partner more frequently initiates sex (i.e., lets "the [partner] know one would like to have sex"). Only 12% of wives said that they usually initiate sex compared to 51% of husbands who said they usually initiate sex. In contrast, 31% of gay men indicated that they initiate sex more than their partner, 32% that the partner initiates sex more often, and 37% that both partners initiate sex equally often. These results are not surprising given that gay couples lack guidelines about which partner should be the sexual leader.

In summary, sexual interactions among modern gay couples do not typically fit into neat and dichotomous categories of "masculine" and "feminine" behavior or roles. This is consistent with much research indicating that the associations between specific sexual activities and masculinity/femininity are variable across relationships, cultural contexts, and historical periods (Murray, 2000). Two gaps in current knowledge suggest useful directions for future research. First, studies of those gay men who do prefer gendered roles in their sexual relationships would be informative. Second, because the norms and values of gay subcultures evolve and change over time, it would be useful to know how successive age cohorts of gay men incorporate themes of masculinity and femininity into their erotic relationships, and how this issue differs across diverse contemporary gay subcultures.

Sexual Exclusivity and Sexual Openness

A distinctive feature of contemporary gay men's relationships is the tendency to form sexually open (nonmonogamous) relationships. This may reflect the fact that regardless of sexual orientation, men tend to have more permissive attitudes toward casual or uncommitted sex than do women, and the size of this male-female difference in attitudes is relatively large (e.g., Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, & Gladue, 1994; Kurdek, 1991). In this section we assess sexual exclusivity in gay male couples, consider how gay male couples negotiate nonmonogamy, and examine how sexual openness affects relationship satisfaction.

How Common is Nonmonogamy?

Sexual exclusivity is by no means the nornir among contemporary gay couples. In understanding patterns of monogamy versus sexual openness, it is useful to distinguish between partners' agreements about sexual

openness and their actual behavior. Unfortunately, not all researchers systematically measured both agreements and behavior. A recent study surveyed 115 gay men who obtained a "civil union" under a new Vermont law that affords gays the legal benefits of marriage (Campbell, 2002). Among this highly committed group of gay men who had been in their relationships for an average of 12 years, 83% of men characterized their relationship as sexually exclusive. Most men acted entirely in accord with this arrangement; 61% of the sample reported being sexually exclusive in their behavior since their current relationship began. In contrast, other studies find lower rates of sexual exclusivity (see early review by Harry, 1984). For example, in Harry and DeValTs (1978) sample of gay men in committed relationships, only 32% of partners agreed to "be "faithful" and fewer, only 25% of the men studied, were sexually "faithful" in their "behavior during the past year. A third of couples agreed to have a sexually nonexclusive relationship, and the remaining 35% disagreed about sexual exclusivity In all, 75% of the men had sex with someone other than their partner during the past year. : Bryant and Demian (1994) reported that 63% of gay men considered their relationship i to be sexually exclusive, although a third of these men broke their monogamy agreement at least once. In a sample of African American gay men, 65% reported that they ; had extradyadic sex since their current relationship began (Peplau et al., 1997).

Another consistent finding is that the longer a gay male couple stays together, the more likely the partners are to have sex outside the primary relationship (Harry, 1984; Harry & DeVall, 1978). In the American Couples Study sample, 66% of the male couples who had been in a relationship 2 years or less had engaged in extradyadic sex, whereas 94% of the couples who had been together 10 years or more had done so. McWhirter and Mattison (1984) found that 73% of their male couples began their relationship with an understanding, sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, that the relationship would be sexually exclusive. Yet, 100% of those couples who had been together 5 years or longer had engaged in extradyadic sexual relations. Thus, it appears that even those gay men who start a relationship with intentions of being monogamous either change their intentions or fail to live up to this standard.

In understanding patterns of monogamy versus sexual openness, it is important to recognize that extradyadic sex comes in a variety of forms. Some couples have an explicit and consensual agreement to be open to outside sexual affairs. It is clear to both partners that extradyadic sex is acceptable. Other couples agree to be sexually monogamous. For these couples, a partner who has sex outside the relationship is "cheating." For still other couples, rules about monogamy are not explicitly discussed and any agreement is implicit. Unfortunately, much of the research on sexual exclusivity has failed to distinguish among these various types of couples or to account for discrepancies between agreements and actual behavior. Future research should examine these issues in greater detail and consider their possible consequences for the well-being of the couple.

Negotiating Sexual Openness. Because extradyadic sex is common among gay couples, partners often make agreements concerning the nature of their sexual relationship. Although some couples7 agreements are unstated, it is often the case that gay male partners discuss their beliefs about sexual exclusivity and openness. Once a decision is made as to whether a couple will be exclusive or not, a whole host of "rules" must often be negotiated. Although clinical psychologists and counselors working with gay couples once viewed extradyadic affairs as evidence of instability, gay affirmative therapists today often help gay couples to work through the negotiations of an open relationship (LaSala, 2001; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984). In her book on creating and maintain-^8 §ay relationships, Tessina (1989) devoted an entire chapter to the negotiation °f "fidelity contracts." Such a contract may or may not include provisions allowing

for extradyadic sex. According to Tessina, violating the rules of the contract is the "enemy," not extradyadic sex itself.

A study of open gay relationships in the United Kingdom (Hickson, Davies, Hunt, Weatherburn, McManus, & Coxon, 1992) investigated sexual contracts. Among the 252 men who had a "regular partner," 56% had a nonmonogamous relationship. Most men (73%) in a sexually open relationship had a set of rules to define the boundaries of nonmonogamy These regulations concerned honesty, politeness, emotional attachment to other partners, threesomes, and safer sex. What worked for one couple did not necessarily work for others. For example, some couples agreed that they would talk openly about all extradyadic affairs; other couples agreed to stay silent. Some couples agreed that anal sex with other partners was permitted; others viewed it as acceptable as long as a condom is used; still others outlawed, it altogether. What mattered was not the rule itself, but rather that both partners accepted and adhered to their self-generated rules. Interestingly, many of the men in the study who were part of a supposed closed relationship also had rules regarding sexual infidelity that constituted a sort of just-in-case clause. These men viewed their monogamy contracts as flexible, a finding in line with previous evidence (e.g., McWhirter & Mattison, 1984) that many men who begin a sexually exclusive relationship shift to a pattern of sexual openness over time.

Sexual Exclusivity and Satisfaction. Does sexual exclusivity affect relationship satisfaction and stability in gay male couples? Blasband and Peplau (1985) found no significant differences between gay men in exclusive and nonexclusive relationships on measures of love or liking for the partner, closeness, satisfaction, commitment, or relationship longevity. From these results, Blasband and Peplau concluded that "both open and closed relationships can be experienced as very positive and rewarding" (p. 409). Kurdek (1991,1988) found similar results: Attitudes about fidelity were not associated with reports of global relationship satisfaction, and behavioral patterns of sexual exclusivity versus nonexclusivity were not associated with sexual satisfaction or relationship quality.

Research suggests that for gay men, agreement about exclusivity versus openness is more important to relationship satisfaction than any specific type of behavior. Harry (1984) reported that men were equally satisfied in relationships with an agreement to be exclusive or to be nonexclusive. In a study of couples of mixed HIV status, Wagner, Remien, and Carballo-Dieguez (2000) compared couples who agreed either to be monogamous or to have a consensually open relationship with couples in which extradyadic affairs were secret or only partially known to the partner. When both partners adhered to an explicit agreement about sex, scores on measures of sexual satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, affectional expression, and dyadic consensus were higher. These findings may indicate that agreement promotes satisfaction, but it is equally plausible that unhappy men are less willing to negotiate an agreement with their partner and so conceal their extradyadic affairs.

Gay Male Couples and the AIDS Crisis

All gay men in the United States have been affected by the epidemic of AIDS and concerns about the sexual transmission of HIV infection. In response to the AIDS crisis, striking changes were reported in the sexual practices of gay men, most notably increases in condom use and declines in rates of improtecteci anal intercourse (see review by Paul, Hays, & Coates, 1995). Research focusing specifically on HIV in the context of committed gay relationships is limited and has centered on two issues: how the AIDS epidemic has affected sexual behavior in gay male couples and how couples manage their sexual relations when one partner is HIV positive.

The AIDS Crisis and Risky Sex in Gay Male Couples. Has the sexual behavior of gay couples changed from the pre-AIDS era to the present? Unfortunately, no definitive data-based answer to this question is available. Rutter and Schwartz (1996) suggested that from the 1970s to the 1990s gay men's attitudes shifted toward greater endorsement of monogamy but their actual sexual behavior did not undergo a corresponding change. After reviewing available evidence, Nardi (1997, p. 77) concluded that "there is little evidence supporting the claims of increases in. coupling and settling down into domesticity" as a response to AIDS. Rather, Nardi suggested, what may have changed is the way gay men talk about relationships, giving greater emphasis to committed relationships and talking less about their casual sexual encounters. Nardi reviewed the few studies indicating that rates of reporting monogamy may have increased in the 1980s, but expressed skepticism about whether these self-reports accurately depict actual behavior. Currently, reliable empirical evidence on changes in sexual exclusivity among gay male couples is lacking.

; Another question is whether partners in intimate gay relationships in the era of AIDS are practicing safer sex with each other, for instance by using condoms, avoiding the exchange of bodily fluids, or getting tested regularly for HIV. Although research on this point is inadequate, it appears that many gay couples do not consistently follow safer-sex guidelines. Gay men may be more likely to protect themselves when having sex with casual partners than with a long-term partner. For example, in a study conducted in Switzerland, gay men in a steady relationship reported using a condom for anal sex an average of 57% of the time with their primary partner compared to 89% of the time with casual partners (Moreau-Gruet, Jeannin, Dubois-Arber, & Spencer, 2001).

: A study of 46 gay male couples from southern California (Appleby, Miller, & Rothspan, 1999) investigated men's reasons for not following safer-sex guidelines. Many couples assumed they were not at risk, either because both partners had tested negative for HIV or because they had discussed their sexual histories. However, this assumption of safety may be false because of continued extradyadic sexual contacts and the time lag between contracting HIV and actually testing positive. Another common reason for not using condoms with a steady partner was the view that condoms reduce pleasure. Men also cited relationship maintenance reasons. Some gay men viewed unprotected sex as a way to demonstrate love, trust, and commitment to a partner. Men also worried that using a condom might signal a lack of trust, especially if a partner asked to switch from unprotected sex to protected sex. More than half the respondents (53%) said that such a request would elicit suspicion of an affair. In order to avoid raising concerns about infidelity and trust, some gay men may find it easier to engage in risky sex with their partner.

In summary, there is reason to believe that many gay men in couple relationships do not consistently practice safer sex, at least in part because of feelings of safety and trust. This may not be a wise strategy, however. The risk associated with unprotected sex with a steady partner was illustrated in a recent study of gay men in the Netherlands (Davidovich, de Wit, Albrecht, Geskus, Stroebe, & Coutinho, 2001). In this longitudinal project, more than 75% of younger men (under age 30) who contracted HIV between 1984 to 1993 got it from a casual sex partner. In contrast, 67%. of younger men who contracted HIV between 1994 and 2000 were infected by a steady partner. According to the researchers (p. 1307), "it appears that young gay men have adopted, over time, safer sex practices with casual partners but to a lesser extent with steady partners." The researchers urged health professionals to pay increased attention to the sexual behaviors of younger gay men in couple relationships.

When a Partner is HIV Positive. When one partner in a couple is HIV positive the other is not, the couple is said to be serodiscordant (or discordant, for short).

The safest course of action for these couples is to use condoms and/or avoid high-risk S behaviors such as engaging in anal sex or exchanging fluids during oral sex. Little isf currently known about how discordant couples manage sexual risks. Although some i of these couples are following safer-sex guidelines, others are not. In a study of 7861 Swiss men with a steady partner (Moreau-Gruet et al., 2001), many discordant couples! practiced safer sex. For example, 29% of discordant couples refrained from anal sex* compared to 14% of HIV-negative couples. Among those who did have anal sex with their partner, 85% of discordant couples reported consistent condom use compared to, only 35% of HIV-negative couples. In contrast, a study of 75 discordant gay couples from New York City found that 76% of couples reported engaging in ana] sex in the^ past year and only half of these couples reported always using condoms (Wagner,: Remien, & Carballo-Dieguez, 1998).

Research also demonstrates that many partners in HIV discordant couples partici-i pate in extradyadic sex. In a study of 63 HIV discordant couples, Wagner et al. (2000) found that extradyadic sex was frequent. In half the couples, both partners had at least one sexual affair during the past year. In 18 other couples, one partner had an affair. The likelihood of having an affair was only slightly greater among HIV-negative men than among men who had tested positive for HIV.

Although informative, these preliminary findings about the impact of HIV on gay men's relationships provide few clues about the psychological and interpersonal im-r pact of HIV. Based on interviews with a small sample of HIV-positive1 men, Powell-Cope (1995) described problems that discordant couples face in trying to protect the* HIV-negative partner and to maintain or regain a sense of intimacy. Some couples she interviewed "mourned" the loss of the spontaneous sexual expression they en-C joyed before HIV became a concern. Some couples tried to deemphasize the importance of sexual activity in their lives together, focusing instead on other ways to? express intimacy and caring. Research is needed to understand the emotional impact of HIV/AIDS, the negotiations that occur between discordant partners about the na-r ture and meaning of their sexual interactions, and the impact of HIV on sexual and relationship quality.

SEXUALITY IN THE RELATIONSHIPS OF LESBIAN WOMEN

This section reviews empirical findings about sexuality in the relationslups of lesbian-women, focusing on sexual frequency, the controversy surrounding the meaning of "sex" for lesbians, sexual satisfaction and its correlates, gender roles and sexuality, and sexual exclusivity in lesbian relationships. As relevant, comparisons with gay male and heterosexual couples will also be provided.

Sexual Frequency

Several studies assessed the frequency of sexual behavior among lesbian women in a current relationship (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Bryant & Demian, 1994; Califa, 1979; Lever, 1995, Loulan, 1987). In an early study, Jay and Young (1979) asked lesbians how often they "have sex" in their relationship. There was considerable variation in sexual frequency in this sample. One percent of women reported having sex more than once a day, 4% once a day, and the majority, 57%, had sex several times a week. Twenty-five percent of women had sex once a week and 8% less often. For 5% of women, sex was not currently a part of their relationship. Another study asked lesbians how often they "engaged in sexual activity that included genital stimulation" with their current partner during the past month (Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978). One third of women had sex once a week, and 37% had sex more often. About

of women had sex once or twice during the month, and 8% had not had sex during the past month. A national study of 398 Black lesbian women in committed relationships also asked about sexual frequency during the past month (Peplau et al., 1997). In this sample, 11% of women indicated having sex more than three times a week, 47% indicated one to three times per week, and 41% of women reported having sex less than once a week. These data are useful in illustrating the variability in sexual frequency among lesbian couples, but cannot be seen as general base rates because all studies use nonrepresentative samples.

c Sexual frequency declines over time in lesbian relationships (e.g., Loulan, 1987, Peplau et al., 1978). Data from the American Couples Study are illustrative. Among Jvvomen who had been together 2 years or less, 76% had sex one to three times a week %r more. Among couples together for 2 to 10 years, the comparable figure was 37% ^and for couples together more than 10 years, only 27% had sex one to three times a Week or more. Both the partners' age and the duration of the relationship contributed to this pattern, but relationship length was a stronger factor than age for lesbians, fever's (1995) survey also found that sexual frequency was negatively associated with the length of time that a lesbian couple had been together. In the first year of a Itelationship, a third of couples had sex three or more times a week, in the second year this declined to 20%, and after the second year it was 10%.

a- Comparative research investigated reports of sexual frequency among lesbian, gay finale, and heterosexual couples. Three patterns were found. First, across all types of | feouples, there is a general decline in sexual frequency as relationships continue over ? time (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). Second, in the early stages of a relationship, gay male couples have sex more often than other couples. Perhaps the best evidence on this point comes from the American Couples Study. Among couples who had been together 2 years or less, 67% of gay men reported having sex with each other three or more times per week. This compared with 45% of the married couples, and 33% of the lesbian couples. This pattern of differences between gay male versus other couples occurred primarily among short-term relationships and not among couples who had been together for 10 years or longer. After a decade | of togetherness, only 11% of the gay couples had sex three or more times per week as compared with 18% of heterosexual married couples, and 1% of lesbians.

A third pattern is that lesbian couples report having sex less often than either heterosexual or gay male couples. The American Couples study compared sexual frequency among lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual couples who had been together less than 2 years, 2 to 10 years, or more than 10 years. At each stage, lesbians reported having sex less often. More recently, Lever compared responses from lesbians who participated in the Advocate survey to national data on heterosexuals. She concluded that "after only two years together, lesbians have sex less frequently than married heterosexual couples do after ten years" (1995, p. 25).

The Controversy Over Lesbian Sexuality

The empirical finding that lesbian couples have sex less frequently than other couples and that sexual frequency declines rapidly in lesbian relationships is sometimes referred to as "lesbian bed death." lasenza (2002, p. 112) noted that lesbian bed death :"has become not only the subject of jokes by lesbian comics but a syndrome that a fair number of lesbian psychotherapy clients and their therapists believe actually exists." I The interpretation of this pattern is currently controversial (see review by Fassinger & Morrow, 1995). A frequent suggestion has been that gender socialization leads Women to repress and ignore sexual feelings, and that the impact of this socialization is magnified in a relationship with two female partners (e.g., Nichols, 1987). Another view has been that women have difficulty being sexually assertive or taking the lead

in initiating sexual activities with a partner, leading to low levels of sexual activity; Blumstein and Schwartz (1983, p. 214) suggested that "lesbians are not comfortable in the role of sexual aggressor and it is a major reason why they have sex less often than other kinds of couples/' A third possibility is based on the presumption that Imen are generally more interested in sex than women. In this view, both lesbian and heterosexual women may experience low sexual desire because of work pressures, the demands of raising children, health issues, and so on. In heterosexual couples,the male partner's greater level of desire and willingness to take the initiative in sex encourages the woman to engage in sexual activity This does not occur in lesbian couples. Efforts to test these possibilities systematically would be useful.

A more fundamental challenge is presented by those who suggest that conventional definitions of "sex" are the problem (e.g., McCormick, 1994). In Western cultural traditions, sex is what you do with your genitals, real sex means heterosexual intercourse and penile penetration is the gold standard of human sexuality Some sexual acts are labeled "foreplay," suggesting that they don't count as real sex. Recently, researchers asked a large sample of college students if they would say they had "had sex" if they had engaged in each of several activities (Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). Less than half the college students responded that they would say they "had sex" if they engaged only in oral-genital contact. In contrast, 99.5% considered penile intercourse to be "having sex." Critics argue that using a male norm of penile penetration as the standard for sex creates problems for understanding women's sexuality, particularly for women who are intimate with other women. ,

One concern is methodological. Is the wording of sex surveys equally appropriate to lesbian, gay; and heterosexual respondents? In a recent health survey for teens, the Vermont Department of Health asked respondents whether they had had "intercourse with males only females only; both males and females, or neither" (cited in Rothblum; 2000). Just how would a lesbian teen answer this question? What does it mean for two girls to have "intercourse?" Surveys about sexuality in adult lesbian relationships may inadvertently suffer from similar problems. We do not know how lesbian respondents interpreted the question posed by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983), "About how ofteri|f in the past year did you and your partner have sexual relations?" In a more recent* study, Lever (1995) tried to clarify terminology by explaining, "When we say 'have sex with' we mean a situation in which at least one person's genitals were stimulated. Research is needed to assess the impact of different ways of asking questions about women's sexual experiences.

Another question goes beyond methods to ask how researchers can more fruitfully!" conceptualize women's sexuality A study that allowed lesbian participants to defineg "sexual activity" as they wanted suggests that a broader conceptualization might beg useful (Loulan, 1987). In this sample, over 90% of lesbians included hugging, cuddling>| and kissing as sexual activities. More than 80% listed holding body to body as well! as touching and kissing breasts. Similarly; in the Advocate survey (Lever, 1995), many j women were enthusiastic about nongenital activities. On a 5-point scale from "I love-it" to "I don't like it and won't do it," 91% of lesbians said they "love" hugging,: caressing, and cuddling; 82% love French kissing; and 74% love just holding hands, g Reflecting on this issue, Rothblum (1994, p. 634) asked whether lesbians "can reclaim^ erotic, nongenital experiences as real sex?" Future research should examine morer closely what lesbian women consider "sex" and then, using women's own definitions,^ determine the frequency of sexual behavior over the course of lesbian relationships, c

A further issue concerns whether low sexual frequency should be considered a problem, as suggested in the term "lesbian bed death." Fassinger and Morrow^; (1995,p. 200) challenged this view: "Is lack of sexual desire or genital activity a 'prob-^i lem' in a loving and romantic woman-to-woman relationship? From whose poin of view?... Who determines what is sexually normative for lesbians?" Indeed, both

torical analyses of 19th century American women (e.g., Faderman, 1981) cind con-emporary accounts of lesbians highlight the existence of passionate and enduring elationships between women that do not involve genital sexuality Rothblum and Brehony (1993) have reclaimed the 19th century term "Boston marriage" to describe lomantic but asexual relationships between lesbians today Such relationships call jjito question the assumption that an absence of genital sex is necessarily a sign of a Dysfunctional relationship.

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Sexual Satisfaction and Its Correlates

In an early study of lesbians (Peplau et al., 1978), most women reported being highly isatisfied with the sexual aspects of their current relationship (mean of 5.9 on 7-point fscale of overall sexual satisfaction). Nearly three fourths of the women found sex lextremely satisfying, and only 4% reported that sex was not at all satisfying. In another study Eldridge and Gilbert (1990) found mean sexual satisfaction scores of 5.4 on a 17-point scale. In a sample of Black lesbians in committed relationships, the mean fiexual satisfaction score was 5.7 on a 7-point scale (Peplau et al., 1997). In short, many jtfesbians describe sex in their current relationship as very rewarding.

Comparative studies find much similarity between the sexual satisfaction of les-Ibian, gay and heterosexual couples. In the American Couples Study 68% of lesbians, fi3% of gay men, 68% of wives, and 67% of husbands were classified as satisfied with fiheir sex life (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). In another comparative study Kurdek 1(1991) found no differences in sexual satisfaction scores among lesbian, gay and het-lerosexual couples.

Greater sexual satisfaction is associated with greater sexual frequency. For example fin the American Couples Study 95% of lesbians who had sex three times a week or linore were satisfied with their sex life. The percentage of participants satisfied with their sex life dropped significantly with declines in frequency Only 37% of lesbians Jwho had sex less than once a month were satisfied with their sex life. The correlation between sexual frequency and sexual satisfaction was .48 (controlling for age and length of relationship). A similar correlation between sexual frequency and sexual satisfaction ($r = .46$, $p < .001$) was reported by Peplau et al. (1978).

Research suggests other possible correlates of sexual satisfaction that deserve fur-rther study In the American Couples Study sexual satisfaction was greater for lesbians in couples where partners were relatively equal in initiating sex and in refusing to have i sex (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). For example, 83% of lesbians reporting equality of refusal were sexually satisfied compared to 58% of couples reporting unequal refusal. Another study found an association between sexual satisfaction and the importance women gave to a measure of "dyadic attachment/' comprised of questions about shared activities, sexual fidelity, and knowing that the relationship would endure into the future (Peplau et al., 1978). Women who scored high on dyadic attachment reported greater sexual satisfaction ($r = .20$, $p < .05$).

Another factor that may contribute to sexual satisfaction in lesbian couples concerns orgasm. Comparative studies suggest that lesbians have orgasms more often during sexual interactions than do heterosexual women. Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, and Gebhard (1953) compared heterosexual women who had been married for 5 years with lesbians who had been sexually active for 5 years. Among these women, 17% of the heterosexuals compared to only 7% of the lesbians never had an orgasm. Only 40% of the heterosexual women had orgasm easily (i.e., 90-100% of the time they had sex) compared to 68% of the lesbians. These findings 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. Four other studies also reported high rates of orgasm among lesbians in relationships

(e.g., Jay & Young, 1979; Lever, 1995; Loulan, 1987; Peplau et al., 1978). There ap pears to be a paradox in lesbian relationships. On the one hand, lesbian relationship may increase the likelihood of orgasm. On the other hand, many lesbians emphasiz their enjoyment of nongenital kissing and cuddling, activities that are not necessaiil^ associated with orgasm. A better understanding of these issues is needed.

An important question is whether sexuality is related to the overall well-being of a relationship. Kurdek (1991) found that sexual satisfaction was positively correlated! with relationship satisfaction among lesbians ($r = .59$, $p < .01$), as well as among gay 1 male and heterosexual couples. For lesbians (but not for gay men), greater discrepant cies in partners' reports of sexual satisfaction were negatively correlated with global! relationship satisfaction ($r = —.43$, $p < .01$). In a study that included both partners ofti 275 lesbian couples, Eldridge and Gilbert (1990) also found that scores on a multi-:-item measure of "sexual intimacy" were significantly correlated with relationship! satisfaction ($r = .39$, $p < .001$). In the Peplau et al. (1997) study of African American! lesbians, overall relationship satisfaction was correlated with both sexual satisfactions ($r — .46$, $p < .001$) and sexual frequency ($r — .35$, $p < .001$).

In summary for both lesbians and gay men, sexual satisfaction is linked to overall relationship satisfaction. Future research might examine the strength of this assocWl ation once other predictors of relationship quality such as emotional intimacy and! conflict are taken into account (cf. Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Kurdek, 1994).

Gender Roles and Sexual Activity

Research conducted from the 1970s to the present has generally refuted the idea that | in lesbian couples, one partner adopts a "butch" or masculine role and the other a "femme" or feminine role. Most lesbians are in dual-worker relationships and, when partners live together, they typically share both homemaking and financial responsibilities (Kurdek, 1993). The study by Jay and Young (1979) asked lesbians, "How often do you 'role-play' (butch/femme, masculine/feminine, husband/wife, dominant/submissive) in your relationship?" Only 10% of women said that they did this somewhat or very frequently. When asked specifically about sexuality, 17% of women said they did this somewhat or very frequently. Most women said they never engaged in butch-femme behavior, either sexually or in other aspects of their relationship. This, of course, contrasts markedly with heterosexual couples in which male and female partners often enact gendered social and sexual roles.

In a survey by Loulan (1990), most lesbians were familiar with butch-femme roles and were able to rate themselves and their partner on a butch-femme continuum.. At the same time, most women said that these roles were not important in their relationships, and no association was found between these labels and women's sexual behavior (e.g., initiating sex, specific sexual behaviors). The Advocate study (Lever, 1995) asked women to rate themselves and their partner on a 7-point scale from "very femme/feminine" to "very butch/masculine." Most women rated themselves and their partner in the middle of the scale. About one fourth of the women described themselves as being in a butch/femme pairing, 17% characterized themselves and their partner as femme-femme and 8% as butch-butch. Lever (1995, p. 28) found "very little evidence that images of masculinity or femininity relate to who takes the role of the sexual aggressor within relationships." In general, research conducted during the past 30 years suggests that consistent butch-femme roles are largely absent from lesbian relationships, and that self-perceptions of masculinity and femininity are not closely tied to sexual behavior.

At the same time, it is useful to understand historical changes in the enactment and meaning of butch/femme roles among American lesbians (Faderman, 1991). In the 1950s, gender-based roles were an important part of some urban lesbian subcultures

F(Davis & Kennedy, 1989). Women had to adopt either a butch or femme role to gain so-Icial acceptance. Intimate relationships were deemed appropriate only between a butch land a femme partner. In the 1970s, lesbian feminists tended to reject such roles as imitations of patriarchal, heterosexual patterns that limited women's potential. Instead, I images of lesbian androgyny (e.g., jeans, T-shirts/comfortable shoes, no makeup) were I encouraged. In the 1980s, a newer version of butch-femme roles reemerged in some middle and upper-class urban lesbian communities, in part as a reaction to the lesbian "clones" of the 1970s. "Many young women who claimed butch or femme identities in the 1980s saw themselves as taboo-smashers and iconoclasts" (Faderman, 1991, Lpp. 263-264). From their perspective, neo butch and femme styles were seen as tran-| scending traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity and as claiming the full range of human traits and behaviors as appropriate for women. Still others argued : that butch-femme roles were a way to enhance eroticism through the attraction of -personal differences in appearance and behavior. According to Nichols (1987, p. 115), butch-femme advocates "are acknowledging that physical appearance is important to sexuality; that at least sometimes, opposites attract, and that these opposites may be, to an extent, modeled after gender roles, affirming that it is all right to have different tastes and preferences, that we do not all need to act or look alike."

In short, the butch-femme distinction is a familiar theme to most contemporary lesbians. Women from different age cohorts are likely to perceive issues surrounding butch and femme styles rather differently. Our knowledge of how this theme affects lesbian relationships today is relatively limited. In-depth studies of specific age cohorts and subcultural groups would be especially valuable.

Sexual Exclusivity and Sexual Openness

Among contemporary lesbian couples, sexual exclusivity appears to be the norm (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Peplau et al., 1978). In the survey by Bryant and Demian (1994), 91% of lesbians said their current relationship was sexually exclusive and 90% said they had never broken their agreement about being monogamous. In the Advocate survey (Lever, 1995), roughly 80% of lesbians said that their current relationship was monogamous and many of the rest said they were trying to be sexually exclusive. In a recent study of 160 lesbians from Vermont who obtained "civil union" status for their relationships (Campbell, 2002), 92% of women reported that their relationship (mean length of 9 years) was sexually exclusive both in principle and in practice. Only 4% indicated that they had had sex with another person since their relationship began.

Most research on lesbian sexuality has studied White women. In an investigation of 398 Black lesbians in relationships (mean length of just over 2 years), more variation was found in sexual exclusivity (Peplau et al., 1997). More than half of the women (54%) said they had not had sex with someone else since their current relationship began, but a significant minority (46%) had had extradyadic sex, usually with only one person. Similarly, most lesbians (57%) said that they and their partner had an agreement that did not permit sex with others, but again, a sizeable minority did not have an exclusivity agreement.

Comparative studies suggest that there are several important differences between patterns of sexual exclusivity for gay male couples versus lesbian and heterosexual couples. Data from the American Couples Study are illustrative. First, there are differences in attitudes about monogamy. In the American Couples Study, 71% of lesbians, 84% of wives, and 75% of husbands indicated that it was important to be monogamous, but only 36% of gay men held this view. Second, there were major differences in actual behavior. Only a minority of lesbians (28%), wives (21%), and husbands (26%) reported having engaged in extradyadic sex, compared to 82% of gay men. Third, among those individuals who had engaged in extradyadic sex, gay men reported

having a greater number of outside partners. Specifically, 43% of gay men who] extradyadic sex reported 20 or more other sex partners, compared to only 7% Of husbands, 3% of wives, and 1% of lesbians. Fourth, among those who had extradyadic sex, only 7% of gay men reported having a single outside sex partner compared^ 29% of husbands, 43% of wives, and 53% of lesbians. Fifth, because some instances of extradyadic sex may occur early in a relationship and then not be repeated, BlumsteiiP and Schwartz (1983) also asked about recent experiences of outside sex. Regardless I of the length of their relationship, gay men were substantially more likely than other groups to report having extradyadic sex during the past year. Finally, Kurdek (1991)? I .reported that sexual fidelity was positively related to relationship satisfaction for le$f f bian and heterosexual couples, but not for gay male couples.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Several general patterns emerge from this review of empirical studies. For both lesti bians and gay men, sex is typically satisfying. There is a reciprocal association between?] sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction; each can enhance or detract from th^j other. Sexual satisfaction is linked to sexual frequency In long-term couples, the fre§ quency of sex decreases over time. This trend is most pronounced among lesbian! i couples, who are sometimes characterized as experiencing "lesbian bed death." The!I interpretation of low sexual frequency among long-term lesbian couples is controvert| sial and has led some researchers to question conventional ways of conceptualizing | and measuring women's sexuality.

Few contemporary lesbians and gay men characterize their sexual interactions a| involving consistent gendered, butch (masculine) versus femme (feminine), roles, Many lesbians and gay men show flexibility and variety in their sexual activities^ J Nor is there a consistent link between performing traditionally masculine versus^ | feminine activities in a relationship (e.g., cooking or doing home repairs) and sex-^5 ual interactions. Nonetheless, issues of masculinity and femininity continue to be ai topic of discussion between partners in intimate lesbian and gay relationships and ^ also in the media and other aspects of lesbian and gay communities. The meaning of concepts such as butch and femme has changed over time and varies by social class.

One of the major differences between lesbian and gay male couples concerns sexual exclusivity versus openness in relationships. Simply put, monogamy is the norm for most lesbian relationships, and sexual openness is the norm for most gay male relationships. For gay men, sexual openness does not necessarily diminish the quality of a primary relationship, particularly when partners adhere to mutually acceptable agreements about extradyadic sex. The AIDS epidemic has raised concerns for all sexually active gay men. Research does not yet provide clear answers about how gay couples are responding to this challenge and the extent to which sexual exclusivity may have increased. Some evidence suggests that gay men may engage in risky sexual practices with their intimate partners as a way to demonstrate love and trust.

The scientific database concerning sexuality in lesbian and gay relationships continues to be woefully limited. Available studies are biased toward younger, urban, White lesbians and gay men. Convenience samples are the norm, and may under-represent couples who are not open about their sexual orientation (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). Further, as Tolman and Diamond (2001, p. 50) observed, researchers have often adopted "an improverished approach to adult sexuality that tabulates acts, instead of eliciting their meanings and contexts." Perhaps most troubling, virtually no new research on sexuality in gay and lesbian couples has been conducted during the past 10 years.

-Many important topics about sexuality in relationships merit further attention. llWo topics are illustrative. First, we know very little about sexuality among older gay and lesbian couples. In a study of 41 older lesbians, Cole and Rothblum (1991) itfourid that menopause appeared to have relatively little effect on women's sexuality I The researchers suggested that menopause may have less impact on lesbians than on Heterosexual women because "lesbian women are not as intercourse or penetration focused as heterosexual women and therefore the physiological changes of menopause might not be so disruptive" (p. 192). Second, research on sexual coercion in same-sex I couples would be valuable. In heterosexual dating and married couples, sexual coercion is typically initiated by the male partner and is often interpreted by researchers as Ifllated to male aggressiveness and beliefs about male privilege. Evidence that forced 1 sexual activities also occur in gay and lesbian relationships (e.g., Merrill. & Wolfe, 2000; ^fl/Valdner-Haugrud & Gratch, 1997) raises important questions about the nature and origins of sexual abuse in intimate relationships. (See Christopher and Kisler, chapter | 12, this volume.)

New studies would benefit substantially from more sophisticated methodologies. St The use of more representative samples, such as the recent national surVey conducted for the Kaiser Foundation (2001), is helpful. So, too, are studies of specific populations I with known characteristics, such as lesbians and gay men seeking government recog-Inition for their relationships through civil unions (e.g., Campbell, 2002). Many studies i*elied on fairly basic descriptive analyses, rather than testing theory-based models or S using multivariate approaches to consider the effects of several factors simultane-jf ously Further, research has emphasized general trends and has not focused attention ion exceptions. It would be valuable to know more about nontypical groups, such 1 as gay men in sexually exclusive relationships or lesbians who incorporate butch-femme themes into their sexual lives. Given the ongoing changes in gay and lesbian ft subcultures, ethnographic studies of sexual relationships among specific communities would be informative. Finally, the importance of culture in shaping aspects of gay and lesbian relationships and sexuality highlights the value of studies of lesbians and gay men from ethnic minority communities, as well as studies of how acculturation influences the sexuality of gay men and lesbians who emigrate from one country to another. Studies will be especially valuable that go beyond merely comparing ethnic groups and instead attempt to link relationship experiences to specific cultural norms, values, and attitudes.

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