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10 The Intimate Relationships of Lesbians and *Gay* Men

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The problems generated by societal attitudes toward single adults are compounded for those whose sexual preference is toward people of the same gender. Letitia Anne Peplau and Steve Gordon begin their consideration of gay relationships by pointing out how popular stereotypes about gays demonstrate our assumptions about the centrality of gender roles in governing a couple's relationship. The knowledge that two single people who are living together *are* also sexually intimate raises questions in many naive observers regarding who plays the "man" and who plays the "woman." This area provides a clear demonstration of how intimately linked in many people's minds sexuality and gender-role behaviors *are*.

Several issues of importance in both gay and heterosexual relationships are explored in this chapter: what people want from relationships, the part played by love and commitment, satisfaction, and the issue of sexual exclusivity versus openness. Many commonalities *are* found in the relationship values of gays and heterosexuals: most people seek an intimate and relatively enduring partnership. One major difference has been found, however. Unlike the majority of heterosexual couples who emphasize traditional masculine-femininerole behavior, most gay couples reject such roles. In gay relationships, a more flexible division of labor occurs resembling a "best friend" pattern more than a traditional marriage. In fact, along with the examples provided by some of the elderly couples described earlier by Rick Allgeier, gay relationships may offer models of more egalitarian relationships.

One impact of gender-role socialization can be seen by comparing lesbian relationships to the relationships of gay men. Long-term bonding and fidelity *are* somewhat more characteristic of lesbian than of gay male relationships. Sexual variety and nonexclusivity is more valued by gay males.

Emotional intimacy and equality *are* values that *are* very strongly held among lesbians, perhaps more so than is characteristic of gay males or of heterosexual relationships. As the authors emphasize, however, there appears to be as much diversity in the lifestyle patterns of gay people as exists among heterosexual people.

Finally, regarding sexual interaction per se, homosexuals appear to be more sexually satisfied in their relationships than is characteristic of some heterosexuals. Perhaps this is to some extent a function of the absence of rigid patterns regarding who does what to whom. With greater flexibility and variety, there may be greater pleasure. There may also be a greater possibility for understanding the physical feelings of someone of the same gender. This understanding is, of course, theoretically also possible for heterosexual couples, but the communication needed to facilitate it may be easier for gays than for traditional heterosexuals.

Confusion about gender roles and sexuality is perhaps greatest in response to homosexuality. Stereotypes often depict gay men and lesbians as individuals who *are* uncomfortable with their gender identity and who want to change their gender. Cultural images of the effeminate gay man and the masculine, "butch" lesbian are common. In relationships, homosexuals *are* thought to mimic heterosexual patterns, with one partner acting as the "wife" and the other partner playing the "husband." But current research shows that these stereotypes are inaccurate and misleading. Although these stereotypes may characterize a small minority of homosexuals, they fail to fit the lifestyles of most gay men and lesbians.

Where do these stereotypes come from? In part, they stem from the faulty assumption that three components of human sexuality *are* inseparable. These components are *sexual* orientation (attraction to same-gender versus other-gender partners), gender *identity* (our belief that we *are* male or female) and gender-role behavior (acting in traditionally "masculine" or "feminine" ways). Many people wrongly believe that, if an individual differs from the norm on one of these components, he or she must differ on the others as well. In North American culture, a typical heterosexual woman is attracted romantically and sexually to men (sexual orientation), she knows without doubt that she is female (gender identity), and she frequently enacts the roles or behaviors that society defines as appropriate for women. A lesbian differs from this pattern in that her sexual and romantic attraction is to women. The stereotype assumes that the lesbian must also differ in her gender identity and gender-role behavior. This assumption is wrong.

Homosexuals *are* not confused about their gender identity: lesbians *are*

not different from heterosexual women in their sureness of being female, nor do gay men differ from heterosexual men on this dimension. In terms of behavior, research indicates that most gay men are not effeminate in dress or manner, nor are lesbians usually "masculine" in their behavior (see DeLora & Warren, 1977; Gagnon, 1977; Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Warren, 1974).

This chapter reviews research findings about the love relationships of lesbians and gay men. We begin by asking what people want in love relationships and by examining how relationship values are affected by sexual orientation. We next look at the question of whether homosexuals adopt heterosexual scripts for relationships (see Chapter 1 for a description of the use of scripts in our lives). Are homosexual relationships more similar to heterosexual "marriages" or to same-gender "best friendships"? We then consider love and commitment in the relationships of lesbians and gay men. Finally, we investigate sexual behavior and the issue of sexual exclusivity in gay relationships.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES AND LIMITATIONS

Before beginning our investigation of homosexual relationships, however, a few methodological issues deserve mention. First, terms need to be defined. The term *homosexual* is appropriately used to refer to both men and women whose primary sexual and affectional orientation is toward same-gender partners. But many gay men and lesbians dislike the term, believing that it overemphasizes the sexual aspect of their lifestyle. Instead, most prefer "gay" (for both men and women) or "lesbian" (for women).

Second, research on gay relationships, like studies of heterosexual relationships (see Hill et al., 1979), is limited in several ways. Most research uses questionnaires or interviews. Self-report responses can be biased because people lack insight into their relationships or because they want to present a favorable image to researchers. Whatever their sexual orientation, people are not always truthful in describing their relationships to themselves or to researchers. People who volunteer for studies may differ from nonvolunteers in being more interested in social science research, more liberal or permissive in their views, or more trusting of psychologists. In addition, studies of gays or of any partially hidden population encounter special problems. There is no such thing as a representative sample of lesbians and gay men (Morin, 1977). Some gay people are secretive about their sexual orientation and would not volunteer for psychological research. Those gays who have participated in research tend to be younger, educated, middle-class, white adults. Because of these limitations, we can place greatest confidence in findings that have been replicated in several different studies. And we need to be cautious in assuming that research findings adequately describe the entire gay population in America. In this chapter for instance, our primary focus is on voluntary relationships. Generalizing our conclusions to forced sex in institutions (for example, prisons or the military) would be inappropriate. With these warnings in mind, we turn to the questions of what gay men and lesbians are looking for in an intimate relationship.

VALUES ABOUT INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

What do lesbians and gay men want from their close relationships? Do gays want a long-term relationship with a single partner, or do they prefer to live pretty much in the present? Is their view of love romantic or cynical? Do homosexuals have a distinctive set of values about relationships unique to lesbians and gay men, or do gays and heterosexuals seek similar goals in relationships? Research is beginning to answer these questions.

Most gays want to have steady love relationships. Few would be satisfied to have only casual liaisons. One study (Bell & Weinberg, 1978) asked homosexuals how important it was to them to have "a permanent living arrangement with a homosexual partner." Of the lesbians, 25 percent said this was "the most important thing in life," and another 35 percent said it was "very important." Less than one woman in four said that a permanent relationship was not important. Gay men showed a similar pattern: 15 percent said a relationship was the most important thing in life; 22 percent said it was very important; and only a third said it was not important at all. Thus a somewhat higher proportion of women than men said that having a permanent relationship was extremely important.

Most gays, like most heterosexuals value steady love relationships (for example, see Hill, Rubin & Peplau, 1976). What are the characteristics that gays seek in such partnerships? Lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals were asked to rank nine possible relationship goals (Ramsey, Latham, & Lindquist, 1978). All groups ranked affection, personal development, and companionship as most important; least importance was given to having "a place in the community" and to religion. Other goals such as economic security and having an attractive home were ranked in the middle. Lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals have also been asked to rank the qualities that they seek in partners (Laner, 1977). All groups gave greatest importance to honesty, affection, and intelligence; these traits ranked above having "good looks," a sense of humor, and money.

Matched samples of lesbians, gay men, and heterosexual women and men rated the importance of various features of love relationships (Peplau & Cochran, 1980). These included such issues as revealing intimate feelings, spending time together, holding similar attitudes, having an equal-power relationship, and having sexual exclusivity. Participants gave varied answers.

For example, although some considered it essential to share many activities with a partner, others viewed joint activities as relatively unimportant. Despite such individual differences, remarkably few overall group differences were found between heterosexuals and homosexuals. For example, on average, both groups gave greatest importance to "being able to talk about my most intimate feelings" with a partner.

One major difference between homosexuals and heterosexuals did emerge, however. Sexual exclusivity in relationships was much more important to heterosexuals than to homosexuals. Lesbians and gay men gave sexual fidelity an average rating of somewhat more than 5, compared with a rating of just over 7 for the heterosexuals (the highest possible importance rating was 9). Homosexuals were less likely than heterosexuals to endorse monogamy as an ideal for relationships. Two interesting gender differences also emerged. Whatever their sexual orientation, women gave greater importance than men did to emotional expressiveness and the sharing of feelings. This finding is consistent with the emphasis in North American gender-role socialization that men should conceal their feelings and present a tough exterior (David & Brannon, 1976). Second, lesbian and heterosexual women cared more than did men about having egalitarian relationships. Perhaps *because* of the women's movement, women showed greater sensitivity to equal power in love relationships.

Finally, Peplau and Cochran (1980) examined how "romantic" gays were in their attitudes about love. Participants were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with statements about love such as "Lovers ought to expect a certain amount of disillusionment after they have been together for a while" and "To be truly in love is to be in love forever." No differences were found in the answers of lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals; most people took a middle-of-the-road position. Homosexuals and heterosexuals were equally likely to be starry-eyed romantics or cold-hearted cynics. In sum, the picture that emerges from these studies is that most people, whatever their sexual orientation, want much the same things from love relationships; namely, affection and companionship.

RELATIONSHIP SCRIPTS: MARRIAGE OR BEST FRIENDSHIP?

Of the myths about homosexual relationships, none is more persistent—or wrong—than the belief that in gay partnerships one person adopts the role of "husband" and the other the role of "wife." According to this stereotype, gay partners "make believe," in some sense, that one of them is male and the other female. One partner is the breadwinner, takes the initiative in sex, and

generally assumes the conventional role of dominant male. The other partner keeps house and acts the part of the submissive female.

Scientific research refutes this stereotype. More typical of actual gay relationships are the following personal descriptions:

> [Gay man:] My involvement with other men is always like we are buddies, or at least that's what I strive for. . . . I very much want to have a man-to-man relationship with my friend and I value this element of masculinity. . . . I believe masculinity can be realized as readily through another man as it can through a woman. [Quoted by Spada, 1979, p. 168]
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> *[Lesbian:]* In a heterosexual relationship, you are playing a role . . . in a gay relationship, you don't have that. You have two people on an equal level living together, sharing responsibilities. In a heterosexual relationship you are not going to get it 50:50 (division of labor). You'd be lucky if you get it 60:40, so there is a certain amount of role playing that you are going to have in a heterosexual relationship that you don't have in a gay relationship. [Quoted by Tanner, 1978, pp. 90–91]

Most lesbians and gay men actively reject traditional husband-wife roles as a model or script for love relationships. One study (Jay & Young, 1977) asked lesbians and gay men their feelings about "role playing." Most of the lesbians and half of the men said they felt negatively about role playing. One lesbian explained, "I don't like role playing because it copies the traditional male-female relationship. I'm proud I'm a woman. And I love women, not pseudo-men" (cited in Jay & Young, 1977, p. 320). Many gays value their relationships precisely because they feel freed from the restrictions imposed by gender roles in traditional heterosexual relationships. A gay man commented, "Role playing seems to me by nature to involve dominance and control, both of which make me feel uncomfortable" (cited in Jay & Young, 1977, p. 369). Three possible areas of masculine-feminine role playing in gay relationships have been investigated: the division of household tasks, sexual behavior and decision making (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Caldwell & Peplau, 1980; Cardell, Finn, & Marecek, 1981; Harry & DeVall, 1978; Jay & Young, 1977; Saghir & Robins, 1973).

In most heterosexual marriages, clear distinctions are made between the husband's work (for example, being the breadwinner, doing household repairs) and the wife's work (for example, doing the cooking and other domestic chores). Is there a similar division of household tasks among gay couples who live together? Research finds little evidence for this idea. For example, Bell & Weinberg (1978) asked gay men and lesbians which partner in the relationship does "the housework"; 61 percent of gay men and 58

percent of lesbians said that housework was shared equally. When asked if one partner consistently does all the "feminine tasks" or all the "masculine tasks," about 90 percent of the gay men and lesbians said no. As one gay man commented, "When I am asked who is the husband and who is the wife, I would say we're just a couple of happily married husbands" (quoted by Saghir & Robins, 1973, p. 74). The predominant pattern is one of role flexibility, with partners sharing in housekeeping and financial expenditures. Because it is common in gay relationships for both partners to have jobs, both are usually able to contribute financially to the relationship and neither can devote all their time to homemaking (see Chapter 7 for a description of the effects of the employment of both partners in heterosexual marriages).

In the area of sexual behavior, role playing might be reflected in which partner initiates sexual interactions or in personal preferences for particular sexual activities (see Chapter 3). Some studies have asked gays which partner is more "active" or "passive" in sex. A majority of lesbians and gay men say that both partners are equally active or that partners alternate from situation to situation (Califia, 1979; Harry, 1976; Marmor, 1980; Saghir & Robins, 1973). Jay and Young (1977) asked gays if they role played sexually when they were sexually intimate. Only 12 percent of gay men and 8 percent of lesbians said they did this frequently; some said they took an active or passive role occasionally, and the largest group responded "never." Studies of gay men have investigated men's preferences for particular sexual activities, such as receiving versus giving anal intercourse. Again, many men indicate enjoying both roles. When a man does have a preference for one kind of sexuality, this preference is not linked to more general dominance in decision making in the relationship (Harry & DeVall, 1978). Few homosexuals consistently engage in sexual role playing. When role playing does occur, it may be more common among gay men than lesbians.

A third component of traditional marriage is the idea that the masculine partner should be the "boss" and leader in decision making. Gay men and lesbians largely reject this model, preferring a relationship in which partners share equally in power (for example, see Harry, 1979; Spada, 1979). One study (Peplau & Cochran, 1980) asked matched samples of heterosexual and homosexual college students about power in their current love relationship. Virtually everyone (over 95 percent in each group) said that ideally both partners should have "exactly equal say" in their relationship. Unfortunately, only about half the lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals thought that their current relationships lived up to this ideal.

What *are* some of the factors that tip the balance of power away from equality in gay relationships? In gay relationships, power is more likely to be wielded by the partner who has greater personal resources, in terms of greater education, income, age, or other characteristics (Caldwell & Peplau, 1980; Harry & DeVall, 1978). In addition, when there is an imbalance of involvement or commitment in a relationship, the partner who is less interested often has greater power. Gay relationships, like heterosexual ones (Peplau, 1979; see also Chapters 3 and 5), seem to have the greatest chance for equality when partners have similar resources and commitments to the relationship.

Although most lesbians and gay men do not engage in gender-role playing, a small minority does. One lesbian described her experience: "When I am with a younger girl, I like to act 'male'—that is, protect her—and I like it very much if she lets me buy drinks, etc. . . . What I like best about the 'male' or 'butch' role is the protective angle, even though I realize intellectually that this is a lot of sexist shit" (quoted by Jay & Young, 1977, p. 322). A gay man expressed these views:

> I put strong emphasis on roles, more sexually than nonsexually. But, and this is the distinctive part, I can feel perfectly comfortable in either set of roles . . . but I like to keep these roles clearly defined with any given person. . . . I like the stability and clarity of it, the ease of prediction and minimal conflict it provides; the communications are so much easier, more familiar. [Quoted by Jay & Young, 1977, p. 367]

For a minority of homosexuals, some elements of gender-role playing are an important and comfortable part of relationships, just as they are for many heterosexuals (see Peplau, Rubin, & Hill, 1977).

Because a few gays do engage in some gender-role playing, it is informative to examine factors that may affect the adoption of these patterns. It appears that such role playing was more common in the "old gay life" prior to the recent evolution of homophile organizations, gay liberation, and the women's movement. One older lesbian commented, "I was 'butch' in experience prior to 1960, but never heavy butch. Just a wee bit more the aggressor, paying the way of my partner, for example. . . . Since 1964 I haven't engaged in role playing. [Now] we *are* equal women together" (cited in Jay & Young, 1977, p. 321). There has been a historical decline in gender-role playing in the United States. One possible consequence is that such role playing may be more common among older gay men and lesbians than among younger ones.

Gender-role playing may be more common among gays and lesbians from lower socioeconomic and educational levels (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Harry & DeVall, 1978; Wolf, 1979). It has also been suggested that role playing is part of the "coming-out" experience of some gays (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Saghir & Robins, 1973). For example, a young woman new to the lesbian community may initially dress in a "butch" manner in order to be more easily identified as lesbian (Wolf, 1979).

In some cases, gender-role playing may result from temporary situational factors. Saghir and Robins (1973) found that only 12 percent of lesbians and 17 percent of gay men had engaged in domestic role playing for a period of three months or longer. Role playing usually occurred because one partner was temporarily unemployed or attending school. Finally, role playing occurs in prison settings; prison culture sometimes defines masculine-feminine roles as the acceptable form for sexual or love relations between sarne-gender prisoners (for example, see Gagnon & Simon, 1973).

The idea that most lesbians and gay men engage in masculine-feminine role playing is a myth. Although a small minority of homosexuals does show these patterns, the vast majority does not. Why, then, does the role playing stereotype persist? One reason is that this, like other common stereotypes, is seldom subjected to *careful* scientific scrutiny. In addition, those gays who do engage in role playing may be much more visible to the general public than the majority of gays who do not. Movies and television often perpetuate the stereotype. Finally, in North America, heterosexual marriage is so powerful a script for love relationships that many people find it difficult to imagine an intimate relationship that does not involve husband-wife roles. In North American society, the imagery of romance, love, and "living happily ever after" is heavily colored by the symbolism of marriage.

Although most gays reject husband-wife roles as a model for intimacy, they do want a loving, committed relationship. Therefore, lesbians and gay men must find or create alternate scripts for relationships. Harry and DeVall (1978) suggest that gay relationships are often modeled after friendship, with the added component of erotic and romantic attraction. As such, gay relationships may most closely resemble best friendships.

A friendship script fosters equality in relationships. The norms or rules for friendship assume that partners will be relatively equal in status and power; this contrasts sharply with the institution of marriage, in which the husband is traditionally expected to be the "boss" or leader. Friends also tend to be similar in interests, resources, and skills. In contrast, spouses have traditionally brought different gender-linked qualities to a marriage. For heterosexuals, these differences often foster male dominance rather than equality. As one sociologist has observed,

> Take a young woman who has been trained for feminine dependencies, who wants to "look up" to the man she marries. Put her at a disadvantage in the labor market. Then marry her to a man who has a slight advantage over her in age, income, and education, shored up by an ideology with a male bias. . . . Then expect an egalitarian relationship? [Bernard, 1972, p. 146]

Because of the divergent socialization of males and females in our society, partners in heterosexual relationships often find it difficult to break out of traditional patterns. Research on sarne-gender relationships suggests that when partners are more similar in their interests and abilities, equality between partners is more easily (although not inevitably) achieved. Feminists have long argued that heterosexual couples should abandon gender-based differences in behavior and power. Studies of homosexual relationships demonstrate that successful love relationships can be built on models other than traditional marriage. We now turn to studies describing what gay relationships are actually like.

LOVE AND COMMITMENT IN GAY RELATIONSHIPS

A starting point for our discussion is the question of how many lesbians and gay men are actually involved in steady relationships. Although stereotypes often portray gays as unable to develop enduring relationships, empirical evidence argues to the contrary. In studies of lesbians, between 45 percent and 80 percent of the women surveyed were currently in a steady relationship (for example, see Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Jay & Young, 1977; Peplau et al., 1978; Raphael & Robinson, 1980; Schäfer, 1977). In most studies, the proportion of lesbians in an ongoing relationship was close to 75 percent. Studies of gay men show that between 45 percent and 60 percent of the men surveyed were currently involved in a steady relationship (for example, see Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Jay & Young, 1977; Peplau & Cochran, 1981; Spada, 1979). The best estimate about the proportion of gay men in such relationships is about 50 percent. Many lesbians and gay men in steady relationships live with their partners. Although these figures should not be taken as representative of all lesbians and gay men, they do suggest that at any particular point in time a large proportion of homosexuals have stable love relationships. It appears that relatively more lesbians than gay men are involved in steady relationships.

We should emphasize that those lesbians and gay men who do not currently have steady relationships are a diverse group. They include people who have recently ended relationships through breakups or the death of partners, people who are eager to begin new relationships, and others who do not want committed relationships.

Love and Satisfaction

We saw earlier that most homosexuals want close love relationships. How successful are lesbians and gay men in achieving this goal? Unfortunately,

information about love, satisfaction, and commitment in gay relationships comes from a few studies based on fairly small samples. So the following results are presented cautiously. They suggest that gays do find their relationships highly rewarding.

One study (Cardell, Finn, & Marecek, 1981) compared lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual couples on a standardized measure of couple adjustment. Most couples were very satisfied with their relationships, and gay men and lesbians did not differ significantly from each other or from the heterosexuals. Another study (Ramsey, Latham, & Lindquist, 1978) compared lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual couples on the Locke-Wallace Scale, a widely used measure of marital adjustment. All couples scored in the "well-adjusted" range, and the homosexuals were indistinguishable from the heterosexuals.

Only recently have social psychologists attempted to measure love systematically, spurred by Rubin's (1973) development of scales to measure "love" and *"liking"* for a romantic partner. Peplau and Cochran (1980) compared matched samples of lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals on these measures. Lesbians and (fay men reported high love for their partners, indicating strong feelings of attachment, caring, and intimacy. They also scored high on the liking scale, reflecting feelings of respect and affection toward their partners. On other measures, lesbians and gay men rated their current relationships as highly satisfying and very close. When comparisons were made among lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals on these measures, no significant differences were found.

Peplau and Cochran also asked lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals to describe in their own words the "best things" and "worst things" about their relationships. Consider these observations by people listing the best aspects of their relationships: "The best thing is having someone to be with when you wake up" and "We like each other. We both seem to be getting what we want and need. We have wonderful sex together." Or these descriptions of the worst aspects of relationships: "My partner is too dependent emotionally" and "Her aunt lives with us!" All these remarks could have been made by heterosexuals, but they *are* actually all responses made by lesbians. Systematic analyses (Cochran, 1978) found no significant differences in the responses of lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals—all of whom reported similar joys and problems. To examine the possibility that more subtle differences among groups existed that were not captured by the coding scheme, the "best things" and "worst things" statements were typed on cards in a standard format, with information about gender and sexual orientation removed. Panels of judges were asked to sort the cards, separating men and women and separating heterosexuals and homosexuals. The judges were not able to identify correctly the responses of lesbians, gay men, or heterosexual women and men.

Taken together, these findings suggest that many gay relationships are highly satisfying. Lesbian and gay male couples appear, on standardized measures, to be as "well adjusted" as are heterosexual couples. This does not mean, of course, that gays have no difficulties in their relationships. They undoubtedly have many of the same problems as heterosexuals in coordinating joint goals, resolving interpersonal conflicts, and so on. In addition, lesbian and gay male couples may have special problems arising from the hostile and rejecting attitudes of many people toward homosexuals (see Mendola, 1980; Silverstein, 1981). Overall, however, existing research shows that homosexual relationships can be as personally satisfying as heterosexual ones.

Commitment

It is a sad truth that love is no certain guarantee that any relationship will endure. In homosexual relationships, as in heterosexual ones, relationships begun hopefully and lovingly can and do fall apart. Do homosexual relationships last as long as heterosexual ones?

There is no easy answer to this complex question. The U.S. Bureau of the Census records with considerable accuracy the proportion of the population who are heterosexually married and divorced, but no comparable statistical information exists describing any aspect of homosexual relationships. We simply do not know how long the "average" lesbian or gay male relationship lasts. It is useful to remember that for an adolescent, whether lesbian or heterosexual, a relationship of three months may seem "long"; for a 25-year-old, a relationship of 2 years may be relatively "long"; for a 50-year-old, a relationship of 20 years may be long. In other words, a person's age determines to some extent the length of time that it is possible or likely for a relationship to endure.

A recent study of homosexuals in San Francisco (Bell & Weinberg, 1978) inquired about the length of people's *first* homosexual relationships. On the average, lesbians in this sample were 22 years old when they had their first "relatively steady relationships." Nearly 90 percent said they had been "in love" with these first woman partners, and the typical relationship lasted for a median of one to three years. For a third of the lesbians, these relationships lasted four years or longer. Gay men in this sample were, on the average, 23 years old when they had their first steady relationships. About 78 percent said they had been in love with these first male partners, and the typical relationship lasted for a median of one to three years. For 22 percent of the men in this sample, the first steady relationship lasted four years or longer.

Several studies have asked homosexuals to describe the length of their current love relationships (for example, see Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Jay & Young, 1977; Peplau & Amaro, in press; Saghir & Robins, 1973). In these studies, most participants have been young people in their 20s. The typical length of relationships is about two to three years for both men and women. Studies of older gays would be especially useful in understanding the length of homosexual relationships, but such research is strikingly absent from the available literature. A few studies that have included older lesbians and gay men document that relationships of 20 years or more are not uncommon (for example, see Mendola, 1980; Raphael & Robinson, 1980; Silverstein, 1981). Finally, although it is sometimes thought that lesbians have more long-lasting relationships than gay men, evidence about gender differences in the duration of gay relationships is inconsistent (for example, see Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Jay & Young, 1977; Schäfer, 1977).

What factors influence the permanence of gay relationships? Probably many of the same forces that operate in heterosexual relationships. Permanence is affected by two separate factors (Levinger, 1979). The first concerns the strength of the positive attraction that make a particular partner and relationship appealing. We have seen that homosexuals do not differ from heterosexuals in the love and satisfaction they feel in steady relationships. But the possibility always exists that attractions may wane and that people may "fall out of love." Thus, a decrease in attraction can lead to the ending of a relationship.

The second set of factors affecting the permanence of relationships consists of barriers that make the ending of a relationship costly, in either psychological or material terms. For heterosexuals, marriage usually creates many barriers to the dissolution of a relationship, including the cost of a divorce, a wife's financial dependence on her husband, joint investments in property, children, and so on. Such factors may encourage married couples to "work" on improving a declining relationship, rather than ending it. In some cases, these barriers can also keep partners trapped in an "empty-shell" relationship.

Gay men and lesbians probably encounter fewer barriers to the termination of relationships, as these quotations illustrate:

> [Gay Man:] I see differences and I see similarities between gay and straight couples. A big difference is that gays are less frequently obliged "to stay together." Ed and I don't have the kids, the high cost of divorce, the in-laws, and the financial entanglements to keep us together. We also don't have all the support systems that straights enjoy. [Quoted by Mendola, 1980, pp. 122-1231

> [Lesbian:] Marje and I are no different from any straight couple. We've got a lot of problems to work out. And the problems aren't any different from the problems straights have: financial, sexual, in-laws. . . . However, what's different is we don't have a lot of the structures straights have to help them solve their problems. We have to do it on our own, and so it's harder for a gay couple to stay together and make their relationship work. [Quoted by Mendola, 1980, p. 123]

Because of weaker barriers to relationship dissolution (Lewis et al., 1980), lesbians and gay men are less likely to become trapped in hopelessly unhappy relationships. They may also be less motivated to rescue deteriorating relationships.

SEXUAL BEHAVIOR IN GAY RELATIONSHIPS

Most people view gays largely in terms of their sexuality. Stereotypes sometimes depict lesbians and gay men as "highly sexed" people whose lives are organized around the pursuit of sexual pleasure to a much greater extent than is true for heterosexuals. Such a characterization is both far-fetched and wrong. Few of us, whether gay or heterosexual, have sexuality as the organizing principle in our lives (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). For most of us, sex is only one aspect of our lives, along with work, friendship, and other activities. Research suggests that, when it comes to sexuality, differences between men and women are much greater than differences between heterosexuals and homosexuals.

The Physiology of Sexual Arousal

Studies of the physiological aspects of sexuality (Kinsey et al., 1948, 1953; Masters & Johnson, 1979) have found no major differences in the pattern of sexual response of lesbians and heterosexual women, nor in the response of gay and heterosexual men. This should not be surprising. The physiological mechanics of sexual arousal and orgasm are human characteristics, unaffected by sexual orientation.

Heterosexual Experiences

Before considering sexuality in steady relationships, it is useful to provide some background about the more general sexual experiences of gay men and lesbians. Only a minority of lesbians and gay men have had exclusively homosexual experiences throughout their lives. Most homosexuals have had sex with other-gender partners, often before they adopted a homosexual lifestyle (Gundlach & Reiss, 1968; Jay & Young, 1977; Kinsey et al., 1948, 1953;

Saghir & Robins, 1973). For example, a recent study (Bell & Weinberg, 1978) found that 83 percent of lesbians and 64 percent of gay men had had heterosexual intercourse. For many people, these heterosexual experiences occurred in the context of dating relationships (Peplau et al., 1978; Peplau & Cochran, 1981). A significant minority of lesbians and gay men have been married. Bell and Weinberg (1978) found that 35 percent of the lesbians and 20 percent of the gay men surveyed had been in heterosexual marriages. Research findings lead to two conclusions. First, most homosexuals have had sexual experience with other-gender partners. Second, a greater proportion of lesbians than of gay men have had heterosexual experiences, including marriage.

Sex In a Steady Relationship

For most lesbians, sex is an enjoyable part of a steady relationship. In one study (Peplau et al., 1978), 75 percent of lesbians reported that sex with their steady partners was extremely satisfying, and only 4 percent said that it was not at all satisfying. One factor contributing to satisfaction was the reported lack of guilt among lesbians; 80 percent said they never felt guilty about their sexual activity with their partners, and only 4 percent said they usually or always felt guilty. Another major factor was the frequency with which lesbians experienced orgasms with their current partners. Over 70 percent of women said they almost always experienced orgasms; only 4 percent said they never had orgasms. Other studies (Jay & Young, 1977; Kinsey et al., 1953) confirm that most lesbians do not usually have difficulty in having orgasms during sex.

Comparative studies suggest that lesbians may have orgasms more regularly during sex than do heterosexual women (for example, see Hunt, 1974; Jay & Young, 1977; Pietropinto & Simenauer, 1979; Tavris & Sadd, 1977). Kinsey researchers (1953) compared heterosexual women who had been married for five years with lesbians who had been sexually active for an equal number of years. Among these women, 17 percent of the heterosexuals compared to only 7 percent of the lesbians had never had an orgasm. And only 40 percent of heterosexual women had orgasms consistently (that is, 90 to 100 percent of the times they had sex), compared to 68 percent of lesbians. These differences may, as Kinsey suggested, reflect differences in the knowledge and sexual techniques of women's partners. But differences in the emotional and interpersonal aspects of lovemaking may be equally important. Schäfer (1976) asked 57 lesbians who had had sexual relations during the past year both with women and with men to compare these experiences. Most lesbians said that compared to sex with men, sex with women was more tender (94 percent), intimate (91 percent), considerate (88 percent), partner related (73 percent), exciting (66 percent), and diversified (52 percent).

Lesbian couples have sex about as often as do heterosexual couples of the same age. Among the younger lesbians typically studied by researchers, the average frequency of sex is about two to three times per week. This figure varies widely from couple to couple, however. Among the lesbians surveyed by Jay and Young (1977), only 5 percent reported having sex with their partners daily. Most women (57 percent) had sex two to five times per week; 25 percent had sex once a week, and 8 percent had sex less often. Little is known about factors that influence the actual or desired frequency of sex in lesbian relationships. The picture that emerges from these statistics is that most lesbian couples find sex an enjoyable and rewarding part of their relationships.

Research on sexuality in gay men's relationships presents a fairly similar picture. In general, gay men report high satisfaction with sex in their relationships (Peplau & Cochran, 1981). Gay men have sex with their steady partners as often or more often than do heterosexual couples [Lewis et al., 1980; Schäfer, 1977). Among gay men studied by Jay and Young (1977), 11 percent reported having sex with their partners daily, 38 percent had sex three to four times per week, 40 percent once or twice a week, and 11 percent less than once a week. Researchers assume that sex usually leads to orgasm for men, and so questions specifically about orgasms have not been included in most studies of gay men's relationships.

It has been suggested (for example, by Saghir & Robins, 1973) that long-term gay men's relationships often decline in sexual activity and interest. Adequate empirical evidence on this point is, however, lacking. We do not know how often such sexual "devitalization" occurs in gay men's relationships, whether it is any more common among gay male couples than among lesbian and heterosexual couples, or what factors might create such a situation.

Sexual Exclusivity

Today many couples, both heterosexual and homosexual, are questioning whether it is better for relationships to be sexually monogamous or sexually "open." As we discussed earlier, Peplau and Cochran (1980) found that more heterosexuals than homosexuals strongly valued sexual exclusivity in a steady relationship. It is important to emphasize, however, that gays are a diverse group with varied views about sexual behavior. Some gays are strong advocates of sexual exclusivity, as this quotation from a gay man illustrates: "I want my lover to be mine and only mine, and I want to be his and only his. He is my life, and I am his life, and that's the way I want it to be" (cited in

Silverstein, 1981, p. 141). Other gay men and lesbians reject the idea of *sexual* exclusivity. One gay man explained,

> I still feel that a commitment to a relationship . . , has very little to do with what I choose to do with my body. My commitment is more intellectual and in the heart. I differentiate between sex and making love. . . . When I feel strongly toward a person, I make love. When I don't, I have sex. And I can enjoy both of them very much. [Quoted by Silverstein, 1981, p. 143]

Although these two quotations are from gay men, it is easy to imagine lesbians and heterosexuals who would agree with these views.

In actual practice, the relationships of gay men are less likely to be sexually exclusive than are those of lesbians or heterosexuals. Studies suggest that most gay men who *are* in a steady relationship also have sex with men other than their primary partner (for example, see Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Blasband & Peplau, 1980; Harry & Lovely, 1979; Plummer, 197% Warren, 1974). In some studies, all the men whose relationships had continued for several years reported having had outside affairs. Why is sexual openness so common in the relationships of gay men? Several factors *are* relevant.

First, gender-role socialization in America teaches men to be more interested in sex and sexual variety than are women. One gay man suggested that "Promiscuity is inbred in all boy children, and since most boy children don't find out they're gay until later in life, their promiscuity has nothing to do with their gayness. It has to do with their *maleness*" (quoted by Mendola, 1980, p.55). In contrast, for many women, whatever their sexual orientation, sex and love *are* closely linked; thus casual sex may be less appealing.

In Jay and Young's survey (1977), 97 percent of lesbians said that emotional involvement was important to sex, and 92 percent said that emotional involvement always or very frequently accompanied their *own* sexual relations. In comparison, 83 percent of the gay men said that emotional involvement is important in sex, and 45 percent said that involvement always or usually accompanied sex. Gay men more often than lesbians separate sex and love and *can* enjoy casual sex for its own sake, without emotional involvement. In Schäfer's (1977) survey, gay men were more likely than lesbians to say that many of their sexual partners were people they had never met before (70 percent of gay men, 26 percent of lesbians) and were partners with whom they had sex only once (64 percent of gay men; 18 percent of lesbians). Gay men were less likely than lesbians to say they were in love with most of their sex partners (19 percent of gay men, 64 percent of lesbians).

Basic differences in men's and women's orientations toward love and sex may be more important here than sexual orientation. Equal proportions of lesbians and heterosexual women (64 percent) told Gundlach and Reiss (1968) that they could have sex only if they were in love with their partners. Similarly, just as gay men are more likely than lesbians to have sexually open relationships, so too are heterosexual husbands more likely than wives to have extramarital affairs (Hunt, 1974; Kinsey et al., 1948, 1953; Pietmpinto & Simenauer, 1979). Gender has a major influence on the kind of relationship people want. Whereas most men and women want a steady relationship with one special partner, men *are* more likely to want—and to have—sexual relations with other partners as well.

For gay men, the norms of the gay community may also encourage sexual openness rather than exclusivity. Especially in urban centers, the gay men's community provides many opportunities for casual sex. Gay men *can* find new partners at gay bars, public baths, and other places. The important point to remember is that for many gay men, as for many heterosexual men, casual sexual affairs *are* a complement to a steady relationship, not a substitute for it.

In growing up, men and women learn different lessons about sexuality. As adults, the genders *are* exposed to different opportunities for sexual exploration, and men continue to receive greater social support for *sexual* experimentation. Thus, we believe, differences in the sexual attitudes and behaviors of men and women are largely a result of socialization. But others attribute these gender differences to biology. For example, sociobiologist Donald Symons (1979) proposes that evolutionary pressures have encouraged a desire for sexual exclusivity in females and a desk for sexual diversity in males. In Symons' view, "the sex lives of homosexual men and women—who need not compromise sexually with members of the opposite sex—should provide dramatic insights into male sexuality and female sexuality in their undiluted states" (1979, p. 292). Symons is referring to the fact that heterosexual relationships are, in some measure, a compromise between the goals and desires of the male and female partners—a compromise that *can* obscure underlying gender differences. In relationships with same-gender partners, individuals may be able to express their personal dispositions more fully.

For gays as for heterosexuals, decisions about sexual exclusivity can have varied consequences for a love relationship. For some people, sexual exclusivity is a sign of love and commitment to their partners. For such individuals, sexual exploration with other partners might only occur if there were problems in the primary relationships. For others, however, secure and rewarding primary relationships *are* enhanced by the excitement and novelty of outside liaisons. Indeed, some people view sexual fidelity as excessively restrictive and *unnecessary* (see Harry, 1977; Jay & Young, 1977; Silverstein, 1981; Warren, 1974). In other words, the meaning of sexual openness and its implications for the continuation of a relationship *can* be quite diverse.

Research on the relationships of lesbians and gay men leads to several broad conclusions. There are many similarities between the relationship values of homosexuals and heterosexuals. Few significant differences have been found between gay and heterosexual couples on measures of relationship adjustment, love and satisfaction, or sex with one's partner. There appear to be many commonalities among intimate relationships, regardless of sexual orientation. However, a major difference between gay and heterosexual relationships did emerge. Heterosexual relationships usually emphasize gender-based differences between partners and adopt husband-wife roles as a relationship script. In contrast, lesbians and gay men usually reject traditional marital roles. Instead of treating one another as husband and wife, homosexuals treat their partners like best friends. The patterns of interaction that develop in gay couples are more likely to be based on the unique individual characteristics of the partners than on predetermined cultural scripts.

Our review has also highlighted several gender differences between the relationships of lesbians and gay men. Homosexuals are not a unitary group; it is unwise to assume that all homosexuals, regardless of gender, are necessarily similar. Lesbians are more likely than gay men to be in stable relationships. Lesbians give greater emphasis to emotional intimacy and to equality in relationships than do gay men. Lesbians are more likely to view sexuality and love as closely linked, and to prefer having sex only with partners they care about. Gay men, in contrast, are more likely to separate sex and love. Gay men enjoy sex with loved partners, but they are also more likely than gay women to enjoy recreational sex with casual partners. Gay men are more likely than lesbians to be in a sexually open relationship and to have had sex with a considerably larger number of partners. Cultural gender-role socialization undoubtedly touches all of us, regardless of sexual orientation. Gay men and lesbians bring to love relationships many of the same expectations, values, and interests as heterosexuals of the same gender.

11 Gender Roles and Sexual Violence

FRANCES CHERRY

In this chapter, Fran Cherry examines the relationship between increases in sexual assault (rape) and a number of factors including violent pornography, gender-role socialization, and reactions to the women's liberation movement.

The fusion of sex, dominance, and aggression that accompany sexual assault makes it difficult to disentangle the motivation of rapists. Cherry explores the socialization of men for sexual and aggressive behavior as one possible source of sexual assault. She also considers women's failure to communicate their feelings assertively. This problem is inherent in the traditional socialization of women. Although the lack of such skills probably contributes little to stranger rape, it may play some role in date rape.

Cherry devotes considerable space to the tendency of society as a whole, and rape victims in particular, to place responsibility for rape on the victim. Given societal attitudes toward rape victims, it is not surprising that many of these women fail to report rape; they blame themselves for their own victimization. Relying on the important work of Burgess and Holmstrom, Cherry describes the long-term effects of sexual assault.

Changes in gender-role norms in concert with other factors appear to be increasing the capacity of women to cope with rape in a more adaptive fashion. Such changes include learning self-defense techniques and showing an increased willingness to seek prosecution of the offender.

It is reasonable to be alarmed at what appears to be an increase in the incidence of rape. However, it is not clear what the source of that increase is. One possibility is that the rate is not increasing, but more women are perceiving assaults as rape and are willing to report rapes to authorities. Cherry describes legal reforms that are reducing (if not eliminating) the extent to which, having been raped, the victim must go through several more