THE LIVES OF LESBIANS, GAYS, AND BISEXUALS

Children to Adults

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Chapter 11

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GAY AND LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

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Few heterosexual Americans have a close friend who is gay or lesbian, and fewer still invite gay or lesbian couples to their homes. In a recent national survey, only one person in three indicated that any of their female or male friends, relatives, or close acquaintances were lesbian or gay (Herek, 1994). Many heterosexuals who believe that they do not know any lesbians or gay men are mistaken—they are simply unaware of the sexual orientation of their friends, coworkers, or acquaintances. Fearing social rejection, discrimination, and harassment, many lesbians and gay men conceal their sexual orientation. This point is illustrated in a study of 275 lesbian couples, most of whom had been together for more than five years and currently lived with each other (Eldridge <£ Gilbert, 1990). Several couples (15%) were raising children. Despite their strong commitment to the relationship, more than three quarters of these couples concealed their lesbianism and the true nature of their relationship from their neighbors, two thirds had not disclosed to their employers, more than one half had not told their fathers, and more than one third kept the true nature of their relationship a secret from their mothers. As a result of such concealment, gay and lesbian couples remain largely invisible to heterosexual society.

Lacking personal contact with lesbian and gay couples, many heterosexuals ' attitudes about same-sex relationships are based on stereotypes, media images, and hearsay—sources that are often negative and of questionable accuracy. Many Americans do not view lesbians and gay men as real people, but rather as abstract symbols who challenge conventional roles for women and men and who threaten traditional religious and family values. More than half of all Americans consider the "homosexual lifestyle" unacceptable (Turque, 1992), and a common belief is that same-sex couples have transient and troubled relationships.

Social science research on lesbian and gay relationships challenges prevailing stereotypes. In this chapter we summarize the growing body of scientific research about the love relationships of lesbians and gay men. We consider the quality of same-sex partnerships, the dynamics of power and the division of labor, problems and conflicts, the ending of relationships through breakups and death, and new forms of couples counseling. Research findings highlight the diversity among same-sex partnerships and reveal many basic commonalities among human love relationships regardless of sexual orientation.

LOVE AND COMMITMENT

The engraved invitation read, "After 20 years of love and life together, Emalee and Sarah would like to renew the vows they mode to one another. You are invited to share in the joy of the 20th anniversary of their commitment ceremony. A reception and dinner at their home will follow the ceremony."

Love and companionship are important ingredients for a happy life. A national survey of Americans found that most people, regardless of sexual identity, consider love to be extremely important for their overall happiness (Freedman, 1978). Ample research documents that intimate relationships are a key factor in psychological health and happiness. In a recent review, Myers (1992) concluded, "Whether young or old, male or female, rich or poor, people in stable, loving relationships do enjoy greater well-being" (p. 156).

Many gay men and lesbians desire an enduring love relationship (Bell & Weinberg, 1978) and are successful in achieving this goal. Empirical surveys about intimate relationships report that 40% to 60% of gay men and 45% to 80% of lesbians are currently in a romantic relationship (Peplau & Cochran, 1990). These figures may underestimate the true proportions because most studies survey relatively young individuals, who may be less likely to have settled into a committed relationship. Studies that include older adults report that many lesbians and gay men establish lifelong partnerships (Blumstein & Schwartz. 1983; McVVhirter & Mattison, 1984). For example, a study of lesbians over the age of 60 found relationships lasting 30 years and longer (Kehoe, 1989).

Love and Satisfaction

Many people believe that gay and lesbian relationships are unhappy. For example, one study found that heterosexual college students expected gay and lesbian relationships to be less satisfying and more prone to discord than heterosexual relationships, and they believed gay and lesbian couples to be 'Mess in love" than heterosexual partners (Testa, Kinder, & Ironson, 1987). However, available research provides no evidence that same-sex couples are typically troubled or less successful than heterosexual couples.

Several studies have compared gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples in order to investigate differences in the partners' love for each other and their satisfaction

with the relationship. These studies often matched same-sex and heterosexual couples on age, income, and other background characteristics that might otherwise bias the results. In an illustrative study, Peplau and Cochran (1980) selected matched samples of 50 lesbians. 50 gay men, 50 heterosexual women, and 50 heterosexual men who were currently in a romantic/sexual relationship. Among this sample of young adults, about 60% said they were in love with their partner, and most of the rest said they were "uncertain" about whether they were in love. On Rubin's standardized Love and Liking Scales, the lesbians and gay men generally reported very positive feelings for their partners and rated their current relationships as highly satisfying and close. No significant differences were found among lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals on any measure of relationship quality. Other studies using standardized measures of satisfaction. love, and adjustment have found the same pattern—no significant differences among couples based on sexual orientation. Gay men and lesbians report as much satisfaction with their relationships as do heterosexuals (Cardell. Finn, & Marecek, 1981; Dailey. 1979; Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Kurdek & Schmitt. 1986a. 1986b, 1987; Peplau & Cochran, 1980; Peplau, Padesky, & Hamilton, 1982). Thus, contrary to prevailing stereotypes, research indicates that most gay and lesbian couples are happy.

These findings do not imply that all gay men and lesbians have problem-free relationships. As reported later in this chapter, there are sources of conflict in same-sex relationships, just as there are in heterosexual relationships. Rather, the point is that lesbians and gay men are no more likely than heterosexuals to have dysfunctional relationships.

In the last decade, researchers have begun to identify factors that enhance satisfaction in same-sex relationships. Social exchange theory predicts that satisfaction is high when a person perceives that a relationship provides many rewards, such as a partner's intelligence, interesting personality, sense of humor, or sex appeal. Satisfaction is also high when a relationship entails relatively few costs, for instance, when conflict is low and a partner has few irritating behaviors. Several studies have found that perceived rewards and costs are significant predictors of happiness in lesbians' and gay men's relationships (Kurdek, 199la; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986a). For example, Duffy and Rusbult (1986) compared the relationships of lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals. In all three groups, greater satisfaction was significantly associated with the experience of relatively more personal rewards and fewer personal costs. In a study of lesbian relationships. Peplau et al. (1982) found support for another exchange theory prediction, that satisfaction is higher when partners are equally involved in or committed to a relationship.

Other correlates of satisfaction in gay and lesbian relationships have been investigated as well. For example, partners' values about relationships can make a difference. Individuals vary in the degree to which they value "dyadic attachment" (Peplau, Cochran. Rook, & Padesky, 1978). A person is high in attachment to the extent that he or she emphasizes the importance of shared activities, spending time together, long-term commitment, and sexual exclusivity in a relationship.

Lesbians and gay men who strongly value togetherness and security in a relationship report significantly higher satisfaction, closeness, and love for their partner than do individuals who score lower on attachment values (Eldridge & Gilbert. 1990; Peplau et al., 1978; Peplau & Cochran, 1981). Individuals can also differ in the degree to which they value personal autonomy, defined as wanting to have separate friends and activities apart from their primary relationship., Although some studies have found that lesbians and gay men who place strong emphasis on autonomy report significantly lower love and satisfaction than individuals who score lower on autonomy values (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Kurdek, 1989), other studies have not (Peplau et al., 1978; Peplau & Cochran, 1981).

There may also be links between the balance of power in a relationship and partners' satisfaction. Several studies of lesbians and gay men have found that satisfaction is higher when partners believe they share relatively equally in power and decision-making (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Harry, 1984; Kurdek, 1989; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986a; Peplau et al., 1982). Finally, a recent study suggests that happy and unhappy couples may differ in their approach to problem-solving (Kurdek, 1991a). In both lesbian and gay relationships, satisfied partners were more likely than unhappy partners to use positive problem-solving approaches, such as focusing on the specific problem at hand. Partners in happy couples were less likely than other couples to use such negative approaches as launching a personal attack, growing defensive, or withdrawing from the interaction.

Commitment

It is estimated that roughly one in every two recent heterosexual marriages will end in divorce (Martin & Bumpass, 1989). These figures are a forceful reminder that romantic relationships do not necessarily last "until death do us part" or even for a very long time. How do lesbians and gay men fare in their efforts to maintain enduring intimate relationships? Those interested in heterosexual relationships can use official marriage records and census reports to chart the length of relationships, but comparable data are not available for gay men and lesbians.

One of the few large-scale studies of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983) assessed the stability of relationships over an 18-month period. For couples who had already been together for at least 10 years, the breakup rate was quite low: Only 6% of lesbian couples, 4% of gay couples, and 4% of married couples separated during the 18-month period. Among couples together for 2 years or less, some differences in the breakup rates were found: 22% for lesbian couples, 16% for gay couples, 17% for heterosexual cohabiting couples, and 4% for married couples. It is noteworthy that the largest difference among these short-term couples was not between heterosexual and same-sex couples, but rather between legally married couples and unmarried couples, regardless of sexual orientation.

Relationship researchers have identified several factors that affect the longevity of intimate relationships and that help to explain the greater duration

of legally married couples (e.g.. Levinger. 1979). A first factor concerns positive attraction forces that make one want to stay with a partner, such as love and satisfaction with the relationship. As we noted earlier, research shows that same-sex and male-female couples typically report comparable levels of happiness in their relationships.

Second, the duration of a relationship is also affected by barriers that make it difficult for a person to leave a relationship. Barriers include anything that increases the psychological, emotional, or financial costs of ending a relationship. Heterosexual marriage can create many barriers to separation, such as the cost of divorce, investments in joint property, concerns about children, and one partner's financial dependence on the other. These obstacles may encourage married couples to work toward improving a deteriorating relationship, rather than ending it. In contrast, gay and lesbian couples are less likely to experience comparable barriers to the ending of a relationship—they cannot marry legally, they are less likely to co-own property, their relatives may prefer that they end their relationship, they are less likely to have children in common, and so on.

Kurdek and Schmitt (1986a) systematically compared the attractions and barriers experienced by partners in gay, lesbian, and heterosexual cohabiting couples and in married couples. They found no differences across the four groups in attractions; all groups reported comparable feelings of love and satisfaction. However, barriers, assessed by statements such as "many things would prevent me from leaving my partner even if 1 were unhappy," differed. Married couples reported significantly more barriers than either gay men or lesbians, and cohabiting heterosexual couples reported the fewest barriers of all. Similarly, in their study of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that couples who pooled some or all of their financial assets together were less likely to break up. Not surprisingly, married heterosexuals were the couples most likely to have joint finances. In a recent longitudinal study of cohabiting lesbian and gay couples followed over a four-year period, Kurdek (1992) also found that couples who pooled their finances were less likely to break up.

A third factor affecting the longevity of a relationship is the availability of alternatives to the present relationship. To the extent that people want to be involved in an intimate relationship, having fewer potential partners available may encourage partners to work out their problems. In contrast, a person who believes that many attractive partners are readily available or who would be just as happy single may be quicker to end a relationship. Only two studies have compared the perception of available alternatives among gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples, and they differ in their findings. One study found that lesbians and married couples reported significantly fewer alternatives than did gay men and heterosexual cohabitants (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986a). In contrast, a second study found no significant differences among lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals—all of whom reported having moderately poor alternatives (Duffy & Rusbult, 1986).

In summary, research finds that gay and lesbian couples can and do have committed, enduring relationships. On average, heterosexual and same-sex couples report similar high levels of attraction toward their partner and satisfaction

with their relationship. Couples differ, however, in the obstacles that make it difficult to end a relationship. Here, the legal and social context of marriage creates barriers to breaking up that do not typically exist for same-sex partners or for cohabiting heterosexuals. The relative lack of barriers may make it less likely that lesbians and gay men will be trapped in hopelessly miserable and deteriorating relationships. However, weaker barriers may also allow partners to end relationships that might have improved if given more time and effort. As lesbians and gay men gain greater recognition as "domestic partners," the barriers for gay and lesbian relationships may become more similar to those of heterosexuals. Currently, for example, several large companies have extended health benefits to same-sex domestic partners and increasing numbers of lesbian couples are raising children jointly (see Patterson, this volume). The impact of such trends on the stability of same-sex relationships is an important topic for further investigation.

POWER AND THE DIVISION OF LABOR

Jim is deeply in love with lorn, and the two have been together for almost a year. When Km suggested that they move in together, lorn gave excuses. Jim wonders just how much km cares for him and tries hard to make their relationship work. When they disagree about something, Jim usually gives in and lets Jom have his way, rather than risking an argument.

Power

Who has more say in a relationship? Does one partner dominate the other? Researchers have studied the balance of power, that is. the general way in which power is distributed in a relationship. Today, many Americans endorse power equality as an ideal for love relationships, and this emphasis on egalitarianism is especially strong among young adults. For example. Peplau and Cochran (1980) compared the relationship values of matched samples of young lesbians, gay men. and heterosexuals. All groups rated "having an egalitarian (equal power) relationship" as quite important. When asked what the ideal balance of power should be in their current relationship, 92% of gay m«n and 97% of lesbians said it should be "exactly equal." Not everyone, however, was successful in attaining this egalitarian ideal. Only 59% of lesbians, 38% of gay men, 48% of heterosexual women, and 40% of heterosexual men reported that their current relationship was "exactly equal." The percentage of people who describe their relationship as equal in power has varied across studies. For instance, equal power was reported by 59% of the 140 lesbians studied by Reilly and Lynch (1990) and by 60% of the 243 gay men studied by Harry and DeVall (1978).

Several factors can tip the balance of power away from equality. Social exchange theory predicts that greater power accrues to the partner who has

relatively greater personal resources, such as education, money, or social standing. Several studies have provided empirical support for this hypothesis. In two separate studies of gay men, Harry found that unequal decision-making was associated with partner differences in age and income; men who were older and wealthier tended to have more power than their partner (Harry, 1984; Harry & DeVall, 1978). Similarly, in their large-scale study of couples. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) concluded that "in gay male couples, income is an extremely important force in determining which partner will be dominant" (p. 59). For lesbians, research findings on personal resources and power are less clear-cut. A study of 77 young adult lesbians in Los Angeles found that differences in income and education were significantly related to power (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984). Another study reported that perceptions of which partner had "more say" were unrelated to education or age but were associated with large differences between the income of the two women (Reilly & Lynch, 1990). In contrast, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) concluded, "Lesbians do not use income to establish dominance in their relationship. They use it to avoid having one woman dependent on the other" (p. 60). Further research on the balance of power among lesbian couples is needed to clarify these inconsistent results. A second prediction from social exchange theory is that when one person in a relationship is relatively more dependent or involved than the other, the dependent person will be at a power disadvantage. This has been called the "principle of least interest" because the less interested person tends to have more power. Studies of heterosexuals have clearly demonstrated that lopsided dependencies are linked to imbalances of power (e.g., Peplau & Campbell, 1989). To date, only one study has tested this hypothesis with same-sex couples. Among the young lesbians studied by Caldwell and Peplau (1984), there was a strong association between unequal involvement and unequal power, with the less involved person having more power.

Another approach to understanding power in relationships focuses on the specific tactics that partners use to influence each other. For example, Falbo and Peplau (1980) asked lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals to describe how they influence their romantic partner to do what they want. These open-ended descriptions were reliably categorized into several influence strategies. The results led to two major conclusions. First, gender affected power tactics, but only among heterosexuals. Whereas heterosexual women were more likely to withdraw or express negative emotions, heterosexual men were more likely to use bargaining or reasoning. But this sex difference did not emerge in comparisons of lesbians and gay men influencing their same-sex partner. Second, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, individuals who perceived themselves as relatively more powerful in the relationship tended to use persuasion and bargaining. In contrast, partners low in power tended to use withdrawal and emotion.

Another study comparing the intimate relationships of lesbians, gay men. and heterosexuals also found that an individual's use of influence tactics depended on his or her relative power in the relationship (Howard, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1986). Regardless of sexual orientation, a partner with relatively less power tended to use "weak" strategies such as supplication and manipulation.

Those in positions of strength were more likely to use autocratic and bullying tactics, both "strong" strategies. Further, individuals with male partners (i.e.. heterosexual women and gay men) were more likely to use supplication and manipulation. Similarly, Kollock, Blumstein, and Schwartz (1985) found that signs of conversational dominance, such as interrupting a partner in the middle of a sentence, were linked to the balance of power. Although interruption has sometimes been viewed as a male behavior, it was actually used more often by the dominant person in the relationship, regardless of that person's gender or sexual orientation. Taken together, the results suggest that although some influence strategies have been stereotyped as masculine or feminine, they may more correctly be viewed as a reflection of power rather than gender.

Division of Labor

All couples face decisions about who will do what in their life together. For a dating couple these decisions range from who will do the driving to who will take the lead in initiating sexual intimacy. When a couple decides to live together, new questions arise about responsibilities for housework, finances, and entertaining guests. Traditional sex roles have provided ready-made answers to these questions for heterosexuals—the man is the leader and breadwinner and the woman is the follower and homemaker. Heterosexuals who reject traditional roles may find that it takes considerable effort to forge new patterns of relating. How do gay and lesbian couples organize their lives together? Tripp noted, "When people who are not familiar with homosexual relationships try to picture one, they almost invariably resort to a heterosexual frame of reference, raising questions about which partner is 'the man' and which 'the woman'" (1975, p. 152). Historical accounts of gay life in the United States before the advent of gay rights organizations and the modern feminist movement suggest that masculine-feminine roles were fairly common (see Jacobson & Grossman, this volume). For example, Wolf (1980) described lesbian experiences in the 1950s in these terms:

> The old gay world divided up into "butch" and "femme."... Butches were tough, presented themselves as being as masculine as possible… and they assumed the traditional male role of taking care of their partners, even fighting over them if necessary ___ Femmes, by contrast, were protected, ladylike___ They cooked, cleaned house, and took core of their "butch." (p. 40)

Today, most lesbians and gay men actively reject traditional husband-wife or masculine-feminine roles as a model for enduring relationships (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Harry, 1983, 1984; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984; Pepiau & Gordon, 1983).

Most lesbians and gay men are in dual-worker relationships, so that neither partner is the exclusive breadwinner and each partner has some measure of economic independence. The most common division of labor involves flexibility, with partners sharing domestic activities or dividing tasks according to personal preferences. For example, in Bell and Weinberg's (1978) study nearly 60% of lesbians

and gay men said that housework was shared equally. Asked if one partner consistently does all the "feminine tasks" or all the "masculine tasks/' about 90% of lesbians and gay men said "no." Indeed, some gay men and lesbians report that one of the things they appreciate about same-sex relationships is being able to avoid traditional roles: "Role playing seems to me by nature to involve dominance and control," one gay man explained, "both of which make me feel uncomfortable" (Jay & Young, 1977, p. 369). A lesbian explained that she and her partner joke about butch-femme roles. "She will say, 'Well, I guess I'm the femme today/ but we really aren't into role playing at all.... If we see couples into butch-femme relationships, we go, 'Oh. yick!'" (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983, p. 451).

Several researchers have suggested that today many lesbians and gay men base their relationships on a friendship model (Harry. 1983, Peplau. 1991). In best friendships, partners are often of relatively similar age and share common interests, skills, and resources. Unlike traditional marriages, best friendships are usually similar in status and power.

Additional research about the division of labor in same-sex relationships is needed. One particularly valuable direction for inquiry is the examination of the ways in which same-sex couples juggle the various responsibilities they have to their partner, job, children, aging parents, and community activities (e.g. Shachar & Gilbert, 1983). When both spouses in a heterosexual marriage have full-time jobs, women shoulder the majority of housework and child care, creating a substantial imbalance in workload (Crosby, 1991). Perhaps an understanding of the more egalitarian division of labor in same-sex relationships will provide clues about how all couples can arrive at a more equitable sharing of responsibilities.

PROBLEMS AND CONFLICT

Joon and Kate hove lived together for six yeors. Joan's career os on attorney frequently takes her out of town ond fate's work os o librarian ot a local college is also very demanding. Increasingly Joon and Kate have little time to spend with each other. Jhey often argue out of frustration ond fear that their relationship is headed for o breakup. Both women ore unwilling to compromise their careers but do not wont to lose the relationship.

Disagreements and conflicts occur in all intimate relationships. A study of heterosexual newlyweds identified 85 different types of conflicts (Gottman, 1979). Among lesbian and gay couples, the range of possible conflicts is probably equally large. Because most of the available information about problems in lesbian and gay relationships comes from reports by therapists about their clients, the full range of problems encountered in same-sex partnerships may not be represented. Issues described in the literature include differences in background or values, concerns about finances or work, sexual problems, jealousy or possessiveness, and problems with family members (Berger, 1990; Berzon, 1988; Browning, Reynolds, & Dworkin, 1991; George & Behrendt, 1988). In short, many problems

in same-sex relationships are similar to those in heterosexual relationships. There are, however, problems specific to same-sex couples. We consider two problems that arise from gender socialization and from homophobia.

Merger and Competition

Some authors have speculated that the gender socialization of men and women may create unique problems for same-sex couples that are not encountered by heterosexuals. For example, it has been suggested that lesbians are at special risk of becoming overly involved and identified with each other, in part because our society teaches women to value intimacy and emotional closeness. Evidence for this point comes from clinicians who work with lesbian couples in therapy and have described a problem called "merger," "fusion," or "enmeshment" (Falco, 1991; Krestan & Bepko, 1980; Roth, 1984; Smalley, 1987). *Merger* has been defined as "the difficulty of maintaining separate identities within the relationship, and a tendency for merging in thoughts, actions, or feelings" (Browning et al., 1991, p. 185). In therapy, merger is inferred when partners seem to be too emotionally close, or when partners appear confused about their individual feelings, opinions, or personal identity. Burch (1986) provided the following illustration of a merger problem:

> Judith and Mario both complained that they did not follow their own desires because that would disturb the other. Mario said, "She mokes me feel guilty when I go out with my friends without her, so I can't do it." Judith said, "I can't tell Maria when I'm unhappy because she takes it so personally/ (p. 60)

Burch noted that merger can occur in all types of relationships but suggested that lesbians have a greater tendency toward enmeshment because of their psychological development as women and because the larger society does not recognize or value lesbian relationships. These clinical reports illustrate that merger can be a problem for some lesbian couples. However, in the absence of systematic research comparing the frequency of merger problems among lesbians and among heterosexual couples, the claim that this problem is more common among lesbians remains untested.

It has been suggested that gay couples are vulnerable to unique problems that result from men's traditional socialization. For instance, Hawkins (1992) linked male socialization for achievement, competitiveness, sex, and aggression to problems commonly reported by therapists who work with gay couples, including conflicts over finances or jobs, anger and violence, jealousy, and sexual difficulties. Hawkins also commented on gay men's communication skills, asserting that male socialization "leaves men ill-equipped to deal with relationships. .. . When two men then try to build a relationship, the problem is compounded because both are lacking in the interpersonal skills needed" (p. 82). Other clinicians have also emphasized that gay couples have problems because of adherence to stereotypic male roles (e. g., George & Behrendt, 1987; Shannon & Woods, 1991).

Although these speculations and clinical observations about problems in gay couples are intuitively plausible, counterevidence is also available. For instance, in interviews with 156 gay couples not in therapy, McWhirter and Mattison (1982) found no pervasive lack of verbal expressiveness. "In fact gay men have a tendency to over-communicate with each other. At times they process their feelings and behaviors 'to death,' causing relationship fatigue and distress" (p. 88). Systematic research is needed to test the accuracy, prevalence, and generalizability of clinical beliefs about gender-linked problems in gay and lesbian couples.

Coming Out and Being Out

Bill and Roger hove lived together for o year. B/7/ is *active in o local goy political organization and regularly asks Roger to* offend *organization events with him. Roger refuses because he fears that his boss or family might find out that he is gay. When Roger's parents visit, he asks Bill to spend the week with friends. Jhe couple hod o major fight about Roger's decision not to come out to his family, and Bill stomped out of the apartment without pocking any of his things.*

Society's negative attitudes toward homosexuality create problems for gay and lesbian couples. A common dilemma for lesbians and gay men concerns whether to reveal their sexual orientation to friends, family, coworkers. and others in their social network. Decisions about whether to "come out" or "be out" about their relationship can be a source of conflict for gay and lesbian couples.

Reports by therapists have identified ways in which disclosure about one's sexual orientation can affect relationships. In some couples, partners disagree about how much they want to reveal about themselves and their relationship. For example, Roger prefers to keep his relationship hidden, fearing harassment at work or rejection by his parents. Bill prefers a more open approach. Disagreements of this sort can be particularly stressful; the less open partner may feel pressured into more disclosure than is comfortable, arid the more open partner may interpret the other's fear of disclosure as a lack of commitment to the relationship (Murphy, 1992; Shannon & Woods, 1991). *As* an illustration, Decker (1984) explained that if one member of a couple wants to give a party for coworkers at home and expects the other to pretend that he or she is "just a roommate," confusion, anger, and depression may result.

Even when partners agree about the extent to which they will be open, problems can arise because of negative reactions from family, friends, or coworkers. Murphy (1989) found that the anticipation of negative reactions from parents created stress in lesbian relationships. Writing about a woman whose father disapproves of her lesbianism, Murphy (1989) reported, "She and her lover felt so much conflict about seeing her father that they would fight with each other 'over any stupid thing' before visiting him" (p. 48). Many therapists believe that resolving issues about "outness" is central to a successful same-sex relationship (e.g., George & Behrendt, 1988; Murphy, 1992; Shannon & Woods, 1991).

Belonging to an ethnic-minority group can make coming out even more difficult (see Manalansan, this volume). Two small studies have suggested that gay and lesbian Asian Americans may experience considerable stress concerning coming out (Chan, 1989; Wooden, Kawasaki, & Mayeda, 1983). On the one hand, Asian Americans place great importance on family and community relationships and so being cut off from these ties is a serious threat. On the other hand, Asian American culture is extremely negative about homosexuality, and individuals who identify openly as gay or lesbian risk bringing shame not only on themselves but also on their family and community. As one Asian American explained. "I wish I could tell my parents—they are the only ones who do not know about my gay identity, but I am sure they would reject me. There is no frame of reference to understand homosexuality in Asian American culture" (Chan, 1989. p. 19). Thus, the common fears of lesbians and gay men that coming out may lead to rejection and stigmatization may be heightened for Asian Americans and members of other ethnic groups that emphasize strong family ties and have strong antigay attitudes.

Violence and Partner Abuse

*"The fighting began with intense arguments that were devastating ___ When she was angry it was like being stabbed in the chest. She was the source of that pain; she was also the only source of com fort, understanding and affirmation of love ___*One *day we had an argument, and she hit me. We were on my motorcycle, I was driving, and all I could think was what an insane thing it was—to hit my arm and risk our lives." (Lisa, / 986, p. 38)*

In some relationships conflicts escalate into psychological abuse and physical violence. Estimates of battering and prolonged physical abuse in heterosexual relationships range from 25% to 33% (Herbert, Silver, & Ellard, 1991; Koss, 1990). Adequate information about the frequency of abuse in gay and lesbian relationships is not currently available. Understandably, some lesbians and gay men have been reluctant to discuss violence in same-sex couples for fear of contributing to negative attitudes toward homosexuality. In a book about violence in lesbian relationships, Hart (1986) explained, "We recognized how threatening the reality of lesbian battering was to our dream of lesbian Utopia—a nonviolent, fairly androgynous ... community struggling for social justice" (p. 13). Nonetheless, there is growing evidence that violence is a problem for some lesbian and gay couples (e.g., Kanuha, 1990; Lobel, 1986; Morrow & Hawxhurst, 1989; Renzetti, 1992; Waterman, Dawson, & Bologna, 1989).

As in heterosexual relationships, abuse in same-sex couples can take many forms, including verbal abuse (e.g., demeaning the partner in front of others), negative actions (e.g., destroying partners' property), sexual coercion, and physical violence. Many of the same factors that contribute to heterosexual partner abuse appear to affect violence in gay and lesbian couples. For example, the misuse of alcohol or drugs is a common precursor to violence. Jealousy, dependency,

and dominance may also contribute to abuse (Renzetti. 1992: Schilit, Lie. & Montagne. 1990). Individuals who stay in an abusive relationship often report that they are socially isolated and have no one to turn to for help. In addition, homophobia may create unique problems for lesbians and gay men who face violence in a relationship. For example, Renzetti (1982) reported that many of the abused lesbians she studied did not turn to their family for help. In some cases, the family did not know that the woman had a lesbian partner. In other cases, the family knew that a woman was lesbian but the woman nonetheless chose not to seek help from relatives because she feared that knowledge of the battering would reinforce their negative, homophobic attitudes,.

More research is needed to clarify the magnitude of the problem of abuse in gay and lesbian couples and to understand the factors that contribute to this violence. To date, most published studies of violence in same-sex relationships have investigated lesbian relationships. Even less is known about abuse in gay relationships. Also needed are better community services to help lesbians and gay men who are victims of abuse. Currently, social service agencies lack adequate information and resources to address gay and lesbian battering (Hammond, 1988). Indeed, existing shelters for battered women are often hesitant to extend services to lesbians (Lobel, 1986; Renzetti, 1992). Although public discussion of battering in same-sex couples is relatively new, it is already apparent that violence is a significant problem.

WHEN RELATIONSHIPS END

Jennifer ond Michelle lived together for two years, their relationship was always stormy, but both women tried to work out their problems. Finally deciding that the relationship would never get any better, Jennifer moved out lost weekend. Jennifer feels guilty about ending the relationship but is relieved that their stressful fights ore over. Michelle was very surprised by Jennifer's decision and feels deeply hurt ond depressed.

Couples who have dated casually may break up after a few months. More enduring relationships may end as partners grow apart or discover incompatibilities. Sadly, relationships of any length can end tragically when a partner dies. During the current AIDS epidemic, bereavement has become an all too familiar experience for many gay couples. In this section, we examine research about the experience of breaking up and bereavement in gay and lesbian couples.

Breaking Up

Relationships end for diverse reasons, many of which have been considered in our discussion of the problems and conflicts experienced in gay and lesbian relationships. Two studies have specifically addressed the reasons lesbian and gay

partners give for a breakup. In one study, 50 lesbians rated the extent to which each of 17 possible factors had contributed to the ending of a past relationship (Pepiau et al., 1983). Among this sample of young lesbians (median age 26). who may not have been ready for a permanent commitment, issues of independence were the most important factor cited. One half of the women rated their desire to be independent as a major factor, and nearly one third indicated that their partner's desire to be independent was a major factor. A second theme concerned differences between the partners in interests (36%). attitudes about sex (24%). background (17%), intelligence (10%), and/or political views (7%). These findings highlight the potential importance of similarity for relationship satisfaction among lesbians, a point amply documented among heterosexuals (Brehm, 1992). Perhaps surprising in light of society's hostility toward homosexuality, issues about being lesbian were not commonly cited as reasons for a breakup. Less than 20% of women cited as a major factor their feelings about being a lesbian, 14% cited "societal attitudes toward lesbian relationships," and only 2% cited pressure from their parents.

In a longitudinal study of cohabiting couples, Kurdek (1991b) investigated factors contributing to the breakup of lesbian and gay relationships. Although only 12 gay men and 14 lesbians were included in this breakup sample, the results offer preliminary evidence about the reasons for dissolution. In open-ended descriptions of reasons for the breakup, the most common themes were nonresponsiveness (e.g., "There was no communication between us and little support"), partner problems (e.g., "He had a big drug and alcohol problem"), and sexual issues (e.g., "She had an affair"). Participants also rated the importance of 11 specific issues that might have contributed to their separation. Highest ratings were given for the partner's frequent absence, sexual incompatibility, mental cruelty, and lack of love. Kurdek noted that these diverse explanations for separation are similar to those reported in studies of heterosexuals.

A final source of information about factors leading to breakups is a large-scale study of lesbian and gay couples conducted by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983). They followed a sample of 493 gay and 335 lesbian couples for an 18-month period and compared those who ended their relationship to those who stayed together. Money mattered: Couples who argued about money, fought about their level of income, and did not pool their finances were more likely to break up than other couples. The partners' commitment to their jobs was also a factor. Couples who said that work intruded into their relationship were more likely to break up, and partners who were more ambitious and spent more time at work vyere more likely to leave the relationship. In contrast, couples who spent a lot of time together were more likely to survive the test of time. Sexual satisfaction also contributed to the longevity of a relationship.

The ending of an important relationship is usually an emotion-laden experience. In the Kurdek study (1991b), participants rated their emotions following separation. The most common negative emotional reactions were loneliness, confusion, anger, guilt, and helplessness. Common positive emotions included personal growth, relief from conflict, increased happiness, and independence.

Research with heterosexual dating couples found similar emotional reactions (Hill Rubin. & Peplau, 1976). This study also showed that the kind of emotional reactions experienced depend on the part that each person played in the breakup: Individuals who had initiated the breakup were more likely to feel guilty, free, and happy, whereas partners who wanted to continue the relationship but were left behind felt lonelier and more depressed.

The severity of emotional reactions to a breakup depends on many factors. Kurdek (1991b) found that lesbians and gay men who placed great emphasis on attachment to a partner had more difficult emotional reactions than did individuals who gave less emphasis to attachment (see also Peplau & Cochran, 1981). In addition, individuals had a more difficult emotional adjustment when their relationship had been of longer duration, when the couple had pooled their finances, and when they had felt greater love for their partner.

The Death of a Partner

One of the most stressful events in life is the death of a spouse (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Much is known about the psychological reactions of heterosexuals to bereavement and about the sources of social support usually available to a grieving spouse. When a heterosexual partner dies, a period of public grieving is commonly allowed. In addition to the support of friends and family, widows and widowers can turn to religious institutions and to self-help groups for the widowed. There is no reason to believe that the emotional anguish of bereavement is different for lesbians and gay men who lose a beloved partner. After the death of her partner of 15 years, one older lesbian reacted the following way:

> I become o hermit. For ot leost o yeor I wept when I looked ot onyone—this I hid—but I still become depressed. For severol years I frequently visited the mausoleum and talked to her (No one else around). My work is my savior. (Kehoe, 1989, p. 49)

Although the personal pain of loss may be similar for people regardless of their sexual orientation, the social circumstances of bereavement often differ considerably. Same-sex partners who have been closeted about their relationship may receive little social support. They may be unable to talk about the nature of their loss or the meaning that it has for them. According to mental health professionals, their grief may never be adequately expressed and so the period of mourning may be prolonged (McDonald & Steinhorn, 1990). Even when lesbian and gay partners have been open about their relationship, a surviving partner may encounter difficulties. For example, they may not be granted bereavement leave from work. Without legal documents such as wills or joint insurance policies, widowed partners may not have rights to their joint property (see Ruben-stein, this volume). Even when partners take legal precautions, problems can still arise. An older woman who had been named the beneficiary of her lover's part in the house and business they owned together explained:

> Her will is being contested by her family and the property we had in joint ownership is in litigation. Even the burial plans were overruled by them, and they finally made the medical decision to remove her life support systems. (Kehoe, 1989, p. 49)

A gay man described the problems created by the family of his lover:

> Not two months after he died they were accusing me of stealing from him and demanding a complete accounting for the money spent during the time he was sick ____Right after the funeral,... they wanted to get into the apartment... as if it was his house, not mine ___ I really wonder, do straight people go through this, or is there more respect? (Shelby, 1992, p. 146)

Currently, information on the bereavement process for lesbians and gay men remains sparse. Clinicians are only beginning to develop therapeutic approaches to help lesbians and gay men who have lost their partners (Saunders, 1990; Siegal & Hoefer, 1981).

Losing a Partner to AIDS

> *Gary's partner Miguel recently died from AIDS. Gary had* cared *for Miguel through the night sweats, delusions, and pain. As he watched over Miguel every night, Gary asked himself why he had not gotten the virus. He felt guilty* for *being the healthy one and sometimes wished that he also had AIDS.*

Because the AIDS epidemic struck first in the United States in gay communities, many gay men have lost a loved partner to this disease. The difficulties of bereavement are heightened when AIDS is the cause of death, both because victims tend to die at an untimely young age and because of the social stigma of AIDS (Stulberg & Smith, 1988). Before the AIDS crisis, it would have been unusual for a young adult to confront the death of many friends to disease. But in many gay communities, attendance at funerals has become a familiar part of life. A study of 745 gay men in New York City found that nearly one third had suffered the loss of a lover or close friend to AIDS. Some had experienced multiple losses. The more people an individual knew who had died of AIDS, the greater the person's risk of experiencing serious psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, sleep problems, and increased use of recreational drugs and sedatives (Martin, 1988).

An additional problem experienced by some surviving partners and friends has been termed "survivor guilt" (Wayment, Silver, & Kemeny, 1994). Men who have engaged in risky sexual behavior but do not test positive for HIV may believe that they "should" be HIV positive and have been spared by chance. As one man explained:

> As a surviving partner, one whose number of living friends has dwindled steadily from 1983 to 'mostly deceased by 1989,' I'm here to tell you that the stress and anxiety ore real. It's very difficult to figure out why some of us are left and others are not, especially when we all did the same things, (p. 21)

Experts acknowledge that professional services to assist people whose partners have died from AIDS are inadequate (Kubler-Ross, 1987).

COUPLES COUNSELING

Lesbians and gay men seek counseling for many of the same relationship problems as do heterosexuals. Yet their experiences in therapy can be quite different because gay men and lesbians often confront antihomosexual bias from therapists. Only recently have clinicians begun to acknowledge this problem and to create gay and lesbian affirmative approaches to therapy. Another recent trend has been the development of couples counseling for same-sex partners.

Bias in Psychotherapy

Karen began seeing o psychotherapist because she was having problems in her relationship with Amy. Jhe therapist, believing that homosexuality reflects psychological immaturity, encouraged Karen to break up with Amy. Jhe therapist told Karen that her of fail with Amy was just o "phase" she would outgrow and advised Karen to start dating men.

The process of psychotherapy is inevitably influenced by the values and biases of the therapist (Murray & Abramson, 1983). A large-scale survey of members of the American Psychological Association identified many ways in which therapists sometimes provide biased and inadequate care to lesbian and gay clients (Garnets, Hancock. Cochran, Goodchilds, & Peplau, 1991). For instance, therapists may view a client's homosexuality as a sign of psychological disorder, trivialize or demean gay and lesbian lifestyles, or be poorly informed about lesbian and gay identity development and the societal context of antihomosexual prejudice. When relationship problems are the reason for entering therapy, lesbians and gay men may encounter additional types of bias (DeCrescenzo 1983/1984: Falco, 1991; Ussher. 1991). A therapist may underestimate the importance of intimate relationships for gay men and lesbians or regard same-sex partnerships as unhealthy or transient. A therapist may be insensitive to the nature and diversity of lesbian and gay relationships, perhaps relying on inaccurate stereotypes about masculine and feminine roles in same-sex couples (Eldridge, 1987). In addition, a therapist may fail to consider couples counseling when it might be more appropriate than individual psychotherapy. Therapists who are themselves gay or lesbian are not necessarily invulnerable to these biases (Anthony, 1981/1982; Stein, 1988).

Affirmative Therapies for Lesbian and Gay Couples

Peter started seeing a therapist because of increasing conflicts with his lover, Sean. Jhey argued o lot about money, housework, and sexual values. Jhe therapist suggested that Sean and Peter consider couples counseling so they could work together to solve their problems.

Some therapists believe that it is not enough to provide unbiased therapy for lesbians and gay men. Rather, clinicians should go further by developing approaches to therapy that affirm the value and legitimacy of gay and lesbian lifestyles. Gay and lesbian affirmative psychotherapies place importance on the

development of a positive gay or lesbian identity in the context of loving and healthy relationships with same-sex others (DeCrescenzo, 1983/1984; Malyon, 1981/1982). Affirmative therapists are especially sensitive to the psychological consequences of societal prejudice and homophobia, including the possibility that lesbians and gay men may have internalized negative attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality (Gonsiorek, 1988).

Within the framework of affirmative psychotherapy, clinicians are now creating therapeutic approaches specifically for lesbian and gay couples. For some relationship problems, a couples approach may be preferable to seeing one or both partners individually. In a discussion of therapy with gay couples, Shannon and Woods (1991) noted that all couples in healthy relationships, regardless of sexual orientation, share such characteristics as commitment, respect for each other, the expression of feelings, and the ability to resolve conflicts. Based on their knowledge of gay men's experiences, Shannon and Woods highlighted additional issues that are often important for gay couples. These include each partner being able to accept and value his homosexuality and giving up rigid male stereotypic roles that can detract from a successful same-sex relationship. In a discussion of affirmative therapy for lesbians, Browning and colleagues (1991) noted the potential value of feminist therapy in helping lesbian clients understand the influences of both sexism and homophobia in their lives. Currently, therapists are developing treatment models for specific relationship issues that can affect gay and lesbian couples, including sexual problems (Hall, 1988; Reece, 1988), alcohol abuse (Glaus, 1988/1989; Kus, 1990), and physical abuse (Hammond, 1988; Morrow & Hawxhurst. 1989).

Affirmative therapies emphasize the role of therapists as advocates for social change as well as service providers (Brown. 1989; Browning et al., 1991; Shannon & Woods, 1991). Although many gay affirmative therapists are themselves gay men or lesbians, an affirmative approach can be used by therapists regardless of their sexual orientation. The key is drawing on knowledge about the personal and relationship experiences of lesbians and gay men, being sensitive to the diversity of lesbians and gay men, and developing expertise in effective treatment approaches (Fassinger, 1991).

CONCLUSION

We have reviewed a growing body of scientific research on gay and lesbian relationships. Although many gaps remain in our knowledge, much has been learned about same-sex couples in the past 20 years. Public interest in same-sex couples appears to be increasing, perhaps spurred by the recent efforts of lesbians and gay men to secure legal rights in such arenas as health benefits for domestic partners, child custody, marriage rights, and service in the armed forces.

Research has demonstrated that most lesbians and gay men desire intimate relationships and are successful in creating them. Many sarne-sex couples want an equal-power relationship, although not all couples attain this ideal. Many times,

differences between partners in personal resources and psychological dependency on the relationship set the stage for power inequalities. However, same-sex couples do not typically adopt "husband" and "wife" roles in their relationships. Instead, most lesbian and gay couples have a flexible division of labor, sharing housework and other chores. Contrary to stereotypical beliefs, same-sex partnerships are no more vulnerable to conflicts and dissatisfactions than their heterosexual counterparts. The loss of a close relationship through breakup or death is always a painful emotional experience. Because of the AIDS epidemic, many gay men have confronted the untimely loss of friends and lovers. In recent years, therapists have developed new gay affirmative approaches to helping lesbian and gay couples cope effectively with problems that occur in their relationships.

Many similarities have emerged in the relationship experiences of lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals, suggesting that there is much commonality in the issues affecting all contemporary couples. That which most clearly distinguishes same-sex from heterosexual couples is the social context of their lives. Whereas heterosexuals enjoy many social and institutional supports for their relationships, gay and lesbian couples are the object of prejudice and discrimination. Drawing on their clinical observations, therapists have begun to analyze the impact of social rejection on the adjustment of gay and lesbian couples. However, additional research is needed to understand more fully how traditional social institutions and hostile attitudes affect all facets of gay and lesbian relationships.

Scholars are increasingly emphasizing the rich diversity that exists among gay and lesbian couples. Gender differences between the relationships of lesbians and gay men have received the most attention (e.g., Peplau, 1991). Additional studies are needed, however, to understand the varieties of same-sex partnerships and how such factors as rulture and ethnicity influence lesbian and gay couples. Virtually all studies discussed in this chapter examined the relationships of White, educated, middle-class people. The few studies that considered ethnic-minority lesbians or gay men typically focused on issues such as identity development or AIDS (e.g., Chan, 1989; Espin. 1987; Loiacano, 1989; Wooden et ah, 1983), not on relationships. Additional research on ethnic-minority couples will help to clarify issues that are especially prominent among ethnic-minority lesbians and gay men. These issues include how relationships are shaped by racial or ethnic identity, how conflicting loyalties to families and to love relationships are balanced, how couples react to potential homophobia in their ethnic communities and to racism or other prejudice in gay and lesbian communities, and how different forms of spirituality affect couples' lives.

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