

# THE UNFAITHFUL LOVER

## *Heterosexuals' Perceptions of Bisexuals and Their Relationships*

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To examine heterosexuals' perceptions of bisexuals, 353 young adults read a description of a dating couple and rated each partner and the couple on several dimensions. The gender and sexual orientation (bisexual, heterosexual, homosexual) of each partner was varied among research participants. Compared to heterosexuals, bisexuals were seen as less likely to be monogamous, more likely to give a sexually transmitted disease (STD) to a partner, and more able to satisfy a partner sexually. Compared to gay men and lesbians, bisexuals were seen as more likely to give an STD to a partner and less able to satisfy a partner sexually. Despite their seeming behavioral compliance to heterosexual relationship norms, bisexuals in male–female relationships were not viewed more positively than bisexuals in same-gender relationships. Participants perceived male and female bisexuals similarly. Explanations for these and other findings are considered.

Although bisexual women and men are gaining increased visibility in the media, they continue to face misunderstanding and prejudice from heterosexuals. Psychologist Naomi McCormick (1994, p. 65) suggests, for example, that “According to widely held but erroneous beliefs, bisexuals are destined to become unfaithful lovers who will destroy the hearts (and possibly the health) of their devoted lesbian, gay and heterosexual partners.” Unfortunately, systematic research to document heterosexu-

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als' views about bisexuals is lacking. The best available information comes from the personal statements of bisexual men and women who have described their experiences in anthologies or to researchers (e.g., Hutchins & Kaahumanu, 1991; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994). According to these personal accounts, heterosexuals' perceptions of bisexuals incorporate five themes.

### Monogamy

First, bisexuals are seen as rejecting sexual monogamy. Bisexuals are viewed as promiscuous people who desire concurrent sexual relationships with both men and women and who pursue several sexual relationships at the same time (Hutchins & Kaahumanu, 1991; Shuster, 1987; Weinberg et al., 1994). For example, a bisexual man noted, "Some [heterosexual women] didn't want to date me because they feared I would not be sexually faithful to them" (cited in Weinberg et al., 1994, p. 120). According to one bisexual woman, her partner worried that having "a bisexual identity meant that I was declaring . . . my need to have my cake and eat it too . . . so the hardest part was convincing her . . . that I did not need a man and a woman in my life to be [bisexual]; that one person could fulfill me" (Anderson, 1992, p. 171).

### Sexual Riskiness

Second, bisexuals are seen as particularly likely to contract sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) through unsafe sexual practices and to spread these diseases to their heterosexual partners (Shuster, 1991; Sumpter, 1991). McCormick (1994, p. 65) suggested that "prejudiced heterosexuals falsely blame bisexuals for being members of a promiscuous group that is responsible for spreading the AIDS epidemic and other sexually transmitted diseases to the heterosexual population." As one bisexual man stated, "It's awful. We are seen as carriers of disease to the heterosexual community" (cited in Weinberg et al., 1994, p. 216).

### Trust

Third, bisexuals are seen as romantically fickle, likely to deceive a partner about their other romantic affairs, and unlikely to make a lasting commitment (George, 1993; Hutchins & Kaahumanu, 1991). As one bisexual noted, "My 'ex' used to say she couldn't trust me because I'm bi. . . . I would never leave someone for anyone else. I'm an extremely loyal and honest person, and it hurt not to have my girlfriend trust me" (cited in Ault, 1994, p. 109).

### Sexual Talent

Fourth, bisexuals are seen as sexually talented lovers who enjoy an active sex life and who are highly knowledgeable and open-minded about sexuality (Hutchins & Kaahumanu, 1991). For example, some bisexuals report being perceived by hetero-

sexuals as “chic, intriguing turn-ons” (Shuster, 1987, p. 66). Others may perceive bisexuals as having expert knowledge about sex or as using special sexual techniques because of their experiences with both men and women.

### Relationship Quality

Because bisexuals are believed to reject the cultural ideal of monogamous and committed relationships, bisexuals’ romantic relationships may be seen as generally poor in quality—lower in love, satisfaction, and intimacy, and higher in conflict than the relationships of heterosexuals. This would be parallel to research showing that heterosexuals tend to perceive gay male and lesbian relationships as poorer in quality than heterosexual relationships (Testa, Kinder, & Ironson, 1987).

In summary, bisexuals have often reported experiencing misunderstanding and negative stereotyping from their partners and friends. To date, however, no research has systematically investigated how heterosexuals actually view bisexuals. The present study represents a first step toward understanding how heterosexuals perceive bisexual women and men. The five themes previously described suggest that beliefs about bisexuals often center around their relationships—what they value in a relationship and how they treat their partners. Consequently, the strategy of this research was to ask heterosexuals to read a description of a person in a romantic relationship and then to evaluate that target person, his or her partner, and the couple. The gender and sexual orientation of the partners were varied systematically so that some couples included a bisexual partner and others did not. This study focused on comparisons among three types of couples, as will be described.

First, we compared participants’ perceptions of bisexuals versus heterosexuals in a mixed-gender (male–female) relationship. Is a bisexual woman dating a heterosexual man seen as similar to a heterosexual woman dating a heterosexual man? To the extent that heterosexuals use their own group as the implicit standard, stereotypes of bisexuals may be most apparent when compared to heterosexual targets. For example, if bisexuals are seen as avoiding monogamous relationships, they may be viewed as more interested than heterosexuals in dating others outside their current relationship or as more likely to “cheat” on their partner. If bisexuals are perceived as risky sex partners, they may be seen as more likely than heterosexuals to spread an STD to a partner. If bisexuals are seen as untrustworthy, they may be perceived as more likely than heterosexuals to become bored with their relationship and to feel only weak commitment to their partner. If bisexuals are seen as sexual experts, they may be judged as better able to satisfy a partner sexually than heterosexuals. Finally, if bisexuals are believed to have poorer relationships than heterosexuals, mixed-gender couples with one bisexual partner may be seen as less in love and more conflicted than heterosexual couples.

Second, we compared perceptions of bisexuals dating a same-gender versus an other-gender partner on each of the five themes. For example, is a bisexual woman dating a lesbian viewed as similar to a bisexual woman dating a heterosexual man? Or do the gender and sexual orientation of the bisexual’s partner alter perceptions of the bisexual individual and of the relationship? Empirical research has not yet

determined how perceptions of a bisexual person are influenced by his/her choice of a romantic partner. Comparing perceptions of bisexuals with a same-gender homosexual partner versus an other-gender heterosexual partner provides information about possible variations in the perceptions of bisexuals.

Third, we compared perceptions of bisexuals versus homosexuals in a same-gender relationship. For example, is a bisexual woman with a lesbian partner seen as similar to a lesbian with a lesbian partner? If heterosexuals simply have generalized beliefs about nonheterosexual individuals or about individuals in a same-gender relationship, then descriptions of bisexuals, gay men, and lesbians might be similar. Heterosexual adults may have more differentiated perceptions, however. So, for instance, they might view bisexuals as more promiscuous than homosexuals because bisexuals can have partners of both sexes.

In all of these comparisons, the possible impact of the gender of the bisexual person was also analyzed. Do heterosexuals perceive bisexual men and women similarly or differently? No empirical research has addressed this question. Studies of heterosexuals' perceptions of gay men and lesbians have found that gay men and lesbians are often seen as having the characteristics of opposite-gender heterosexuals (e.g., Laner & Laner, 1979, 1980; Levitt & Klassen, 1974). For example, Kite and Deaux (1987) asked heterosexuals to list characteristics of heterosexual and homosexual men and women. Respondents characterized both heterosexual women and gay men as "feminine," and associated gay men with a "feminine walk and mannerisms," "feminine clothing," and a "high-pitched voice." Heterosexual respondents also perceived both lesbians and heterosexual men as "masculine," and associated lesbians with "masculine clothing," "masculine appearance," and being "athletic." If heterosexuals see bisexuals as comparable to homosexuals, then they may assume that bisexual men are similar to heterosexual women and bisexual women are similar to heterosexual men. On the other hand, heterosexuals' lack of knowledge about bisexuality may lead them to form highly generalized impressions that minimize differences between male and female bisexuals.

## METHOD

### Participants

An initial sample of 366 undergraduates enrolled in psychology courses participated in this research as part of an in-class exercise. Because this study focused on the attitudes of heterosexuals, two self-reported gay male and lesbian students, seven bisexual students, and four "unsure" students were excluded from analyses. The final sample of 353 participants included more women (63.5%) than men (36.5%), with a similar gender ratio in each experimental condition. Participants were diverse in their self-reported ethnic identity: 37% were identified as Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders, 33% as European Americans, 17% as Latinos or Latinas, 5% as African Americans, 5% reported other ethnic identities, and 3% did not report their ethnic identity.

## Design

The experiment used a between-subjects design with multiple independent variables. The first set of analyses compared perceptions of bisexuals to perceptions of heterosexuals. Specifically, ratings of male and female bisexuals dating someone of the other gender were compared to ratings of male and female heterosexuals dating someone of the other gender. These analyses involved only mixed-gender relationships and used a 2 (bisexual or heterosexual target)  $\times$  2 (male or female target) design. The second set of comparisons examined how evaluations of bisexuals are affected by the gender of their partner. Specifically, ratings of male and female bisexuals dating a gay man or lesbian, respectively, were compared to ratings of male and female bisexuals dating a female or male heterosexual, respectively. These analyses involved only bisexual targets and used a 2 (male or female bisexual target)  $\times$  2 (same-gender or other-gender partner) design. The third set of analyses compared perceptions of bisexuals with a same-gender partner to perceptions of gay men and lesbians with a same-gender partner. Consequently, these analyses involved only same-gender couples, and used a 2 (bisexual or homosexual target)  $\times$  2 (male or female target) design.

For all analyses, the dependent variables were 23 ratings assessing characteristics of each partner and the couple as a whole. These items evaluated monogamy, sexual riskiness, trustworthiness, sexual talent, and relationship quality.

## Materials

Our approach in creating stimulus materials was similar to the approach used to study gender bias in performance evaluation. In this paradigm (e.g., Cash, Gillen, & Burns, 1977), participants evaluate male or female targets in a social context (e.g., as “job applicants” for traditionally masculine, feminine, or gender-neutral jobs), and then rate the target’s qualifications to perform the job and likelihood of success in the job. Judgments about the target’s competence reflect both participants’ stereotypes of men and women (the target group) and information about the specific context (e.g., the type of job). In the present study, participants read a description of bisexual, homosexual, or heterosexual adults (the target groups) in the context of a dating relationship (with brief information provided about the target person, the partner, and their relationship). Participants then rated the target person, the partner, and the couple on a variety of relationship-related characteristics. Choosing this approach had two benefits. First, the contextual information about the couple made the task more comparable to perceptions of bisexuals that might actually occur outside the laboratory. Second, the inclusion of contextual information made the purposes of the study less obvious and may have reduced possible social-desirability bias in evaluations.

### *Couple Description*

Each participant read one of eight couple descriptions. All descriptions were identical except for the gender and sexual orientation of the partners. (See the Appendix for a sample couple description.) To create a description of a couple that was “going steady,” statements were adapted from the Relationship Events Scale (King &

Christensen, 1983), an instrument that describes relationship progress among dating couples.

All couples were presented as having dated for 6 months and as being currently involved in a romantic and sexual relationship that involved seeing each other frequently. A "quote" from the target described the relationship as "going great." The partners were depicted as spending weekends together, often buying each other small gifts, and arguing occasionally. The couple had talked about living together, but decided to wait. Individual information was also given about the target and the partner. This included their ages (21 and 20 years old), majors in school (Communication Studies and History), and hobbies (bicycling, photography, swimming, hiking, and listening to classical music). Majors and hobbies were chosen to be gender neutral.

The gender of the partners was varied by their name, either "Michael" or "Lisa" for the target and either "Jim" or "Karen" for the partner. All four gender combinations were included. The sexual orientation of the target and partner was also varied. Sexual orientation was operationalized by describing each partner as either heterosexual, bisexual, gay male, or lesbian, with a corresponding sexual history. For example, the male bisexual target was described as follows: "Michael is bisexual and has dated both men and women in the past." Gay male, lesbian, and heterosexual targets and partners were included for comparison purposes, and were described in a similar fashion. For example, the gay male target was described as: "Michael is gay and has dated men in the past." The female heterosexual target was described as: "Lisa is heterosexual and has dated men in the past." Therefore, the eight couples used in this study were as follows, with the target listed first and the partner listed second: bisexual woman/heterosexual man, bisexual woman/lesbian, bisexual man/heterosexual woman, bisexual man/gay man, heterosexual woman/heterosexual man, heterosexual man/heterosexual woman, lesbian/lesbian, and gay man/gay man.

#### *Ratings of Partners and the Relationship*

Respondents rated each partner and the relationship using items relevant to the five themes of interest. All characteristics were measured using 9-point Likert scales (ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 9 = *completely*). Monogamy was assessed by four items measuring the target's "interest in dating other people," how likely the target is to "cheat" on the partner, how worried the partner is that the target "will be unfaithful," and the likelihood that the partners "date other people." These four items had an average item intercorrelation of .50,  $p < .01$ . Sexual riskiness was measured by a single item that addressed perceptions of how likely the target is "to give [the partner] an STD." Trust was evaluated with three items measuring how "concerned" the partner is that the target "will leave the relationship," how "worried" the partner is about "trusting" the target, and the likelihood that the target "would become bored with the relationship." These items had an average item intercorrelation of .43,  $p < .01$ . Sexual talent was measured by ratings of the partner's "sexual attraction to" and "sexual satisfaction with" the target, and the quality of the couple's sex life. These three items had an average intercorrelation of .61,  $p < .01$ .

Finally, relationship quality was assessed in three ways. Four items focused on the target and assessed perceptions of the target's feelings of "being in love with"

the partner, "emotionally close" to the partner, "satisfied in the relationship," and "likely to make personal sacrifices for the relationship." These items had an average intercorrelation of .43,  $p < .01$ . Four items assessed perceptions of the partner on the same characteristics, and had an average item intercorrelation of .55,  $p < .01$ . A third set of four items focused on the couple as a whole, and assessed perceptions of how likely they were "to still be together in 1 year," how "well adjusted" they seemed, how well they "got along with each other," and how "good" their relationship was. These items had an average intercorrelation of .56,  $p < .01$ .

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In general, participants rated the partners and their relationship favorably. For example, couples were seen as having a good relationship ( $M = 7.18$ ) and likely to still be together in 1 year ( $M = 6.24$ ). The target was typically seen as being in love with the partner ( $M = 6.68$ ) and not interested in dating others ( $M = 2.65$ ). This pattern is not surprising as the couple description read by participants characterized the couple in positive terms. Nevertheless, there were important differences across conditions in how partners and couples were perceived, and these variations were the focus of our analyses. Of central interest was whether heterosexual participants evaluated bisexuals differently than people with other sexual orientations.

Data analysis consisted of a series of multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs). A MANOVA is particularly useful for identifying patterns of significant differences among a cluster of correlated variables. Therefore, items were grouped by theme and analyzed using a series of MANOVAs. Because sexual riskiness was assessed by a single item, it was analyzed with analyses of variance (ANOVAs).

Significant MANOVA results were further analyzed using a series of stepdown ANOVAs (Stevens, 1973). Stepdown ANOVAs identify significant differences within a group of correlated variables. Each stepdown ANOVA examines group differences in a dependent measure while simultaneously controlling for the effects of the preceding variables in the series. In this manner, stepdown ANOVAs are able to uncover the variables "responsible" for the significant MANOVA result. Dependent variables were entered into the stepdown ANOVAs in the order in which they were listed in the Methods section.

In all analyses, data were examined for gender of participant effects by including a third factor, participant gender (male/female participant), to each MANOVA or ANOVA. No significant interactions with the other independent variables were found, and there were no main effects for participant gender on ratings of bisexual targets. Therefore, data from male and female participants were combined for all analyses reported below.

### Comparing Bisexuals and Heterosexuals in Male-Female Relationships

Our first goal was to determine whether heterosexuals perceive bisexuals as similar to or different from heterosexuals. This comparison is important because heterosexual respondents may use heterosexuals as an implicit standard against which to

Table 1

Comparing Ratings of Bisexuals and Heterosexuals in Mixed-Gender Couples

Theme	F values	
	Main effect of target's gender	Main effect of target's sexual orientation
Monogamy (4, 173) <sup>a</sup>	1.63	7.80***
Sexual riskiness (1, 177)	5.12*	21.58***
Trust (3, 175)	0.63	1.03
Sexual talent (3, 175)	1.98	2.53
Relationship quality		
Target (4, 174)	0.89	1.13
Partner (4, 173)	2.94*	0.92
Couple (4, 176)	0.46	0.63

**Note:** All F values are based on multiple analyses of variance (MANOVAs), except for the F values for sexual riskiness, which are based on analyses of variance (ANOVAs). All gender  $\times$  sexual orientation interactions were nonsignificant.

<sup>a</sup>Numbers in parentheses are the degrees of freedom for the numerator (number of items) and denominator (number of participants).

\* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

judge individuals with other sexual orientations. A series of 2 (bisexual or heterosexual target)  $\times$  2 (male or female target) MANOVAs was performed for mixed-gender couples on the four themes. In addition, a similar 2  $\times$  2 ANOVA was performed on ratings of the single sexual-riskiness item. Results are presented in Table 1. Both the target's sexual orientation (bisexual or heterosexual) and gender affected participants' evaluations. Contrary to expectation, however, ratings of trust were unaffected by the target's gender or sexual orientation. The statistically significant findings are detailed as follows.

### Monogamy

As expected, there was a significant main effect of sexual orientation on ratings of monogamy (see Table 1). Stepdown ANOVAs indicated that this main effect resulted from two variables. Specifically, bisexuals ( $M = 3.66$ ) were seen as more likely than heterosexuals ( $M = 2.21$ ) to be dating people other than their partner,  $F(1, 174) = 19.54$ ,  $p < .001$ . Bisexuals ( $M = 3.84$ ) were also seen as more likely to cheat on their partner than were heterosexuals ( $M = 2.92$ ),  $F(1, 176) = 10.29$ ,  $p < .01$ .

### Sexual Riskiness

As expected, bisexuals were associated with greater sexual riskiness than heterosexuals. An ANOVA indicated that bisexuals ( $M = 4.99$ ) were seen as more likely to give an STD to their partner than were heterosexuals ( $M = 3.59$ ),  $F(1, 177) = 21.58$ ,  $p < .001$ . The gender of the target also affected ratings. An ANOVA revealed that men ( $M = 4.55$ ) were seen as more likely than women ( $M = 3.82$ ) to give an STD to their partner,  $F(1, 177) = 5.12$ ,  $p < .05$ . There was no significant Sexual Orientation  $\times$  Gender interaction, however,  $p > .05$ .



### *Sexual Talent*

The MANOVA yielded a marginally significant main effect of sexual orientation,  $F(3, 175) = 2.53, p < .059$ . Stepdown ANOVAs indicated that this main effect could be explained by ratings of sexual satisfaction. As expected, partners of bisexuals ( $M = 6.95$ ) were seen as more sexually satisfied than partners of heterosexuals ( $M = 6.58$ ),  $F(1, 176) = 5.78, p < .05$ .

### *Relationship Quality*

Contrary to expectations, participants perceived the bisexual and heterosexual mixed-gender relationships as similar in quality (see Table 1). Bisexual and heterosexual targets were seen as equally close to their partner, in love, satisfied with the relationship, and likely to make sacrifices for the sake of the relationship. The only significant difference concerned perceptions of the partner, who in this set of analyses was heterosexual. A significant main effect of gender on ratings of the partner was further analyzed with stepdown ANOVAs. Heterosexual women ( $M = 6.64$ ) were seen as more likely than heterosexual men ( $M = 5.89$ ) to make sacrifices for the sake of the relationship,  $F(1, 173) = 9.12, p < .01$ .

In summary, respondents perceived both commonalities and differences between heterosexuals and bisexuals in male–female relationships. Both were seen as equally trustworthy and equally likely to have a satisfying romantic relationship. Significant differences were found in the domain of sexuality, however. Compared to heterosexuals, bisexuals were seen as less interested in dating one person exclusively, more likely to cheat on a partner, and more likely to give an STD to a partner. A marginally significant finding suggested that bisexuals were seen as better able to satisfy their partners sexually.

### Comparing Bisexuals with Same-Gender vs. Other-Gender Partners

A second goal of this study was to determine if perceptions of bisexuals depend on whether they have a same-gender versus other-gender partner. For example, is a bisexual man seen differently if he is dating a heterosexual woman versus a gay man? A series of  $2$  (male or female bisexual target)  $\times 2$  (same-gender or other-gender partner) MANOVAs was performed. In addition, a similar  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA was performed on the single sexual-riskiness item. These results are presented in Table 2. Bisexual women and men were perceived similarly; no significant main effects for gender were found. Bisexuals in mixed-gender and same-gender relationships were perceived to be similar in trustworthiness, STD risk, and general relationship quality. Significant differences were found in evaluations of monogamy and sexual talent, however. These differences are described in the next section.

### *Monogamy*

The MANOVA indicated a significant main effect of couple type on ratings of monogamy (see Table 2). Stepdown ANOVAs showed that this main effect was caused by significant differences in ratings of the likelihood of cheating. Bisexuals were perceived as more likely to cheat on a heterosexual partner ( $M = 3.84$ ) than on a gay or lesbian partner ( $M = 2.86$ ),  $F(1, 161) = 11.30, p < .001$ .

Table 2

Comparing Ratings of Bisexuals in Same-Gender vs. Mixed-Gender Couples

Theme	F values	
	Main effect of target's gender	Main effect of couple type
Monogamy (4, 159) <sup>a</sup>	0.22	3.30*
Sexual riskiness (1, 163)	0.44	2.11
Trust (3, 160)	0.80	1.91
Sexual talent (3, 159)	0.34	3.05*
Relationship quality		
Target (4, 159)	0.71	1.59
Partner (4, 158)	1.39	0.37
Couple (4, 161)	0.29	1.19

**Note:** All *F* values are based on multiple analyses of variance (MANOVAs), except for the *F* values for sexual riskiness, which are based on analyses of variance (ANOVAs). All gender  $\times$  couple type interactions were nonsignificant.

<sup>a</sup>Numbers in parentheses are the degrees of freedom for the numerator (number of items) and denominator (number of participants), respectively.

\* $p < .05$ .

### Sexual Talent

The MANOVA also yielded a significant main effect of couple type for sexual talent (see Table 2). Stepdown ANOVAs indicated that this effect could be explained by ratings of sexual satisfaction. Heterosexual partners ( $M = 6.95$ ) were seen as more satisfied with the bisexual's sexual skill than were homosexual partners ( $M = 6.41$ ),  $F(1, 160) = 8.94$ ,  $p < .01$ . This finding may indicate that respondents view heterosexuals as being more easily satisfied sexually than their gay or lesbian peers. Alternatively, bisexuals may be perceived as more skilled in satisfying other-gender rather than same-gender partners.

### Comparing Bisexuals and Homosexuals in Same-Gender Relationships

A third goal of this research was to compare perceptions of bisexuals, lesbians, and gay men in a same-gender romantic relationship. For example, do heterosexuals perceive a bisexual woman with a lesbian partner as similar to a lesbian woman with a lesbian partner, or are bisexuals seen as distinctive? A series of 2 (bisexual or homosexual target)  $\times$  2 (male or female target) MANOVAs was performed. A similar 2  $\times$  2 ANOVA was performed on ratings of the single sexual-riskiness item. As shown in Table 3, participants perceived these groups as highly similar. No significant main effects of target gender were found. Nor were there significant differences between bisexuals and homosexuals in perceived monogamy, trustworthiness, or relationship quality. Only two differences between bisexuals and homosexuals were found.

Table 3

Comparing Ratings of Bisexuals, Lesbians, and Gay Men in Same-Gender Couples

Theme	F values	
	Main Effect of Target's Gender	Main Effect of Target's Sexual Orientation
Monogamy (4, 163) <sup>a</sup>	2.11	1.35
Sexual riskiness (1, 166)	0.17	3.74
Trust (3, 164)	1.75	2.51
Sexual talent (3, 162)	1.63	2.95 <sup>a</sup>
Relationship quality		
Target (4, 162)	0.94	0.71
Partner (4, 162)	1.44	0.47
Couple (4, 162)	1.84	0.87

**Note:** All *F* values are based on multiple analyses of variance (MANOVAs), except for the *F* values for sexual riskiness, which are based on analyses of variance (ANOVAs). All gender  $\times$  sexual orientation interactions were nonsignificant.

<sup>a</sup>Numbers in parentheses are the degrees of freedom for the numerator (number of items) and denominator (number of participant's), respectively.

<sup>a</sup> $p < .05$ .

### Sexual Riskiness

A marginally significant effect of sexual orientation was found for sexual riskiness,  $F(1, 166) = 3.74$ ,  $p < .055$ . Bisexuals ( $M = 4.51$ ) were seen as more likely than gays or lesbians ( $M = 3.90$ ) to give an STD to their same-gender partner. This is noteworthy because it is consistent with the earlier finding showing that bisexuals ( $M = 4.99$ ) were rated as more likely than heterosexuals ( $M = 3.59$ ) to give an STD to an other-gender partner. Together, these findings indicate that bisexuals are seen as the highest risk group, homosexuals somewhat lower, and heterosexuals the lowest of all.

The issue of gender and sexual risk also deserves comment. In these analyses comparing the risk of STD transmission to a partner in a same-gender relationship, gender was not a significant factor. Lesbians and gay men were seen as equally likely to give an STD to a partner. This finding is consistent with earlier research showing that heterosexuals believe that lesbians and gay men have an equal risk for transmitting HIV to sexual partners (Hamilton, 1988). These beliefs are factually incorrect, however. Studies of the actual probabilities of STD transmission (e.g., Guinan & Hardy, 1987; Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, & Kolata, 1994) show that gay men are a relatively high-risk group and lesbians are a relatively low-risk group. These differences may reflect biological differences in STD transmission, as it is relatively easier for men to infect a partner with an STD than for a woman to do so (Guinan & Hardy, 1987; Michael et al., 1994). Little is known about rates of STD transmission for bisexuals, particularly bisexual women. Like lesbians, bisexual women may be misperceived by heterosexuals as being a high-risk group.

### Sexual Talent

As seen in Table 3, a main effect of sexual orientation was found for ratings of sexual talent. Stepdown ANOVAs indicated that this main effect resulted from

ratings of sexual satisfaction. Gay and lesbian partners were seen as more sexually satisfied in a relationship with a homosexual target person ( $M = 6.89$ ) than in a relationship with a bisexual target person ( $M = 6.41$ ),  $F(1, 163) = 8.66$ ,  $p < .01$ .

In general, participants perceived many similarities among bisexuals, gay men, and lesbians. There are several reasons why this might occur. Some respondents may believe that people who consider themselves bisexual are actually gay men or lesbians who haven't yet "come to terms" with their "true" (homosexual) orientation (George, 1993; MacDonald, 1981; Shuster, 1987; Sumpter, 1991). Heterosexuals may also assume that bisexuals and homosexuals share a common alternative lifestyle or culture that sets them apart from heterosexuals and creates similarities between bisexuals and homosexuals. Other respondents may have a generalized view of people in same-gender relationships and not make finer discriminations concerning the sexual orientation of the individuals in these couples.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Several patterns have been identified concerning perceptions of bisexuals. Compared to heterosexuals, bisexuals were seen as proponents of sexual openness who were more likely to cheat on a partner and to transmit a sexual disease. At the same time, bisexuals were seen as better able than heterosexuals to satisfy a heterosexual partner sexually. Somewhat surprisingly, bisexuals and heterosexuals were viewed as equally trustworthy and equally likely to have loving and committed dating relationships. Compared to homosexuals, bisexuals were seen as more likely to transmit a sexual disease and as less able than homosexuals to satisfy a gay male or lesbian partner sexually. Several issues raised by this research merit further comment.

In this study, heterosexuals viewed bisexuals as differing from heterosexuals and homosexuals in characteristics related to sexuality, but not in other aspects of relationship functioning. This finding may reflect general stereotypes about bisexuals but may also result from specifics of our research methods. The participants in this study read a written description that characterized all couples as having a generally good relationship. Participants may have based their own evaluations of relationship quality on this information, resulting in similar evaluations of all couples. In contrast, the couple description did not contain information about sexual issues, and so in making evaluations about monogamy, sexual risk, and sexual talent, respondents may have relied more on their own preexisting stereotypes about bisexuals, gay men and lesbians, and heterosexuals. If this is so, then our results may underestimate actual differences in perceptions of bisexuals, heterosexuals, and homosexuals. In addition, perceptions of bisexuals who are in a relationship may differ in unknown ways from perceptions of bisexuals who are not in a relationship or who are in multiple relationships simultaneously. Further research using different methods would help to clarify these points.

Two types of relationships are open to bisexuals: male-female relationships that behaviorally conform to societal norms of heterosexuality and same-gender relationships that violate those standards. Are heterosexuals more positive in their views of bisexuals who appear to conform to the norm of heterosexuality? According

to our research, the answer is no. Bisexuals were seen as a high-risk group for transmitting STDs regardless of the gender of their partners. Further, bisexuals were seen as more likely to cheat on an other-gender partner than on a same-gender partner, and better able to satisfy an other-gender partner sexually. Why are bisexuals in male–female relationships viewed more stereotypically than bisexuals in same-gender relationships? Because the respondents in our study were heterosexual, this finding may reflect their own mixed feelings about bisexuality—the allure of a potentially exotic partner combined with concerns about being deceived or contracting an STD. Further, as noted earlier, some heterosexuals may believe that bisexuals are actually homosexuals who have not yet come to terms with a gay or lesbian identity. If so, then bisexuals might be seen as better suited for same-gender relationships and less likely to be faithful to a heterosexual partner.

A third issue concerns perceptions of bisexual women versus men. Previous research has found that heterosexuals hold rather different stereotypes of lesbians and gay men (e.g., Kite & Deaux, 1987; Laner & Laner, 1979, 1980) and of heterosexual women versus men (e.g., Hatfield, 1983; Hochreich, 1975; Reiss, 1986). Consequently, we might anticipate different views of bisexual women versus men. In fact, we found no differences in perceptions of male and female bisexuals. One possible explanation is that participants' limited knowledge of bisexuality resulted in relatively undifferentiated perceptions of bisexuals. Alternatively, heterosexuals may perceive differences between male and female bisexuals on characteristics not measured in this study, such as personality or physical attributes. Future research on this issue would be valuable.

This study represents a first step toward understanding how heterosexuals perceive bisexuals and their relationships. Several consistent patterns have been identified centering around issues of sexual fidelity, sexual talent, and sexual risk. We have also shown that heterosexuals' perceptions of a target are affected by both the target's sexual orientation and the gender of the target's partner.

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#### APPENDIX: SAMPLE COUPLE DESCRIPTION (BISEXUAL WOMAN/LESBIAN PARTNER)

Lisa is a 21-year-old college senior at a major university. She is a History major and a Communication Studies minor. Lisa enjoys bicycling and photography, and is a member of the photography club on campus. Lisa is bisexual and has dated both men and women in the past. Lisa is currently dating Karen, a 20-year-old lesbian.

Karen is also a senior History major. Karen enjoys outdoor sports, especially swimming, bicycling, and hiking. She also likes classical music.

Lisa and Karen have been dating each other for 6 months. They had met through mutual friends, and were immediately attracted to each other. They started dating shortly after that. They now see each other frequently and have a sexual relationship.

Lisa describes her relationship with Karen as follows: "We are very comfortable with each other and enjoy spending time together. Actually, the friends who introduced us have invited us to spend a weekend with them at their family cabin at Lake Arrowhead. We're really looking forward to getting away. It will be our first vacation together. We're both so busy, it's hard to find time to get away."

*"Our relationship is going great. We really care about each other. We like doing special things for each other, like buying little gifts "just because." We spend almost every weekend together—we miss each other if we don't talk on the phone or see each other every day. Sometimes we do have fights. One time we didn't speak to each other for three days, but then we made up. But most of the time we're close and can open up with each other. We've talked about moving in together, but both agree it's probably too soon for that. I can't say for sure what the future will hold for us, but I'm very glad we're together now."*