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A National Survey of the Intimate Relationships of African American Lesbians and Gay Men *A Look at Commitment, Satisfaction, Sexual Behavior, and HIV Disease*



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Love and companionship are essential ingredients for a happy life. A national survey of Americans found that most people, both heterosexual and homosexual, consider love to be extremely important to their overall happiness (Freedman, 1978). Empirical research amply documents that intimate relationships are vital to psychological health (Cohen & Willis, 1985). In a recent review, Myers (1992) concludes, "Whether young or old, male or female, rich or poor, people in stable, loving relationships do enjoy greater well-being" (p. 156). There is also growing evidence that supportive personal relationships contribute to physical health and longevity (Schuster, Kessler, & Aseltine, 1990;

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Taylor, 1995; Willis, 1985). Researchers and others have long known about the positive aspects of having intimate close personal relationships (Rook & Pietromonaco, 1987). Intimate interactions with others tend to enhance our moods and feelings of self-worth, and provide the context for emotional health and happiness. They challenge, stimulate, and reward us in our everyday lives, and also serve as buffers during times of stress and upheaval. They allow us to feel secure that we can handle life stressors. Intimate relationships provide us with others we can turn to for help, emotional intimacy, and guidance (Rook & Pietromonaco, 1987). As Bowlby (1973) has noted, people function most effectively "when they are confident that, standing behind them, there are one or more trusted persons who will come to their aid should difficulties arise" (p. 359). In contrast, researchers and health care professionals find that persons who lack intimate relationships tend to be vulnerable to a host of emotional problems, such as anxiety, diminished feelings of self-worth, depression, and psychosomatic symptomatology (Perlman & Peplau, 1984). What emerges from the available evidence is that having a good, close, intimate relationship is important to overall health and well-being.

However, current knowledge about personal relationships is based on research that has largely focused on couples who are White and heterosexual. Little is known about the intimate relationships of ethnic minority lesbians and gay men, particularly African Americans. Studying the intimate relationships of African American lesbians and gay men seems particularly warranted, as African Americans in general tend to have higher rates of morbidity and mortality (Cochran & Mays, 1994; Reed, Darity, & Roberson, 1993; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1985). If intimate relationships can in any way contribute to enhancing or promoting better physical and/or psychological health, then studies of such relationships among African American gays and lesbians are well worthwhile (Cochran & Mays, 1994).

In this chapter we take a look at the intimate relationship experiences of African American lesbians and gay men—a population that is virtually invisible in U.S. society, not only in the eyes of the general public but also in the eyes of scientific researchers (Cochran & Mays, 1994; Mays, Cochran, & Rhue, 1993). Researchers who study Black families typically acknowledge a diversity of family forms and write that African Americans are less likely than other populations in the United States to be in heterosexual marriages, but they rarely mention the

existence of enduring same-sex couples (e.g., Hatchett, Cochran, & Jackson, 1991; Mays, Chatters, Cochran, & Mackness, in press; Staples, 1981; Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, & Lewis, 1990). This occurs despite the fact that mothers and other close female relatives in African American families may be quite aware that members of their families are gay or lesbian (Mays et al., in press). Discussions of alternative lifestyles and patterns of friendships among African Americans have not considered same-sex gay and lesbian relationships (e.g., Cazenave, 1980; Ericksen, 1980). Similarly, reviews of the slowly growing literature about same-sex lesbian and gay couples typically focus on Whites (e.g., Harry, 1983; Peplau & Cochran, 1990). Even in very large studies, such as Blumstein and Schwartz's (1983) report *American Couples*, the number of African Americans has been small; among the 1,930 gay men in Blumstein and Schwartz's study, only 39 were Black, and among the 1,549 lesbians, only 15 were Black. The result is that we know very little about the experiences of African Americans whose intimate relationships are with same-sex partners (Cochran & Mays, 1988b; Cochran, Nardi, Mays, & Taylor, 1997; Mays & Cochran, 1988a; Mays et al., 1993).

In this chapter we report findings from the first large-scale empirical study of the same-sex relationships of more than 700 coupled homosexually active African American men and women. Because of the general lack of knowledge about African Americans in same-sex relationships, one of our objectives is to provide basic descriptions of these relationships. Our second goal is to explore relationship satisfaction and its correlates among members of our sample. Finally, our third goal is to compare the experiences of African American gay men and lesbians, noting their similarities and differences as members of both the gay and lesbian community and the African American community. Throughout the presentation of our findings, we refer to previously published research when relevant as a way of learning more about how ethnicity/culture, sexual orientation, and gender affect the relationships of African Americans in same-sex intimate relationships.

Study Participants

As part of two national studies, more than 1,400 homosexually active African American women and men were recruited across the United States to fill out an anonymous questionnaire (Cochran & Mays, 1994;

Mays & Cochran, 1988a; Mays & Jackson, 1991). In order to ensure a heterogeneous sample, we employed a variety of recruitment methods. Questionnaires were mailed to the members of national Black gay and lesbian political, social, and health care organizations, such as the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays. Each nondescript, brown manila envelope contained a questionnaire as well as a stamped, preaddressed envelope with which to return the questionnaire. Also included was a postcard that could be returned separately if the respondent wished to request additional questionnaires for friends or flyers to be distributed or posted in the meeting places of local social and political organizations. In addition, information about the research was distributed nationally via flyers to lesbian and gay bars listed in publications geared toward homosexually active adults and through announcements in gay and lesbian newspapers and gay male erotic publications (see Mays & Jackson, 1991, for methodological discussion).

Participants responded voluntarily to the self-administered, anonymous questionnaires, which, in part, assessed their same-sex relationship experiences. A cover letter informed subjects about the purpose of the study and the protection of their privacy. Men and women completed different, but similar, questionnaires. Male and female versions included identical questions about a current serious, committed, intimate same-sex relationship. Items were drawn from our previous work on primarily White lesbians (Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978) and gay men (Peplau & Cochran, 1981). We describe specific items below, as we present the findings.

We conducted several focus groups and pretests of preliminary instruments in locations throughout the United States, including both rural and urban areas, to assist us in the modification of our previous instruments. Our goals in the focus groups and pretests were (a) to determine areas of specific concern in the lives of African American lesbians and gay men; (b) to develop language that would be reflective of the culture of African American lesbians and gay men regardless of regional, education, and class differences (see Mays et al., 1992, for discussion); (c) to determine the best ordering of items, tolerable length of questionnaire, and format of the instrument; and (d) to learn more about methodological parameters for reaching "hidden" African American gays and lesbians who, despite being homosexually active,

Table 2.1 Demographic Characteristics of African American Lesbians and Gay Men

	Women (n = 398)	Men (n = 325)
Mean age in years	33.5 (7.8)	32.9 (8.2)
Mean years of schooling	15.4 (2.4)	15.0 (2.1)**
Median annual income	\$17,500	\$22,500***
Employment status (%)		
Professional/technical	30.1	24.3
Management/administrator	12.9	17.4
Sales/clerical	22.1	25.6
Other	17.7	15.1
Employed less than half-time or unemployed	17.2	17.7
Mean age when first had sex with a partner of the same gender	19.7 (6.9)	15.1 (5.5)
Self-reported sexual orientation (%)		
Gay or lesbian	85.3	84.6
Bisexual	11.7	10.2
Other	3.1	5.2

NOTE: Standard deviations are given in parentheses.

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

did not identify as such and were not likely to be reached through organized gay and lesbian networks.

Respondents (846 men and 605 women) to the finalized questionnaire were included in the larger project if they indicated that they (a) were African American and that they (b) had had at least one homosexual sexual experience at some point in their lives, or indicated some intention to do so in the future, or (c) identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The analyses reported in this chapter are based on examination of responses from the subsample of study participants who indicated that they were currently involved in a "committed, romantic/sexual relationship" with a same-sex partner. Demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 2.1.

Women

A total of 398 Black women reported being in a committed, romantic relationship with another woman at the time they completed the survey. Their average current age was 33.5 years, with a range from 18 to 60 years. On average, these women first had sex with another

woman at age 20. They had completed an average of 15 years of school, and most (83%) were employed full-time; nearly one-third held professional or technical positions. There was a considerable range of incomes, with 25% of the women earning less than \$11,000 per year and 18% earning \$30,000 or more. The women's median income was less than \$18,000 per year. All female study participants indicated that they were currently in a committed relationship with another woman, but they differed somewhat in their self-reported sexual orientations. The vast majority of our participants (85%) indicated that they were lesbian or gay, but almost 12% said they were bisexual, and 3% preferred some other designation.

Men

A total of 325 African American men indicated that they were currently in a committed, serious relationship with a man. The average male participant was just under 33 years old, although sample members ranged in age from 18 to 70 years. The men reported that they first had had sex with another man at an average age of 15. The average years of schooling completed by the men was similar to that reported by the women participants. They had typically completed 15 years of schooling, or the equivalent of 3 years of college. Most (82%) were employed full-time, and one-fourth held professional or technical jobs. There was considerable variation in the men's annual incomes, with 20% of the sample earning less than \$11,000 and 31% earning \$30,000 or more. The median annual income was \$22,500. Most of the men considered themselves gay (84.6%) or bisexual (10%). Another 5% said they were neither gay nor bisexual but were sexually active with men. By self-report, 34% of the men did not know their HIV status, 37% were HIV-antibody negative at their most recent testing, and 25% were HIV infected, including 41 men (13% of the total sample) diagnosed by a physician with HIV-related disease. (The women's questionnaire did not include questions about HIV status.)

As can be seen in Table 2.1, the men and women in the sample were very similar in their backgrounds. Only three statistically significant demographic differences emerged between the men and women. First, women reported significantly more education than did men, $t(710) = 2.79, p < .01$. Although reliable, the magnitude of this gender difference was quite small, amounting to less than half a year of school. Second,

although there was no significant difference between the occupational status of men and women, as might be expected given the prevailing gender gap in wages, men reported significantly higher annual incomes, $t(712) = -3.58, p < .001$. The average income difference amounted to roughly \$5,000 per year. In addition, women reported having had their first sexual experience with a same-sex partner at a significantly older age than did men, $t(710) = 9.62, p < .001$. This age difference at first sexual experience was more than 4 years.

This sample, as in all volunteer studies of partially hidden populations, may not be representative of all African American lesbians and gay men in the United States. Nonetheless, the size and relative diversity of demographic backgrounds among participants suggest that these data can provide a valuable window into the lives of a segment of the African American population about whom few studies examining close relationships exist. A good place to begin this exploration is by looking at what characteristics and attributes are important to African American lesbians and gay men in their selection of intimate partners.

Partner Selection

A general principle of interpersonal attraction is that similarity tends to bring people together. In general, married partners tend to be matched on demographic characteristics such as age, ethnicity, and education (Glick, 1988). Is this pattern found among same-sex partners? Harry (1983) has speculated that a more restricted pool of potential partners from which to choose might lead to less similarity among gay male partners in age, education, employment, and income. Kurdek and Schmitt (1987) tested this idea in a study comparing White gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples (without children). They found that heterosexual partners were highly matched on age, income, and education, and that lesbian couples were also matched on age ($r = .79$) and education ($r = .39$) and marginally on income ($r = .29$)—although the magnitude of these correlations was smaller than for heterosexual partners. Gay male couples were significantly similar only on age ($r = .38$), supporting the hypothesis of less homogamy in gay male relationships.

In our study, we asked respondents to describe the background characteristics of their current partners with whom they were in a "serious, committed" relationship. As can be seen in Table 2.2, partners for the most part were generally similar to respondents in age, educational attainment, and employment. There were significant correlations between partners in age ($r[394] = .53, p < .001$ for women; $r[318] = .42, p < .001$ for men), and partners were significantly matched in educational attainment ($r[387] = .33, p < .001$ for women; $r[304] = .22, p < .001$ for men). Partners also tended to be similar in their employment status. In 76% of our Black male couples, both partners were employed full-time, and in 4% both were employed half-time or less; 20% of partners had different work statuses ($\chi^2[1] = 14.4, p < .001$). Among the Black female couples, both partners were employed full-time in 77% of cases, 3% both were employed half-time or less, and, as with the men, 20% of the women partners had different job situations; however, this pattern of association for women was not statistically significant. Looking at similarities and differences in jobs classified based on typical labor market categories in Table 2.2, we found significant matching in types of jobs held by partners for both the women ($\chi^2[16] = 56.4, p < .001$) and the men ($\chi^2[16] = 36.7, p < .003$) participants. In sum, we found for the African American lesbians and gay men in our study a fair degree of demographic similarity with their partners. This stands in marked contrast to results reported by Kurdek and Schmitt (1987) for White gay men and lesbians. Whether this finding of greater similarity in our study of African American lesbians and gay men is the result of ethnic, cultural, or class differences between the two samples or the greater size of our sample (and hence the greater power to achieve statistical significance) is unclear and remains a question for further study.

There are several questions raised by the greater demographic similarity of African American gay men and lesbians compared with Whites, but one can only speculate as to the answers. One such question concerns the importance or influence of class and/or cultural differences on African American gay men's and lesbians' relationships. Scholars continue to debate the primacy of race/ethnicity versus social class in the experiences of Blacks in the United States today. This debate could well be relevant to our examination of the relationship choices of African American gay men and lesbians.

Table 2.2 Partner Characteristics of African American Lesbians and Gay Men

	Women (n = 398)	Men (n = 325)
Demographic characteristics		
Mean age in years	33.0 (7.6)	33.9 (8.6)
Mean years of schooling	14.9 (2.7)	15.2 (2.8)
Employment status (%)		
Professional/technical	28.3	39.2
Management/administrator	12.0	15.7
Sales/clerical	20.8	18.0
Other	25.1	15.4
Employed less than half-time or unemployed	13.9	11.8
Ethnic background (%)		
Black	70.3	57.6
White	20.8	36.8
Other	8.9	5.6

NOTE: Standard deviations are given in parentheses.

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Another interesting pattern to emerge in our study was that more than one-third of the participants were in interracial relationships. As shown in Table 2.2, 30% of the women and 42% of the men had non-Black partners (most often, these partners were White). The greater tendency for the Black gay male participants to have non-Black partners, compared with the Black lesbians in the sample, was statistically significant: $\chi^2(2) = 23.35, p < .001$. (This tendency for more men to have White partners may help explain, in part, the observed difference between the occupational achievement of men's and women's partners— $\chi^2[4] = 16.70, p < .01$ —despite the absence of significant gender differences in the partners' ages or years of schooling.)

To our knowledge, only one previous study has examined interracial relationships among African American lesbians and gay men. In *Homosexualities*, Bell and Weinberg (1978) report data from a survey that included 111 Black gay men and 64 Black lesbians, as well as several hundred White gay men and lesbians. These respondents, all from Northern California, were somewhat younger than those in our sample (by 1 year for women and 6 years for men). Although, unfortunately, Bell and Weinberg do not report the races of their subjects' partners at the time of their study, they did ask what proportion of each respondent's gay/lesbian sexual partners had been of a different race.

They found that interracial sexual partners were relatively common among their African American respondents. Two-thirds (67%) of the Black gay men in Bell and Weinberg's San Francisco sample said that half or more of their sexual partners were non-Black, and only 2% had never had sex with a person of another race. In our sample, 14% of the men said they had never had sex with a partner of another race. Among Black lesbians, 30% of Bell and Weinberg's sample said that more than half their sexual partners were non-Black, and 22% had never had a White partner. In our sample, 38% of the women said they had never had sex with a White partner. Hence both studies found that interracial sexual partners were more common among African American gay men than among African American lesbians.

A further context for considering interracial sexual relationships is provided by data on heterosexuals. A recent national sex survey based on a predominantly heterosexual sample gathered by an opinion poll research group found that only 3% of Black women who reported sexual partners reported having a non-Black partner, compared with 18% of Black men (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). If we look at U.S. Census data on interracial marriages, a similar pattern emerges. Nationally, about 4.6% of heterosexual Black men marry non-Black women, compared with 2.1% of Black women who marry non-Black men (Taylor et al., 1990). On the West Coast of the United States, which was the site of the Bell and Weinberg (1978) study, the rates of outmarriage among Black men (over 12%) are higher than the national average. The factors that promote interracial marriages are not fully understood. Based on census data for Los Angeles County, Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan (1990) found that such marriages are more common among individuals living away from their place of birth.

It is possible that in a similar way, interracial relationships among African American lesbians and gay men may be fostered when these individuals move into urban gay social communities that may hold more tolerant attitudes than are found in the larger society and provide opportunities for meeting partners of other races. Interracial relationships may also be a function of limited partner choice (Mays et al., 1993). Within the African American community, where homosexuality is often more hidden in comparison to among White gays and lesbians (Cochran & Mays, 1988a, 1988b; Mays et al., 1993), finding a partner of the same ethnicity may be relatively difficult. Whereas White gay men and lesbians can draw upon a number of social organizations, bars,

and organized political activities to meet potential partners, organized meeting places for openly gay and lesbian activities are less likely to be a path for partner selection for African Americans. This is particularly a problem for homosexually active African Americans who may not self-identify as gay or lesbian. Parks and Eggert (1993) hold that although individuals may be free to choose whomever they like as partners, relationship initiation is often contextually constrained by dynamics of physical proximity, social norms regarding appropriate and inappropriate relational partners, the position of the initiator in the potential pool of partners, and the actions of third parties. African American gay men and lesbians are likely to find their relationship choices constrained by some of these factors, particularly the problem of physical proximity, if they prefer to choose among other African Americans.

Studies of the role of social norms within the gay community of African Americans about choosing same-ethnicity versus interracial same-sex partners would be useful to our understanding of influences on the relationships of African American lesbians and gay men. Equally interesting would be studies that determine same-sex/same-ethnicity ratios of available partners for African Americans. We already know from researchers studying sex ratio imbalances in the heterosexual African American community that this phenomenon has an influence on the initiation, maintenance, and dissolution of relationships (Staples, 1981). Such behaviors as man sharing, power imbalances (Mays & Cochran, 1988b), and infidelity (Staples, 1981) are viewed as consequences of the unequal ratio of females to available males within the heterosexual African American population. It would be worthwhile to study further whether such influences occur in the same-ethnicity relationship choices of African American gay men and lesbians, and, if so, what behaviors are associated with this socially constructed imbalance in partner choices.

In general, our findings indicate that committed interracial relationships occur at a higher rate among African American lesbians and gay men than among Black heterosexuals. In our sample, African American men were more likely than African American women to have partners of other races, but this gender gap in interracial relationships appears smaller among our sample of homosexually active African Americans than the rate reported in the literature for African American heterosexuals.

Table 2.3 African American Lesbians' and Gay Men's Reasons for Choosing Relationship With Current Partner

	Factor I (32%)	Factor II (15%)	Factor III (10%)	Mean (SD) Scale Scores	
				Women	Men
Instrumental resources (alpha = .79)					
Type of job	.87	-.01	-.02	2.0 (0.9)	2.1 (0.9)
Type of home	.81	.04	.01		
Income	.79	-.00	-.03		
Friends	.61	-.00	.07		
Inner attributes (alpha = .69)					
Intelligence	.01	.88	-.06	4.0 (0.8)	3.7 (0.8)***
Personality	-.16	.79	.00		
Cultural sophistication	.35	.54	.03		
Spiritual energy	.16	.50	.14		
Physical attributes (alpha = .54)					
Sexual ability	.15	-.12	.76	3.1 (1.0)	3.0 (1.0)
Ethnicity	.02	-.03	.70		
Physical attractiveness	-.14	.15	.68		

NOTE: Each attribute was rated on a scale from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*very important*). Factor analyses combined data from men and women. Factors were extracted by principal components analysis and rotated by oblique rotation. Table presents factor loadings; the percentage of variance accounted for by each factor is given in parentheses. Cronbach's alpha was calculated using items loading .50 or above. Mean scores and standard deviations (SD) on each factor are given separately for women and men.

*** $p < .001$.

We also investigated more personal factors that had led the study participants to select their current partners. Specifically, participants were given a list of partner attributes (e.g., the person's physical attractiveness, the type of job he or she has) and were asked to rate how important each attribute was "in your decision to have a serious/committed relationship with your lover" on a scale from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*very important*). These items were subjected to a principal components factor analysis combining responses for women and men. Three factors emerged that accounted for 57% of the variance. Factors were rotated using the OBLIMIN procedure in SPSS. Factor loadings are given in Table 2.3. As the table shows, the first factor (instrumental resources) indexed the partner's personal resources, including his or her type of job, the "kind of place" he or she lived in,

income, and friends. The second factor measured inner personal attributes of the partner, including intelligence, personality, cultural sophistication, and spiritual energy. A final factor appeared to index more physical attributes of the partner, including sexual abilities, ethnic background, and physical attractiveness. Estimates of internal reliability of the items associated with each factor were high. (Identical factor analyses conducted separately for women and men yielded the same three factors.) Mean scores for each of the three scales were calculated by summing those items loading above .5 for each scale and then dividing by the number of items in each scale.

As can be seen in Table 2.3, respondents tended to give greatest weight in selecting their partners to inner attributes (means close to 4 on the 5-point scale); the next highest weight was given to physical attributes (means of about 3), and the lowest to resources (means of about 2). This general pattern of emphasizing socioemotional aspects of a relationship over economic and instrumental concerns replicates previous findings from other samples. For example, in a predominantly White sample of lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals, Laner (1977) found that all groups gave greatest importance to honesty, affection, and intelligence, and less importance to good looks and money.

Despite the general similarity in men's and women's responses, one gender difference was found. Women gave significantly greater importance to a partner's psychological qualities, such as intelligence and personality, than did men: $t(706) = 3.81, p < .001$.

It is also informative to note some common sex differences that did *not* emerge in these data. In studies of White college students and adults in 37 countries, two consistent findings have emerged for heterosexuals. First, when initially selecting opposite-sex partners, men tend to give greater emphasis to physical attractiveness than do women (e.g., Buss, 1994; Matlin, 1993). Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) also found this gender difference in their sample of predominantly White gay men and lesbians, with substantially more gay men than lesbians indicating that it was important that a partner be "sexy-looking" (59% v. 35%) or be "movie star" good-looking (17% v. 6%). They conclude that although "some lesbians respond to the dictates of fashion, many inhabit a culture scornful of what they consider male standards of female attractiveness, which they reject as indicators of

women's worth" (p. 250). In contrast, in our study of African American gay men and lesbians we found no such sex differences in ratings of the importance of a partner's physical attractiveness or other external attributes. Among our African American participants, both men and women gave moderate importance (3.3 on a 5-point scale) to physical attractiveness. The reasons for our unusual findings are not entirely clear, especially given that previous studies have often used single-item measures such as ours. A closer examination of the meaning of physical attractiveness among African Americans gay men and lesbians is warranted.

Second, studies of predominantly White heterosexuals have found that women tend to give greater emphasis to the financial resources of their partners than do heterosexual men (e.g., Buss, 1994; Matlin, 1993). A recent analysis of data from the National Survey of Black Americans also addressed this issue. Hatchett (1991) examined the reasons that African American men and women gave for living with a person of the other sex. She concludes that "black women seem to value the instrumental aspects of marriage—particularly financial security—more than black men" (p. 99). In contrast, African American men gave greater emphasis to "socioemotional" factors, such as companionship and children. In our sample of African American gays and lesbians, we found no gender differences in the importance of instrumental resources. Women did not rate any of the four resource attributes more highly than did men.

We can only speculate about the absence of these gender differences in our sample. Unfortunately, comparative data are not available that would tell us whether the similarities we found stem from differences in the attitudes of lesbians (giving answers more like men's) or differences in the attitudes of gay men (giving answers more like women's) or differences in both. One interpretation of the typical gender pattern is economic. As sociologist of the family Willard Waller (1938) has explained: "A man, when he marries, chooses a companion and perhaps a helpmate but a woman chooses a companion and at the same time a standard of living. It is necessary for a woman to be mercenary" (p. 243). In other words, women's financial dependence on men forces them to emphasize a husband's economic resources; men's financial independence permits them to emphasize other criteria in a mate, such as good looks. From this perspective, a major difference between

traditional heterosexual marriages and same-sex relationships is that most homosexual couples have a dual-worker relationship. So it may be that lesbians' greater financial independence reduces their concern about a partner's instrumental resources. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) conclude, "Our data have told us that lesbians hold up, as the ideal relationship, one where two strong women come together in total equality" (p. 310).

It is worth noting that Buss (1994) interprets the commonly found heterosexual sex differences in valuing appearance versus economic resources from the perspective of evolutionary psychology. He asserts that "men and women have evolved powerful desires for particular characteristics in a mate [that are] highly patterned and universal" (p. 249). Our findings appear to challenge this assertion of human universality.

In summary, we have found that partner selection among African American lesbians and gay men reflects the well-established principle that similarity leads to attraction. Our look at the partner selection of African American gay men and lesbians highlights the need for further studies to investigate how ethnicity and culture influence the ethnic choices of partners and to explain the absence of gender differences in the importance for partner selection of factors such as instrumental resources and physical attractiveness.

Satisfaction and Commitment

Stereotypes often depict gay and lesbian relationships as unhappy. For example, one study found that heterosexual college students expected lesbian and gay relationships to be less satisfying, more prone to discord, and "less in love" than heterosexual relationships (Testa, Kinder, & Ironson, 1987). Contrary to such stereotypes, the available research indicates that most gay and lesbian couples are happy (Peplau, Veniegas, & Campbell, 1996). Studies of the quality of lesbians' and gay men's relationships have found generally high levels of love and satisfaction (e.g., Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Peplau & Cochran, 1981; Peplau et al., 1978; Peplau, Padesky, & Hamilton, 1982). Comparative studies indicate that the quality of relationships is generally similar for lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual couples (e.g., Duffy & Rusbult, 1986;

Table 2.4 Comparisons of the Current Intimate Relationships of African American Lesbian and Gay Men Study Participants

	Women	Men
Length of current relationship (median months)	28.2	26.0
In love with partner (%)		
Yes	74.2	61.3
Unsure	16.2	27.8
No	9.6	10.9
Mean closeness of relationship	5.9 (1.3)	5.6 (1.4)***
Balance of satisfaction in relationship (%)		
Partner more satisfied	37.4	40.3
Equal	43.0	44.8
Respondent more satisfied	19.6	14.9
Mean overall satisfaction	5.3 (1.4)	5.0 (1.5)*
Currently living with partner (%)	53.8	43.9**
Median months lived together	34.7	27.0*
Mean likelihood relationship will exist		
in 1 year	5.6 (1.5)	5.4 (1.6)
in 5 years	4.9 (1.9)	4.6 (1.9)

NOTE: Standard deviations are given in parentheses.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Kurdek, 1994; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986). Unfortunately, none of this work has examined the same-sex partnerships of African Americans.

The current research extended these earlier studies by examining aspects of the quality of intimate relationships among African Americans with same-sex partners. We asked participants to assess satisfaction, commitment, and other dimensions of the quality of their current relationships. The results are presented in Table 2.4. The median length of the current relationship was a little more than 2 years. For the women, the relationships ranged in duration from less than a month to nearly 21 years. For the men, relationship duration varied from less than a month to more than 35 years.

Satisfaction

Several questions assessed respondents' personal satisfaction with their current relationships. Overall, most said that they had a close and satisfying relationship, although women gave somewhat more favorable reports about their relationships than did men (see Table 2.4).

When asked if they were "in love" with their partners, 74% of women and 61% of men said yes. Only about 10% were definitely not in love, and the rest were unsure. Women were more likely than men to report being in love with their partners: $\chi^2(2) = 15.92, p < .001$. In general, respondents reported high levels of closeness in their relationships, with mean scores approaching 6 on a 7-point scale. Women reported somewhat greater closeness than did men (mean of 5.9 v. 5.6, $t[714] = 3.38, p < .001$).

Another question asked if one partner was more satisfied with the relationship than the other. Roughly 44% of respondents indicated that both partners were equally satisfied. When the balance of satisfaction was unequal, it was more common for study participants to say that their partners were happier than they were. Whether this reflects an accurate perception of the relationship or a tendency to perceive one's own discontents more readily is unknown. Finally, a question asked, "Overall, how satisfied are you with your relationship?" Mean scores were above 5 on the 7-point scale, indicating better-than-moderate satisfaction. Once again, women's scores were significantly higher than men's (mean of 5.3 v. 5.0, $t[712] = 2.23, p < .05$). Although the magnitude of the gender differences in satisfaction was small, the pattern consistently favored women.

Commitment

Several questions attempted to gauge the study participant's degree of commitment to the current relationship. Living together rather than apart can be one sign of commitment; roughly half the participants currently lived with their partners. Women were significantly more likely than men to cohabit: 54% of women versus 44% of men, $\chi^2(1) = 6.91, p < .01$. Among those living together, women reported having done so for significantly longer periods of time than did men, Mann-Whitney $U = 11,575, Z = -1.97, p < .05$; this difference amounted to about 8 months. Whether this sex difference in cohabitation reflects greater commitment in women's relationships or women's generally lower incomes (which might require shared housing) is uncertain.

Another question assessed perceptions of commitment more directly by asking participants to estimate the likelihood that their relationships would still exist in 1 year and in 5 years, using a 7-point scale

(from *not at all likely* to *definitely will exist*). On average, both men and women were relatively certain that their relationships would continue for 1 year: Nearly two-thirds of participants gave scores of 6 or 7 on this item. Not unexpectedly, they were somewhat less confident about the longer-term outlook (5 years or greater) for their relationships, with 42% scoring 6 or 7. Men and women did not differ in their estimates of likely future duration.

In summary, although there was variation among respondents in their current relationship satisfaction and commitment, a majority of both women and men indicated that they were in love with their partners, that their relationships were highly satisfying, and that they expected the relationships to continue into the future. In a later section, we will consider some of the factors that were correlated with relationship satisfaction.

Sexual Behavior and Satisfaction

Several questions addressed the nature of the respondent's sexual relationship with the current partner as well as sexual contacts with others outside the primary relationship.

Sex With the Current Partner

The questionnaire asked if the respondent had had sex on his or her first meeting or date with the current partner. As shown in Table 2.5, only a minority of respondents said yes: 17.5% of women and 30.7% of men. Women were significantly less likely than men to report having had sex on the first occasion that they went out with their partners, $\chi^2(1) = 16.7, p < .001$. Another question asked how often the couple had had sex during the past month. Sexual frequency was quite variable. Some couples had not had sex in the past month; others reported having sex more than three times a week. Reports of current sexual frequency did not differ significantly between men and women, $\chi^2(4) = 3.82, p < .10$. Despite similar frequency of sexual activity within the relationship, women reported greater levels of sexual satisfaction than did men—a small but statistically significant difference, $t(713) = 2.09, p < .05$.

Table 2.5 African American Lesbians' and Gay Men's Sexual Behavior and Satisfaction With Current Partner

	Women	Men
Sex with current primary partner		
Had sex with partner at first meeting/date (%)	17.5	30.7**
Sexual frequency with partner in past month		
Never	10.7	12.8
Less than once a week	30.5	27.7
Once a week	16.0	20.6
2-3 times a week	31.3	29.0
More than 3 times a week	11.4	10.0
Mean sexual satisfaction	5.7 (1.5)	5.5 (1.4)*
Current agreement with partner: Is sex with others permitted? (% not permitted)	56.5	49.4
Since current relationship began: Has respondent had sex with someone else? (% yes)	45.8	65.3**
Same-sex affairs (%)		
None	12.6	2.5
One partner	52.2	29.9
More than one partner	35.2	67.6
Other-sex affairs (%)		
None	73.1	90.6
One partner	19.8	5.0
More than one partner	7.1	4.5
Partner knows about last affair (%)		
No	35.2	71.2
Yes, but issue not talked about	10.1	9.8
Yes, discussed with partner	54.7	19.0
Since current relationship began:		
Has partner had sex with someone else? (%)		
No	48.4	30.7
Not sure	22.4	36.3
Yes	29.2	32.9
Same-sex affairs by partner (%)		
None	12.8	16.2
One partner	53.8	23.8
More than one partner	33.3	60.0
Other-sex affairs by partner (%)		
None	71.8	77.5
One partner	20.5	8.8
More than one partner	7.7	13.7

NOTE: Standard deviations are given in parentheses.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

Sex Outside the Primary Relationship

Several questions concerned the participants' attitudes and experiences about sexual exclusivity in their relationships. Previous research has found considerable variation in attitudes toward monogamy. For example, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) assessed attitudes about the personal importance given to being monogamous among their large, predominantly White, couples sample. They found that 36% of gay men and 71% of lesbians thought it was important to be monogamous, as did 75% of husbands and 84% of wives. Although differences were evident based both on gender and sexual orientation, the most striking finding was the endorsement of sexual openness by a large percentage of gay men. Other studies have also found tolerant attitudes toward sexual openness among gay men (e.g., Blasband & Peplau, 1985). Participants in our study were asked about their current understandings with their partners concerning sex with other people. As shown in Table 2.5, roughly half indicated that the current agreement was that sex with others was prohibited. There was a trend for more women (56.5%) than men (49.4%) to say their relationships were closed to sex with others ($\chi^2[1] = 3.56, p < .06$), but this difference did not achieve statistical significance. Why didn't we find the gender difference reported by Blumstein and Schwartz? One possibility may be that a heightened awareness of the dangers of AIDS has reduced men's enthusiasm about sexual openness and thus narrowed the gender gap in attitudes about monogamy. The reasons for the somewhat lower endorsement of monogamy by lesbians in our sample, compared with Blumstein and Schwartz's, are less clear and merit further study.

When it came to actual behavior, a gender difference was found: Women were more likely than men to report sexually exclusive behavior (see Table 2.5). Since the current relationship began, two-thirds of men had had sex with someone other than their primary partners, compared with less than half of the women, $\chi^2(1) = 27.08, p < .001$. These figures—65% for men and 46% for women—differ somewhat from those reported by Blumstein and Schwartz for a White sample. They found that 82% of gay men and 28% of lesbians had had non-monogamous sex since their primary relationships began. Again, our data seem to suggest a greater convergence between the African American women and men in our sample.

If a respondent had had sex with someone else, the questionnaire then asked about the gender of the sex partner(s). As shown in Table 2.5, most of the extrarerelationship sex occurred with same-sex partners: 91% of men and 73% of women had sex only with same-sex partners. Although heterosexual affairs were relatively uncommon, they were more often reported by women (27%) than by men (9%), $\chi^2(2) = 22.35$, $p < .001$. Further, more women (15%) than men (7%) reported having had affairs with *both* men and women, $\chi^2(2) = 7.66$, $p < .01$. As the data in Table 2.5 also indicate, men tended to have had more outside partners than had women. Half of the women indicated that they had had sex with only one other woman. In contrast, two-thirds of men who had had affairs reported multiple male partners, $\chi^2(2) = 44.98$, $p < .001$. This gender difference is similar to that reported by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983).

Finally, respondents who had had extrarerelationship sex were asked if they had told their partners about their most recent sexual affairs. More than half the women (55%), compared with only 19% of the men, had discussed their last affairs with their partners, $\chi^2(2) = 56.98$, $p < .001$. Most of the men (71%) believed that their partners did not know about the sexual contact.

Participants were also asked if their partners had had sex with someone else since their relationships began (see Table 2.5). Most respondents expressed confidence in their knowledge of their partners; only 22% of women and 36% of men said they were unsure about their partners' behavior. About 48% of women and 31% of men believed their partners had not had sex with anyone else since their relationships began, $\chi^2(2) = 26.44$, $p < .001$. These proportions are similar to those found for participants' reports of their own behavior: 54% of women and 35% of men said they had not had sex with another person. Women were significantly more likely than men to report that their partners had had sex only with other same-sex partners, $\chi^2(2) = 21.60$, $p < .001$. Men reported more frequent heterosexual affairs by their partners than did women, $\chi^2(2) = 7.06$, $p < .05$. These beliefs about the partner differ from respondents' own behavior, in which women were more likely than men to have heterosexual affairs. Approximately 9% of the women and 8% of the men reported that their partners had had sexual contact with both men and women since the beginning of their relationships.

Table 2.6 Correlates of Relationship Satisfaction for African American Lesbians and Gay Men

	Women	Men
Partner attributes		
Resources	.02	.01
Inner attributes	.16*	.16*
External attributes	.06	-.04
Length of relationship	.00	-.02
Live together	.16**	.08
Love and commitment		
In love with partner	.48**	.52**
Closeness in relationship	.74**	.73**
Likelihood relationship will exist		
in 1 year	.69**	.66**
in 5 years	.63**	.65**
Sexual behavior		
Sexual satisfaction with partner	.46**	.44**
Sexual frequency with partner	.35**	.19**
Sex with others not permitted	.18**	.10
Participant has had sex with others	-.20**	-.21**
Partner has had sex with others	-.23**	-.18*

* $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$.

In summary, most participants reported satisfying sex lives with their current partners. Sexual frequency varied greatly among couples, but did not differ systematically between women and men. The sexes differed most on the issue of sexual exclusivity. Although about half of both men and women had agreed with their partners to be sexually monogamous, men were more likely than women to have had sex with other partners and to have had a greater number of partners.

Correlates of Relationship Satisfaction

Our final purpose in undertaking these analyses was to investigate the correlates of participants' general satisfaction with their relationships. These data are presented in Table 2.6. In this study, as in an earlier study of White gay and lesbian couples (Kurdek, 1988), the correlates of relationship quality were usually similar for women and men.

In general, demographic characteristics of the study participant and the partner, such as age, education, and type of job, were unrelated to

satisfaction. In this African American sample, the partner's race was unrelated to relationship satisfaction: Interracial couples were no more or less satisfied, on average, than same-race couples. In contrast, participants' ratings of their partners' psychological attributes were important. Of the three types of partner attributes considered, only inner attributes, such as the partner's intelligence and spiritual energy, were significantly associated with satisfaction. For both sexes, evaluating a partner higher on these personal qualities was linked to higher satisfaction.

Neither the length of the relationship nor how long a couple had been living together was related to current satisfaction. In contrast, subjective evaluations of being in love and feeling emotionally close were significant correlates. In addition, perceiving that partners were equally satisfied with the relationship (rather than one person being more satisfied) predicted higher levels of satisfaction for both men ($F[2, 307] = 28.72, p < .001$) and women ($F[2, 388] = 28.48, p < .001$). Sexual behavior both inside and outside the relationship was associated with personal satisfaction. Greater sexual frequency, higher sexual satisfaction, and monogamy correlated positively with overall relationship satisfaction for both women and men. In all of these patterns of association, the direction of causality is uncertain. It is plausible, for example, that believing a partner is smart and good-looking enhances satisfaction with the relationship. It is also possible that finding a relationship gratifying leads to positive perceptions of one's partner.

Finally, in these difficult times, when AIDS and HIV infection threaten the lives of so many Americans, it is important to consider the possible effects of this disease on the relationships of gay men and, in some instances, lesbians. Remarkably, in this sample, men's own HIV status (HIV-negative, untested, HIV infected but asymptomatic, and HIV disease diagnosed) was not related to their ratings of relationship satisfaction ($F[3, 313] = .60, p > .10$), to the frequency of sex with their partners in the previous month ($F[3, 316] = .59, p > .10$), or to their sexual satisfaction ($F[3, 317] = .65, p > .10$). Similar findings were observed when the partner's HIV status (HIV-negative, HIV infected, and status unknown) was considered. Partner's HIV status was not associated with relationship satisfaction ($F[3, 307] = 1.80, p > .10$), frequency of sex with partner in the previous month ($F[3, 308] = 1.19, p > .10$), or sexual satisfaction ($F[3, 310] = 1.83, p > .10$). Another perspective on HIV and men's relationships considered the combined

HIV status of the couple. The gay men in our sample included couples in which both partners were believed to be HIV infected ($n = 33$, 11%), both were believed to be HIV negative ($n = 74$, 24%), both partners' HIV statuses were undetermined ($n = 70$, 23%), one partner was infected and the other was not ($n = 73$, 24%), and one partner was infected and the other's status was unknown ($n = 58$, 19%). Overall, relationship satisfaction was unrelated to the couple's HIV classification, $F(4, 303) = 1.20, p > .10$. Also unrelated to couple HIV status were levels of sexual satisfaction ($F(4, 306) = 1.01, p > .10$) and sexual frequency in the previous month ($F(4, 304) = 1.09, p > .10$).

Although some might imagine that the threat of HIV and AIDS would invariably detract from the satisfaction derived from an intimate relationship, this was not the case. In our sample, all men were currently in a "serious, committed" relationship. Apparently those men who had tested positive for HIV or who were diagnosed with HIV disease found ways to cope with their situation without diminishing the perceived quality of their primary relationships. Indeed, it may be that the support of a caring partner proved especially valuable to men confronting HIV. Information about when men learned of their HIV status (before beginning a relationship versus after a relationship was established) and about ways in which couples cope with HIV would help us to understand the links between HIV status and the quality of intimate relationships. This seems important in a time when some men correctly fear that if they reveal a positive serostatus to a seronegative partner the relationship either will not progress or, if long-term, will dissolve due to the discordant serostatuses. Yet findings from our study hint at a more positive picture among Black gay men: that a satisfying relationship and sex life are possible between HIV-discordant men.

At the time we were in the field with our study of Black lesbians, we did not ask their HIV status. In recent years, little has appeared in the literature about the HIV concerns of this population, due to small numbers of cases of AIDS and HIV infection among lesbians. This should not deter us from thinking about the impact of HIV on Black lesbians, particularly as they struggle with issues concerning safer sex and injection drug use (Cochran, Bybee, Gage, & Mays, 1996; Mays, Cochran, Pies, Chu, & Ehrhardt, 1996). This seems especially salient for those lesbians and bisexual women who are sexually active not only

with women but also with men (Cochran & Mays, 1988a; Cochran, Nardi, et al., 1997).

Our brief look at the close, intimate relationships of African American lesbians and gay men confirmed several previous findings on the relationships of heterosexual African Americans and White lesbians and gay men. However, our study also found variations that suggest unique dimensions to the intimate relationships of African American lesbians and gay men. For example, we found African American lesbians and gay men to be more alike than different in the rating of attributes important in partner selection. This convergence in similarity also seems greater for African American lesbians and gay men in other areas, such as attitudes about sexuality exclusivity and episodes of sex outside of primary relationships. Research that clarifies the gender similarities found in the relationships of African American lesbians and gay men may help us to gain a better understanding of the role of ethnicity and culture in intimate relationships. Further studies into the intimate relationships of African American lesbians and gay men are also one important means of determining the universality of our theories about close relationships. For African American gay men and lesbians, efforts by behavioral scientists to understand more fully how gender, ethnicity/culture, sexual orientation, and social status function in the structuring and maintenance of intimate relationships will strengthen efforts to enhance their emotional well-being and physical health.

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