

## Loving Women: Attachment and Autonomy in Lesbian Relationships

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The love relationships of lesbians were investigated as part of a questionnaire study of a diverse sample of 127 lesbians. The majority of women said their current relationship was extremely close, personally satisfying, and egalitarian. Differences among women's values concerning relationships reflected two distinct dimensions: dyadic attachment and personal autonomy. These relationship values were associated with women's social characteristics and feminist involvement. Relationship values were also related to such characteristics of women's current relationships as measures of love and satisfaction, future commitment, sexual exclusivity, and problems of independence/dependence.

Virtually no empirical research exists concerning the romantic and sexual relationships of lesbians. Investigators interested in interpersonal attraction and close relationships (see review by Huston & Levinger, in press) have focused exclusively on heterosexual relationships. Research on homosexuals (see review by Morin, 1977) has typically studied gay men, and has primarily been concerned with issues of etiology and personal adjustment. Heterosexual women can readily find information about the joys and problems of relationships with men in advice columns, scholarly books, and even college courses on marriage and the family. Lesbians have no comparable sources of accurate informa-

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Lisa Rivo played a major role in questionnaire development and data collection. Bari Burke assisted in early stages of the study. We appreciate the helpful comments made on earlier drafts of this manuscript by Tora Kay Bikson, Charles T. Hill, J. Roy Hopkins, Marion Jacobs, Patricia Miller, and Zick Rubin. Our most sincere thanks go to the women who participated in this research.

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tion about the nature of love relationships between women. Unfortunately, clinicians and others interested in understanding lesbian lifestyles are also forced to rely on speculation and common sense, rather than on documented evidence.

The available literature on lesbians suggests two distinct value orientations that may influence lesbian relationships. The first, *dyadic attachment*, concerns an emphasis on establishing emotionally close and relatively secure love relationships. The second, *personal autonomy*, concerns an emphasis on independence and self-actualization that may lead to a questioning of traditional patterns of love relationships. It seems likely that all close relationships require a balancing of the desire for intimacy and the desire for independence. As Levinger (1977) suggests, individuals must somehow "walk the path between counterdependency and overdependency . . . between interpersonal enmeshment and personal isolation" (p. 155). According to Hess and Handel (1959), the effort to achieve a satisfactory pattern of separateness and connectedness is a fundamental task of family life. To understand contemporary lesbian relationships, it is important to consider each of these themes and their social origins. At the same time, an analysis of attachment and autonomy in lesbian relationships may also shed light on basic issues relevant to all close relationships.

### *Dyadic Attachment*

Lesbians have typically been depicted as emphasizing the emotional quality of love relationships. According to Chafetz (1974), lesbians "develop more meaningful emotional attachments to other females than to males" (p. 189) and find it easier to achieve open communication and emotional expression in same-sex relationships. Gagnon and Simon (1973) observe that for most lesbians, "the pursuit of sexual gratification as something separate from emotional or romantic involvement is not particularly attractive" (p. 182). Such views suggest that lesbians desire relatively permanent, sexually exclusive, and emotionally close relationships.

A desire for intimacy in close relationships undoubtedly reflects many factors, ranging from psychologically based affiliative needs (e.g., Sullivan, 1953; Weiss, 1974) to culturally based norms concerning love and personal relationships (Rubin, 1973). Of particular importance for women, however, is the impact of sex-role socialization. Young women have been taught to value emotionally close and relatively permanent relationships. The traditional message has clearly indicated that close relationships should be based on love and romance, rather than on sex (Peplau,

Rubin, & Hill, 1977). Sexual fidelity and commitment have been emphasized. It seems likely that all American women, both lesbian and heterosexual, are exposed in some measure to socialization pressures encouraging strong dyadic attachments. Several researchers have noted the continuities between the sex-role socialization of lesbian and heterosexual women in our culture. According to Strom, "much of the sexual and courtship behavior of lesbians closely resembles that of heterosexual women and differs from that of gay men" (Note 1, p. 1). Gagnon and Simon (1973) argue that the lesbian "follows conventional feminine patterns in developing her commitment to sexuality and in conducting not only her sexual career but her nonsexual career as well" (p. 178). This view suggests that sex-role prescriptions concerning women's orientation towards love are a major influence on lesbian relationships.

#### *Personal Autonomy*

A second theme in descriptions of lesbians concerns personal autonomy. Abbott and Love (1972) suggest that lesbians, unlike heterosexual women, are not afraid to develop qualities of independence, self-actualization, strength, and intelligence; and that in preferring a same-sex partner, lesbians choose personal autonomy over culturally prescribed female roles. Cassell (1977) postulates that women who become lesbians "seek autonomy and independence, and define the self by activity rather than relationships" (p. 75). An emphasis on autonomy may lead women to prefer relationships that are less exclusive and that last only so long as they remain personally satisfying. Autonomy concerns might also lead women to emphasize the importance of having separate interests and friends outside a primary love relationship.

Within contemporary American society, a desire for personal autonomy may be fostered by such diverse factors as a psychologically based concern with ego identity or self-actualization, and recent social criticisms of the constraints imposed by the institution of monogamous marriage (e.g., Smith & Smith, 1974). For lesbians, however, a concern with autonomy is probably most closely tied to feminism. The modern feminist movement espouses an ideology with clear implications for women's personal lives: Sex-role change requires modification not only in legal and political institutions but also in personal relationships (Abbott & Love, 1972; Millett, 1970).

The impact of feminism on lesbian relationships may be to temper a desire for exclusive dyadic relationships with a broader

commitment to personal goals or to the lesbian feminist community (Barnhart, 1975; Strom, Note1). We expect lesbian feminists to value equal-power relationships and to minimize the importance of sexual exclusivity or temporal permanence in relationships. Barnhart's research on one radical lesbian feminist community indicated that "applied to pair relations, equality means a woman need not limit her emotional and sexual involvement to only one other woman" (1975, p. 106). Feminism encourages women to develop personal interests and commitments apart from love relationships.

### *Variations in Orientations towards Relationships*

We propose that lesbians' orientations towards love relationships vary along two primary dimensions concerning the value placed on dyadic attachment and on personal autonomy. These two sets of values are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Ramey (1976) suggests that greater attention to personal growth can convert lopsided "pair bonds" into more egalitarian "peer bonds" that can foster self-actualization for both partners. Raush (1977) explicitly rejects the notion that autonomy and intimacy are polar opposites. He argues instead that autonomy may be a developmental prerequisite for adult intimacy, and he further observes that relationships provide a means for individuals to transcend their own personal limitations. We expect individual differences in the importance given to attachment and to autonomy, with some persons giving equal emphasis to both.

Variations among lesbians in the importance given to attachment and autonomy are affected by many factors. Historically, there may be a trend towards increased emphasis on personal independence and self-actualization, fostered in part by the women's movement. This historical trend may be mirrored in the life histories of individual women who as adults are re-examining traditional attachment values learned in childhood, and are considering new values of personal independence that may be more compatible with their current lifestyles. Some women may reconcile strong desires for independence and for intimacy with relative ease. Other women, however, may experience conflict in combining these two sets of relationship values. A radical lesbian feminist interviewed by Barnhart illustrates this possible conflict: "In spite of the ideal that a pair ought to have separate interests and that polygamy is desirable, Tina felt cheated in her relationship because she had expected to have someone with whom she could share all her activities and time" (1975, p. 110).

Lesbians' social characteristics, including their attitudes, socio-economic status, and membership in various groups, may have important effects on relationship values. In this study, we were centrally concerned with the impact of feminism on orientations towards love relationships. We predicted that personal autonomy would be most important to women who view themselves as feminists and who are actively involved in feminist groups. Since the contemporary women's movement is a relatively new phenomenon, it might be expected to have its greatest impact on women who are younger and more highly educated. In contrast, we predicted that dyadic attachment would be most important to women who are least involved with the women's movement and who are relatively conservative in other aspects of life, such as religion.

Implicit in our approach to studying lesbian relationships is a hypothetical model which posits that social characteristics of women influence their relationship values, which in turn influence the nature of their actual relationships. This model is analogous to Reiss's (1967) work on sexual permissiveness, which suggested that people's position in the social structure influences their sexual standards, which in turn affect their sexual behavior. This causal model is quite useful in organizing information about lesbian relationships and presenting the results of our research. It is important to keep in mind, however, that such models are necessarily oversimplifications. Other causal links undoubtedly occur. For instance, the nature of a woman's close relationships can shape and change her values. In all close relationships, causal connections among social characteristics, values, and behavior are likely to be complex and reciprocal.

### *METHOD*

The present study had three major objectives. First, it was designed to examine lesbians' values about love relationships and to determine whether separate orientations towards dyadic attachment and personal autonomy could be identified. Second, the study investigated social characteristics of women, including feminist involvement, that might be associated with particular relationship values. Finally, the study explored links between these value orientations and various aspects of an on-going relationship, including love and satisfaction, future commitment, sexual behavior, problems, and the balance of power.

Women were recruited for a study of "Lesbian Relationships"

by ads placed in a university newspaper, a feminist student publication, and a gay community newsletter. Leaflets were distributed at a university campus and at the Los Angeles Women's Building. Contacts were also made with a community feminist center, the Los Angeles Gay Community Services Center, and a church-related lesbian rap group.

Participants spent approximately one hour filling out a detailed questionnaire. Most women completed the questionnaire in a group setting, either at UCLA or at one of five meetings scheduled at community locations; other participants were scheduled individually. Responses were anonymous. All data were collected in 1976.

### *Participants*

The 127 women in our sample ranged in age from 18 to 59 with a median of 26 years. All but two women were white. The sample was fairly equally divided between women who worked full-time for pay (46%) and women who were students in college or graduate school (41%). The majority of women (88%) either held a BA degree or were currently college students. Over 25% of the women had some graduate training.

Participants had diverse religious backgrounds: 38% were raised as Protestants, 35% as Catholics, and 17% as Jews. Most indicated that they were currently not very religious (mean 3.6 on 9-point scale of religiosity). Only 13% said they attended religious services weekly, and 63% said they went to religious services less than once a year.

At the time of our study, 61% of the women reported being in an on-going "romantic/sexual relationship" with a woman, and the remaining women had previously had at least one "romantic/sexual relationship" with a woman. Most women in our sample reported having had several lesbian relationships: 17% had had only one relationship, 46% had had two to five relationships, and 37% had had six or more. The length of the women's longest lesbian relationship ranged from one month to 25 years, with a median of 2.5 years. The women's age when their first lesbian relationship began ranged from 13 to 47, with a median of just over 20 years.

Most of the women indicated that they had had relationships with men at some point in their lives. Over 95% of the women had "dated" a man; 84% had been in a "romantic/sexual relationship" with a man. The median number of such relationships was four. About 80% of the women had had sexual intercourse

with a man; of these, the median number of heterosexual partners was five.

It is important to emphasize that our sample is not representative of lesbians, either in Los Angeles or elsewhere. As Morin (1977) has observed, there is no such thing as a representative sample of members of a hidden population such as lesbians. While our sample is fairly diverse in religion, occupation, and income, it does not include a full spectrum of lesbians. Women in our sample were relatively young, well-educated, middle-class whites. Our sample probably overrepresents women involved in lesbian and/or feminist groups, and women who are relatively open about being lesbian. The women who volunteered may well have been more interested in psychological research or more trusting of psychologists than other lesbians.

### *The Questionnaire*

Participants completed a 23-page questionnaire. Development of the questionnaire was based on extensive two-hour interviews with 12 lesbians about their relationships and on group discussions with lesbian students. The questionnaire benefited from previous research with heterosexual couples (Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976; Peplau, Rubin, & Hill, 1977; Peplau, in press; Rubin, Peplau, & Hill, Note 2).

The first part of the questionnaire concerned participants' background and involvement in lesbian and feminist activities. Questions probed attitudes toward lesbian relationships, as well as more general beliefs about romantic relationships and about women's roles. The second part of the questionnaire focused on a specific "romantic/sexual relationship." For women who were currently in a relationship, questions assessed love and commitment, sexual behavior, living arrangements, and problems. Women who were not currently in a relationship answered similar questions about their most recent past relationship.

### *RESULTS AND DISCUSSION*

A major goal of this research was to investigate characteristics that lesbians value in love relationships. The questionnaire asked women to rate on a 9-point scale the importance for them personally of 20 statements relevant to a romantic/sexual relationship. This set included statements about self-disclosure, joint activities, similarity of attitudes, sexual compatibility and exclusivity, permanence of the relationship, power and the division

of tasks, and interests and friends outside the relationship.

We predicted that the patterning of responses to these statements would indicate distinct dimensions of dyadic attachment and personal autonomy. A factor analysis of the 20 items provided strong support for this prediction. The best fit to our data was obtained by an orthogonal two-factor solution. Table 1 presents the eight statements that loaded most highly ( $>.35$ ) on each factor.

The first factor clearly reflected dyadic-attachment concerns with having a close-knit, exclusive, and relatively permanent relationship. Emphasis was given to spending time together, sharing activities, sexual fidelity, and knowing that the relationship will last a long time. We anticipated that two other items about emotional expressiveness would form part of this factor: "being able to talk about my most intimate feelings" and "being able to laugh easily with each other." However, these statements were both endorsed strongly by virtually all women (means 8.2 on 9-point scale) and so did not differentiate between the two factors.

The second factor reflected personal-autonomy concerns with independence and equality. Included were statements about

TABLE 1  
THE DYADIC ATTACHMENT AND PERSONAL AUTONOMY SCALES

Scale Item	Loadings
<i>Dyadic Attachment (Factor 1)</i>	
1. Sharing as many activities with my partner as possible	.76
2. Living together	.72
3. Spending as much time together as possible	.70
4. Knowing that the relationship will endure for a long time	.69
5. Sexual fidelity in the relationship	.68
6. Knowing that my partner depends on me	.54
7. Sexual compatibility	.47
8. Working together on tasks like shopping, cooking or cleaning, rather than dividing such tasks between us	.43
<i>Personal Autonomy (Factor 2)</i>	
1. Having similar attitudes about women's issues	.74
2. That we both have similar political attitudes	.63
3. Having a supportive group of friends as well as my romantic/sexual partner	.63
4. Having an egalitarian (equal-power) relationship	.49
5. Being able to have sexual relations with people other than my partner	.41
6. Trying new sexual activities or techniques with my partner	.38
7. Having major interests of my own outside the relationship	.37
8. Enjoying our relationship now without insisting on a future commitment	.37

*Note.* Items on the Dyadic Attachment scale loaded below .35 on Personal Autonomy, and vice versa. Individual scale scores were estimated by computing mean responses for the 8 items on each scale.



having friends and interests outside the relationship, and not insisting on a future commitment. For the women in this sample, personal autonomy was strongly linked to concerns that both partners have similar attitudes about women's issues and about politics. This pattern is consistent with our expectation that, for lesbians, personal autonomy is associated with feminism. Not surprisingly, the set of attitudes comprising this factor is quite similar to values espoused by lesbian feminists studied by Barnhart (1975) and Strom (Note 1), and discussed in articles appearing in the Los Angeles-based, feminist newspaper, *Lesbian Tide*. Although personal-autonomy values may have diverse roots for the general population, for lesbians such values are tied to contemporary feminist ideology.

On the basis of the factor analysis, separate Dyadic Attachment and Personal Autonomy scales were constructed. Each woman was assigned a dyadic attachment score based on the average of her responses to the eight items in this scale listed in Table 1; similarly, each woman received a personal autonomy score based on the average of her responses to the eight items included in that scale.

For the 127 women in our sample, there was a small negative correlation between scores on these two scales,  $r = -.26$ ,  $p < .001$ . Women who gave great importance to one orientation tended to de-emphasize the other, but this tendency was quite small in magnitude, and some women endorsed both sets of values equally strongly. About 20% of the women scored above the median on both scales; another 18% scored below the median on both. These data provide empirical support for the contention of Rausch (1977) and others that an emphasis on attachment is not necessarily incompatible with an emphasis on autonomy; the two are not mutually exclusive.

#### *Relationship Values and Social Characteristics*

Further analyses examined the links between relationship values and such social characteristics of women as their background, attitudes, and involvement in feminist and lesbian activities.

*Demographic characteristics.* No relationship was found between attachment scores and the woman's age, education, employment status, income, or parental education. Consistent with the notion that strong proponents of dyadic attachment are more conservative, it was found that women who scored high on attachment reported being significantly more religious than other women. In contrast, women who scored high on personal auton-

omy were significantly younger, better educated, less religious, and had more highly educated parents than women who scored low on personal autonomy. These results suggest that whereas a concern with dyadic attachment may cut across different demographic groups, an emphasis on personal autonomy tends to be concentrated among younger lesbians with higher levels of education.

*Romanticism.* To examine the possibility that dyadic attachment is associated with more traditional attitudes about love relationships, a 6-item general romanticism scale (adapted from Rubin, 1969) was included in the questionnaire. Items assessed such beliefs as that true love lasts forever or that love can overcome barriers of race, religion, and economics. The wording of items was modified so as to be appropriate for same-sex relationships. As we expected, scores on this romanticism scale were significantly correlated with scores on the dyadic attachment scale,  $r = .50$ ,  $p < .001$ . Women who valued exclusivity and permanence in their love relationships were likely to believe in traditionally romantic conceptions of love. In contrast, the relationship between romanticism and personal autonomy scores was weaker and in the opposite direction,  $r = -.27$ ,  $p < .001$ .

*Sex-role traditionalism scale.* We have suggested that traditional sex-role socialization may contribute to an emphasis on dyadic attachment, whereas feminist ideology may contribute to an emphasis on personal autonomy. The questionnaire included a 10-item sex-role traditionalism scale (Peplau, 1973), assessing general attitudes about proper roles for women and men. Although women in the sample tended to reject traditional attitudes about sex roles, significant relationships were found between scores on the sex-role scale and scores on dyadic attachment,  $r = .32$ ,  $p < .001$ , and on personal autonomy,  $r = -.38$ ,  $p < .001$ . Women who wanted a relatively secure and permanent love relationship held somewhat more conservative attitudes about sex roles, whereas women who desired autonomy and equality in love relationships tended to reject traditional sex roles to a greater degree. Thus it appears that women's relationship values are to some extent tied to more general beliefs about sex roles.

*Feminist involvement.* It was predicted that personal autonomy would be valued most strongly by lesbians actively involved in feminism. The questionnaire included an 8-item index of involvement in feminist activities. Questions concerned the frequency of participation in feminist groups, attendance at feminist social and political events, and self-rated involvement in feminist activi-

ties. Slightly over half the women (58%) in our sample currently belonged to a feminist group or organization, and 42% had participated in a feminist consciousness-raising group at some time. As expected, active feminists scored significantly higher on personal autonomy,  $r = .52$ ,  $p < .001$ , and lower on dyadic attachment,  $r = -.50$ ,  $p < .001$ .

*Lesbian activism.* Finally, we examined links between relationship values and women's involvement in the lesbian community in Los Angeles. While all of the women in our sample were self-defined lesbians, they varied considerably in their participation in gay political and community activities. A measure of lesbian activism was developed based on the number and types of lesbian activities a woman had attended during the past year and on the term she preferred in describing herself. On this basis, women were divided into three groups. *Apolitical women* did not participate in lesbian rap groups, collectives, or other gay organizations. While they might attend gay bars or private parties, they were not involved in other activities of the gay community. These women often described themselves as "a person" or "a human being." *Political moderates* had some involvement in the gay community other than bars and parties. They participated in such activities as rap groups, concerts, the local gay church, lesbian athletic groups, or the Gay Community Services Center, but they did not consider themselves to be radical. These women were likely to describe themselves as "gay" or "lesbian." Finally, a group of *politically radical women* were highly active in lesbian feminist activities. For example, they might participate in a radical women's center, in lesbian work collectives, in lesbian publications, or in radical therapy groups for women. Their self descriptions often included such terms as "radicalesbian," "lesbian feminist," or "dyke." This latter group is the most similar to the lesbian feminists studied by Barnhart (1975) and Strom (Note 1). For the women in our sample, lesbian activism was virtually synonymous with feminist involvement. Consequently, we predicted that the radical

TABLE 2  
RELATIONSHIP VALUES AND LESBIAN POLITICAL ACTIVISM  
(Mean Scores)

	Apoliticals	Political Moderates	Radicals
Dyadic Attachment	6.6	6.3	5.2
Personal Autonomy	5.9	6.0	6.9
(N)	(28)	(53)	(46)

lesbians in our sample would give relatively greater importance to autonomy and lesser importance to attachment than other women. Data presented in Table 2 confirm both predictions. Radical lesbians scored significantly higher on personal autonomy and lower on dyadic attachment than other women ( $p < .001$  in both instances). Apoliticals and political moderates had similar scores on both scales.

### *Current Relationships*

A major objective of this research was to investigate characteristics of women's actual relationships, and the impact that dyadic attachment and personal autonomy values may have on relationships. To avoid problems associated with retrospective reports, we limited our analyses to the 77 women in the sample who were currently in a relationship at the time of our study.

*History of the relationship.* Women were asked how they and their partner had first met. About a quarter of the women reported meeting "through friends," and another quarter met through school (16%) or work (10%). Although 18% of the women indicated having met "through a lesbian activity (e.g., dance, meeting, encounter group)," only one woman had met her partner "at a lesbian bar." About 12% met "through a feminist (not specifically lesbian) activity." High and low scorers on both attachment and autonomy were equally likely to have met their partner through school, work, or lesbian activities. But relationship values were associated with two other ways of meeting a partner. Since high-autonomy women tended to be active feminists, it was not surprising that they were significantly more likely than low-autonomy women to have met through a feminist activity. In fact, all the women who met a partner in this way scored above the median on autonomy. Women who scored high on attachment were significantly more likely than low scorers to have met their partner through friends.

The length of current relationships among women in this subsample varied from one month to 11 years, with a median of 13 months. Women who scored high on personal autonomy tended to have begun their current relationship more recently,  $r = -.50, p < .001$ . This may reflect the facts that high-autonomy women were significantly younger than other women and that they gave less importance to having long-term relationships. In contrast, scores on dyadic attachment were unrelated to the length of the current relationship.

About 62% of the women in our sample lived with their

partner. Among those not living together, 80% of the women saw their partner three or more times a week. Since the dyadic attachment scale emphasized the importance of partners' spending time together, we expected that attachment scores would be related to how often respondents saw their partner. Significant support was found for this prediction. Among women scoring above the median on attachment, 82% lived together, compared to only 44% of low scorers. Among those who were not living together, 63% of high-attachment women saw their partner daily, compared to only 20% of low-attachment women. Scores on personal autonomy were inversely related to frequency of contact; high-autonomy women were significantly less likely than low-autonomy women to live with their partner or to see her daily.

These results indicate that women's values were significantly related to characteristics of their current love relationship. A strong emphasis on personal autonomy was associated with spending less time with one's partner, having a shorter-term relationship, and having met through a feminist activity. A somewhat different pattern was found for dyadic attachment. An emphasis on attachment was not associated with the length of the woman's relationship, but was related to seeing one's partner frequently and having met through friends.

*Intimacy and satisfaction.* Most of the women reported being in a close, loving relationship. About 75% indicated that they and their current partner were "in love"; only 17% said they were not in love, and 8% were undecided. Women reported considerable closeness in the relationship (mean 7.7 on 9-point scale) and a high degree of satisfaction (mean 7.1 on 9-point scale). It is possible that such high levels of satisfaction among the women in our sample may in part reflect a sampling bias; women may have been less likely to volunteer for the research if their current relationship was unhappy. Nonetheless, these data clearly indicate that lesbian relationships can be highly satisfying.

We expected women who gave importance to dyadic-attachment values to report greater intimacy and closeness in their relationship. Clear support was found for this prediction. Among women scoring above the median on attachment, 87% reported being "in love" compared to only 57% of women scoring below the median on attachment,  $p < .01$ . The questionnaire also included Rubin's (1973) "love scale" and "liking scale." Although these two measures were developed on heterosexual samples, their content appeared to be potentially appropriate for lesbian relationships. The 9-item love scale assesses elements of attachment,

caring, and intimacy; it includes such items as "I feel I can confide in \_\_\_ about virtually everything" and "It would be hard for me to get along without \_\_\_." A moderately high correlation was found between scores on dyadic attachment and on Rubin's love scale,  $r = .54$ ,  $p < .001$ . Scores on the 9-item liking scale, a measure of respect and affection for the partner, were also correlated with dyadic attachment,  $r = .40$ ,  $p < .001$ . Finally, significant correlations of a lower order were also found between dyadic attachment and ratings of closeness and of satisfaction in the relationship, both  $r_s = .20$ ,  $p < .05$ .

These data indicate that a general emphasis on the importance of having emotionally close and relatively secure dyadic relationships is associated with greater intimacy in current relationships. Two processes may underlie this association between dyadic attachment and intimacy. First, women who emphasize attachment values may be more likely to idealize their partner and the relationship. At the same time the experience of being in a very close, satisfying relationship may reinforce a belief in the importance of attachment concerns.

No relationship was found between personal autonomy and any measure of love or closeness. Although women who placed importance on personal autonomy and activities outside the relationship reported seeing their partner less often, they were not less satisfied with their relationship. This suggests that the lower frequency of interaction among high-autonomy women is a desired pattern, not an indication of lesser intimacy or happiness in the relationship.

*Future expectations.* The women were asked to estimate the likelihood that their current relationship would exist in six months, one year, and five years. Most women expressed at least moderate confidence that their present relationship would continue into the future. About 44% of the women were certain (7 on 7-point scale) that their relationship would continue for six months, 37% were certain it would last a year, and 26% were certain it would exist in five years. Answers to these questions were related to measures of satisfaction with the relationship. For example, estimates of the likelihood of the relationship enduring for one year were correlated with self-reported closeness,  $r = .74$ , with satisfaction,  $r = .74$ , and with scores on both the love scale,  $r = .58$ , and liking scale,  $r = .51$  (all  $r$ 's at  $p < .001$ ). There was also a tendency for women in longer term relationships to give higher estimates of the longevity of their relationships,  $r = .24$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Additional questions assessed women's willingness to make

major changes in their own lives in order to preserve their relationship. On one item, women were asked to imagine that their partner had decided to move to another city to pursue an attractive job or educational opportunity, and were then asked how likely it was that they would move with their partner. Less than half of the women said they definitely (28%) or probably (13%) would move in order to continue the relationship. About 30% reported being uncertain what they would do, and about 30% indicated that they probably or definitely would not move. Responses to a parallel question gauging the probability that the partner would move with the respondent followed a similar pattern. These results suggest considerable variation in women's relative commitment to their relationship versus their work or education.

Further analyses examined the links between these measures of commitment to the relationship and women's relationship values. Women who scored high on dyadic attachment were significantly more likely than low scorers to expect their relationship to continue into the future, and were more likely to say that both partners would move to preserve the relationship (all *t*-tests significant at  $p < .01$ ). In other words, women who valued permanence in relationships expressed greater optimism about the future of their own current relationship, and said that they were more willing to make a major change such as moving in order to preserve the relationship. In contrast, women who valued personal autonomy showed an opposite pattern. Women who scored above the median on autonomy were significantly less likely than low scorers to indicate that either partner would move, and expressed less confidence in the future continuation of their current relationship (all *t*-tests significant at  $p < .01$ ).

*Sexual behavior.* The women in our sample were generally quite satisfied with the sexual aspects of their relationship (mean 5.9 on 7-point scale of overall sexual satisfaction). Nearly three quarters of the women indicated that they found sex extremely satisfying, and only 4% reported that sex was not at all satisfying. One factor contributing to satisfaction was the high frequency with which women experienced orgasm when having sex with their current partner. Over 70% of the women said they "almost always" experienced orgasm; 14% said they "usually" did. Only one woman in ten said that she experienced orgasms "occasionally" and only 4% said "never." Another factor contributing to satisfaction was the reported lack of guilt among our respondents. About 80% said they never felt guilty about their sexual activity with

*their partner*; 16% said they did occasionally, and only 4% reported usually or always feeling guilty.

Perhaps as a consequence of high sexual satisfaction, many women expressed a desire to have sex somewhat more frequently than they had recently. While 50% of the women were satisfied with the actual frequency of sex in their relationship, 45% desired to have sex more often and 5% preferred a lower frequency of sex. When asked how often they and their partner "had engaged in sexual activity that included genital stimulation" during the past month, most women reported having had sex about once a week. Specifically, 8% of the women said they had not had sex during the past month; 21% had had sex once or twice during the month; and 33% had had sex "once a week." A third of the women (29%) reported having sex two to three times a week, and 8% said they had sex four or more times a week. There was a positive correlation between reported frequency of sex and sexual satisfaction,  $r = .46$ ,  $p < .001$ , and between frequency of sex and frequency of orgasm,  $r = .32$ ,  $p < .01$ . There was also a tendency for sexual frequency to be lower in longer-term relationships,  $r = -.31$ ,  $p < .01$ , and among older respondents,  $r = -.31$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Two predictions were made concerning the relationship of dyadic attachment and personal autonomy values to sexual behavior. First, we anticipated that there would be a greater emphasis on love as a basis for sex among women with strong attachment values. Our questionnaire inquired whether the woman had been "in love" with her current partner when they first had sex with each other. While the proportion of women who were in love was greater among women scoring above rather than below the median on attachment (68% versus 52%), this difference was not statistically significant. Scores on attachment were, however, related to self-rated sexual satisfaction,  $r = .20$ ,  $p < .05$ . Scores on personal autonomy were not related to any measure of sexual satisfaction.

A second prediction was that sexual exclusivity would be associated with low scores on personal autonomy. Only 13% of the women in our sample said they had had sex with someone else during the past two months. Furthermore, only 28% had had sex with another person since their current relationship began. Analyses indicated that having sex outside the relationship was not related to the woman's sexual satisfaction with her primary partner, nor with her frequency of having orgasms with her primary partner. This suggests that women do not seek new sexual



partners because of dissatisfaction with their primary relationship. Rather some women may positively value non-exclusivity. Consistent with this notion was the finding that women who scored above the median on personal autonomy were more likely than low scorers to have had sex with another person during the past two months, 22% versus 5%,  $p < .07$ . No relationship was found between scores on dyadic attachment and sexual exclusivity.

*The problem of independence versus dependence.* Based on clinical experience, Sang (Note 3) suggested that an emphasis on emotional closeness in lesbian relationships might create problems concerning independence and dependence. "By far the most frequent theme in lesbian couple relationships has to do with time together and time alone. Many lesbians feel that if they are in a committed relationship they will not have time to be themselves" (p. 5). Our questionnaire examined women's perceptions of potential problems in their relationship, including concerns related to independence and dependence.

The questionnaire included a list of 17 "factors that may cause difficulties in close relationships" (adapted from Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976). Women indicated whether each factor was likely to lead to major difficulties, minor difficulties, or none at all in their relationship during the next year. Many women expressed some concern about independence. For example, "my desire to be independent" was cited as a major problem by 17% of women, and as a minor problem by 37%. In a similar vein, "my partner's dependence on me" was cited as a major problem by 11% of women, and as a minor problem by 29%. We expected that dyadic attachment and personal autonomy would be associated with different concerns about independence/dependence. As anticipated, women who scored above the median on attachment were significantly less likely than low scorers to see their own desire for independence as a problem,  $t = 2.6$ ,  $p < .01$ . While only 6% of high-attachment women thought their own independence might be a major problem, 32% of low-attachment women listed this as a possible major problem. Presumably, women who value a close, secure relationship are less likely to have strong desires for personal independence. In contrast, scores on personal autonomy were significantly associated with concerns about "my partner's dependence on me,"  $t = 2.5$ ,  $p < .01$ , presumably because high-autonomy women want to guard their own independence from an overly dependent partner.

Of the 17 problems listed on the questionnaire, four others were cited fairly often as a source of potential difficulty. Some

women indicated that major problems might be created by "living too far apart" (20%), "jealousy" (17%), "differences in interests" (13%) and "conflicting attitudes about sex" (11%). All other problems, including differences in attitudes and backgrounds, pressure from parents, and feelings about being a lesbian were cited infrequently. It should be emphasized, however, that most women anticipated few problems in their relationship. Women typically cited only one factor as a possible major problem.

*The balance of power.* A final aspect of lesbian relationships considered in this study concerned women's perceptions of the balance of power in their relationship. It was predicted that women who strongly valued personal autonomy might be more likely than other women to have egalitarian relationships. This would be consistent with the finding that high-autonomy women were more likely to be active feminists, and the fact that the personal autonomy scale included an item concerning the importance of having an equal-power relationship.

Women were asked to indicate which partner "has more of a say about what you and (—) do together." Responses were on a 5-point scale from "I have much more say" to "(—) has much more say." A later question asked which partner should have more say in the relationship. (For details about these measures and data from a heterosexual sample, see Peplau, in press.)

Results indicated that virtually all women (97%) believed that ideally both partners should have "exactly equal say" in the relationship. Not all women attained this ideal, however. Only 64% of the women in our sample reported that their current relationship actually was "exactly equal." Contrary to our prediction, no relationship was found between the balance of power and scores on either personal autonomy or dyadic attachment (see Peplau & Caldwell, Note 4).

### SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Our investigation of lesbian relationships supports several conclusions. First, most of the women in our sample reported a high degree of closeness and satisfaction in their current relationship. While we do not know how representative this finding is of all lesbians, it does provide a clear empirical demonstration that a high degree of intimacy is possible in lesbian relationships. The majority of women in our sample also indicated that they and their current partner shared equally in power.

Second, evidence was found linking women's values concern-

ing relationships to characteristics of their current love relationship. Women who endorsed attachment values of togetherness and security differed significantly from women who de-emphasized these values. An emphasis on attachment was associated with spending more time with the current partner, reporting greater closeness and satisfaction with the relationship, expressing greater confidence that the relationship would continue in the future, and worrying less that personal independence would create difficulties for the relationship. Women who endorsed autonomy themes of equality, having personal interests outside the relationship, and de-emphasizing future commitment differed significantly from women who gave less importance to these values. In particular, a strong emphasis on autonomy was associated with spending less time with the partner, being less willing to maintain the relationship at the expense of work or education, being more likely to have a sexually open relationship, and worrying about having an overly dependent partner.

Third, support for our contention that autonomy and attachment are distinct but not mutually exclusive orientations was provided by evidence that the two had different correlates. For example, reports of closeness and satisfaction in the relationship were related to attachment values but not to autonomy values. Whether or not a woman was a strong proponent of equality and personal independence had no impact on her happiness with her current relationship. In addition, sexual exclusivity was related to autonomy values but not to attachment values. A woman was more likely to have sex outside her primary relationship if she valued personal independence strongly rather than weakly, but the degree to which a woman valued dyadic attachment was unrelated to sexual openness.

The results of this study are pertinent to social-psychological research on close relationships in several ways. Our study provides an empirical demonstration of the importance of dimensions of autonomy and attachment in love relationships, and suggests a methodology for studying these relationship values. The study also provides empirical support for the theoretical view of Raush (1977) and others that autonomy and intimacy are not polar opposites, but rather are independent dimensions. It is possible for individuals to be strongly oriented towards both ideals. Finally, the study documents interrelationships among social characteristics, relationship values, and features of actual dyadic relationships (see Reiss, 1967). We can speculate that comparable research on gay men and heterosexuals would also find autonomy and

attachment to be important value dimensions. Further, we imagine that while the relationship correlates of autonomy and attachment might be the same across samples, the social origins of these value orientations would be different for lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals.

This study also contributes to a growing body of empirical research concerning lesbians and their lifestyles. In a recent critique of research on homosexuality, Morin (1977) urged that higher priority be given to studies concerning the diversity of homosexual lifestyles and the dynamics of gay relationships. Our research represents a first step in that direction. A few major similarities were found among the lesbians we studied. Virtually all women viewed intimate self-disclosure as essential to a good relationship. The majority of women said their current relationship was extremely close and personally satisfying, and most reported equal power in the relationship. While we do not know how representative these findings are of all lesbians, they clearly indicate that lesbians can establish personally rewarding and egalitarian love relationships.

Around these areas of commonality, wide variations were found in women's values about relationships, and the characteristics of their own current relationships. The patterning of these values and experiences reflected dimensions of dyadic attachment and personal autonomy, and were strongly related to women's involvement in feminism. In their love relationships as in other aspects of their lives, lesbians are a diverse group. As lesbians continue to evaluate the sorts of personal relationships they prefer, the importance given to attachment and autonomy concerns may shift. It seems likely however, that the need to reconcile basic desires for intimacy and for independence will continue.

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