



## A Relationship Perspective on Homosexuality

*Letitia Anne Peplau and Susan D. Cochran*

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Research on the interpersonal relationships of lesbians and gay men represents a relatively new direction in the study of homosexuality. Only during the past decade have studies of close homosexual relationships emerged as a recognizable scientific perspective on homosexuality (see reviews by Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Harry, 1983; Larson, 1982; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984; Peplau, 1982; Peplau & Amaro, 1982; Peplau & Gordon, 1983). In this chapter, we examine the close relationships of gay men and lesbians. We begin by outlining important issues raised by a relationship perspective on homosexual experiences. We then discuss the goals of relationship research. We conclude with a review of recent empirical findings about homosexual couples in the United States.

### **Three Perspectives on Homosexuality**

Human experience can be studied from many perspectives. To understand a relationship approach, it is useful to contrast it with two more established perspectives on homosexuality—approaches that focus on the individual and on the society or culture.

Most research on homosexuality has taken the *individual* as the focus of analysis. Kinsey's pioneering work investigated the sexual behaviors of the individual and used biographical information to locate the person on a continuum from exclusive homosexuality to exclusive heterosexuality. Other individualistic approaches include studies of the personality characteristics, psychological well-being, and life histories of gay men and lesbi-

ans (e.g., Morin, 1976). More recent work exploring individual homosexual "identity" (see Cass, Chapter 14 of this volume; De Cecco & Shively, 1984; Shively, Jones, & De Cecco, 1984) also represents a person-centered analysis. These lines of inquiry have in common their focus on describing and/or explaining the behavior and subjective experiences of individuals. What individual approaches often neglect, however, is the extent to which homosexuality also involves interpersonal experiences and behaviors occurring between two people of the same sex.

*Sociocultural* analyses, typically undertaken by anthropologists, historians, and sociologists, focus on the societal patterning of homosexuality. Sociocultural researchers seek to describe and explain societal reactions to homosexuality, cultural and subcultural variations in homosexuality, social rules and institutions that regulate homosexuality, and so on. For example, Boswell's (1980) historical analysis, tracing social attitudes toward homosexuality from the beginning of the Christian era to the fourteenth century, showed that there have been periods of relative tolerance toward homosexuals, and questioned the role of Christianity in shaping intolerance toward homosexuality. Herdt's (1981, 1987) ethnography of the Sambia provided a detailed description of the nature and social meaning of ritualized male homosexuality among a tribe in New Guinea. Closer to home, Warren's (1974) early sociological account of the "gay world" described such features of the gay community as gay bars, styles of socializing, gay vocabularies and ideology, and strategies for maintaining secrecy. Wolf's (1980) work described the development of a lesbian feminist community in San Francisco in the mid-1970s. What these investigations have in common is their concern with describing and explaining social institutions and public attitudes concerning homosexuality.

In contrast, a *relationship* perspective takes as the central phenomenon of interest the sexual and romantic relationships that occur between same-sex partners. As De Cecco and Shively (1984) noted, a relationship perspective shifts the focus of inquiry "from isolated individuals to their mutual associations" (p. 1). A relationship perspective seeks to describe the characteristics of homosexual pairings, addressing such issues as the extent of commitment in gay relationships, the balance of power between partners, and the nature of sexual expression in long-term couples. A relationship perspective also explores the goals and values that individuals have about relationships and their subjective experiences in relationships. A further goal of relationship research is to analyze the causes of variations among homosexual couples and to understand the factors that lead relationships to change over time.

### Conceptual Issues in Studying Homosexual Relationships

A first question for those interested in gay and lesbian relationships is seemingly obvious: "What is a homosexual relationship?" One answer to

the question is provided by the specific criteria or operational definitions that empirical researchers use when enlisting the participation of members of homosexual couples. In practice, researchers have usually studied romantic/sexual relationships of some duration between partners who describe themselves as gay, lesbian, or homosexual. For example, in their study of gay male couples, McWhirter and Mattison (1984) included as participants only male couples who had lived together in the same house for at least a year and who considered themselves to be a "couple." In a study of lesbian relationships, Mays (1986) identified eligible participants by asking women to indicate if they were currently in a "serious, committed romantic/sexual relationship with a woman." In a comparative study of lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual relationships, Duffy and Rusbult (1986) used a broader criterion that permitted participants to describe any relationship, past or present, of any duration and any level of seriousness. These examples make it clear that current research encompasses a range of relationships, with some researchers using considerably more restrictive operational definitions of homosexual relationships than others.

Little attention has been given to the more difficult *conceptual issues* involved in defining a homosexual relationship. In an insightful article titled "The Fallacy of Misplaced Precision," Koertge (1984) used examples from the history of science to argue that current research on homosexuality can benefit from the use of "cluster concepts" and "fuzzy sets." Koertge argued convincingly that efforts to impose single, rigidly precise definitions in work on homosexuality are premature. We agree, and think it useful to consider some of the difficult issues involved in conceptualizing the meaning of a "homosexual relationship"—namely, what we mean by "relationship" and when we will consider a relationship to be "homosexual."

### What Is a Relationship?

We believe that it is essential to conceptualize homosexual relationships without using heterosexuality as a model or standard. Assumptions about relationships based on the values and experiences of heterosexuals may not necessarily apply to gay and lesbian couples. The extent to which actual gay and lesbian relationships resemble heterosexual marriages is an open question—and should not be an implicit assumption guiding research hypotheses and practices. Instead, we argue for a broader concept of relationships. For these purposes, a useful starting point is provided in the book *Close Relationships* by Kelley et al. (1983).

Kelley et al. presented a framework for understanding the range of close human relationships and defined close relationships in terms that can be applied to relations with lovers, friends, family, coworkers, and others. The key feature of any relationship is that two people are interdependent, that each partner influences the other. Relationships can range

from fleeting encounters between strangers to enduring relationships between partners whose lives are deeply intertwined. Of central interest are *close relationships*, those that are both relatively enduring and important to the participants. In technical terms, Kelley et al. defined close relationships as involving four core ingredients.

1. The partners interact or otherwise affect each other *frequently*. In most cases, people in close relationships see each other often. But when partners are separated, their mutual influence may continue because they think about each other, take actions on behalf of the other, make plans for future joint activities, and so on.

2. The influence that partners have on each other is *strong* and intense. This could mean that partners are able to create strong positive or negative feelings in each other, that they are highly dependent on the relationship to satisfy important psychological or material needs, that they are able to change each other's thoughts and behaviors in important ways, and so on.

3. The influence that partners have on each other spans a range of *diverse* activities, domains, or topics. In a close romantic relationship, for example, partners may talk about many issues, spend time in various leisure pursuits, exchange advice and presents, communicate both verbally and physically, share stories about the past and make plans for the future, create a circle of mutual friends, or begin a joint household.

4. Close relationships are characterized by relatively long *duration*.

In sum, close relationships are influential associations in which partners have a great deal of impact on each other.

This definition identifies the core features common to all close relationships. The definition is deliberately phrased in very general terms that can encompass a broad range of different types of pairings. Many other possible features of relationships—whether the partners are male or female, whether the partners love each other or feel committed, whether the relationship involves sexual behavior, whether the partners share power equally, whether the influence that partners have on each other is "good" or "bad," whether the relationship is formally recognized and approved by society, and so forth—are seen as dimensions along which close relationships can meaningfully vary. Indeed, the description of variation and diversity among close relationships is an important research goal.

### When Is a Relationship Homosexual?

More difficult than defining a relationship is specifying when a relationship is "homosexual." Of all close same-sex relationships between friends, relatives, coworkers, acquaintances, or others, which shall be considered homosexual relationships? Social scientists would probably agree on the *prototype* or most typical description of a close homosexual relationship in our society, namely, a couple in which same-sex partners build a life together that includes both love and sex. But what of other

cases—two women who live together as loving partners but do not have sex with each other? College roommates who have a lengthy sexual affair but insist that they are “not gay” and just love this one special partner? A long-term couple who continue to live together, even after sexual interest and passionate love have disappeared? Examples such as these raise dilemmas about conceptualizing homosexual relationships. Several rather different approaches have been taken to defining the core features of a close *homosexual* relationship.

#### SEX AND LOVE

One approach to defining homosexual relationships focuses on specific characteristics of same-sex relationships, most commonly sexuality and love. In this view, a close same-sex relationship is homosexual if, or only if, the partners have sex and/or experience love.

One view has been that *sexuality* is crucial to defining homosexual relationships. For example, De Cecco and Shively (1984) argued for the value of shifting discourse on homosexuality from “sexual identity” to “sexual relationships” (p. 14). Bullough (1984) echoed this point, encouraging “the attempt to shift from equating homosexuality with sexual identity” to “emphasizing sexual behavior” (pp. 3, 5). Certainly in the public mind, it is the fact of sex occurring between same-sex partners that most readily distinguishes homosexuality from heterosexuality. Participants in same-sex relationships may themselves use sexual interest or behavior as evidence of whether their relationship is a homosexual one rather than a platonic friendship. For example, when we (Peplau, Cochran, & Mays, 1986) asked a large sample of black lesbians whether or not they were in a “serious, committed” lesbian relationship, all those who responded yes indicated that they had had sex with their partner. This is not necessarily true for heterosexuals, who may consider themselves to be dating or engaged without having sex. Lacking the social institutions that define and structure heterosexual courtship and marriage in America, homosexuals may emphasize the occurrence of sexual behavior as a key to labeling their own same-sex relationships.

A focus on sexuality as the distinguishing feature of homosexual relationships entails several difficulties, however. One is the problem of defining sexuality and specifying whether sexuality must involve explicitly genital acts—or can be construed more broadly to include other forms of physical affection and/or “latent” sexuality. De Cecco and Shively (1984) acknowledged this difficulty when they wrote that “still unanswered is the question of what distinguishes a relationship that is *sexual* from one that is not sexual” (p. 2).

Further, the use of sex as a definitional criterion appears, by omission, to ignore other facets of a relationship such as love, communication, commitment, and shared activities that may be of equal or greater importance, either to the partners or to researchers. The sexual interaction

criterion also seems to exclude from consideration partners whose love and commitment are not expressed in sexual ways, and leaves uncertain the status of couples whose relationship may once have been sexual but subsequently continues without sexual activity. In a discussion of contemporary lesbians, Miller and Fowlkes (1980) flatly discounted the usefulness of sex as a defining criterion:

For Masters and Johnson, as for Kinsey, the sex act is the problem. It is a problem for the remainder of contemporary research on lesbianism as well, but here it is a problem because it is not a problem. In recent scholarly work [on lesbians], there is widespread agreement that the sex act itself is not a fruitful area for study. (p. 797)

A similar point was made by Faderman (1984) in her discussion of contemporary lesbian feminists:

Women who have come to lesbianism through radical feminism reject the notion that *lesbian* is a *sexual* identity . . . . [S]exual activity is for them, generally, only one aspect, and perhaps a relatively unimportant aspect, of their commitment to a lesbian life-style. . . . Lesbian-feminists define lesbianism in much more inclusive terms: A lesbian's entire sense of self centers on women. While sexual energies are not discounted, alone they do not create the lesbian-feminist. (pp. 86-87)

It makes good sense to include sexuality as a key feature in the "fuzzy set" that defines the prototype of a homosexual relationship in contemporary America, but it seems unwise to require sexual interaction as a criterion in all cases.

Another key element in defining homosexual relationships concerns the *emotional quality* of a relationship and the experience of love between the partners. For example, in a discussion of women's relationships in the nineteenth century, Faderman (1981) argued that the term *lesbian*

describes a relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other. Sexual contact may be a part of the relationship to a greater or lesser degree, or it may be entirely absent. By preference the two women spend most of their time together and share most aspects of their lives with each other. . . . [I think that most] female love relationships before the 20th century were probably not genital. (pp. 17-18)

Faderman also provided the interesting observation that many of the "lesbian" cases discussed by Havelock Ellis, Sigmund Freud, and other

early sexologists were Victorian women whose same-sex love relationships were nongenital.

The dilemma of whether love or sex or both are requisites for a homosexual relationship has not been resolved. It seems to us that gender sometimes plays a part in how people think about the matter. It appears that observers are more likely to emphasize sexuality in discussing men's relationships and to focus on love in discussing lesbian relationships. This may, in some measure, mirror the way that lesbians and gay men themselves conceptualize and talk about their own relationships. We can also speculate that male and female researchers may differ in the relative importance that they attach to love and sex in their scholarly research on homosexual relationships. We are not sure of the accuracy of these impressions or certain about their possible origins in gender role socialization and stereotypes, but we think the topic warrants further examination.

As relationship researchers, we propose that *neither* sex nor love be taken as a necessary or an exclusive definitional criterion for homosexual relationships. To insist on either would unnecessarily narrow the scope of research on homosexual relationships. Any particular researcher will, of course, need to use specific operational definitions of gay or lesbian relationships. Some may decide, as we ourselves have done (Peplau & Cochran, 1981; Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978), to study relationships that participants define as "romantic/sexual." But other criteria, such as living together or being in a "serious/committed" relationship, may be equally reasonable. We think that scientists should view sex and love as common and potentially important elements in cultural prototypes of homosexual relationships but not necessarily as the best or only criteria for researchers to use in defining homosexual relationships scientifically.

In practical terms, we suggest that researchers use general indices of close relationships to identify homosexual couples, such as objective measures of relationship duration or living together, and subjective measures of the partners' perceptions of themselves as being a "couple," or having a serious or important relationship. Measures such as these do not prejudice the motivations of the partners or the character and quality of their relationship. Rather, the proposed measures permit and encourage researchers to investigate naturally occurring variations in love and sexual behavior in homosexual relationships. Further, researchers may be well advised to use multiple indicators of a homosexual relationship rather than relying on a single criterion such as living together.

#### HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY

Another issue in conceptualizing homosexual relationships centers on the *personal and/or social identities* of the partners. Most researchers have included in their conception of a homosexual relationship that the partners must define themselves as gay, lesbian, or homosexual. Thus, for example, Mays (1986) excluded from her study of lesbian relationships those

women who were currently in a "serious/committed relationship" with another woman but who described themselves as bisexual. McWhirter and Mattison (1984) required that the participants in their couples study identify themselves as "gay men." The criterion that a relationship be considered "homosexual" only if the participants define themselves as homosexual has clear merits. It permits researchers to describe their research participants with greater precision and provides a more homogeneous sample of homosexual relationships. In doing so, it probably enables researchers to study couples who more closely approximate contemporary prototypes of homosexual relationships.

This approach also has disadvantages, however. For those who argue that homosexuality research should move away from a focus on sexual identity and who see relationship research as an alternative to the identity approach (e.g., De Cecco & Shively, 1984), the use of homosexual self-identification to define homosexual relationships is problematic. A further criticism is that the use of an identity criterion may be heavily biased by contemporary American cultural beliefs and values. In our society, individuals may feel considerable pressure to define themselves in such categories as gay, lesbian, heterosexual, or bisexual. As Bullough (1984) noted, both personal needs for self-identification and the impact of the political gay movement encourage individuals to adopt specific self-labels such as gay or bisexual. In other times and places, however, homosexual relationships have not invariably been associated with a personal or social identity as homosexual. According to Bullough (1984), "homosexuality has always existed, but if it is defined to meet present-day requirements, then it becomes difficult to identify those in the past who were homosexuals" (p. 4).

As relationship researchers, we believe that important questions should be raised about the varied links between personal identity and experiences in close same-sex relationships. In a critique of traditional work on sexual identity, De Cecco and Shively (1984) noted that sexual identity has frequently been "conceived as an essence, interiorly lodged within the individual, one which determines whether the individual has only female or only male sexual partners or both" (p. 2). From such a perspective, same-sex relationships are an expression and consequence of sexual identity. But other patterns are also possible. For some, the first experience of having a close same-sex relationship may be a major factor causing a person to question his or her personal identity and to adopt a new identity as gay or lesbian. In still other cases, same-sex relationships may be seen as irrelevant to sexual identity. For instance, Vicinus (1984) provided a fascinating description of the intense friendships or "crushes" that developed among boarding-school girls in the late nineteenth century and noted that although these relationships were often passionate, they were not labeled as homosexual. Both Tripp (1975) and Hencken (1984) have discussed the processes by which individuals can engage in homosexual

behavior but avoid the self-definition of being gay. For example, casual same-sex liaisons may be defined as simply "experimentation" or "just physical," or can be excused because the person was intoxicated at the time. For more involved relationships, "special friendship" and love may be emphasized so that the relationship is seen as an expression of unique feelings for the partner that have no implications for sexual identity. These brief examples indicate that the links between same-sex relationships and personal identity may be more complex than is frequently assumed and merit further investigation.

#### RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Most studies of homosexual relationships have not discussed these conceptual issues in depth. Operationally, researchers have commonly defined homosexual relationships on the basis of characteristics of the relationship (e.g., living together, defining the relationship as "romantic/sexual") and self-definition by participants as gay or lesbian. Individual researchers must, of necessity, make such choices in operationally defining homosexual relationships. We encourage researchers to think carefully about these choices, to consider the use of general indices derived from research on close relationships, and to use multiple indicators to identify homosexual relationships.

We believe that a comprehensive understanding of homosexual relationships will require broadening the scope of empirical investigations in several directions. Current studies have provided much useful information about what might be considered "prototypical" homosexual relationships in America today. Research has focused on couples who define themselves as homosexual and whose relationship involves both love and sex. Future research will benefit from studying relationships that depart from the cultural prototype, such as relationships between same-sex partners who experience passion or commitment without overt sexuality, same-sex partners who define themselves as something other than homosexual, or people who relate simultaneously or sequentially to both same-sex and other-sex partners. For example, both Ross (1984) and Kaplan and Rogers (1984) have suggested that the physical sex of a partner may not be the central basis for attraction in homosexual relationships, that researchers should investigate social and psychological factors that may be more important than physical sex, and that to explore these issues, relationship studies should include bisexuals. In general, we need to know more about the diversity among homosexual relationships.

We also think it will be essential to broaden the comparisons used to understand homosexual relationships. It has been fairly common for researchers to compare same-sex relationships to other-sex relationships, asking for instance, about sexuality or love in homosexual versus heterosexual couples. It may be equally illuminating to consider homosexual relationships in the context of other same-sex relationships, looking for

similarities and differences in relationships with one's closest same-sex partner and with other same-sex friends. Adrienne Rich's provocative essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980) used the term lesbian continuum to

include a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support . . . we begin to grasp the breadth of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of "lesbianism." (pp. 648–649)

A parallel continuum might also be proposed to explore the range of men's relations with other men. The implication of Rich's comments is that we should consider a full range of same-sex relationships and not limit our investigations to those that meet prevailing social "tests" for homosexuality.

### The Goals of Relationship Research

In recent years, there has emerged an interdisciplinary field of inquiry into close relationships (see Gilmour & Duck, 1986; Hinde, 1979; Kelley et al., 1983). This field recognizes the central importance of relationships to human life, from the first attachments between newborn and parent to peer relations, adult love relations, and ties with friends, neighbors, and coworkers. This approach focuses on questions about the nature of relationships themselves, recognizing the importance of individual and socio-cultural factors that shape relationships. Our own relationship perspective on homosexuality draws heavily from this new social science work on close relationships. Broadly speaking, relationship research has three interrelated goals.

*Description.* As in all science, adequate description is essential—in this case, efforts to describe the nature and diversity of close homosexual relationships. In so doing, we seek to identify the key dimensions that characterize these relationships and to describe the range of variation that occurs on these dimensions. The description of homosexual relationships includes both studies of patterns of interaction in couples and studies of partners' perceptions and attitudes about the relationship—their "experiences" in the relationship. Thus, we might ask: What is the emotional quality of homosexual relationships? What is the range and meaning of sexuality in gay and lesbian couples? How common is it for partners to

share equally in decision making? What types of problems arise in homosexual couples? Are there typical changes in homosexual relationships as they develop over time?

*Causal analysis.* A second goal is to explain variations and changes in homosexual relationships by analyzing such factors as gender, personal values, and social norms that influence homosexual couples. Causal analyses most often ask how individual and social factors affect relationships. Causal questions might include the following: Why are some lesbian relationships happy and satisfying, while others are miserable and conflict-ridden? Why are some partnerships characterized by equal power and shared decision making, while others have one clearly dominant partner? What effects do differences in age or income have on the nature of gay male couples? What impact has the gay rights movement had on the nature of homosexual relationships? Also of interest are questions about the effects that homosexual relationships have on individuals and society. For instance, how does the experience of being in a long-term homosexual relationship affect an individual's sense of personal identity and psychological well-being? What effects have women's romantic friendships had on the feminist movement or on the development of predominantly female professions?

*Theory building.* A third goal of relationship research is to construct and evaluate theories about relationships. One approach has been to test the applicability of general theories to homosexual relationships. For instance, can the principles of social exchange theory predict the balance of power in homosexual relationships? Are existing models of commitment to relationships helpful in understanding the longevity of gay and lesbian couples? Another theoretical approach has been to develop new models based on gay or lesbian relationships. The stage model of gay men's relationship development proposed by McWhirter and Mattison (1984) is illustrative.

### **Studies of Lesbian and Gay Male Relationships in the United States**

In this section we review research conducted in the United States about homosexual relationships. Our goal is to highlight major areas of research and to identify new research directions. Space limitations preclude a completely comprehensive review. Most of the available studies are based on younger, urban, primarily Anglo individuals. Although a few studies have involved fairly large samples, none has been completely representative of either lesbians or gay men.

Most lesbians and gay men want to have enduring close relationships. Bell and Weinberg (1978) asked homosexuals how important it was to them to have "a permanent living arrangement with a homosexual partner" (p. 322). In their sample, 24% of the lesbians and 14% of the gay men indicated that this was "the most important thing in life;" 35% of lesbians

and 28% of gay men said it was "very important." Less than 13% of lesbians and 19% of gay men indicated that a permanent, living-together relationship was "not important at all," and some of these individuals may have preferred a close relationship in which partners lived apart.

Several studies have investigated the extent to which lesbians and gay men are actually involved in close relationships. In surveys of gay men, between 40% and 60% of the men questioned were currently involved in a steady relationship (e.g., Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Harry, 1983; Jay & Young, 1977; Peplau & Cochran, 1981). Harry (1983) argued that these figures may underrepresent the actual frequency of enduring relationships because men in long-term relationships tend to be somewhat older and less likely to go to bars—both factors that would make these men less likely to be included in current studies. In studies of lesbians, between 45% and 80% of women surveyed were currently in a steady relationship (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Jay & Young, 1977; Peplau et al., 1978; Raphael & Robinson, 1980). In most studies, the proportion of lesbians in an ongoing relationship was close to 75%.

Harry (1983, p. 225) estimated that approximately half of all gay male couples live together, compared to about three quarters of lesbian couples. We presently know little about the factors that lead some homosexual couples to live together and others to live apart. Possible causes might include efforts to maintain secrecy about being gay, a rejection of a "marriage" model in which lovers must live together, a reluctance to pool finances, the requirements of partners' jobs, and the like. From a methodological standpoint, researchers who use living together as a criterion for the selection of homosexual couples will have a significantly more restricted sample than those who use other criteria of couplehood, although we do not know the specific differences such a choice creates.

These estimates may not be completely representative of all lesbians and gay men in the United States. They do suggest, however, that a large proportion of homosexuals have stable close relationships and that a higher proportion of lesbians than gay men may be in steady relationships. We do not yet have good information on how such factors as age, ethnicity, or social class influence the likelihood that gay men and lesbians form close relationships. It should also be stressed that those lesbians and gay men who are not currently in a close relationship are a diverse group. They include people who have recently ended a close relationship through breakup or death, people who are eager to begin new relationships, and others who do not currently want committed relationships.

### **The Quality of Gay and Lesbian Relationships: Satisfaction and Love**

Several studies have examined satisfaction in lesbian and gay male relationships (e.g., Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Jones & Bates, 1978; Kurdek &

Schmitt, 1986a, 1986b; Peplau, Padesky, & Hamilton, 1982; Peplau et al., 1986). In general, research has found that most gay men and lesbians perceive their close relationships as satisfying and that levels of love and satisfaction are similar for homosexual and heterosexual couples who are matched on age and other relevant characteristics.

*Comparative studies.* In an early study, Ramsey, Latham, and Lindquist (1978) compared samples of 26 lesbian, 27 gay male, and 25 heterosexual couples from Southern California on the Locke-Wallace Scale measure of "marital" adjustment. All couples scored in the "well-adjusted" range, and the homosexuals were indistinguishable from the heterosexuals. Dailey (1979) used several standardized measures to compare 26 heterosexual couples, 5 lesbian couples, and 5 gay male couples living in Kansas. In general, all couples appeared to be "successful," and no significant group differences were found for satisfaction, expression of affection, or cohesion. A small but statistically significant difference was found on a measure of couple "consensus," with homosexual couples scoring lower than heterosexuals. Cardell, Finn, and Marecek (1981) compared partners in 10 heterosexual, 10 lesbian, and 5 gay male couples in Pennsylvania on a standardized measure of couple adjustment and found no group differences. More recently, Kurdek and Schmitt (1986a) compared somewhat larger samples of lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual cohabiting and married couples. They found no significant differences among groups on measures of love or relationship satisfaction, with the exception that heterosexual cohabitators scored lower than the other three groups.

In research at UCLA (Peplau & Cochran, 1980), we selected matched samples of 50 lesbians, 50 gay men, 50 heterosexual women, and 50 heterosexual men—all involved in "romantic/sexual relationships." Participants were matched on age, education, ethnicity, and length of relationship. Among this sample of young adults, about 60% said they were "in love" with their partner; most of the rest indicated they were "uncertain." On a standardized love scale, lesbians and gay men generally reported high love for their partners, indicating strong feelings of attachment, caring, and intimacy. They also scored high on a liking scale, reflecting feelings of respect and affection toward their partners. On other measures, lesbians and gay men rated their current relationships as highly satisfying and very close. We found no significant differences among lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals on any of these measures.

In the UCLA research, we also asked lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals to describe in their own words the "best things" and "worst things" about their relationships. Responses included such comments as these: "The best thing is having someone to be with when you wake up" or "We like each other. We both seem to be getting what we want and need. We have wonderful sex together." Worst things included, "My partner is too dependent emotionally" or "Her aunt lives with us!" Systematic content analyses (Cochran, 1978) found no significant differences

in the responses of lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals—all of whom reported a similar range of joys and problems. To search for more subtle differences among groups that may not have been captured by the coding scheme, the "best things" and "worst things" statements were typed on cards in a standard format, with information about gender and sexual orientation removed. Panels of student judges were asked to sort the cards, separating men and women or separating heterosexuals and homosexuals. The judges were not able to identify correctly the responses of lesbians, gay men, or heterosexual women and men. (Indeed, judges may have been misled by their own preconceptions; they tended, for instance, to assume incorrectly that statements involving jealousy were more likely to be made by homosexuals than heterosexuals.)

*Correlates of satisfaction.* Which couples are happiest? Social exchange theory predicts that satisfaction is high when a person perceives that a relationship provides many rewards and entails relatively few costs. Duffy and Rusbult (1986) tested these predictions among heterosexuals, lesbians, and gay men. They found that in all groups, greater satisfaction was significantly associated with the experience of relatively more personal rewards and fewer personal costs. Kurdek and Schmitt (1986a) provided similar results. In a study of lesbian relationships, Peplau et al. (1982) found support for another exchange theory prediction, that satisfaction is higher when partners' are equally involved in (committed to) the relationship.

Many contemporary lesbians and gay men strive for power equality and shared decision making in their relationships. Three studies have found that satisfaction is higher when lesbians and gay men perceive their current relationship as egalitarian (Harry, 1984; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986a; Peplau et al., 1982).

Some plausible factors have *not* been shown to predict relationship satisfaction. Individual characteristics of partners such as their age, education, or income have not been associated with satisfaction (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986a; Peplau et al., 1982). For instance, a study of 295 black lesbians (Peplau et al., 1986) found that relationship satisfaction was unrelated to living together versus apart, to age, education, income, religion, or to whether the respondent's partner was black versus nonblack. Harry (1984) also found that for gay men, living together was unrelated to satisfaction.

Finally, a few studies have examined the impact of similarity or matching between the partners on satisfaction. Harry (1984) found that satisfaction was lower when gay men's incomes were different, but satisfaction was unrelated to age differences. Kurdek and Schmitt (1987) found that differences in partners' age, income, or education had no effect on satisfaction in lesbian or gay male couples. Peplau et al. (1982) discovered that the degree of similarity between partners on age, religion, or work status was not linked to satisfaction. In interpreting these findings, however, it is important to note a methodological issue: in most research to date, there

has usually been relatively little variation in satisfaction scores (most people surveyed tend to be happy); neither has there been much variation in levels of matching (most couples tend to be at least somewhat matched). This makes it difficult to test the matching hypothesis. It is also likely that having similar attitudes and values is more important to relationship happiness than matching on demographic characteristics (see Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987; Peplau et al., 1982).

### Commitment and the Duration of Relationships

Love is no guarantee that a relationship will endure. For homosexuals, as for heterosexuals, relationships begun hopefully and lovingly can and do fall apart. Love and commitment do not necessarily go hand-in-hand (see Kelley, 1983). Little empirical work is currently available on commitment and permanence in homosexual relationships (see Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Lewis, Kozac, Milardo, & Grosnick, 1980).

Commitment refers to those forces that cause a relationship to endure over time. Commitment is affected by two separate factors (Levinger, 1979). The first concerns the strength of the *positive attractions*, including love, that make a particular partner and relationship appealing. Current data suggest that homosexuals do not differ from heterosexuals in the love and satisfaction they experience in steady relationships. But the possibility always exists that attractions may wane and that people may "fall out of love." Such a decrease in attraction could encourage the ending of a relationship.

A second set of factors affecting the permanence of relationships consists of *barriers* that make the ending of a relationship costly, in either psychological or material terms. The lack of alternative partners, the perception of having invested a great deal in a relationship, an awareness of the personal costs of leaving a relationship—these and other nonpositive factors cause relationships to endure. For heterosexuals, marriage usually creates many barriers to dissolution, including the costs of divorce, a spouse's financial dependence on the partner, joint investments in property, the presence of children, and so on. Such factors may encourage married couples to "work" on improving a declining relationship rather than end it. In extreme cases, these barriers can also keep partners trapped in an "empty-shell" relationship. Researchers have speculated that gay men and lesbians may experience fewer barriers to the termination of relationships than heterosexuals (e.g., Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Peplau & Gordon, 1983). If this is true, lesbians and gay men will be less likely to become trapped in hopelessly unhappy relationships. But they may also be less motivated to rescue deteriorating relationships that may warrant saving.

In an empirical comparison of lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual relationships, Duffy and Rusbult (1986) found that for all types of relationships, higher levels of perceived commitment were significantly linked to

feeling greater personal satisfaction, having made greater investments in the relationship, and feeling less confident of finding an alternative partner. They also found that regardless of sexual orientation, women reported having made greater investments and feeling greater commitment than did men. Kurdek and Schmitt (1986a) compared attractions, barriers to leaving, and available alternatives for partners in gay, lesbian, and heterosexual married relationships. They found no differences in attractions. But married partners perceived more barriers than did either gay men or lesbians; and both lesbians and married individuals perceived fewer available alternative partners than did gay men.

Data on the longevity of relationships are provided by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983), who followed a large sample of lesbian, gay male, and cohabiting heterosexual couples over an 18-month period. At the time of original testing, lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals were about equal in their personal expectations of staying together, although both lesbians and gay men speculated that gay men usually have less stable relationships than lesbians. During the 18-month period, fewer than one couple in five broke up. Breakups were rare among couples who had already been together for more than 10 years (6% for lesbians and 4% for gay men). Among shorter-term couples, lesbians had the highest breakup rate (about 20%), with roughly 16% of gay male couples and 14% of cohabitators breaking up. Although these differences among groups are quite small, they do run counter to the suggestion that lesbians are more likely to have enduring partnerships. These three studies provide interesting information about commitment and permanence in homosexual relationships, but definitive conclusions will have to await additional research.

## Sexuality

Relationship researchers view sexuality as one facet of experience in couples. In the domain of sexuality, differences between men and women may be at least as important as differences between homosexuals and heterosexuals.

### SEXUAL FREQUENCY AND SATISFACTION

Research has investigated both the frequency of sexual activity in homosexual couples, and partners' evaluations of sexual satisfaction. In their large-scale study *American Couples*, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) have provided the only detailed comparative investigation of sex in lesbian, gay male, heterosexual cohabiting, and married couples. They reached several conclusions that seem generally consistent with other studies of sexuality in homosexual relationships (e.g., Jay & Young, 1977; Lewis et al., 1980; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984; Peplau & Cochran, 1981; Peplau et al., 1986; Peplau et al., 1978).

First, across all couples, the median frequency of sex is about one to three times a week. But there is enormous variation among couples in the

average frequency of genital sex—ranging from couples who have sex less than once a month to couples who have sex daily. We know little about factors that create these differing patterns. It appears that the frequency of sex declines the longer a couple stay together and, to some extent, with age (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984).

Gender is an important factor in sexual frequency. There is some evidence that at all stages of a relationship, average sexual frequency is lower among lesbian couples than among gay male couples, heterosexual cohabitators, or married heterosexuals. For instance, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983, p. 196) reported that among couples who have been together less than two years, only 33% of lesbians had sex three or more times a week, compared to 45% of married couples, 61% of cohabitators, and 67% of gay men. In other words, the proportion of couples who had sex often varied with the gender composition of the couples. The reasons for this pattern are unclear. Blumstein and Schwartz speculated about the possible importance of traditional socialization that represses women's sexual expression but encourages men to be sexually active, the possibility that women may put more emphasis on nongenital activities such as hugging and cuddling, or possible problems that lesbians may have with initiating sex. Blumstein and Schwartz also reported an interesting pattern of sexual frequency for gay men. For the first several years of a relationship, gay men had sex with their primary partner more often than heterosexuals did, but later on gay male couples showed a reversed pattern of lower sexual frequency than heterosexuals. In many gay couples, sex with men outside the relationship compensated for the declining frequency of sex with the primary partner, at least for relationships studied prior to the AIDS crisis.

In general, lesbians and gay men report high levels of sexual satisfaction with their partner (e.g., Peplau & Cochran 1981; Peplau et al., 1986; Peplau et al., 1978). For example, Blumstein and Schwartz found that roughly 70% of lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals were satisfied with the quality of their sex life. For all groups, satisfaction was higher among couples who had sex more frequently and who reported that the initiation of sex was equal in their relationship. In McWhirter and Mattison's (1984, pp. 278–279) study of gay male couples, 83% reported having a satisfactory sex life, 7% said it was very satisfactory, and only 10% reported dissatisfaction. Most men (91%) said that the level of sexual satisfaction with their partner had improved since the beginning of their relationship. At the same time, there is also a growing awareness that gay and lesbian couples are not immune to sexual difficulties (e.g., McWhirter & Mattison, 1980; Toder, 1978).

#### SEXUAL EXCLUSIVITY

Few relationship issues are as controversial for Americans as whether a couple should be sexually exclusive or sexually open. In this century, we

have seen a steady shift toward more permissive attitudes about sex outside a primary relationship. Very recently, however, the growing awareness of the dangers of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases may once again be changing attitudes about sexual conduct. At present, most published studies of sexual exclusivity in gay and lesbian relationships predate the AIDS crisis and so do not yet reflect possible recent changes in attitudes and/or behavior.

A number of studies have investigated sexual exclusivity in homosexual relationships, particularly among gay men (e.g., Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Blasband & Peplau, 1985; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Harry, 1984; Harry & DeVall, 1978; Harry & Lovely, 1979; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Peplau & Cochran, 1982; Peplau et al., 1978; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984). In general, homosexuals—especially gay men—appear to have more permissive attitudes about sexual fidelity than do heterosexuals (Peplau & Cochran, 1980). Blumstein and Schwartz (1983, p. 272) reported that *for men* in couples, 75% of husbands and 62% of heterosexual cohabiters believe monogamy is important, compared to only 35% of gay men. *For women*, 84% of wives, 70% of heterosexual cohabiters, and 71% of lesbians believe monogamy is important. For all groups except gay men, a majority endorse the virtues of sexual fidelity; among gay men, sexual exclusivity is the minority view.

Blumstein and Schwartz (1983, p. 274) provided comparative data on the extent of actual "nonmonogamy" in couples. The likelihood that a partner has ever been nonmonogamous increased over time. For lesbians, nonmonogamy was uncommon in the first 2 years of a relationship (15%), as it was for heterosexual wives (13%) and husbands (15%). For gay men, however, 66% of those surveyed reported nonmonogamy during the first 2 years of their relationship. Among couples together for more than 10 years, 22% of wives, 30% of husbands, 43% of lesbians, and 94% of gay men reported at least one instance of nonmonogamy. McWhirter and Mattison (1984) found a similar pattern for the gay male couples in their study; all men in relationships lasting more than 5 years reported at least one instance of nonmonogamy. There has been much discussion of the possible reasons for the high incidence of sexual openness in gay men's relationships (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984; Silverstein, 1981). Suggested factors include sex role socialization that may teach men to value sexual variety, a tendency for men to separate sexuality from emotional commitment, norms of the gay male community that encourage sexual openness, and the availability of many opportunities for casual sex.

Some studies have taken a closer look at sexual exclusivity in gay male relationships (Blasband & Peplau, 1985; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Harry, 1984; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986b; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984). Research has investigated the ways couples negotiate sexual exclusivity, studying for instance the extent to which partners keep their behavior

secret and the extent to which couples develop agreements about circumstances in which sexual openness is mutually acceptable. Other research has examined the links between sexual openness and satisfaction within the relationship, finding that nonmonogamy is not necessarily a sign of problems or dissatisfaction in the primary relationship. What seems most important is that partners in a relationship reach some degree of agreement about this issue.

We do not yet know what impact the AIDS crisis will have on sexuality in gay male couples. A study by McKusick et al. (1985) followed a group of gay men from 1982 to 1984 and reported a general decrease in the number of encounters gay men had with new partners and a decrease in the frequency of high-risk sex behaviors. Men who had a primary relationship were more likely than single men to reduce encounters with new partners. McKusick et al. also found a statistically significant decrease in the frequency of sex with the primary partner (from 10.8 times per month in 1982 to 8.5 times per month in 1984), which they speculated may reflect a general inhibition of sexual activity. A clearer understanding of the impact of AIDS on gay male couples must await further research.

## Power

Power refers to one person's ability to achieve his or her own ends by influencing another person (Huston, 1983, p. 170). Powerful people can use interpersonal influence to "get their own way." Research on homosexual relationships has investigated both the balance of power (dominance structure) in relationships and the specific influence tactics that partners use with each other.

### THE BALANCE OF POWER

In general, it appears that most lesbians and gay men value power equality as a goal for relationships. For example, in a study comparing the relationship values of matched samples of younger lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals, Peplau and Cochran (1980) found that all groups rated "having an egalitarian (equal power) relationship" as quite important, although women, both lesbians and heterosexuals, gave equal power even more importance than did men. On another question asking what the ideal balance of power should be in their current relationship, 92% of gay men and 97% of lesbians said it should be "exactly equal." But although most participants wanted equal-power partnerships, not all of those currently in a relationship said that it met this standard. Only 59% of lesbians, 38% of gay men, 48% of heterosexual women, and 40% of heterosexual men reported that their relationship was "exactly equal." What factors tip the balance of power in favor of one partner?

Social exchange theory predicts that a partner who has relatively greater personal resources (e.g., more money, education, or status) will have a power advantage in the relationship. Several studies have tested

this hypothesis for gay male couples. Harry and DeVall (1978) studied 243 gay men from Detroit. About 60% said that decision making in their relationship was shared "half and half," 24% said they personally made more decisions, and 16% said the other partner made more decisions. Harry and DeVall tested the impact of money as a resource and found that the partner whose income was relatively greater had a power advantage. In a more recent study, Harry (1984) replicated this finding. More than 65% of men currently in a relationship said decision making was joint. Unequal power was significantly linked to differences in income and also to differences in age, with the power advantage going to men who were wealthier and older. This theme is echoed by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983), who concluded from their data that "in gay male couples, income is an extremely important force in determining which partner will be dominant" (p. 59).

For lesbians, the impact of personal resources on power is not well understood. Caldwell and Peplau (1984) found that differences in income and education were significantly related to power in a sample of 77 younger lesbians from Los Angeles. In contrast, Reilly and Lynch (1986) found that differences in age, education, income, and assets were not related to the balance of power in 70 lesbian couples from the Northeast. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) studied the effects of income on power, concluding that "Lesbians do not use income to establish dominance in their relationship. They use it to avoid having one woman dependent on the other" (p. 60). The reasons for these inconsistent findings are unknown. It could be that the concept of "resources" is somehow less relevant to lesbian couples than to gay men and heterosexuals or that the material resources typically studied (e.g., money, education) are less significant in this group than are other perhaps less tangible resources (e.g., status in the lesbian community, social skills).

The "principle of least interest" is another prediction from social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). This states that when one person is more dependent, involved, or "interested" in a relationship than the partner, the more dependent person will have less power. In studies of heterosexuals (e.g., Peplau, 1984), such lopsided dependencies have been strongly associated with an imbalance of power. Only one study has tested this hypothesis among homosexuals. Caldwell and Peplau (1984) found support for the principle of least interest among lesbians. Among the women who said the partners were equally involved, 72% also reported equal power. Among women who reported unequal involvement, 82% reported that the less involved partner had relatively more power. Caldwell and Peplau also found that women in equal-power relationships were more satisfied and anticipated fewer problems than did women in unequal relationships. Similarly, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) reported that power imbalances were a factor in the breakup of lesbian and gay male relationships (although not for married couples.)

Virtually nothing is known about how the balance of power affects face-to-face interaction in homosexual couples. One fascinating exception comes from a study by Kollock, Blumstein, and Schwartz (1985). They compared the conversational patterns of lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual couples. Of interest was the extent to which partners showed conversational dominance by using a disproportionate amount of the "air" time available, by using interruptions to gain the floor, or by asking questions. Their complicated results are not easily summarized, but a few examples will illustrate. In both lesbian and gay male couples, the amount of talking and the number of interruptions were significantly linked to power—the more powerful person was more loquacious and interrupted more. Results for asking questions were different for lesbians and gay men. In male couples, more powerful partners asked substantially more questions than did less powerful partners, perhaps using questions as a way of structuring or controlling the conversation. For lesbians, power had no impact on asking questions. Studies such as this, which investigate the dynamics of power in interpersonal interaction, provide an important direction for future research.

#### INFLUENCE STRATEGIES

A few studies have begun to examine the specific strategies or behaviors used by lesbians and gay men to influence their partners. In a study comparing self-reports of power strategies by lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals, Falbo and Peplau (1980) found no overall differences between the strategies used by homosexuals and heterosexuals. Gender affected influence tactics only among heterosexuals: whereas heterosexual women were more likely to withdraw or express negative emotions, heterosexual men were more likely to use bargaining or reasoning. Among homosexuals, women and men did not differ significantly in the strategies used. Regardless of sexual orientation, people who perceived themselves as relatively more powerful in a relationship tended to use direct and mutual strategies, such as persuasion and bargaining (i.e., the strategies characteristic of heterosexual men.) Low-power partners tended to use more unilateral approaches, such as doing what they wanted without the partner.

In another study, Howard, Blumstein and Schwartz (1986) also compared influence tactics in the intimate relationships of homosexuals and heterosexuals. They found that in power-unequal couples, regardless of sexual orientation, the partner with less power tended to rely more on "supplication" and manipulation, both "weak" strategies. Those in positions of strength were more likely to use bullying and autocratic tactics, both "strong" strategies. They also found that individuals with male partners (i.e., heterosexual women and homosexual men) were more likely to use manipulation and supplication. These two studies provide beginning insights into the impact of gender and sexual orientation on influence tactics, but more research is clearly warranted.

## Roles

In any close relationship, partners develop consistent patterns of interaction—characteristic ways of being together, specialization in terms of who does what in their relationship, shared hobbies and interests, special rituals and terms of endearment, agreements about goals for the relationship, and so on. The concept of social roles is typically used to describe and/or explain these relationship patterns (Peplau, 1983).

### ROLE TAKING AND ROLE MAKING

Relationship roles emerge or develop in two ways (e.g., Turner, 1962). Role taking refers to the processes by which partners adopt or conform to preexisting cultural or social guidelines for their relationship. For many types of relationships, such as heterosexual marriage or relations between teacher and student, there exist fairly explicit, conventional guidelines and social models. In contrast, role making refers to the processes by which partners create their own idiosyncratic rules, expectations, and goals for a relationship. Partners may actively discuss and think about their relationship, hammering out agreements, and discussing points of difference. They may "fall into" habit patterns or discover what seems to "work best" for them on the basis of their individual values, interests, and skills. Close relationships usually involve a mix of both role taking and role making. Presumably, when preexisting guidelines for relationships are explicit and detailed, partners are more constrained in their interactions and less likely to innovate.

The nature and extent of cultural guidelines for homosexual relationships vary both cross-culturally and historically. Some societies define institutionalized patterns of homosexuality. Among the Sambia of New Guinea, for example, all boys are expected to spend part of their teenage years in all-male groups that practice specific forms of homosexuality (Herdt, 1981, 1987). Elaborate ceremonies are conducted to teach young boys about these culturally prescribed practices. Social rules control the selection of partners, the nature of the sex acts, and the circumstances under which sex can occur. The patterning of these homosexual relationships is well defined as part of male Sambia culture, although individuals undoubtedly vary in the specifics of how they play out the prescribed roles. It is further expected that after this period of adolescent homosexuality, adult men will marry women and father children.

In contrast, in contemporary American society, gay relationships are "largely lacking in institutional supports and cultural guidelines" (Harry, 1977, p. 330). As a consequence, homosexual partners must rely more on innovative processes of role making than on enacting culturally defined scripts for homosexual relations. Nonetheless, it seems likely that aspects of other cultural roles such as marriage or friendship do influence patterns of interaction in homosexual partnerships.

## POSSIBLE MODELS FOR HOMOSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

At least three different patterns for male homosexual relationships have been described (e.g., Harry, 1982). Some gay male relationships are structured at least in part by *gender roles*, with one partner playing a more "masculine" role and the other a "feminine" role. Here, heterosexual roles for dating and marriage are used as a model for gay relationships. A second pattern is based on *age differences*, such as a relationship between an adult male and an adolescent boy or between an older man and a younger man. This pattern bears some similarity to other age-structured roles as between teacher and student or mentor and apprentice. A third pattern is based on *peer relations*, with partners being similar in age and emphasizing sharing and equality in the relationship. This pattern seems more similar to cultural roles for friendship. In each case, homosexual patterns incorporate elements of other, conventional social roles in the society.

The three patterns identified for men may also have parallels in lesbian relationships. Descriptions of lesbian experiences in the 1950s (Martin & Lyon, 1972; Wolf, 1980) suggest that the influence of heterosexual role models was strong:

The old gay world divided up into "butch" and "femme." . . . Butches were tough, presented themselves as being as masculine as possible . . . and they assumed the traditional male role of taking care of their partners, even fighting over them if necessary, providing for them financially, and doing the "men's" jobs around the house. Femmes, by contrast, were protected, ladylike . . . They cooked, cleaned house, and took care of their "butch." (Wolf, 1980, p. 40)

Age-differences as a basis for women's romantic relationships are reported by Vicinus (1984) in her description of the adolescent "crushes" experienced by young girls living at boarding schools around the turn of the century. In this instance, the girls developed passionate attachments toward an older woman, usually a teacher. Finally, relationships modeled after friendship or peer relations are found in Faderman's (1981) description of late nineteenth century "Boston marriages." These were long-term monogamous relationships between two unmarried women. The women were typically financially independent of men, were involved in social causes, and were identified as feminists.

These three forms for homosexual relationships—modeled loosely after husband-wife roles, mentor-student roles, and friendship roles—may not exhaust the range of diversity among gay and lesbian relationships. In complex industrial societies such as ours, it seems likely that these and perhaps other relationship patterns may all exist.

## RESEARCH ON AMERICAN COUPLES

Empirical research on role patterns in contemporary homosexual relationships has focused primarily on the question of how closely homosexual relationships resemble heterosexual pairings. Stereotypes would suggest that "butch-femme" roles are widespread. Tripp (1975) notes that "when people who are not familiar with homosexual relationships try to picture one, they almost invariably resort to a heterosexual frame of reference, raising questions about which partner is 'the man' and which 'the woman'" (p. 152). A good deal of research on this issue has been generated (see reviews by Harry, 1983; Peplau & Gordon, 1983).

In general, research suggests that most lesbians and gay men today actively reject traditional husband-wife or masculine-feminine roles as a model for enduring relationships. Most lesbians and gay men are in "dual-worker" relationships, so that neither partner is the exclusive "breadwinner" and each partner has some measure of economic independence. Further, examinations of the division of household tasks, sexual behavior, and decision making in homosexual couples find that clear-cut and consistent husband-wife roles are uncommon. In many relationships, there is some specialization of activities, with one partner doing more of some jobs and less of others. But it is rare for one partner to perform most of the "feminine" activities and the other to perform most of the "masculine" tasks. That is, a partner who usually does the cooking does not necessarily also perform other feminine tasks such as shopping or cleaning. Specialization seems to be based on more individualistic factors, such as skills or interests.

Nonetheless, it has been found that a small minority of lesbians and gay men do incorporate elements of husband-wife roles into their relationships. This may affect the division of labor, the dominance structure, sexual interactions, the way partners dress, and other aspects of their relationship. In some cases, these role patterns seemed to be linked to temporary situations, such as one partner's unemployment or illness. For other couples, however, masculine-feminine roles may provide a model of choice. Evidence suggests that this pattern has declined in recent years, at least in part as a response to the gay liberation and feminist movements.

Only a few analyses have explicitly looked at age-differentiated relationships, notably among gay men. Harry (1982, 1984) suggests that the age-difference pattern characterizes only a minority of gay male couples. When it does occur, the actual differences in age tend to be relatively small, perhaps 5-10 years. Harry has found that in these couples, the older partner often has more power in decision making.

Those who have reviewed the research on today's homosexual couples have concluded that the majority of relationships develop roles similar to friendship—with expectations that partners should be similar in age and equal in power and should share responsibilities fairly equally.

An important direction for research on relationship roles is to investigate the impact of gay and lesbian subcultures and, more recently, of gay rights and lesbian feminist movements on relationships. An illustration is found in Barnhart's (1975) description of "friends and lovers in a lesbian counterculture community." In the early 1970s, counterculture lesbians living in Oregon formed small "communities" of about 30 women that served as a psychological "kin group" for members. The community developed fairly explicit expectations and norms about love relationships and encouraged members to conform to these group standards. For example, loyalty to a partner was to be secondary to loyalty to the community. Sexual openness and equality were considered important values for relationships. If a couple broke up, they were expected to remain friends. Studies examining how other elements of homosexual culture affect relationships would be useful.

In summary, contemporary homosexual relationships follow a variety of patterns or models. Relationships patterned after friendship appear to be most common. Among both lesbians and gay men, a decreasing minority of couples may incorporate elements of traditional masculine-feminine roles into their relationships. For others, age differences may be central to role patterns. More efforts are needed to describe relationship roles in lesbian and gay male couples. Further, we currently know little about the causal factors responsible for these patterns. Why, for instance, are some men attracted to older partners and others to peers? Why do some partners prefer to share tasks and responsibilities and others prefer to develop patterns of specialization? These and other questions remain for future investigations.

### Final Thoughts

In the 40 years since Kinsey and his colleagues published their pioneering work on homosexual behavior, research on relationships has emerged as an important perspective in the study of homosexuality. Our knowledge about gay and lesbian couples has increased markedly in the last decade.

### Research Questions

Existing research on homosexual relationships leaves many important topics unexamined. For instance, we know little about conflict in couples and the ways that partners strive to avoid and resolve their differences. The process of "breaking up" and the aftermath of separation are also worthy of study. McWhirter and Mattison (1984) took an important first step in their analysis of developmental trends in gay male couples. But more work needs to be done to understand the developmental course of relationships among gay men and among lesbians. Close relationships are often affected by ties to third parties—to children, aging parents, siblings, and others. How, for instance, does the decision to have a child affect a

lesbian relationship? There is growing awareness that close relationships can provide important kinds of social support that help us to meet major crises and to deal with the hassles of daily life. What types of social support are available to lesbians and gay men, and which types of relationships are most important? (See Aura, 1985; Collins, D'Augelli, & Hart, 1985.) Finally, how are close homosexual relationships affected by social and historical changes? In particular, how is the current AIDS crisis affecting homosexual couples?

### Research Methods

Those who study homosexual relationships face a major methodological challenge. We know that accurate description is a keystone of good science, and yet we also know that we are not able to obtain truly representative samples of gay and lesbian couples. At the very least, this dilemma should make us cautious in generalizing from results of single studies to "all" homosexual couples. It should also make us critically aware of the importance of replication across many studies and should encourage us to describe the couples we study with care and precision. In addition, however, we need to increase the diversity of our information base by broadening the samples we investigate. Studies of homosexual relationships among people from varied ethnic and racial groups, from working-class backgrounds, from closeted professional elites, and from rural areas will be especially valuable. Our knowledge about young adults should be supplemented with studies of relationships among teenagers and older adults. Detailed "ethnographic" studies that attempt to provide comprehensive descriptions of relationships in defined communities or specific groups may be extremely useful.

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