Learning from couples in relationships that last: A final word

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A monograph

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A final word

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Author's Note

In order to respect the privacy of individuals who participated in this research, any identifying information, such as names, have been disguised. Pseudo-names have been substituted for real names. Also, for each partner in a relationship, the pseudo-names begin with the same letter. For example Barbara is the partner of Ben and Candice is the partner of Clair. In addition to names, any other references to information that might identify an individual have been redacted. These steps to protect privacy were done without compromising the goals of the research, which was to explore how couples that stay together for many years adapt in their relationships. In this document most of the text is original but I have relied extensively on written material in our previous books and articles, the references to which may be found in the bibliography.

For more than two decades we have been studying how couples adapt in primary relationships that last for many years. Our publications have included two books, one of which focused on heterosexual couples and the other on lesbian and gay male couples. Several articles and papers presented at professional meetings have focused on different dimensions of the data, which include satisfaction, intimacy, sexual relations, religion, conflict and how conflict was managed between partners. .

In this monograph, we push the discussion of data a step further by exploring themes that may offer new understandings, not only of how partners adapt within relationships, but also how

attachments may survive as partners live out their lives together. How do individuals who are attracted to each other in a bond of initial love manage to stay together as life and their relationships change over the years? That question captures the meaning of adaptation, which is the central conceptual theme that shaped our research

We hope that such an exploration of the data as a whole may offer additional understandings into why these relationships lasted for so many years, the mystery of why these attachments endured when so many do not last. We believe that the data offer some clues, albeit in the form of hypotheses, about what may fuel stability and support continuity rather than discontinuity in these relationships. Hopefully, the findings may offer other researchers clues to designing new studies that will deepen our understanding of stability in loving relationships.

The monograph is organized into three parts:

*the methodology of the research including its origins, the basis for using focal question interviews, the sample, data analysis procedures and the limitations of the research;

*themes from the data; and

*some concluding thoughts from the data about why these relationships endured.

The monograph integrates material from our previous publications, which focused mostly on specific aspects of the research, with themes that emerged from the data as a whole. The primary focus is on themes that emerged during the recent years of these relationships with a secondary focus on earlier years as the data from those years help in understanding the recent years. One might ask why I would now think of writing about data that was collected several years ago and about which we have already published in books and articles as well as numerous presentations at professional conferences and meetings. I believe a new look at the data may be

helpful in expanding our understanding of loving relationships that endure. Dimensions of those relationships, such as intimacy and managing conflict that are explored here, are to a considerable extent timeless and worth another look.

I want to thank the following people for their help as the manuscript emerged: my wife, Eileen, who supported my work, as always, and offered her thoughts on the manuscript; Dr. Bernard O'Brien, my best friend and long-time colleague, who read the manuscript and offered feedback on its strengths and weaknesses, and Dr. Bruce Burnett, whose generosity and comments were of enormous help. I also wish to acknowledge the following publishers that allowed me to use ideas and excerpts from some of my previous publications in writing this monograph:

* Journal of Religion, Spirituality and Aging,

* The Journal of Homosexuality,

* Sex Roles,

* Psychotherapy: Theory/Research/Practice.

The full citations are in the bibliography at the end of this monograph.

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Part 1: Methodology

The origin of the research was grounded in a discussion that my colleague, Bernard A O'Brien, Ph.D., and I had one day over lunch. I had completed a book on ego psychology in the mid 1980's and was beginning to think about new directions in my scholarly work. We talked about our teaching as well as our experiences in the practice of psychotherapy, which included considerable work with couples who had consulted us because of conflicts in their relationships. One of the questions that emerged from that discussion was how partners adapted in relationships if they stayed together for many years. In particular, we wondered how couples that had no therapy for their relational conflicts coped with the challenges and vicissitudes in their relationships.

We had other conversations about our mutual interests and decided to spend the next several months reading the research literature on relationship. We discovered several significant holes in the literature. Most studies focused on young couples that were mostly white and from the middle-class. Except for Rubin's research (1983), we found no studies of couples from blue-collar occupations and the trades. Similar to the hole related to social status (defined by traditional measures, such as education, occupation and income) was the absence of people of color in the studies reviewed. The notable exception was the work of Gray-Little who studied African American couples (see Mackey 1998). Religion and/or religious backgrounds of research respondents were other neglected foci in the research literature. Finally, we noted that most of the research employed quantitative means of collecting data. Few studies were found that used qualitative methods of data collection and analysis; that is, the use of interviews to

explore how individual partners viewed their relationships and what relational phenomena meant to them.

Our initial focus was on heterosexual married couples. We were fortunate to attract very competent doctoral students in counseling psychology at Boston College to conduct the interviews and to participate on the research team. Each student focused on a sub-group of the overall sample so that the goal of diversity of research respondents was achieved. About halfway through the study, we were approached by students who asked about including lesbian and gay male couples in the project. Similar to heterosexual couples in lasting relationships, there was relatively little attentions in the research literature to gay couples who had stayed together for a comparable number of years as the couples in our sample. The addition of homosexual couples also added to the diversity of the sample. Except for minor modifications, such as the use of "partner" instead of "spouse," in the interview guide the research protocol remained similar for all respondents

Based on the initial review of the literature, we decided to design research that would explore how couples adapted over the years in relationships that had lasted at least 15 years. Further, we deliberately recruited couples to the study that had been neglected in previous research: a diverse sample that included people of color, those from various religious backgrounds and those from "blue-color" occupations. The use of focal question interviews to collect the data rather than written questionnaires and scales fit well with our goals and with the knowledge and skill that each of us brought to the project.

The interview

A semi-structured interview format was developed and pretested by the researchers. The resulting interview guide consisted of focal questions that were designed to elicit how respondents viewed various dimensions of their relationships. Collaborative researchers provided feedback that led to further refinement of the interview guide.

The guide, which was used in all interviews, was divided into four sections:

*the relationship,

*social influences including economic and cultural factors,

*the relationships of parents' relationships (all respondents had been reared by heterosexual parents), and

*experiences of respondents and views of their relationships from the early to recent years.

The recent years were the last 5-10 years prior to the interviews. The early years were the years prior to the birth of the first child for couples who had children or the first 5 years for those without children or those who adopted children after being together for 5 years. These parameters were used in a flexible way and offered interviewees a guideline for discussing their relationships during various time periods (phases).

Interview Guide

Introduction:

Thank you for being in the study. Brief explanation of the project. Read and sign consent form.

Explain structure of the interview:

1. Background information.

2. Your relationship as it was when you were first met and how it has stayed the same as well as how it has changed in terms of roles, expectations, and needs.

3. The influence of cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors on your relationship.

4. A look at your own family background and values and how these influenced your relationship.

5. The influence of your parent's relationship on your own relationship in terms of roles, expectations, and relating.

6. Your assessment of the important factors in your relationship over time.

Background Data:

Name: Date of Birth:

Occupation: Income:

Educational Level:

Children:

Names Birth Dates

Other People Living in the Home:

Names Relationship

Geog. Origins: Religion:

Date of Relationship:

Partner's Name and Birthdate:

I. The Relationship

A. Initial attraction, life circumstances, and family reactions.

1. As you look back to the time when you met (partner), what first attracted you to him/her? What do you think attracted him/her to you?

a. What interests did you share?

b. How long did you date before you decided to get married and/or make a long-term commitment to each other?

c. Did any cultural and/or ethnic traditions influence your dating?

d. How were you sure you wanted to marry or be committed to (partner)?

2. How did your family feel about and react to (partner)?

a. Tell me about your family's reaction to your relationship (feelings of approval or disapproval).

b. How did your family's reaction affect your decision to be with and/or marry (partner)?

3. How did (partner's) family react to the relationship?

a. How much of an impact did their reaction have on your plans to get married or form a committed relationship?

4. What was going on in your life around the time of your relationship educationally, vocationally, family, etc.?

a. Who did you live with when first married or lived together?

5. What kind of role did you see yourself playing in the relationship?

a. What about (partner's) role? (Expected, actual, changes).

b.Did you expect to have to work at the relationship? Why?

B. Roles, expectations, problem solving, issues of relatedness and equity in the beginning, during child rearing, and post-childrearing. (Clarify and define phases depending on whether couple have children. Ask the following questions in relation to the early years, the child-rearing or middle and recent years.)

1. Can you tell us how you and (partner) got along?

a. In general?

b.What has been important to getting along? E.g. Sense of humor?

c. How would you describe the communication between you?

2. How did you go about making decisions and solving problems? (Re: work, friends, recreation, where to live, etc.)

a. How did you handle differences (values, career, sex, etc.)?

b. How would you describe your problem-solving style as compared to (partner's)?

c. Is there one particular area of conflict that stood out during each of the three phases of your relationship?

d. Can you give me some examples of how you faced and dealt with crises (health, financial, etc.)?

3. How did you handle child-rearing responsibilities? (early, latency, adolescence)

4. How do you feel about your relationship?

a. Looking back, what has been good, not so good and/or bad about the relationship?

b. How much understanding do you feel (partner) has had of you? (differentiation, separateness, etc.)

c. How much understanding have you had of (partner)?

d. How sensitive has (partner) been to you? And you to him/her?

e. How much respect do you feel (partner) has had for you? And you for him/her?

f. How much trust have you felt for (partner)?

g. How much trust do you think (partner) has felt towards you?

h. How have you gotten along sexually?

i. Non-sexual intimacy like hugging and touching?

5. Overall, have you felt a sense of fairness in the relationship?

a. Despite differences, have things balanced out?

b. Do you feel that your ways of solving problems as a couple have been generally fair to each of you?

c. Have there been situations where one of you had more influence than the other (money, friends, recreation, work, living, etc.)?

II. Socioeconomic Influences

How have the following played a role in your life together and how have they affected your relationship?

A. Religion

1. How important has religion been in your life? What church activities do you participate in? How regularly?

2. How have your religious beliefs affected the way you cope different issues?

B. Extended families.

1. What influence has your family and your partner's family had on your relationship?

C. Cultural factors including ethnicity and race.

1. Do you feel that ethnicity such as black or Latino or sexual orientation person in America has affected your relationship?

2. How have you and (partner) coped with discrimination and prejudice?

D. Economic factors, including income.

1. Do you feel that you or (partner) have ever been discriminated against in the workforce because of your (race, ethnicity or sexual orientation)?

a. How did you and (partner) handle situation?

b. Did it affect your relationship in any way?

2. Do you feel that being a (race, ethnicity or sexual orientation) person has ever made it hard to provide financially for your family?

a. If yes, how did this affect your relationship with (partner)?

E. Are there other values, beliefs, or moral standards that have played a role in your life together?

1. Are there any traditions or values that are part of your married/family life?

III. Parents' Relationship

A. What were your family's attitudes toward/experience with divorce?

B. What do you think you learned about relationship from observing your parents?

1. How did you view your parents' relationship in terms of roles, relatedness, and equity?

2. Can you tell me how your parents got along?

3. How did they go about making decisions and solving problems? (Ask for some examples of how a disagreement was solved.)

a. Despite differences did things balance out in their relationship?

b. Did you feel that their ways of solving problems were generally fair to each partner? Were there situations where one of them had more influence than the other (money, friends, work, etc.)?

C. What are some important similarities in your relationship compared to your parents' relationship?

1. What are some important differences?

2. Did your parents have any cultural traditions that were a part of their relationship?

a. If yes, do you follow these traditions in your own relationship?

IV. Respondent's Views of the Relationship Over Time and Wrap-up

A. As you look back, what were the personal qualities of (partner) that kept you together?

1. What other factors in the relationship kept you together?

2. Were there any cultural traditions that helped you to stay together?

B. In what ways has your relationship changed over the years? How has it remained the same?

1. How have your expectations changed or remained the same?

a. How does what you are currently looking for in the relationship differ from your earlier expectations? (needs, roles, relatedness, communication)

C. What words best describe what (partner) means to you now? In the past?

D. Are there any other things that you wish to add that were critical issues or factors that kept you in the relationship? Significant events, periods of assessment and/or renewal?

E. Is there anything else that you think would be important for us to understand about your relationship, yourself, or your partner?

1. Anything else about your experiences in the relationship that would be important for us to know about?

Thank you!

(Note: Additional inquiries were included to explore the experiences of specific sub-groups, such as questions related to ethnicity/race for African-American and Latino respondents and questions related to sexual orientation for lesbian and gay male respondents. Also, several questions in the interview guide were framed to be relevant to a specific sub-group.)

The interview structure was designed to acquire in-depth information from the point of view of individual respondents in order to develop an understanding of how each partner adapted over the life span of their relationships. An open-ended style of interviewing allowed for freedom of expression in order to elicit information from the perspectives of respondents about interactions with their partners. The approach, which adapted clinical interviewing skills to the needs of the research, explored the experiences of individuals within relationships as they remembered and reported them.

Interviewers, who were advanced doctoral students with extensive clinical experience, were trained in the use of the interview guide. They were respectful and accepting of the uniqueness of each respondent's perceptions. Their empathic interviewing skills were a valuable resource in collecting the data.

The interviews were held in the homes of respondents, which provided additional information about lifestyles and environments. Prior to each interview, respondents were told about the purpose of the study, given an overview of the interview schedule and were assured that their identities would remain anonymous. Informed consent for audiotaping and the research use of interviews were obtained. Each partner was interviewed separately; the length of each of the interviews was approximately two hours.

Sample

Couples were recruited through business, professional and trade union organizations as well as through churches, synagogues, and a variety of other community organizations. Most couples resided in the northeast part of the country.

The sample was chosen purposively to fit with the goal of developing an understanding of a diverse and older group of heterosexual and same sex couples in lasting relationships. Couples were recruited who met the following criteria:

1. Married or in a committed same sex relationship at least 15 years;

2. Diversity of race/ethnicity, education, religious background and sexual orientation.

Of the 216 partners who were interviewed, 76% were White and 24 % were people of color (African-Americans and Mexican-Americans). Religious background was as follows: 46 % were Protestant; 34 % were Catholic; and 20% were Jewish. Fifty-six percent were college graduates and 44% were non-college graduates. The mean age for the sample as a whole was 57 years (S.D.=10.24): 27% of respondents were in their 40's, 33% in their 50's, 26% in their 60's, and 14% in their 70's. Sixty-seven percent of couples were heterosexual and 33% in same sex relationships. The mean number of years together was 30.22 (S.D.=10.28): 18% of couples had been together 40 years or longer; 29% between 30 and 39 years; 34% between 20 and 29 years; and 19% less than 20 but more than 15 years. Seventy-seven percent of couples had children; 23% did not have children. By total gross family income, 7% of couples earned less than $25,000; 25% between $25,000 and $49,999; 29% between $50,000 and $74,999; and 39 % had gross incomes of $75,000 or more.

There were differences in the demographic characteristics of same sex and heterosexual respondents. Although all couples had been together for at least 15 years, heterosexual couples were together for more years than same sex couples; the latter were also younger than the former and had higher levels of education. Given the exploratory nature of this research which also focused on new territory not cover in previous studies, these differences did not have a

substantive effect on the goals of the research, which was to explore how a diverse sample of couples adapted in their relationships over the years.

Demographic characteristics of sample

Each respondent was assigned a pseudonym, the first letter of which was the same as the pseudonym of that person's partner.

name: pseudonym

age: actual age of respondent

years: actual years together

sexor:
1 = heterosexual males, 2 = heterosexual females, 3 = lesbian females, 4 = gay males

religion (religious background):
1 = catholic, 2 = protestant, 3 = jewish

race/ethnicity:
1 = white, 2 = african-american, 3 = mexican-american

educ (education):
1 = high school or less, 2 = high school grad, 3 = post high school

or some college, 4 = college grad , 5 = graduate or professional school

work (occupation):

1 = business, 2 = professional, 3= trade, 4 = at home, 5 = other

pseudo name	age	years	sexor	relg	race	educ	work
01. Andrew	72	47	1	3	1	1	3
02. Ann	72		2	3	1	1	4
03. Ben	58	37	1	2	1	3	3
04. Barbara	57		2	2	1	1	t
05. Carl	58	33	1	2	2	3	3
06. Carol	51		2	2	2	3	4
07. David	57	36	1	2	1	2	3
08. Donna	57		2	2	1	2	3
09. Edward	44	23	1	2	1	2	3
10. Eve	43		2	2	1	2	3
11. Fred	61	41	1	1	1	2	3
12. Fran	61		2	1	1	1	3
13. George	63	41	1	2	1	2	1
14. Grace	61		2	2	1	2	1
15. Ivan	48	26	1	1	1	2	3
16. Irene	45		2	1	1	4	2
17. John	58	35	1	1	1	2	3
18. Judy	56		2	1	1	3	
19. Ken	54	23	1	1	1	2	3
20. Karen	51		2	1	1	2	3
21. Larry	59	31	1	1	1	2	3
22. Laura	55		2	1	1	2	1

pseudo name	age	years	sexor	relg	race	educ	work
23. Mike	70	40	1	1	1	4	2
24. Mary	65		2	1	1	2	4
25.Al	48	27	1	2	1	2	1
26.Arlene	47		2	2	1	3	0
27.Bill	48	28	1	1	1	4	1
28.Brenda	48		2	1	1	4	1
29.Calvin	56	24	1	2	1	4	2
30.Cathy	50		2	2	1	4	1
31.Donald	68	40	1	1	1	4	2
32.Doreen	62		2	1	1	4	4
33.Earl	53	27	1	2	1	3	1
34.Evelyn	50		2	2	1	4	1
35.Frank	76	29	1	1	1	4	1
36.Faith	62		2	2	1	4	2
37.Grover	53	26	1	3	1	4	2
38.Gladys	50		2	3	1	2	5
39.Kevin	53	28	1	2	1	4	1
40.Kate	51		2	2	1	4	1
41.Ian	63	40	1	2	1	4	1
42.Irene	61		2	2	1	3	1
43.Jeff	64	29	1	3	1	4	2
44.Jill	59		2	3	1	4	2
45.Howard	51	28	1	3	1	4	2
46.Holly	51		2	3	1	4	2
47.Louis	64	37	1	1	1	4	1
48.Lilly	59		2	1	1	3	1

pseudo name	age	years	sexor	relg	race	educ	work
49.Jorge	73	54	1	1	3	1	3
50.Josephina	73		2	1	3	1	3
51.Beto	58	37	1	1	1	1	o
52.Buena	56		2	1	3	3	o
53.Carlos	64	40	1	1	1	1	3
54.Cenci	63		2	1	2	2	3
55.Dimos	71	26	1	1	3	1	3
56.Dora	59		2	1	3	2	3
57.Estban	53	31	1	1	3	2	3
58.Esperanza	55		2	1	3	2	5
59.Francisco	47	26	1	1	3	3	3
60.Felicidad	48		2	1	3	4	2
61.Gonzalo	47	29	1	1	3	1	3
62.Gaudalupe	43		2	1	3	3	0
63.Homero	43	47	1	1	3	2	1
64.Hermina	47		2	3	3	3	3
65.Kiko	45	24	1	1	3	2	5
66.Krystal	45		2	1	3	3	3
67.Ignacio	51	29	1	1	3	0	1
68.Isabel	50		2	1	3	0	2
69.Amando	59	37	1	1	3	1	3
70.Alicia	55		2	1	3	1	4
71.Martin	53	30	1	1	3	2	1
72.Maribel	51		2	1	3	3	1
73.Arthur	59	33	1	3	1	4	4
74.Allison	56		2	3	1	4	4
75.Brian	67	43	1	3	1	4	2
76.Bernice	66		2	3	1	3	4

pseudo name	age	years	sexor	relg	race	educ	work	
77.Clifton	73	44	1	3	1	4	2	
78.Cora	69		2	3	1	4	1	
79.Daniel	66	40	1	3	1	4	1	
80.Debra	62		2	3	1	4	4	
81.Earl	77	50	1	3	1	4	1	
82.Emily	74		2	3	1	4	4	
83.Freeman	63	47	1	3	1	4	1	
84.Fannie	64		2	3	1	2	4	
85.Greg	65	47	1	3	1	4	1	
86.Gail	66		2	3	1	2	4	
87.Henry	52	26	1	3	1	4	1	
88.Hillary	48		2	3	1	2	1	
89.Len	56	29	1	3	1	4	2	
90.Lillian	51		2	3	1	2	4	
91.Joseph	57	32	1	3	1	4	2	
92.Julia	55		2	3	1	2	1	
93.Issac	56	29	1	3	3	4	1	
94.Ina	51		2	3	3	4	2	
95.Kent	45	23	1	3	2	4	1	
96.Kim	44		2	3	2	4	1	
97.Art	64	45	1	2	2	4	2	
98.Amy	66		2	2	2	3	2	
99.Bob	71	50	1	1	2	1	1	
100.Beth		67		2	1	2	2	1
101.Cory	70	22	1	1	2	1	3	
102.Camiela	68		1	2	1	3		
103.Douglas	63	45	1	2	2	1	3	
104.Della	57		2	2	2	2	5	

pseudo name	age	years	sexor	relg	race	educ	work
105.Eugene	70	22	1	2	2	0	3
106.Edith	73		2	1	2	0	3
107.Felix	72	51	1	2	2	1	3
108.Fay	73		2	2	2	1	4
109.Guy	73	34	1	2	2	1	3
110.Gloria	77		2	2	2	2	3
111.Harold	56	32	1	2	2	2	3
112.Heidi	52		2	2	2	2	1
113.Irwin	71	48	1	2	2	2	5
114.Iris	72		2	2	2	2	4
115.Justin	58	32	1	2	2	2	1
116.Jane	51		2	2	2	2	1
117.Kirk	74	21	1	3	2	1	3
118.Kirsten	72		2	3	2	1	4
119.Mark	49	55	1	1	2	4	2
120.Melinda	48		2	1	2	4	2
121.Angela	45	20	3	1	1	5	2
122.Alice	46		3	2	1	4	2
123.Betsy	64	27	3	3	2	4	2
124.Beverly	50		3	3	3	4	2
125.Claire	49	24	3	1	1	2	5
126.Cathy	48		3	1	1	2	1
127Deirde	65	22	3	2	1	5	2
128.Daphine	56		3	2	1	5	2
129.Elaine	61	18	3	2	1	5	2
130.Emily	63		3	2	1	5	2

pseudo name	age	years	sexor	relg	race	educ	work
131.Florence	49	18	3	2	1	5	1
132.Felicia	47		3	2	1	5	2
133.Gwen	52	20	3	2	1	5	2
134.Grace	52		3	1	1	5	2
135.Harriet	46	17	3	1	1	5	2
136.Hillary	46		3	2	1	5	2
137.Isabelle	53	20	3	2	1	4	2
138.Ingrid	53		3	2	1	5	2
139.Jennifer	57	21	3	2	1	5	2
140.Joyce	76		3	2	1	5	2
141.Kathl	69	25	3	2	2	5	2
142.Kristen	65		3	2	2	5	2
143.Lucy	58	19	3	1	1	5	2
144.Liz	36		3	1	1	5	2
145.Abby	38	16	3	3	1	5	2
146.Alicia	38		3	3	1	5	2
147.Beatrice	45	19	3	2	1	5	2
148.Barbara	48		3	2	1	3	5
149.Samatha	51	24	3	3	1	5	2
150.Sarah	62		3	3	1	5	2
151.Chris	41	17	3	1	2	5	2
152.Connie	41		3	1	1	5	2
153.Nancy	41	18	3	1	1	5	2
154.Nina	44	1	3	3	3	5	2
155.Octavia	53	15	3	2	3	5	2
156.Olivia	45	15	3	2	3	5	2
157.Pamela	60	29	3	2	1	4	2
158.Penny	68		3	2	1	5	2

pseudo name	age	years	sexor	relg	race	educ	work
159Dana	42	19	3	2	1	2	5
160.Diane	42		3	2	1	3	5
161Regina	49	16	3	2	1	5	2
162.Roberta	55		3	2	1	5	2
163.Maria	62	35	3	1	1	5	2
164.Molly	63		3	3	1	5	2
165.Elly	37	17	3	3	2	2	4
166Esther	41		3	3	2	5	2
167.Felise	60	21	3	2	1	5	2
168.Florenc	53		3	2	1	5	2
169,Frank	60	18	4	2	1	5	1
170.Fred	45		4	2	1	5	1
171.Gary	43	15	4	1	1	4	1
172.Greg	37		4	1	1	2	1
173.Henry	58	15	4	1	1	2	0
174.Howard	61		4	1	1	2	1
175 Ian	58	24	4	1	5	5	2
176.Ira	54		4	2	4	4	0
177.Jeffrey	66	24	4	1	1	5	4
178.Jason	52		4	1	1	2	0
179.Keith	37	16	4	3	1	5	5
180.Ken	36		4	3	1	4	5
181.Larry	62	16	4	2	1	5	4
182.Louis		16	4	1	1	4	1
183.Adam	42	19	4	3	1	5	1
184.Andrew	42		4	3	1	5	1
185.Barry	49	18	4	1	1	4	1
186.Brian	55		4	1	1	2	1

pseudo name	age	years	sexor	relg	race	educ	work
187.Carl	62	35	4	1	1	2	4
188.Charles	63		4	2	1	2	5
189.Daniel	37	17	4	1	1	2	1
190.Dwight	41		4	3	1	4	1
191.Edward	60	21	4	2	1	5	1
192.Evan	53		4	2	1	5	1
183.Arthur	80	53	1	2	1	5	2
184.Anne	75		2	2	1	4	2
185.Ben	70	43	1	2	1	5	2
186.Beth	69		2	2	1	5	2
187.Cal	81	22	1	2	1	1	2
188.Cyd	55		2	2	1	1	2
189.Dave	68	37	1	2	1	5	2
190.Drew	68		2	2	1	4	2
191.Ed	62	31	1	2	1	5	2
192.Eve	63		2	2	1	5	1
193.Frank	51	29	1	2	1	2	5
194.Fran	49		2	2	1	2	2
195.Greg	48	21	1	2	1	5	1
196 Gert	49		2	2	1	4	1
197.Hal	49	21	1	2	1	4	2
198.Hope	50		2	2	1	4	2
199.Ikr	64	31	1	2	1	5	2
200.Irene	54		2	2	1	4	2
201.John	68	43	1	2	1	5	2
202.Joyce	66		2	2	1	4	2
203.Ken	53	31	1	2	1	5	2
214.Kim	51		2	2	1	5	2

215.Lou	63	37	1	2	1	5	2
216.Linda	63		2	2	1	5	2

Coding

Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed to facilitate coding and to prepare the data for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Interview passages were coded for relational themes that were then developed into categories.

Initially, a research team (2 women, 2 men) coded eight transcriptions independently. Detailed notes were kept and categories were generated. A relationship-coding sheet was developed and used in subsequent coding of interviews. As new categories arose previous interviews were re-coded in keeping with the constant comparative process. Having both genders involved in that process helped control for gender bias and contributed to the development of a shared conceptual analysis. Using this method, a scoring system was developed to identify themes that evolved from each section of the interviews. There were over 90 categories in 24 topic areas for every research respondent.

Coding Sheet

Code# name partner's name

interview date income occupation interviewer

education age # of years married

1 Respondent's Initial Attraction to Partner
(0)negative (1)ambivalent (2)positive ____

2 Respondent's Family Support for Partner Choice
(0)disapproval (1)no response (2)approval (3)mixed ___

3 Respondent's Circumstances at Time of Relationship or Commitment
(0) no conflict (1) conflictual ____

4 Role Expectations of Self in relationship
(0) Traditional-clear (1) Traditional-diffuse (2) Non-traditional/clear
(3) Non-traditional/diffuse ___

5 Expectation of Need to Sustain relationship
(0) no expectations (1) no __ (2) yes ___

6 Respondent's Perception of the Sexual Relationship
(0) negative (1) mixed (2) positive
(A) first phase __ (B) second phase __ (C) third phase __

7 Respondent's Perception of the Importance of Sexual Relationship
(0)not important (1)important (2)very important
(A) first phase __ (B) second phase __ (C) third phase __

8 Respondent's Perception of the Presence of Intimacy in the relationship
(0) no (1) mixed (2) yes
(
A) psychosocial intimacy
(1) first phase __ (2) second phase __ (3) third phase __

(B) non-sexual physical touching
(1) first phase (2) second phase (3) third phase

9. Respondent's Personal Style of Decision Making
(0) logical (1) impulsive (2) intuitive
(A) first phase __ (B) second phase __ (C) third phase __

10. External Decision Making Style as a Couple
(0) separate (1) variable (2) mutual (e.g. friends, recreation, vacations, and purchases)
(A) first phase__ (B) second phase__ (C) third phase__

11. Style of Handling Interpersonal Differences in relationship

(0) denial (1) avoid (2) confront

(A) Respondent's Style
(1) first phase__ (2) second phase__ (3) third phase __

(B) Respondent's Perception of Partner's Style
(1) first phase__ (2) second phase__ (3) third phase__

12. Respondent's Reported Level of relational conflict
(0) minimal (1) major
(A) first phase__ (B) second phase__ (C) third phase__

13. Respondent's Perception of the Responsibilities for Child Rearing
(0) individual (1) mutual
(A) children's infancy__ (B) latency period__ (C) adolescence__

14. Respondent's Perception of Relational Values: Partner to Respondent
(0) no (1) mixed (2) yes

(A) sensitivity
(1)first phase__ (2)second phase__ (3)third phase__

(B) understanding
(1)first phase__ (2)second phase__ (3)third phase__

(C) respect
(1)first phase__ (2)second phase__ (3)third phase__

(D) trust
(1)first phase__ (2)second phase__ (3)third phase _____

15. Respondent's Perception of Relational Values: Respondent to Partner
(0) no (1) mixed (2) yes

(A) sensitivity
(1)first phase__ (2)second phase__ (3)third phase__

(B) understanding
(1)first phase__ (2)second phase__ (3)third phase__

(C) respect
(1)first phase__ (2)second phase__ (3)third phase__

(D) trust
(1)first phase__ (2)second phase__ (3)third phase__

16. Respondent's perception of fairness/equity in the marital relationship
(0) no (1) mixed (2) yes
(A) first phase__ (B) second phase__ (C) third phase__

17. Respondent's perception of communication within the marital relationship
(0) no (1) mixed (2) yes
(A) first phase__ (B) second phase__ (C) third phase__

18. Respondent's Overall Sense of Relatedness
(0) negative (1) mixed (2) positive
(A) first phase__ (B) second phase__ (C) third phase__

19. Respondent's Perception of Other Influences On The Relationship
(0) negative (1) no influence (2) positive (3) mixed

(A) finances
(1)first phase__ (2)second phase__ (3) third phase__

(B) religion
(1)first phase__ (2) second phase__ (3) third phase__

(C) respondent's extended family
(1)first phase__ (2) second phase__ (3) third phase__

(D) partner's extended family
(1)first phase__ (2) second phase__ (3) third phase__

(E) culture/ethnicity
(1)first phase__(2) second phase__ (3) third phase__

(F) other values (list in comments)
(1)first phase__ (2) second phase__(3) third phase__

20. Respondent's Perception of Similarity of Own Relationship with Parent's Relationship
(0) discontinuity (1) mixed (2) continuity
(A) first phase__ (B) second phase__ (C) third phase__

21. Respondent's Perception of Own Marital Behavior
(0) instrumental (1) mixed (2) expressive
(A) first phase__ (B) second phase__ (C) third phase__

22. Respondent's Parent's Attitudes Toward Divorce

(1)disapproved of divorce __ (2) accepting of divorce __

23. Respondent's Perception of Interpersonal Fit with Partner
(0)no (1)mixed (2)complementarity (3)symmetry
(A) first phase__ (B) second phase__ (C) third phase__

24. S's Overall Sense of the Relationship As Satisfying?
(0) no (1) mixed (2) yes
(A) first phase__ (B) second phase__ (C) third phase__

COMMENTS:

Each interview was coded and scored independently by two raters (one male and one female) who noted themes and categories as they emerged from the transcripts. One of the authors coded all 216 interviews to insure continuity in the operational definitions of variables and consistency of judgments from case to case. The agreement between raters, determined by dividing the number of identical judgments by the total number of codes, was 87%. Cohen's kappa, used as a measure of inter-rater reliability, ranged from .79 to .93. When discrepancies occurred, the raters met to discuss their differences and to re-examine the original transcripts until a consensus was reached as to how a particular item was to be scored.

HyperResearch enabled us to do a thorough content analysis of interview transcripts, which totaled over 8,000 double-spaced pages, and to identify, catalogue and organize specific interview passages on which categorical codes were based software (see books and papers at the

end of this monograph for a discussion of this software developed by Hesse-Biber, Dupuis and Kinder, 1992, at Boston College).

As the research evolved and respondents were added to the database, we re-examined the codes to prepare the data for quantitative analysis. Many variables were re-coded into dichotomous categories. For example, psychological intimacy was coded originally into three categories (positive, mixed and negative). The positive category was retained and compared with a re-coded mixed/negative category. A similar process was followed in re-coding other variables for statistical analysis; namely, logistic regression.

Data analysis

The coded data from the scoring sheets yielded frequencies, which were analyzed using SPSS software. Chi square analysis was used to examine the relationship between variables - which included personal, demographic and respondents' reports of various dimensions of relationships treated as independent variables - and other variables, such as psychological intimacy and conflict management styles, which were treated as dependent variables. In general, the alpha criterion was set at .01 for the chi-square analyses.

The chi-square statistic was appropriate since certain conditions were met. First, it has been very difficult to ensure randomness of samples in social and behavioral research, especially in studies that focus on new territory. This non-probability sample was selected deliberately to include older couples who have been understudied in previous research; namely, heterosexual and same sex relationships that had lasted an average of 30 years; the goal was to identify factors that may have contributed to relational stability from the perspectives of individual partners rather than to test hypotheses. Second, compared to other tests of statistical significance, chi-

square has fewer requirements about population characteristics. Third, the expected frequency of 5 observations in most cells was met.

To assess the strength of the associations between a variable and other variables, a correlation analysis was conducted. For example, variables that were related significantly to psychological intimacy in a chi-square analysis and which had been identified in previous studies as having importance to understanding psychological intimacy were selected for building a theoretical model, which was then tested with logistic regression, a useful tool in this exploratory research where the goal was to develop theory rather to test theory.

The previous discussion offers a sketch of the research procedures, which were the basis for understanding relational adaptation. Before moving on to discuss themes from the data, however, the limitations of the research need to be identified.

Limitations

Qualitative modes of data collection based on in-depth interviews conducted by skilled clinicians are an effective tool for studying elusive phenomena, such as the variables explored in this research. The richness of data elicited through the method used in this study is quite different from data collected through other means. But, there are concerns about validity and reliability as well as the nature of the sample.

It is difficult to assess the validity of the data in the traditional sense of that concept since we were eliciting the personal thoughts and feelings of respondents about their relationships at a particular point in time. The candor of these interviewees about highly personal matters, such as the decline in sexual relations because of sexual dysfunctions, suggests they were equally candid about other aspects of their relationships. By interviewing partners separately and asking them

to talk about themselves as well as their observations of their partners, we were able to compare responses to determine if there were significant differences about common realities. For example, did both partners assess the nature of conflict in their relationships similarly? In commenting on an aspect of a partner's behavior, did the reports of an interviewee come close to the partner's observations about the same reality? There was a correspondence between partners in the data, which was illustrated in responses to conflict management styles, when respondents were asked to describe their style as well as the style of their partners. For example, interviewees who described themselves as having an avoidant style were viewed by their partners in an equivalent way.

In a cross sectional design in which respondents are asked to report on their life today and in the past, the meaning of life events and an individual's response to these events will vary, and may vary within the same person at different points over the life span. While longitudinal designs may be superior in contending with problems of validity and reliability, cross sectional designs that use interviews to uncover the meaning of behavior have the strength of eliciting the richness in the experiences of human beings. Our experiences with these people supported that assumption.

There is a shortfall in re-coding the data from multiple categories into dichotomous ones. The re-coding step built onto the original codes offered an additional lens through which to view the data. To offset the potential reductionist effects of re-coding, we incorporate a discussion of the qualitative data into discussions of results where ever statistics are used. The integration of qualitative and quantitative procedures is intended to enhance our understanding of the phenomena of relationships that last and the theory development objective of the research.

The use of an interdisciplinary team throughout the research process enhanced the quality of the study. Issues of bias and misinterpretation were discussed along with other matters that could affect the validity and reliability of the data. One of the principal investigators read all 216 interview transcripts and served as a second independent coder for each interview. Having one researcher read and code every interview facilitated continuity in the operational definitions of variables. That coder was male and the other coders, each of whom were the interviewers of respondents in each sub-group, was a woman., The reliability between the coders was high with Cohen's kappa, ranging from .79 to .93.

As has already been pointed out the sample was selected purposively to include partners in lasting relationships that were often not included in other studies; namely, people of color, blue collar respondents and same sex couples. The goal was not to test theory but to develop an understanding of how partners adapted in lasting relationships, a topic that had not received much attention by researchers in the 1990's when the data were collected.

Part 2: Themes

In this discussion we rely on our previous analyses of the data but stand back from the results to push our understanding of those factors that may contribute to relational adaptation and stability. Such a discussions needs to be framed within the limitations of the study. Rather than conclusive, this discussion is suggestive of factors that may contribute to our understanding of relational stability over the years.

Themes that emerged from the data, which address that goal, are:

1. Relational fit of partners: Symmetry to complementarity
2. Conflict and its management
3. Intimacy: Sexual and psychological
4. Families and friends
5. Religion
6. Satisfaction

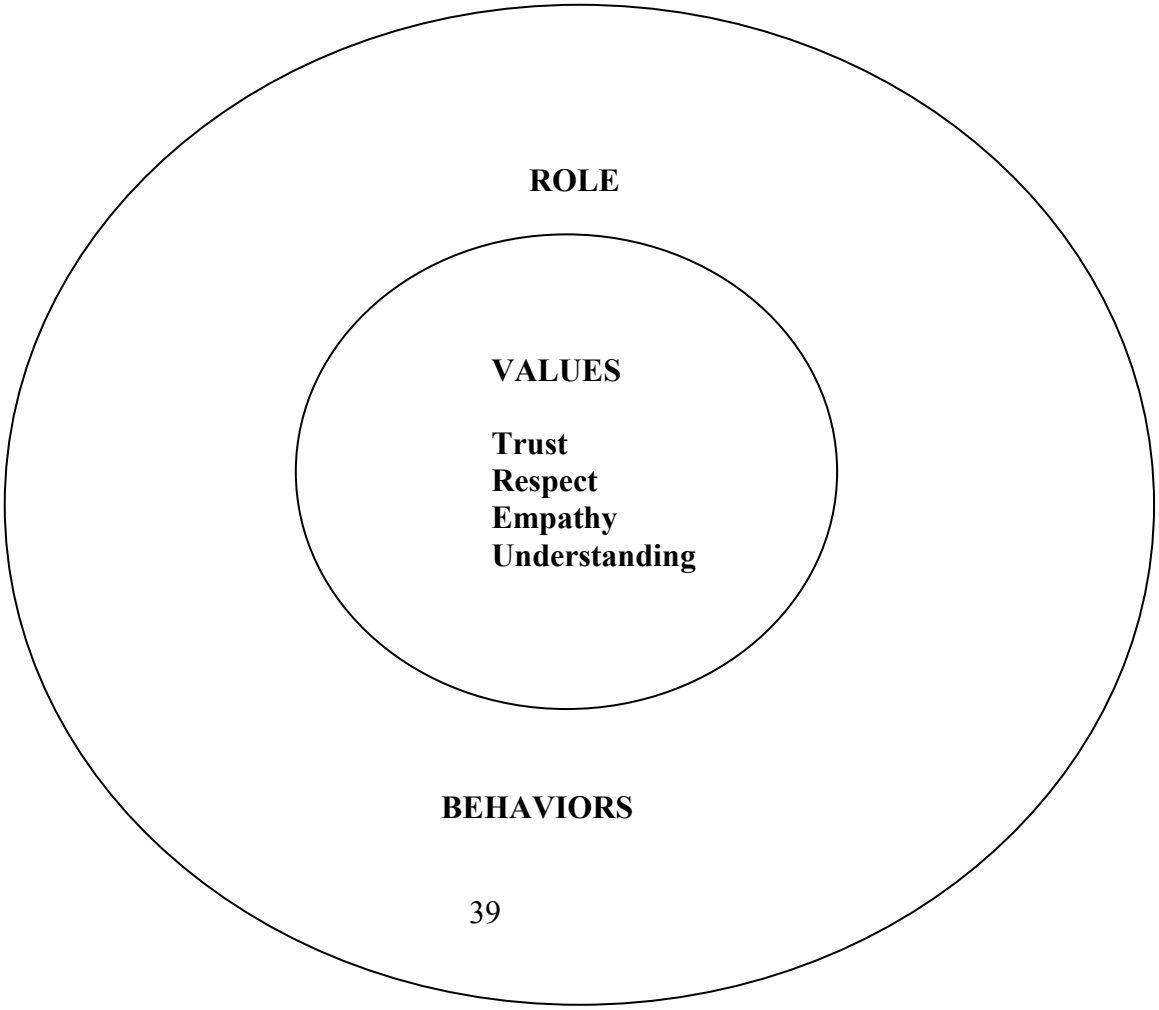
Relational fit: Symmetry to complementarity

We explored several aspects of relationships. Through examining the observations of respondents about their own behavior and that of their partners, we were able to assess how partners fit together. That is, were the connections characterized by individual differences of each partner or by similarities? If respondents viewed their partners as well as themselves as similar in personal characteristics and the roles that each played in their relationships, then we conceptualized the fit as symmetrical. If respondents talk primarily about observed differences between them and their partners, the fit was conceptualized as complementary. As far as we

know, these concepts came from research on communications by Watzlawick and his associates (see: Mackey & O'Brien, 1995).

The other dimension of fit was at the level of values. From the research literature we identified four qualities that appeared to be instrumental in supporting stability and satisfaction in close relationships. We refer to these qualities as relational values; they included trust, respect, sensitivity and understanding.

Values may not have been as visible in daily life as were role behaviors. The following figure is intended to convey the configuration of role behaviors that were more manifest in daily life along the equally important values that may not have been as visible. In a sense, roles were at a sociological - outer level of the self while values, although having a dynamic effect in shaping social role behaviors, were located at an inner - psychological level (see: Mackey, 2009, for a discussion of this concept of the self).



In exploring how respondents viewed their own and their partners' primary modes of relatedness and communication, which included roles and values, we had expected that relational behaviors would be complementary and symmetrical, more or less, and that none of these relationships would be purely complementary or symmetrical. The observations of respondents about interpersonal behaviors in themselves and in their partners were quite different from what we had expected. Not only did respondents talk of primary role behaviors in complementary terms but they observed, as well, that complementarity was relatively stable over the years. Role fit over the years is depicted in Table 1:

Table 1
Reports of relational fit over the years by sexual orientation of couples

Years & fit	Couples			
	Heterosexual #/ col%	Lesbian #/ col%	Gay males #/ col%	Totals #/ col%
Early				
Complementary	118/.82	44/.92	19/.79	181/.84
Symmetrical	26/.18	4/.08	5/.21	35/.16
Middle				
Complementary	116/.81	42/.88	20/.83	178/.82
Symmetrical	28/.19	6/.13	4/.17	38/.18
Recent				
Complementary	107/.74	41/.85	18/.75	166/.77
Symmetrical	37/.26	7/.15	6/.25	50/.23

Complementarity in social role behaviors remained quite stable over the years and did not vary significantly in the reports of heterosexuals, lesbian and gay male respondents. When talking about the early years of their relationships, 84% of respondents used complementary terms to describe the interpersonal fit in their relationships. That percentage hardly changed during the middle years and declined only to 77% in recent years when respondents described their partners and themselves as more similar than different. A heterosexual couple that had been married about 35 years spoke of the complementary nature in their relationship.
Ben observed:

> *As I said I am completely different from what she is. I'm reserved. Laid back. She has made our relationship much easier by her being the way she is and I've gone along and accepted that … If it probably wasn't for her we wouldn't have the friends we have as many friends. Anybody she meets she makes friends with automatically, immediately. I'm not that way. It takes me awhile to get closer to people. Sometimes it bothered me … I've learned to live with it. Her friends are my friends. They might not think as much of me as they do of her but they accept me because I'm part of her and it doesn't bother me.*

His wife, Barbara, observed that:

> *Ben is really very fair. He's very loveable, but he can't show it. But that's not his fault. It's if you dig long enough you get everything out of him. His upbringing. Right now he has more of a problem than he had at the beginning. Ben's got to be mothered. I don't know if you understand what I mean by that. At times he's like a little kid. He's a good*

husband but, his needs are different but again I learned all of that. Some of it he was missing growing up and he's looking for it now. But, he's a very kind man. Very kind. And I usually get what I want from him!

Candice and Clair, a lesbian couple together for over 40 years described the complementary qualities of their relationship.

Candice:

Because of Candice's family background or lack of it, her parents being separated, I think that I became very nurturing. My role, though I may not have been able to tell you that then, was one of a nurturer and it has remained nurturing ... She's the calm to my storm. She is the eye of my hurricane ... I see myself as always overreacting, and being a flooder, and getting all worked up over everything ... she is the one saying, it'll work out. She's the yin to my yang ... I have a certain way of doing things; I'm an obsessive-compulsive. Candice is not. She is very quiet, I'm more a talker. She is very laid-back. She sits there watching me, knowing sooner or later I'll settle down somewhere. I usually turn to her and I'll say: "What do you think?" And she'll say: "Well, this is what I think." And I'll say: " Yeah, you're probably right!" I always seem to need more. I'm always asking to change something. My friend said to me: "Your needs are different. She's just happy to have your presence felt, and you want more; you want dialogue, you want some kind of attention, you want to be doing something together, some kind of interaction, and not mindlessly doing something as a distraction. It's just that you have different needs." Those made me feel better.

Clair:

> *We're very different people, which is probably what has kept us together. If I ever got involved with someone like me, we wouldn't have made it to the next month. I think that I'm there for her when she needs someone ... She goes crazy, makes mountains out of molehills all the time. She needs someone to calm her down and bring her back to reality. I think that the strength that I have, or that she thinks that I have, is something that attracted her to me ... She's a very nurturing person. She's always there, no matter what you need or what you've done. She's always there. I think that's the strength that she has that draws me to her. Her sense of humor. Her empathy. Her ability to bring out the best in me. She has an ability to make me look at myself and make me the kind of person I want to be. She gives me things that I've never had. That, probably more than anything else, keeps us together, as far as I'm concerned. What kept me in this relationship through all of the trials was a need that I had for someone to give me what I was lacking in my life. She never hesitated to be right there for me, to nurture or push me, to try to force me to grow as a person, whether I wanted to or not. As much as it annoyed me at times, I think, it's what helped me, over everything else. Basically, what kept us together was my own need for something that's lacking in my life.*

The Latin roots of the word, complementarity, is complementum which means to fill out or to complete. Whereas symmetrical qualities in a partner resonated with and reinforced similar qualities within one's sense of self, complementary qualities were different and had the perceived effect of making the self more complete. In other words, individuals were attracted initially to

individuals whom they perceived as having attributes that may have been not as extant or lacking in themselves. Differences, as those in these two couples, also helped to sustain relationships over the years.

Exchange theory plays to the theme of complementarity in these relationships. That is, individuals were likely to be attracted to potential mates whom they perceived as meeting their unfilled needs which may have offered them an opportunity to experience fulfillment as an individual. Particular traits were valued and experienced as rewarding within a relationship. These dynamics were evident in the relationships of Ben and Barbara as well as between Candice and Clair. The exchanges were mutually beneficial and provided each person with rewards that may not have been available outside of the relationship. In responding to one's partner, individuals also experienced a fulfillment of their own needs, which was the essence of a relational exchange. Perhaps, the stability of complementarity was related to fundamental qualities within the selves of each partner that were central to their sense of self and not likely to change significantly from early to recent years.

Psychological differences, which had become part of each person, had a powerful effect in shaping interpersonal behaviors. Individuals were attracted to potential partners who could offer them different types of experiences than they had in the past. For example, they looked for someone who would provide nurturing, acceptance and love that may have been missing in other important relationships. Conversely, other individuals also looked for partners whom they could take care of and nurture. So called needy individuals offered as much to their partners as they received. Many of these relationships were a vehicle to continue their personal development throughout adulthood.

In addition to enhancing the quality of relationships, differences also served as a catalyst for change toward a personal sense of wholeness within many respondents. Partners, such as Ben and Barb as well as Claire and Candice, found qualities in each other that they had not received in their families which enabled them to develop as individuals and as a couple. Personal and relational development was inseparable; one could not happen without the other. Although differences had the function of sustaining relationships over the years and of serving as a catalyst for modifications in roles, differences also became a source of interpersonal conflict, which will be explored in the next section of this monograph.

Values were the other dimension of our concept of interpersonal fit. We explored the perceptions of respondents about their own values along with how they perceived similar values in their partners. For example, how trusting were respondents of their partners and how trusting did respondents feel that their partners were toward them? In addition to the four values already identified, we also explored how respondents viewed equity or the fairness of their relationships.

A heterosexual male in his late 50's expressed how he viewed differences in his relationship along with similarities in underlying values:

> *We can argue about an item, but I think our basic values are very close to each other...as far as the goals of our moral thoughts I think they are very close. However, I am volatile and she is still a peacemaker.*

Observations of respondents about the presence of relational values in themselves over the years are shown in the table 2.

There were differences between the groups in the observations of respondents about relational values. Relative to other values, respect showed the least variation among the three groups over the years. Even when respondents viewed themselves as less sensitive, understanding and/or trusting of their partners, they continued to respect them. What that data may mean is not clear but may be an important factor in understanding relational stability. Gay men reported less trust in their partners during the early and middle years than did other respondents. Of surprise were the reports of lesbian respondents about their sensitivity in the early years of their relationships and into the middle years. That data may speak to the level of major conflict reported by lesbians as they struggled to work out mutually acceptable roles in their relationships during those years. For similar reasons, gay men may not have felt sensitive toward their partners during the early years as they too struggled to find meaningful roles in their relationships. In other words, conflict in trying to resolve differences and in working out mutually acceptable roles may compromise trust and sensitivity in one's partner.

To push an understanding of values further, it is important to examine the factors that may have contributed to the significant differences between and among the three groups. Significant differences ($P = <.05$) were found in the reports of heterosexual respondents compared to lesbians and gay males. Numerous differences were found between males and females in heterosexual relationships but none between partners in the same sex relationships. For that reason, the results in Table 3 are shown for partners in heterosexual relationships and for couples in lesbian and gay male relationships.

Table 2
Reports of relational values in respondents by couples over the years

Years & Values	**Couples**				
	Heterosexual # / col %	Lesbian # / col %	Gaymale # / col %	Totals # / row %	X^2 (2DF)
Early					
Sensitive	93/.64	20/.42	7/.29	120/.56	15.27*
Understand	90/.63	16/.33	14/.58	120/.56	12.49*
Respect	128/.89	42/.88	18/.75	188/.87	3.53
Trust	124/.86	36/.75	14/.58	174/.81	11.35*
Middle					
Sensitive	94/.65	26/.54	7/.29	127/59	11.62*
Understand	99/.69	27/.56	12/.50	138/.64	4.70
Respect	128/.89	41/.85	19/.79	188/.87	1.87
Trust	124/.86	34/.71	16.67	174/.81	8.69*
Recent					
Sensitive	114/.79	44/.92	16/.67	174/.81	6.92*
Understand	123/.85	43/.90	19/.79	185/.86	1.43
Respect	132/.92	47/.98	22/.92	201/.93	2.26
Trust	132/.92	42/.88	19/.79	193/.89	3.60

* P = <.05

Across the 216 cases, respondents reported differences in how they viewed their own relational values and those of their partners, especially sensitivity, understanding and trust. For

example, in heterosexual relationships, fewer males compared to females identified themselves as sensitive, and fewer females identified their partners as sensitive as themselves.

Table 3
Respondent observations of relational values of their partners over the years

Years & Values	Respondents					
	Hemale # / col %	Hefemale # / col %	Lesbian # / col %	Gaymale # / col %	Totals # / col %	X^2 (3DF)
Early						
Sensitive	40/.56	53/.74	20/.42	7/.29	120/.56	20.0**
Understand	45/.63	45/.63	16/.33	14/.58	120/.56	12.5*
Respect	63/.88	65/.90	42/.88	18/.75	188/.87	3.8
Trust	66/.92	58/.81	36/.75	14/.58	174/.81	14.2*
Middle						
Sensitive	40/.56	54/.75	26/.54	7/.29	127/59	17.2**
Understand	50/.69	49/.68	27/.56	12/.50	138/.64	4.7
Respect	63/.88	65/.90	41/.85	19/.79	188/.87	2.1
Trust	68/.94	56/.78	34/.71	16.67	174/.81	15.1**
Recent						
Sensitive	50/.69	64/.89	44/.92	16/.67	174/.81	15.6*
Understand	61/.85	62/.86	43/.90	19/.79	185/.86	1.4
Respect	66/.92	66/.92	47/.98	22/.92	201/.93	2.26
Trust	70/.97	62/.86	42/.88	19/.79	193/.89	8.27

* P = <.05

The percentages for the other values –trust, respect and understanding - were not as distinct for same sex couples. Although values modified in a positive direction over the years among heterosexual couples, there were dramatic changes in a positive direction among same sex couples, especially lesbians. For example, the percentages of lesbian and gay respondents that reported being sensitive towards their partners more than doubled from early to recent years. Reported mutual understanding (i.e. how respondents viewed themselves and how they viewed their partners) nearly tripled among lesbians from early to recent years, which was appreciably higher than in the other 2 groups..

The data suggest that certain relational vales, especially sensitivity and understanding, may be modifiable in loving relationships that last. With the exception of lesbian respondents, the data did not indicate dramatic changes but, rather, moderate shifts in partners' feelings and thoughts over the years. Interestingly, shifts of this nature in relational values were apparently independent form roles that partners played in relationships. The development of sensitivity and understanding may strengthen mutual trust and respect that are essential for stabile attachments. We did not explore how such a potential learning process unfolds between two human beings but it is worth further investigation. Also, other factors beyond the scope of our research may facilitate the development of respect and understanding.

We also explored the sense of equity that respondents had about their relationships over the years; that is, overall how fair did individuals feel their relationships were despite differences? Reported equity tended to remain more or less constant from early to recent years among most respondent except for heterosexual females and gay males during the middle years of these relationships. Those data suggest that there is a "U" type pattern to the sense of equity in relationships over the years, notably among heterosexual women who frequently had

disproportionate responsibilities for child rearing, which contributed their to their feelings of inequity. At the same time, other values appeared to provide a balance to the inequitable aspects. Apart from equity, these other values may enable people to tolerate stressful times, as during child rearing. Also, the decline in a sense of fairness among mothers during those years was relatively small. Life with their partners balanced out when one considered all aspects of the relationship. Perhaps the progressive involvement of husbands in child rearing, especially during adolescence, which led to a sense of mutuality about being parents, helped to cultivate feelings of fairness. Among gay men, the decline in a sense of fairness was less clear.

A sense of fairness usually did not happen unless partners accepted responsibility for identifying, discussing and mediating differences and inequities. A Latino couple describes that process. The husband responded to a question about his perceptions of fairness in the relationship. He thought that the relationship was fair for him but not for his wife:

> *For me it has been fair, but I don't think it has for her. I would like for her to feel fully happy but I don't think she is. I can't find a way to convince her that I make everything to stay together and this is her big concern... it's not fair to her because of my work. I think it balanced out ...whenever one of us starts to feel that it's unbalanced, then we say so and work out something.*

His partner described the change in her sense of fairness about their relationship:

> *I think it's fair now.... I gave him all the power in the beginning. It's like the first ten or twelve years I was behind him....I was letting him go and I was taking care of my kids,*

but little by little I was turning things around; now we're this way....if I had been this way in the beginning ...

Despite the dip in feelings about the fairness of relationships during the middle years among heterosexual women and gay men, eight out of ten respondents described their relationships as equitable in recent years.

In summary, the roles of partners in these relationships remained more or less stable over the years. There was relatively little change in the reports of the complementary fit in the roles of partners from early to recent years. Compared to roles, values presented more of a mixed picture. The data suggested that the values of sensitivity and understanding were more likely to change in a positive direction compared to the stability and respect that partners had of each other over the years. Differences may contribute to the sense of completeness in primary relationships that last while also serving as a catalyst for modifications in other aspects of relationships. Mutuality in the underlying value of respect may serve as the glue that holds relationships together, especially through difficult times. Changes in values in a negative direction, such as a decline in trust, were associated with struggles in negotiating roles in relationships, anger triggered by sexual involvements of partners with others and inequities in child-rearing. There was a difference between heterosexual and same sex respondents in their reports of relational values. Partners in same sex relationships tended to agree with one another in their assessments of values both within themselves and in how they perceived similar values in their partners, which was quite different from the reports of heterosexual respondents about perceptions of these values.

Conflict and its management

Conflict between partners in meaningful human relationships, such as the lasting relationships in this study, is inevitable; moreover, constructive conflict is not an "oxymoron" (see Mackey, 2000 for a discussion of this idea by Markman). These two axioms, which emerged from the results of several studies that focused on conflict in human relationships, underscored the importance of understanding the meaning of relational conflict rather than framing conflict only as an undesirable reality to be eliminated. The axioms encourage us to focus on how conflict was managed between partners, which may assist in the development of new understandings of how people adapt in relationships.

Although differences between human beings in close relationships may result in interpersonal conflict, there is no consensus in the field about the definition of such conflict. Interpersonal differences and the accompanying negative feelings appear to have a corrosive effect on the quality of relationships when they remain unresolved. Other researchers have found that unresolved conflict fed and reinforced negative interactions between partners. The resulting defensive behaviors perpetuated dissatisfaction and estrangement between them.

Interpersonal conflict may offer opportunities for development of close relationships if partners learn mutually acceptable ways of negotiating and managing differences between them (see Mackey, Diemer and O'Brien, 2000). Rather than a threat to the integrity of relationships, conflict may serve as a catalyst for reaching higher levels of adaptation.

We operationalized conflict as a state of reported disharmony in relationships that developed because of differences between partners. Conflict may have been triggered by any one or a combination of issues such as negotiating roles, handling finances, child-rearing practices, personality clashes, difficulties in expressing one's needs and communicating one's

expectations to a partner. Our approach to developing an operational definition of conflict in these relationships was to ask respondents to tell us about differences and problems in their relationships. They were asked to describe examples of conflict during early, middle and recent years. Because all respondents reported at least minimal conflict in their relationships, the challenge was to assess and code the severity of conflict, not simply the presence of conflict. We focused on understanding disagreements from the perspectives of individual partners. If conflicts were assessed to have minimal impact on marital relationships, they were coded as minor. If respondents described disagreements as highly distressing to them personally and as having significantly disruptive effects on their relationships, they were coded as major.
The reports of conflict over the years by the sexual orientation of respondents is shown in the table 4

Reports by respondents of conflict over the years suggested that major conflict occurred most often during the middle years of these relationships. As mentioned above, there were various sources for major conflict after partners had been together for several years. Among heterosexual respondents, reports of major conflict more than doubled during the middle years, a frequent source of which were differences in child rearing. Compared to heterosexual couples, major conflict was reported more frequently by same sex respondents from early to recent years, especially by lesbian respondents.. Reports of major conflict were quite different for lesbians than for the other two groups.

Table 4
Reports of conflict over the years by sexual orientation of couples

Years & conflict	Couples				
	Heterosexual # /col%	Lesbian # /col%	Gay males # /col%	Totals # /col%	X^2(!DF)
Early years					13.70*
Minor	126/.87	31/.65	17/.71	174/.81	
Major	18/.13	17/.35	7/.29	42/.19	
Middle years					13.87*
Minor	102/.71	20/.41	13/.54	135/.63	
Major	42/.29	28/.58	11/.46	81/.37	
Recent years					8.64*
Minor	129/.90	36/.75	23/.96	188/.87	
Major	15/.10	12/.25	1/.04	28/.	

* P = <.05

Pamela and Penny, talked about conflict in their relationship. Pamela identified inequality of incomes as a focal point for serious conflict with Penny over the 20 years of their relationship. Recalling events during previous years, Pamela remembered that:

> *Our relationship deteriorated to arguing about money and how to spend time. It was a bad time and there was still the stress of my not really making much money. I felt a lot of inequality around that. So, I didn't want to spend money ... she would be in tears, feeling terrible and I would just be rational about it all ... we could be really rigid at the time*

and sometimes say mean and hurtful things to each other. We would have these horrendous fights ... it was very hard for me to stop doing it.

Penny offered this account of the difficulties between them:

Money and time, plagued us for a really long time. Pamela was involved in outside activities and I felt those things taking over our time together. The issue of money was I would spend too much and Pamela was too reticent to spend it. We have always had problems around that --- I think when we first started realizing that those things were serious was when we were buying a house and all the things came up about money; my sort of being more impulsive ... that triggered Pamela being more involved in her activities outside of our house.

We wondered about the meaning of the differences between lesbian and other respondents in how they assessed and discussed conflict. The data may be related more to gender than to the sexual orientation of these individuals, which raises the question whether or not females are more comfortable in acknowledging the presence of significant difference with their partners than are males? That inference is supported marginally by differences between male and female heterosexual respondents in discussing major differences. Although not as vivid as the differences between lesbians and the other two groups and not statistically significant (i.e. p=<.05), heterosexual females compared to their partners were more likely to report major conflict notably during the middle years when 1/3 of heterosexual women compared

to ¼ of their spouses reported major conflict in their relationships, a finding related primarily to differences in child-rearing practices. A father of four children spoke to that theme:

> *I think the worst was after we started having the children because in my opinion I kind of took her for granted... We've had our rough times. We've been on the verge of trying to get a divorce but it didn't go through because I told her I was going to shape up my life.*

Interestingly, as will be discussed later, the reported frequency of major conflict had little apparent connection to the conflict management styles of respondents, in general, and to other aspects of relationships over the years, such as satisfaction.

Another source of reported conflict over the years was related to behavioral role expectations: if respondents described their relational roles in non-traditional terms, which was reported by all same sex respondents, compared to those who described conventional roles, which was reported by most heterosexual respondents, they were more likely to report major conflict. In general, heterosexual women in this study had internalized prevailing cultural expectations of the era: to care for the home and for children while men expected to work outside of the home to provide for the family. If partner roles were ascribed by the prevailing cultural mores and had become a syntonic part of the selves of respondents, as was the case for most heterosexual individuals, the need to negotiate roles and responsibilities was a less likely source of major conflict, especially during the early years of theses relationships. Where there were few, if any, cultural expectations to shape roles and responsibilities, as was the case among gay male and female respondents, roles needed to be negotiated and negotiation often resulted in

conflict. That observation may resonate, as well, with an important source of conflict among heterosexual couples during the middle or child-rearing years when parenting roles and responsibilities of partners needed to be negotiated.

The exception to the finding of traditional expectations and roles in heterosexual relationships during the early years was among African-American couples (note: there were no individuals of color in the same sex sample; all African-American and Mexican-American respondents identified themselves as heterosexual). The frequency of reported major conflict remained relatively stable for African American respondents from the beginning of marriage (18%) through the child rearing years (21%). In contrast, major conflict among White heterosexual respondents more than tripled from early to middle years (10% to 32%) and more than doubled among Mexican American (13% to 29%). Major conflict for the three groups declined after children had grown to maturity.

The reason for the differences between African Americans and the other two groups may have been related to the following characteristics about their relationships. Recollections of expectations about marital roles prior to marriage were different for African American than for White and Mexican American respondents. Twenty-five percent of African Americans said that they had expected nontraditional roles for themselves and their partners compared to less than three percent of Whites and eight percent of Mexican Americans ($p=<.05$). A 51 year-old African American respondent spoke of what she expected of her marriage:

> *Equal, because I had seen too many of my friends and my own mother in the circumstances that I was not going to put up with in any way, form, shape or fashion ...*

decision-making and every aspect of married life, I felt, should entail the husband and wife together.

In most other heterosexual relationships, women expected to take care of the home, support their husbands in their careers and nurture children; men expected to work in order to support and take care of their families. The price of equity in partner roles, which involved more negotiation than in traditional relationships in which roles were ascribed, was higher rates of major conflict.

Another very important aspect in understanding the higher rates of major conflict in African-American relationships was racism. Most black respondents had been reared at a time when assertiveness, especially for males, was not tolerated by society. One of the few places where black men could be assertive in their lives without risking serious consequences was at home. Several respondents referred to that reality as they talked about their lives.

One manifestation of nontraditional roles was in child rearing. When children were in infancy and latency, African Americans reported higher rates of mutuality in child rearing than the other two groups: 50% of African Americans compared to 25% of Whites and 17% of Mexican Americans reported mutual responsibilities for child rearing during the children's infancy ($p=<.05$). Comparable rates for mutual child rearing during the children's latency years were 61% for African Americans, 46% for Whites and 29% for Mexican Americans. By the adolescent years, mutuality in parenting was reported by half of White and Mexican Americans compared to 75% of African Americans.

Nontraditional roles in African American marriages, which needed to be negotiated as spouses moved through the early years of marriage, apparently led to conflict which was quite

different from White and Mexican American marriages in which roles were ascribed and accepted by spouses without great ambiguity. When roles were allocated according to accepted cultural mores, as most gender roles were in the era when these couples were married, there was less need to negotiate one's place in the relationship, at least in the early years. African Americans may have worked out the challenges of negotiating roles earlier than Whites and Mexican Americans. As White and Mexican American husbands became involved in child rearing during the children's latency years, new roles and responsibilities needed to be negotiated leading to an increase in major conflict.

Finances was another stressor, which contributed to major conflict, a finding that was reported most frequently among lesbian couples, such as Pamela and Penny, where conflict about finances was fueled by differences in underlying values about money and/or inequities in incomes between partners. These differences inevitably involved issues of power and control that were important dynamics in the process of negotiating roles. Another way in which finances fueled conflict was when both partners worked early in relationships, which was more common among African-America than other heterosexual couples. That reality introduced another factor into efforts to negotiate mutually acceptable roles.

To further our understanding of factors that fueled major conflict, we constructed a theoretical model that was tested with logistic regression. Based on the chi-square analysis, the model contained variables that were likely to contribute to major conflict and which appeared to have theoretical relevance to fueling conflict in close relationships, notably during recent years. Respondents who recalled major conflict in the early years were more likely than others to report major conflict during recent years (beta=1.22; p=.02). Psychological intimacy in recent years

was predictive of lower levels of conflict (beta=1.58; p=.01). Compared to men, women reported a higher percentage of major conflict in recent years (beta=1.06; p=.05).

We wondered if the difference between men and women would show up if sexual orientation was substituted for sex in a separate regression analysis (note: sex and sexual orientation cannot be included in the same regression because of redundancy). Women were more likely than men to report major conflict in their relationships; women in same sex relationships were even more likely to report major conflict (beta=3.19; p=.01).

We also examined whether or not there were differences in the reports of individual respondents about major conflict in their relationships, an important measure since each partner was discussing a common reality in separate interviews. Differences between Partner A (N=108) and partner B (N=108) in reports of conflict were virtually non-existent during the early and recent years with small differences in reports during the middle years, when 33% of partners "A" and 42% of partners "B" reported major conflict. Respondents in this study appeared to have a common point of reference for assessing the seriousness of conflict in their relationships over the years, which may not only offer support for the reliability of the data but also offer some understanding of why these relationships remained stable.

As we will see, however, that common frame of reference for assessing the seriousness of conflict did not carry-over to how partners managed conflict.

Conflict management style (CMS) was defined as the predominant ways in which respondents and their partners dealt with differences and disagreements. Direct or face-to-face discussions were coded "confrontive." If respondents reported that they did not or could not discuss their thoughts and feelings about their relationships in face-to-face encounters with their partners, such as denying their feelings or leaving the scene, the style was coded as "avoidant."

A similar coding scheme was used for the observations of respondents about their views of their partners' style of managing conflict. It is important to keep in mind that we were exploring modes of handling conflict that respondents felt were usually employed by them and their partners over the years. To think of conflict management styles along a continuum with avoidance at one pole and confrontation at the other pole is more accurate than thinking of them categorically. We focused these exploratory interviews on the predominant modes through which respondents and their partners reported how they coped with conflict.

Similar to their reports of conflict, the observations of respondents about their own CMS was congruent with the observations of their partners about their styles. For example, respondents who viewed themselves as confrontive were viewed similarly by their partners. That congruence in the independent observations of respondents about common realities added support to the reliability of the data.

The following table depicts conflict management styles (CMS) over the years. As with reports of conflict, there was symmetry in the observations of same sex respondents about their own style of managing conflict as well as their observations of their partners' styles. No significant differences were found between partners when cross tabulations were computed. When a similar analysis was carried out for heterosexuals, the results were different. Based on those results, the following table separates the data for heterosexual partners into heterosexual males (Hemales) and heterosexual females (Hefemales).

Table 5 shows some interesting trends especially in how gender shaped the reports of respondents about their styles of managing conflict. In general, respondents became more confrontive and less avoidant in dealing with interpersonal conflict in their relationships as the years unfolded.

Table 5
Conflict management styles (CMS) over the years by sexual orientation

Years & CMS	Respondents				
	Hemale # / col %	Hefemale # / col %	Lesbian # / col %	Gay m # / col %	Totals # / col %
Early*					
Avoid	49/.68	27/.38	31/.65	12/.50	119/.55
Confront	23/.32	45/.62	17/.35	12/.50	97/.45
Middle**					
Avoid	47/.65	24/.33	23/.48	13/.54	107/.49
Confront	25/.35	48/.67	25/.52	11/.46	109/.51
Recent***					
Avoid	39/.54	17/.24	14/.29	9/.38	79/.37
Confront	33/.46	55/.76	34/.71	15/.62	137/.63

*X2 = 6.15 (3DF) P = <.01
**X2 = 14.95 (#DF) P = <.01
***X2 = 15.97 (#DF) P = <.01

A majority of respondents (55%) described a variety of means to avoid having face-to-face discussions with their partners about conflict in the early years of their relationships. These means included: : flight from face to face encounters, disarming the partner, gunny sacking by reaching into the past to avoid current differences, alcoholism and suppression. Although styles

of confrontation used by 45 % of respondents in the early years varied, that style of managing conflict was far more adaptive mode of dealing with conflict than was avoidance. A confrontive CMS was captured in the expression: "Let's talk!"

Allison, a 56-year-old, woman, recalled how her partner used flight to avoid having a fight with her:

> *If ever I wanted to argue - this is in our beginning years - if I had something I was harping on and I wanted to argue, I mean he could see I was ready to pick a fight, he would go in his workshop in the basement...If ever we wanted to argue, I'd just about say: "Don't run away I want to finish this conversation." And he would be downstairs already, like forget it. Forget it!*

A second mode of avoidance employed by some partners, primarily by some heterosexual males, was through commenting on a vulnerable spot within their partners, which was intended to have a disarming effect on the confrontive mode of the partner, who wanted to talk about their relational difficulties. In the following excerpt, Felicidad commented on the personal effect of her spouse's use of this avoidant mode of managing conflict:

> *Sometimes my husband, if he really wants to shut me up and control me, he'll tell me that I'm starting to look and sound like my mother. That will shut me up for sure.*

This is an interesting comment on how an unempathic confrontation, whether accurate or not, may have been used in the interest of avoidance. A similar remark framed by acceptance

and empathy may have elicited a very different response from Felicidad. Such a remark, when motivated out of defensiveness and directed at a vulnerable spot in the spouse, had the effect of neutralizing face-to-face discussions of differences and reinforcing avoidance.

A closely related mechanism to unempathic confrontation was that of gunny sacking in which an individual reached back to the past to avoid the present. When these memories were verbalized to a partner, the effect was similar to the disarming defense illustrated by Felicidad's observations. A 50-year-old woman who had been married 28 years, described the process of her partner reaching into his sack of memories and its effects on her:

> *When he is in an argument, he likes to bring up the past. That I don't like. I feel the past is the past. I think it is unfair. Then you get off of the argument and try to defend the past. If I could change one thing about him, that would be it. When I say "the past" I mean some little thing I might have done or said. We all make mistakes and you have to go on from that and live and grow from it. If it keeps being brought up it is detrimental to growth. I wish he understood that about me.*

Some respondents volunteered how alcohol had affected their lives and the quality of their relationships over the years. Of the 12 respondents who reported drinking problems, 10 were heterosexual men. When it was mentioned, alcohol was depicted as a mode of avoidance. Eugene, 70 years of age and married 22 years, talked of his use of alcohol as an avoidant defense:

I'm a person that...I take it and whitewash it. I apologize for it now but back then I felt like: "The hell with this mess, let me go get a drink."

One of the most common manifestations of avoidant behavior, especially among male respondents, was suppression of thoughts and feelings. People talked of "keeping things in, of not expressing their feelings, of biting their tongues and of clamming up." To a partner, suppression was not as offensive as other avoidant defenses. Suppression, an inner form of flight, was not tinged with overt anger toward the spouse as was disarming and gunny sacking. Kent, a 45-year-old college graduate, married for 23 years, described this mode of avoiding conflict that he contrasted with that of his partner:

I avoid conflict, but I won't allow silence, if you know what I mean...I avoid confrontation...She's more of an outgoing person; see, I hold in. I admit I hold in a lot, whereas she doesn't hold anything in. I mean, you can see the difference.

The vignettes above were taken from interviews with heterosexual respondents. During the early years and extending into the middle years, heterosexual males and to a lesser extent gay males along with lesbians shared a propensity toward avoidance in their CMS's. A majority of gay and lesbian partners utilized avoidant styles early in their relationships, a pattern which increased slightly among gays during the middle years when it declined among lesbians.

Gay men tended to deal with major conflict only when relationships were at risk. As long as relationships were without significant disruptions, most gay men avoided face-to-face discussions of conflict, although there was a shift toward confrontative CMS's in recent years.

Gay men often talked about going along with their partners or making compromises with little discussion of their feelings about basic differences.

Many lesbians used their communication and conversational skills to avoid potentially powerful feelings during the early and middle years of their relationships, and often avoided powerful feelings associated with interpersonal conflict.

There were several dynamics associated with the avoidant behaviors between partners; they included:

1. fear of abandonment;
2. not knowing how to fight;
3. internalized similarity to parents who used avoidant behaviors
4. shame and guilt about aggressive feelings;
5. fear of losing control; and
6. expecting a partner to know how one felt.

A major dynamic among women in same sex relationships, which led to avoidant behavior, was a fear of abandonment by a partner as a consequence of expressing aggression. Several respondents talked of their anticipation of destroying relationships by driving a partner away if they expressed openly how they felt. That irrational yet common fear was evident as Beverly spoke about her partner's fear of being abandoned:

> *Betsy learned somewhere that if you are that angry with somebody, you didn't love them. I kept saying I love you just as much even if I'm furious at you. I don't want to leave you. I think she would be afraid that I was going to leave. I think I had been much more secure in her love than she has been in mine ... she thought I would leave her.*

Another dynamic, which shaped the use of avoidant defenses, was that partners did not know, nor had they ever learned, how to confront conflict. This lack of skill in contending with conflict in a face-to-face way was triggered often by anxiety about abandonment or losing control. Isabelle spoke to the theme of learning how to deal with conflict when she observed that:

> *In the beginning, we argued less and probably communicated less. We still got along fine. We were just quite compatible ... there was lots that we did talk about but in terms of our relationship, we each had a life that we didn't share with each other, and then we started to talk a little bit about it. That was a hard thing for us, because neither of us were used to tolerating the tension and discomfort if there was a disagreement or anything like that. I think that it's gotten better with each segment of time. That's still something that we work on ... we don't thrive on arguments but we reluctantly understand that you have to do that sometimes. You have to disagree. We just have to discuss when there is disagreement.*

The internalized qualities of important role models, particularly parents who were avoidant in dealing with conflict in their relationships was a third element which shaped avoidance. Many respondents talked about how they were similar to a parent who had dealt with feelings, especially angry ones, by avoiding face-to-face discussion with spouses. Although they did not like how their parents handled conflict, they internalized parent's way of dealing with

feelings about conflict. Jennifer spoke of how she and her partner adopted parental ways of dealing with aggression:

> *My anger and Joyce's withdrawal has been what we fight about ... she's pulled back and not talking and I'm bitching and moaning ... We know what the issue is. I had a withdrawn mother and she had an angry mother; so we know what that's about but we just sometimes still do it.*

Intrapersonal problems contributed to avoidant behaviors in some relationships. This was particularly true of partners who were impaired cognitively and emotionally because of phobias, depression and substance abuse. Psychological impairments contributed to cognitive blocks in identifying feelings and expressing them to their partners. The process fed on itself so that the impaired individuals withdrew more and more from communicating with their partners. Their withdrawal created serious obstacles in dealing with conflict. Unless the unimpaired partner broke the cycle of despair, withdrawal and estrangement, patterns of avoidance were not likely to be modified. Beverly described how she broke through Betsy's avoidance by telling her how upset she was:

> *She's had a couple of very bad depressions and just before I was able to get her to therapy we had some really hard times. I was so frustrated with her ... I didn't know what to do ... the only way I could figure out how to get her there was to show her how upset I was. Finally, when I showed her how upset I was, she'd finally say, "OK" and she would trot along to therapy.*

Resentment and anger toward a partner generated guilt, which prevented individuals from being assertive about their anger in a contained and appropriate way, which resulted sometimes in avoidant behaviors. That pattern was true even among respondents who maintained highly adaptive styles of functioning with partners in other aspects of their relationships, and among individuals who functioned well in friendships and work related roles. The more anger was repressed the more it created serious secondary effects and prevented individuals from facing feelings of resentment toward their partners. The need to control angry feelings fed on itself so that individuals became increasingly more fearful of expressing even understandable and appropriate emotions. The underlying dynamics in this circular and dysfunctional process was that individuals became progressively more fearful that their aggressive feelings, if expressed to their partners, would lead to bad consequences. These consequences included a fear that the relationship would end or that the partner would abandon them.

Among lesbians a progressive pattern of using face-to-face modes of dealing with conflict replaced avoidant modes. Lesbian partners were adept in processing their experiences; they invested considerable effort into talking about and understanding what had happened between them. More than other respondents, lesbians were more likely to utilize couples psychotherapy to discuss their difficulties in confronting conflict and in learning new and adaptive modes of relatedness.

By recent years respondents reported less avoidant and more confrontive modes of dealing with conflict, although 54% of heterosexual men continued to use avoidant styles of managing conflict in their relationships during those years. Probably because of their tenacity in struggling to confront relational problems, 71% of lesbians had moved to a confrontive style of

managing conflict in recent years. Table 6 shows the variables that were statistically related to CMS in recent years.

Table 6

Conflict management style of respondents (CMS) in recent years by relational variables (#/row %)

Variables	CMS of respondents in recent years			
	Avoidant	Confrontive	Totals	X^2
Sex				
male	48/.50	48/.50	96/100	
female	31/.26	89./74	120/100	3.43*(1DF)
Sexual orientation				
hemale	39/.54	33/.46	72/100	
hefemale	17/.24	55/7.6	72/100	
lesbian	14/.29	34/.71	48/100	
gay	9/.38	15/.62	24/100	15.97*(3DF)
CMS respondent early years				
avoidant	75/.63	44/.57	119/100	
confrontive	**4**/.04	.93/96	97/100	79.92*(1DF)
CMS respondent middle years				
avoidant	76/.71	31/.29	107/100	
confrontive	3/.03	106/.97	109/100	108.50*(1DF)
Behavior middle years				
instrumental	52/.56	41/.44	93/100	
expressive	27/.22	96/.78	123/100	26.33*(1DF)
Behavior recent years				
instrumental	.49/57	37.43	86/100	
expressive	30/.23	100/.77	130/100	25.64*(1DF)
Communication recent years				
poor/mixed	37/.53	33/.47	70/100	
positive	42/.28	104/.71	146/100	11.86*(1DF)

* P=<.01

Using similar steps already discussed, which included the chi-square analysis reported in table 6, we constructed a theoretical model to examine how CMS was shaped in recent years and

tested the model with logistic regression. The results suggest that the most influential factors that shaped CMS after couples had been together for many years were the sex of respondents (beta=1.06; p=.05); reported major conflict during the early years (beta=1.22; p=.02); and psychological intimacy in recent years (beat=-1.58; p=.01).

In summary, the data suggest that interpersonal conflict was an inherent part of these relationships as it is in any loving relationship and that major conflict occurred rather frequently, especially after couples had been together for several years. There were various sources of major conflict:

the corrosive effect of less severe conflict that was not confronted earlier,

complementary qualities that were significant sources of initial attraction but which sometimes became irritants as the years unfolded,

the stresses associated with finances and

differences in child-rearing.

Women were more communicative than men about the presence of conflict with their partners, a finding that may reflect the differing ways in which men and women experience relationships and their comfort in discussing negative as well as positive aspects of relationships. Compared to men, women, particularly those in same sex relationships, tended to talk about their relationships in multidimensional ways that included the reality of conflictual and non-conflictual aspects. In other words, women compared to men appeared to be more holistic in assessing and exploring their relationships. Lesbians and heterosexual males were similar in their avoidant modes of dealing with conflict early in these relationships. Compared to heterosexual men, lesbians moved in substantive ways to become confrontive in their styles of managing conflict by recent years. Heterosexual males made only modest shifts in that direction over the years.

These findings raise questions about the goals and interventive techniques of working with older couples that have been together for many years. Intervention may need to facilitate mutual understanding of differences between partners rather than focus on changing behavior. Modifications in conflict management behaviors may emerge as a result of increased understanding that leads to mutual respect and acceptance of differences. Indeed, the comments of many lesbian partners who had sought psychotherapy for problems in their relationships support this strengths oriented approach to clinical work with couples.

Psychological and physical intimacy

We present the data on intimacy by focusing first on the physical dimensions of intimacy – namely sexual relations, hugging and touching – and then moving on to explore the psychological dimension. Sexual intimacy was defined as genital sexual relations. Genital sex did not necessarily involve the same level of interpersonal closeness as did psychological intimacy. Sexual relations as well as hugging and touching were often a barometer of psychological intimacy and served to nurture, reassure and to strengthen the quality of relationships. The quality of sexual intimacy included both the frequency of sexual relations and how satisfying sex was for respondents.

The concept of psychological intimacy has been used variously to refer to feelings of closeness and affection between interacting partners, the state of having revealed one's innermost thoughts and feelings to another person, and relatively intense forms of nonverbal engagement (see Mackey, Diemer & O'Brien, 2000). To be intimate in a psychological sense is to be open and honest about levels of the self that usually remain hidden in daily life. The extent

of personal disclosure is proportionate to how vulnerable one allows the self to be with a partner in revealing thoughts and feelings which usually are not apparent in social roles and behaviors of everyday life.

We developed an understanding of psychological intimacy in this research by exploring the relational experiences of respondents, such as: what partners meant to respondents, how their relationships may have been different from other relationships, how respondents felt about being open with their partners, and what words best described the meaning of the partner to a respondent. Of particular importance were questions that elicited responses about the quality of verbal communication, such as: How would you describe the communication between you? When respondents spoke positively about their comfort in carrying on discussions with their partners about a wide range of issues, communication was coded "positive". Otherwise, communication was coded as "poor or mixed."

Positive communication was essential for the development of psychological intimacy. Although positive communication could be present without having a sense that the relationship was psychologically intimate at least in theory, the two factors were correlated substantially (phi=.50). Therefore, psychologically intimate communication captures what we are referring to as psychological intimacy.

Operationally, we defined psychological intimacy as the sense that one could be open and honest in discussing personal thoughts and feelings with one's partner not usually expressed in other relationships. This concept of intimacy is different from actual observations of verbal and nonverbal interactions, which may contribute (or not contribute) over time to an inner sense of being psychologically intimate in relationships. The focus of our research was on inner psychological themes (i.e., schemas of intimacy) as reported by respondents, which were

assumed to be contingent on the quality of specific relational experiences between partners. When responses reflected themes of openness, reciprocity and interdependence between partners, psychological intimacy was coded as "positive."

Apart from its heuristic value in understanding loving relationships, research has shown that psychological intimacy is important to the well-being of individuals, especially when one is able to share thoughts and feelings about stressful events with someone who cares. Openness within a meaningful relationship has been found to neutralize stress, enhance self-esteem, and reduce symptoms of physical and psychological impairments. Conversely, studies of isolated individuals unable to engage in relationships that promote openness and disclosure of inner thoughts and feelings are at risk for developing physical and psychological symptoms.

Table 7 presents the reports of respondents about the quality of their sexual relations over the years. Note: in this table the negative and mixed categories were combined.

Table 7
Quality of sexual relationships over the years by sexual orientation of couples

Years & quality	Couples				
	Heterosexual # & col%	Lesbian # & col%	Gay males # & col%	Totals # & col%	X^2(1DF)
Early years					.20
Negative	36/.25	12/.25	5/.21	53/.24	
Positive	108/.75	36/.75	19/.79	163/.76	
Middle years					9.81*
Negative	50/.35	29/.60	13/.54	10/.42	
Positive	94/.65	19/.40	11/.46	14/.58	
Recent years					4.79
Negative	67/.47	31/.65	13/.54	111/.51	
Positive	77/.53	17/.35	11/.47	105/.49	

* P = <.01

There were no significant differences among the couple groups in the early years when an average of 76% of all respondents remembered their sexual relationships as positive. By the middle years, there was a substantial decline in the positive assessments of all respondents about the sexual dimension of their relationships. Lesbian reported the most dramatic declines followed by gays and heterosexuals. By recent years, the decline in reports about the quality of sexual relations continued although not as dramatically as in the middle years, nor were differences between the groups during recent years statistically significant, as during the middle years.

Most respondents who reported consistently satisfying sexual relations over the years felt that "good sex" was essential to a successful relationship. Karen, a 51-year-old mother of four children talked to that theme:

> *I think you need to have good sex to have a good marriage. No doubt about it. I think that when you've had a crummy, stinking day, that if you can have good sex, or even not sex, but to be able to snuggle up in bed, I think it is important. I can't imagine a couple that could have a marriage without good sex.*

A 54-year-old heterosexual male, married for 29 years spoke in similar way:

> *This has been excellent from the very beginning...Very satisfactory sex life...we are just fortunate that it worked out that way. It won't work out unless you work at it and have consideration.*

His fifty-two-year-old wife agreed with him:

It has been wonderful, gets better every year.

Their observations were typical of those respondents whose sexual relationships started and remained on a relatively satisfying level from early to recent years.

For other respondents, who experienced sexual difficulties in the early years of their relationships, openness to discussion and willingness to learn about one's self and one's partner led to improved sexual relations and satisfaction. This was reflected in what Douglas, a 63-year-old African American male, had to say about sexual relations:

When I was younger it was just bang, bang and that was the end of it. Now, we enjoy sex...it goes along with marriage, and it helps a marriage. And the things we did, we talk about it many times and that really helped me a lot. It helped her too...I really think it helped our sex life.

His wife, Della, of 37 years agreed with him:

I'd say that our sex life improved, probably better now since we're older.

Couples whose unsatisfying sexual relations persisted beyond the early years accommodated to one another in several ways. Unlike partners who were able to work at mutually agreeable solutions, such as Douglas and Della, these respondents reported ongoing

dis-satisfaction with sexual relations. Not infrequently, discussion about the lack of sexual satisfaction and differences in sexual needs was avoided. Among some couples, avoidance was also symptomatic of how they dealt with interpersonal conflict in other dimensions of their relationships. That is, conflict with sexual relations was a manifestation of negative feelings about unmet emotional needs in the overall relationship. The observations of Ivan, a 48-year-old man illustrated how partners may have acted out interpersonal conflicts by withholding sex:

> *There were times when we certainly punished each other by withholding sex. I mean if you're not talking, you're certainly not going to fool around. There were times when we just did not have sex, not for protracted periods of time, but certainly long enough that it was obvious that something was wrong. And, again, that's been cyclical.*

A prominent theme among respondents was the challenge in negotiating different sexual needs between partners. A gay male couple, Daniel and Dwight, explored that challenge. Daniel talked about their relationship:

> *Dwight has always been what I consider more sexual than I have ... between the two of us, he's more sexual and I tend to be less sexual. So there's a constant struggle to make each person get what they need but that doesn't make it a threat to the relationship ... he's not going to leave me. We've gone beyond that phase ... it's an issue that we need to work on, an important issue, but it's not going to separate us ... initially, it was very physical ... the love certainly developed after that. Now we're in a phase where again we have some sexual issues. They're difficult to deal with, because Dwight is a romantic at heart, and*

he wants to believe that it's always going to be like the day we met, and that we're going to really want each other that lustfully and we're going to be that attracted to each other. For me it's not that way ... It's not a real important part of my relationship. I like sex but with age you perform less adequately, or you have a bad week, or you're stressed from work, or whatever it is ... he is more concerned about the fact that we are progressively having less sex than I am.

The observations of Daniel were typical of those that we heard from many respondents. An important aspect of sexual intimacy was in the differing needs of partners. More than any other potential problem in the sexual dimension of their lives together was the differences in sexual needs, which was frequently the focus of discussions from the beginning of relationships through recent years.

Another theme identified frequently by respondents was the inter-relationship of sexual and psychological intimacy. As genital sex became less frequent and satisfying in recent years, the quality of the relationships became increasingly important. Daniel commented on that trend when he observed:

At this point in my life, I feel that my love for him and my desire to be with him is much more important ... we're going through a normal thing in life where it's nicer to cuddle together at night than to do it ... For him it's an important thing that my desires for him physically have lessened ... I don't see it as a threat to the marriage; I don't see my leaving him and having extramarital affairs. I don't have a desire for that ... it's hard because I understand what he's saying; it's important to show your love and feelings for

people, but on the other hand if you're feeling forced into a situation then it's not going to be healthy or positive.

Differences, such as those identified by Daniel and Dwight, became focal issues between partners as they struggled to adapt to individual differences in sexual drives and needs. Another challenge for Daniel (and others) was in articulating his love for his partner. He felt that he had always experienced difficulty in expressing his love with words. As Daniel's interest in sexual relations waned, Dwight began to question the love that his partner had for him, particularly since sexual relations had been a means through which Daniel communicated his love.

From Dwight's perspective, he remembered sexual relations during the early years as "spectacular" followed by declining frequency and satisfaction during the middle years. In recent years, Dwight said that:

Sex has become more work ... neither one of us are as sexual towards each other. But I think it's an important part of a relationship and we have to work on it ... compared to the beginning when sex was paramount ... now, things have, as we've gotten older, flipped around a little bit, where although I still absolutely believe you can't ignore sex; it has to be an important part of the relationship but it is definitely not as important as it was.

Many respondents, regardless of their sexual orientations, made observations similar to those of Dwight about aging and sexual relations. They wondered, as he did, if "people become less sexual as they became older." For couples that were parents, the responsibilities of child-rearing, especially for women, had an important effect on the quality of sexual relations. Thirty-

five percent of parents reported diminishing frequency and satisfaction with sex during the child-rearing years. During the middle years, twice as many women as men remembered declining frequency and satisfaction with sexual relations.

Doreen, a 63-year-old woman with five children recalled:

> *Part of the problem was physical energy. I needed a lot of sleep...as I was busy with the kids, made me tired, want to go to sleep. He could not understand that, and we basically drifted apart on any sexual relations. In the beginning, it was a very passionate relationship. Then, it became a question of energy.*

A 67-year-old African American woman, Beth, married for 50 years with four children, summed up the feelings of women who had to contend with the demands of children and their partners:

> *There are children and you got to choose. It's not that you love your husband less and that the husband loves the wife less...He loves the wife more, but he doesn't seem to be getting all that he wants of the wife because the attention has gone to the child. Because you got to take care of that kid if you're going to be any kind of a mother. So there's got to be time sharing, and that can be hard for the man.*

Our findings are similar to those of others who have studied sexuality between partners during the child-rearing or, in our study, the middle years. During recent years, the decline in frequency and satisfaction with sexual relations continued when about ½ of heterosexual and gay

male partners and 2/3 of lesbians responded negatively to inquiries about the quality of their sexual relations.

The findings about sexual relations over the years was not congruent with how respondents felt about the importance of sexual relations to them. During the early and middle years, over 88% of all respondents said that sexual relations were important to very important in their relationships. The cognitive distinction between the quality of sexual relations and their importance was most apparent in the data on lesbian relationships. Only in recent years did positive responses decline and even then 92% of lesbians reported that sexual relations were important to very important. Paradoxically, though the frequency and satisfaction with sexual relations declined from early to recent years, the assessments of the importance of sexual relations remained highly positive and quite consistent.

The other aspect of physical intimacy was "touching" or physical affection. On that aspect, there were significant differences among the three groups, particularly between heterosexual and same sex respondents. Over the years, the data suggest that partners in same sex relationships were more physically affectionate than were heterosexual partners. For heterosexual couples, physical affection hovered around 50% from early to recent years. For same sex couples, physical affection declined during the middle years but rose again in recent years. The results are shown in Table 8. The variable of physical affection focused on the observations of respondents about the presence to absence of touching, hugging etc. in their relationships. There were only slight differences between partners in their reports. The congruence between partners in their individual observations about this dimension of their relationships was similar to that for relational conflict, which also asked respondents to assess a common reality.

Table 8
Physical affection between partners over of the years by sexual orientation of couples

Years & quality	Couples				
	Heterosexual # / col%	Lesbian # / col%	Gay males # / col%	Totals # / col%	X^2(1DF)
Early years					9.81*
Negative	72/.50	14/.29	6/.25	92/.43	
Positive	72/.50	34/.71	18/.75	124/.57	
Middle years					4.93
Negative	78/.54	20.42	8/.33	106/.49	
Positive	66/.46	28/.58	16/.67	110/.51	
Recent years					12.93*
Negative	70/.49	10/.21	7/.29	87/.40	
Positive	74/.51	38.79	17/.71	129/.60	

* P = <..001

Differences were found within and between couple groups. For example, physically expressing affection was more characteristic of Mexican Americans than for other heterosexual couples, a statistically significant difference, which became pronounced as couples, grew older. That finding was compatible with other studies that explored how highly valued physical affection is in Mexican American culture (see Mackey & O'Brien, 1995 & 1998)).

Dora who had been married for 26 years expressed the theme of physically demonstrating affection between Mexican American spouses:

> *We're not ashamed of our love. Public displays of affection, we're not afraid to touch each other. We're always touching: at the movies, church, when we're laying down in*

bed, we're always touching each other. We hold hands when we walk together. A lot of people can't believe we've been married so long

Other respondents talked about how their cultural backgrounds may have shaped their inhibitations about expressing affection in a physical way. A 48-year-old Irish Catholic shared his struggles with touching:

I had to learn to touch. We particularly did not touch in public. I mean...it's that Irish Catholic upbringing that if you were out you certainly did not display any emotional affection. It wasn't acceptable.

These vignettes suggest that expressing affection physically was a characteristic that individuals brought with them into relationships, which was acquired through identification with role models and internalization of cultural mores (see Mackey, 1985). If respondents came from families in which important figures expressed their affection for others through hugging and touching, individuals were likely to use similar means to express their feelings to their partners. For example, Jeffery, after saying that physical intimacy was "a big part of our life," talked of his father as a "hugger, so hugging was important to me." This gay man went on to describe how his father hugged everybody and remembered him as "a very warm, loving man ... I've always wanted to be like my father." Expressing affection through hugging and touching was similar to other traits which had become part of one's self. Not uncommonly, individuals who were not as demonstrative in expressing their affections were attracted to individuals like Jeffery, which was a manifestation of the centrality of complementarity in these relationships.

Physical intimacy is a visible and reassuring means of expressing basic human needs for meaningful connection with another human being whom one loves. Alice talked of this exigency when she observed that bodily contact was "a human need to be near someone, to be touching." Commenting on the evolution of the relationship with her partner, she made the analogy to husbands and wives in heterosexual relationships who "end up more like a brother and a sister ... I think in some ways that we've melded more into a sensual relationship; sexual more in the beginning and now sensual."

Partners adapted to the absence of physical touching and hugging in their relationships in a number of ways. Fidelity to the relationship, acceptance of a partner despite differences and kindness were often mentioned as human qualities that compensated for lack of physical affection. These qualities were reported as balances to deficits in expressing affection verbally and through hugging and touching..

As couples grew older, psychological intimacy became increasingly meaningful in these relationships. Respondents talked of experiencing psychological intimacy when they were able to share their inner thoughts and feelings that were accepted, if not understood, by the partner. Such experiences resulted in a sense of genuine connectedness and mutuality and might occur during sexual relations, as part of everyday interactions or while participating together in a social or cultural event. A couple in their 50's reflected on what intimacy meant to them. The wife described her husband as:

> *My best friend, best lover. The person I can come home to when something bad happens to me. Unfortunately, we have not had parents for many years. He is my parent as well as my friend. He is the person who most cares what is happening to me. The same as in*

the past. There is not a morning where he does not say, "Oh, you look nice today." He says it with such sincerity that I know he means it.

Her husband expressed the meaning of intimacy to him:

I don't like to have my own space. You might as well be by yourself... the important thing is to like being with the other person. I would be perfectly satisfied to sit in a room with her all day long. I just like her to be next to me, near me. If you don't have that feeling, I think there is a piece that is missing. I think we are our own people, but we do it together. You just have to respect the other person...trust their decisions and beliefs and want to be with them.

Psychological intimacy changed as relationships evolved over the years. From the early through the middle years reports of psychological intimacy were relatively stable for heterosexual and gay male respondents before taking a significant leap in a positive direction during recent years. The pattern over the years for lesbian couples was different. Their reports of psychological intimacy suggested a U-shaped pattern with reports of psychological intimacy being significantly higher in the early years among lesbians than for heterosexuals and gay males. The dip in psychological intimacy during the middle years was pronounced for lesbians. By the recent years, lesbians reported higher levels of being psychologically intimate with their partners than did the other two groups.

Table 9 presents the data for psychological intimacy:

Table 9
Psychological intimacy over the years by sexual orientation of couples

Years & quality	Couples				
	Heterosexual # & col%	Lesbian # & col%	Gay males # & col%	Totals # & col%	X^2(1DF)
Early years					6.66*
No/mixed	66/.46	13/.27	13/.54	92/.43	
Positive	78/.54	35/.73	11/.46	124/.57	
Middle years					.45
No/mixed	69/.48	22/.46	13/.54	104/.48	
Positive	75/.52	26/.54	11/.46	112/.52	
Recent years					6.04*
No/mixed	40/.28	5/.10	6/.25	111/.5	
Positive	104/.72	43/.90	18/.75	105/.49	

* P = <.05

These patterns mirrored other developments in relationships, especially the increase in major conflict between lesbian partners during the middle years. Psychological intimacy was a casualty of serious interpersonal difficulties that resulted in disaffection and estrangement between partners. Until partners were able to find the means for resolving major conflict, which involved dealing openly with their feelings about their difficulties, psychological intimacy was compromised and apparently eluded them.

The differing relational orientations of men and women may have shaped patterns of psychological intimacy. To experience intimacy, partners needed to focus their discussions on their relationships; that is, to process and to reflect on their experiences together. A renewed sense of interpersonal connection, mutuality and acceptance was one outcome of the process of

reflecting on relational matters. Although most respondents described these kinds of experiences with their partners, lesbians were oriented more to relational processing than were gay men and heterosexuals.

Couple therapy was an important source of support to the relationships of many lesbian couples, 2/3 of whom decided to seek professional help for their relational difficulties. The following lesbian couple discussed what led them to seek psychotherapy. Isabelle remembered the early years of their relationship as a time when they "argued less and probably communicated less"... yet ..."we got along fine," which she attributed to compatibility in their lifestyles. Avoidance of conflict, associated with unspoken differences between them, led to feelings of estrangement and unhappiness with the relationship. Ingrid described how she experienced life with Isabelle and how therapy enabled them to modify ingrained patterns of avoidance that compromised psychological intimacy:

> *In retrospect, we probably didn't communicate very well ... not knowing what to do with anger ... I came from a family that didn't communicate that much and ... Isabelle came from a very verbal family. I don't think I necessarily recognized that until she pointed it out. I was used to holding that stuff in ... When we went to couples therapy, that's really the first time I think that we had looked at how we were communicating or not, and learned some tools about how to talk about things, particularly difficult things ... if we get angry at each other about something, she'll tend to be very verbal about it and I'll tend to shut up ... I just shut up. So that's a dynamic that neither of us is really happy with. But we definitely are aware of it and try to address it when it's happening.*

Despite her assertiveness in the relationship, Isabelle was conflicted about coming out socially, which she thought contributed to the tensions in the relationship. Her partner's silence about their relational difficulties seemed to be a reminder of her public silence about her sexual identity. Isabelle commented on the connection between these two aspects of her life:

> *Couples counseling was the start to help us feel more OK. It was part of our coming out process and to be more self accepting ... When you can do that, when that moves along, it's easy to talk. It was helping us ... to be able to talk about what was going on. We didn't make great strides but it really did start the whole thing ... We were coming out to a lot more people.*

Each partner was troubled by somewhat differing concerns that had negative effects on their relationship, particularly the quality of psychological intimacy between them. As they began to focus in the therapy on their differences, Isabelle talked of the struggle to modify behaviors. Their persistence in that difficult process resulted in better feelings about themselves and their relationship.

The theme of finding ways of communicating about differences and negotiating modifications in behaviors was identified as respondents talked about the value of therapy to their relationships. As with Isabelle and Ingrid, couples therapy was viewed as a process, which supported modifications in behaviors that had prevented partners from reaching higher adaptive plateaus in their personal and relational development. Psychotherapy served as a catalyst to

initiate the process of behavioral modification, and, of equal importance, the development of psychological intimacy.

Despite some studies that suggest that lesbian relationships are characterized by interpersonal fusion – i.e. the blurring of boundaries and the resulting merger of two separate selves in a relationship - we found little evidence for such a hypothesis in our data. Rather, lesbian respondents talked of differentiation between them and their partners within a loving relationship. They valued separateness as significantly as they valued connectedness with partners. Isabelle and Ingrid spoke about those themes in their relationship. Initially, Isabelle commented on the relationship between physical affection and psychological intimacy:

> *Physical affection has been fairly consistent across the time and probably has gotten more so because we've been able to be more emotionally intimate with each other ... we've opened up and communication has increased.*

Isabelle then discussed the centrality of psychological intimacy in their relationship and her thoughts about the nature of fusion and differentiation:

> *I don't get it when people say: "Oh, I could never talk about such and such with my partner because that would upset them, or I couldn't do this because they'd get so mad." I never had that. I feel like I can be who I am. Now, she doesn't always like everything about that. But I can still be that way, and I don't have to pretend. That's never been something that we've had to do. I would be horrified if that had to be. I just can't*

imagine what that's like ... I don't see us as fused. It's important to me not to be. I don't like it. I don't think it's healthy. It's one of those things where people can stay in relationships for years and years and years, from 15 to 75 years, and that's how they do it, and they lose their individuality. I don't want to be in a relationship like that. It's important to me, for us, to be individuals as well.

During recent years, Isabelle described what the relationship meant to her:

She's my best friend. Probably that's always been, but that means something different to me now. There's a peacefulness about that. We spend a lot of time together ... if we're not together, I'm also happy ... She's with me wherever I am. I can be whoever I am. I can say stuff to her that I would never say to anyone else. There are parts of myself that I don't particularly like, and I don't really share with other people, but it's OK to share with her. She'll take them in. She'll understand where it's coming from.

Ingrid spoke to her understanding of the interplay of connectedness and differentiation and how their interpersonal difficulties in the past made the quality of the connection even more meaningful in recent years:

Generally, we've gotten along very well. We like to be with each other. At the same time we've always had sort of different friends but in the later part of our relationship we do have more mutual friends ... Although we like a lot of the same things, our interests are different ... I've appreciated the fact that she has been the one who will raise an issue or

problem for the purpose of resolution, or improvement, and not just because she's angry or something. She seems to be willing to take that initiative. I didn't grow up in that kind of setting, so I think that's one reason this has worked. I think we both each really like the other one a lot ... There was a bond early on, in part because it was a different kind of relationship ... During the negative part, we were isolated for a long time, but that experience also bonded us ... I can be much more vulnerable ... I look to Isabelle for help with it which wasn't something I knew how to do before.

Psychological intimacy between Isabelle and Ingrid represented how this quality developed in other relationships, as well. Lesbian couples recalled high levels of intimacy early in relationships only to have it decline during difficult times and then to return to even higher levels during recent years. A delicate balance between the themes of connectedness and separateness was evident as respondents explored that dimension in their relationships from early to recent years. The factors that had a significant effect on the development of psychological intimacy during recent years is shown in Table 10:

Table 10

Psychological intimacy during recent years by relational variables

Relational Variables	Psychological Intimacy			X^2
	Negative #/col%	Positive #/col%	Totals #/col%	
Communication				54.02*
positive	38/.75	32/.19	70/.32	
	13/.25	133/.81	146/.68	
Conflict				20.05*
minimal	35/.69	153/.93	188/.87	
major	16/.31	12/.07	28/.13	
Conflict management style of partner				15.63*
avoidant	30/.60	47/.28	77/.36	
confrontive	21/.40	118/.72	139/.64	
Decision-making				14.98*
seperate	14/.27	12/.07	26/.12	
mutual	37/.73	153/.93	190/.88	
Equity				28.88*
no	21/.41	15/.09	36/.17	
yes	30/.59	150/.91	180/.83	
Sexual relationship				16.81*
negative	39/.76	72/.44	111/.51	
positive	12/.24	93/.56	105/.49	
Importance of sex				11.15*
not important	20/.39	28/.17	48/.22	
important	31/.61	137/.83	168/.78	
Physical Affection				35.52*
no/mixed	38/.75	49/.30	87/.40	
yes	13/.25	116/.70	129/.60	

***Note:** p=<.001 for crosstabulations of each relational variable with psychological intimacy.

The results of the chi-square analysis along with an assessment from the professional literature of the importance of various factors to psychological intimacy were the basis for constructing two theoretical models that were tested with logistic regression. (Note: We have already described that procedure, so the details will not be repeated here). As was already

discussed, a substantial correlation was found between psychological intimacy and the quality of communication (phi=.50), so communication was not included as an independent variable in the theoretical model tested with logistic regression. Low to negligible correlations were found between psychological intimacy and the independent variables of gender and sexual orientation. These variables were included in the two theoretical models: the first model contained the sexual orientation of couples along with the other relational variables; in the second model, gender of participants was substituted for sexual orientation. (Note: As has been noted, sex and sexual orientation could not be accommodated in the same model because of redundancy,).

Included in the first model was the sexual orientation of couples. The variables in the model that were not related significantly to psychological intimacy were decision-making, the quality of sexual relations and the importance of sexual relations. Factors that were predictive of psychological intimacy during recent years were physical affection between partners (B=1.63, p=.01), the seriousness of conflict between partners (B=-2.24, p=.01), the conflict management styles of their partners as reported by respondents (B1.16, p=.01) and the fairness or equity of relationships (B=1.29, p=.01). On the factor of the sexual orientation of couples, lesbian couples differed from both heterosexual couples (B=1.47, p=.05) and gay male couples (1.96, p=.03). Compared to the gay males and heterosexuals, lesbians were more likely to report that their relationships were psychologically intimate in recent years: 90% of lesbian, 75% of gay male and 72% of heterosexual participants reported that their relationships were psychologically intimate during those years ($X2 = 6.04$ (2df) p=.05).

To clarify whether the differences between lesbians and the other two groups was a matter of sexual orientation or gender, a second model was constructed in which gender was substituted for sexual orientation and tested with logistic regression. That analysis suggests that

factors, which contributed to understanding psychological intimacy in the first regression analysis, continued to have a similar effect in this modified model. The gender of participants had a moderate effect in contributing to reported psychological intimacy in recent years (B=.81, p=<.08).

The dynamic interplay of sexual and psychological intimacy was evident as we explored how partners in these relationships adapted to one another over the years. As satisfaction with and frequency of sexual relations declined from early to recent years, psychological intimacy progressed except during the middle years when respondents reported a decline in this dimension of their relationships. In recent years, the quality of psychological intimacy was related significantly to a the following variables:

if partners were physically affectionate,

if relational conflict was contained,

if the partners of respondents were confrontive rather than avoidant in dealing with conflict, and

if respondents felt that their relationships were fair despite differences.

The interplay of gender and sexual orientation in understanding this dimension of these relationships emerged as we analyzed the data. The responses of many women tended to reflect themes of openness and mutuality along with differentiation in the psychologically intimate connection with their partners. A lesbian respondent spoke of those elements in her relationship:

> *What has been good is the ongoing caring and respect and the sense that there is somebody there who really cares, who has your best interest, who loves you, who knows you better than anybody, and still likes you, and just that knowing, that familiarity, the*

depth of that knowing, the depth of that connection which is so incredibly meaningful. There is something spiritual after awhile. It has a life of its own. This is what is really so comfortable.

Variations by gender may have reflected how individuals perceived and valued different elements of psychological intimacy within themselves and in their partners. The following observations of a heterosexual male illustrated those variations; he viewed his wife as:

very unselfish, and she would sacrifice so that I could go out and do my thing. One thing that we have always done, always, is talk constantly, to each other. I don't know what we talk about, and I don't know what we've had to talk about all these years, but we still communicate with each other ... We've had fights...when she gets mad at me, I stop talking to her. And then she feels very bad, and this may last a day or two, and then it passes and everything is fine again ... She's more open than I am. I keep a lot inside and I don't let it out, and that's probably not good. But, that's the way I am.

Many heterosexual males viewed observable qualities in their wives, such as support and their style of managing conflict, as important in developing and maintaining a sense of psychological intimacy in their marriages. Females, on the other hand, often commented on the observable and then went on to identify their understanding of the underlying dynamics that shaped behavior. More than men, women talked about the interplay of relational dynamics. Referring to her spouse, a woman observed that:

I filled certain needs in him, and I know he filled certain needs in me ... he didn't have very high self-esteem. I may have boosted his confidence a lot ... He tells me I go ballistic over stupid things, and he outwardly is very calming ... I don't always agree with him, and he does not always agree with me ... but we're good friends through it all, and I think that if you have a good friend, you should be able to disagree, or agree, or get angry or be happy or any number of emotions, if that's your friend, that's your friend ... I don't even know how to describe it, you just have that closeness ... there has to be enough there so that when all these little outside things are finally gone, it's not: "Who are you? I don't know you, and we don't have anything." You have to really work at keeping that level of a relationship active ... not just a physical spark, but just the whole picture.

The quotes (above) from suggest that themes of connectedness and separateness were important dynamics in understanding the meaning of psychological intimacy to respondents. If women value attachment in relationships in different ways from men, then the data may suggest a mutually reinforcing process toward strengthening connectedness in lesbian relationships, while the value that males place on separateness in relationships may temper the quality of attachment that develops over the years and result in different forms of psychological intimacy in heterosexual and gay male relationships.

Psychological intimacy between lesbian partners also had a different relational history from that of heterosexual and gay male partners. From the early years to recent years, our data suggest a progressive shift toward psychological intimacy between lesbian partners, despite its decline during the middle years. Lesbians were as avoidant of face-to-face discussions of

conflict as heterosexual and gay males during the early years and into the middle years of their relationships. For lesbians, avoidance appeared to be the consequence of fearing abandonment by their partners if they openly confronted differences. Only as lesbian couples became increasingly disenchanted with their relationships did modification in conflict management styles occur. Usually, one partner took the risk of expressing her unhappiness. As a result, many lesbian couples entered therapy. Being involved in treatment was viewed by lesbian respondents as an invaluable resource and source of support in the development of psychologically intimate communication between partners.

In summary, the data on intimacy suggest that factors within relationships, themselves, had a more powerful effect in shaping the meaning of psychological intimacy than did social and demographic factors. Our findings suggest that a sense of psychological intimacy was nurtured:

when interpersonal conflict was kept to minimal levels,

when one's partner dealt with conflict in the relationship by initiating face to face discussion of differences,

when one had a feeling that the relationship was fair, and

when there were expressions of affection between partners through touching and hugging.

For many couples, these factors nurtured a sense of psychological intimacy that contributed to relational stability.

The data offer hypotheses for exploration and testing in future research on lasting relationships. In addition to the factors that had a shaping effect on psychological intimacy in recent years, there were differences between lesbians and others. Differences based on gender and sexual orientations suggest a subtle interacting dynamic of these factors on psychological

intimacy. We suggest that a mutually reinforcing dynamic between two women who are committed to personal and relational development may explain the subtle yet important differences between lesbians other respondents on this important variable.

Families and friends

We explored the significance of the extended families of respondents to their relationships from several differing perspectives. First, similarities to dissimilarities in the relationships of respondents to the relationships of their parents is explored. Second, the reactions of families, notably the parents of respondents, to the choice of a partner with whom one was making a loving commitment is discussed. For heterosexuals this meant marriage and for homosexuals, a major commitment with their partners (Note: The data was collected before changes in state laws that recognized marriage between same sex partners). That distinction was purely a legal one since the quality of love, as reflected in the data, was similar regardless of the sexual orientations of respondents and the legal status of their relationships. A third aspect of exploration is focused on the influence that extended families had on the relationships of respondents. The fourth area of exploration is focused on the significance of friendships since friends emerged throughout the interviews with same sex respondents as an important source of social support, often seeming to serve the functions that extended families did for heterosexual couples.

How did respondents view their relationships vis-a-vis the relationships of their parents (Note: The parents of all respondents were in heterosexual marriages). In Table 11 the tabulated responses to questions that focused on respondent reports of similarities to

dissimilarities of their relationships to those of their parents are shown. That table focuses only on the recent years since responses were quite consistent over the years, varying hardly at all from early, through middle to recent years.

Table 11
Reported similarity to dissimilarity to relationships of parents

Similar to dissimilar	Couples			
	Heterosexual #/col%	Lesbian #/col%	Gaymales #/col%	Totals #/col%
Dissimilar	63/.44	11/.23	9/.33	83/.38
Similar	80/.56	37/.77	16/.67	133.62
Totals	144/.67	48/22	24/.11	216/.100

$X^2 = 7.07$ (DF2), p=.03

The category of "similar" needs some clarification since it also included mixed responses. When respondents assessed their relationships as similar to their parents' it was not unusual for them to mention some aspects that were not similar. Although the similar category included mixed responses, the predominant responses fell toward the similar end of a similar-dissimilar continuum. The category of dissimilar included responses in which there were few, if any, similarities mentioned. Clearly, those respondents viewed themselves and their relationships as different from their parents' relationships, which is illustrated in the vignette below from the interview with Melinda. In listening to respondent talk about this aspect of their lives, an inter-relationship became evident between their views of interpersonal and personal

similarities to dissimilarities with their parents. It appeared to be very difficult, if not impossible, for respondents to discuss their observations of relational similarities to dissimilarities without also talking about personal qualities in parents that they perceived or did not perceive in themselves and in their partners. Usually, a respondent was specific and selective about qualities and characteristics in parents that had been incorporated or not incorporated into their own sense of self and/or that of their partners (Mackey, 2009).

Table 11 suggests that a majority of respondents (62%) tended to view themselves and/or their relationships as similar to the relationships of their parents. An African-American couple, Mark and Melinda, discuss how similar to dissimilar their parents' marriages were to their own relationship. To the interviewer's question that asked what Mark may have learned about marriage by watching his parents, Mark said:

> *I think it's more or less from my mother. I guess from both of them. But my father was in the same situation I was in in terms of raising us because he worked. He got up in the morning and he went to work, and we would get up in the morning with him and have a cup of coffee and he'd see us off and take off to work. And I appreciated the kinds of things he did for my mother, in that she was the person who ran the house, and he didn't try and second guess … He would come home and do things; there were certain things he did around the house. He would not go in the kitchen and wash dishes, but he would do all other kinds of things like the painting and repairs and so forth. And that was a good thing for me because I used to spend most of my time with him when he was working around the house.*

As the exploration unfolded, Mark focused on qualities in his parent's marriage, which were both similar to yet different from his relationship with Melinda:

> *I think the respect for each other is there. I think the self-sufficiency, hard work in terms of trying to make it work and feeling like that was important to do. I think there was a quality about it in terms of how you handle things. I think they had the work divided differently than the way Melinda and I do, but I think there was sort of an expectation of an equal sharing of it. I cook and wash the dishes. My father wouldn't do that. But I think overall there was sharing in the sense that they had to work together.*

Later, Mark talked about difference between his marriage and that of his parents:

> *The differences … I think just the times. Things are different. The expectation that I have now that Melinda will be much more (flexible). If we want to go someplace, we jump in the car and go. Unlike my father, he would make arrangements and things, so that was somewhat more dependent on my mother's part. But I think the differences were in that kind of vein. The times make the difference I think.*

The response of Melinda was quite different from that of Mark as she talked about her parent's marriage:

> *Not a lot of similarities, no. The things I learned were very traditional. For Instance, my father was very strong in his belief that he was the provider and providing for his family*

and his children was his primary role in his life. And he was very strong in that. My mother never worked during the marriage. So if I looked at that, I would see her as a 100% full time homemaker. And I'm not even sure she was in sympathy with women who worked at that point. She probably thought they belonged at home. And I know my father thought that. I guess I got a strong sense of the union. But I can't say I learned very much about marriage because I ended up doing a lot of learning on my own.

The exploration with Melinda continued:

They got along well. They were not demonstrative people. I never saw a lot of touching and hugging. My father didn't believe too much in kisses. He would say: "Kissing is not the only thing." But they were devoted to each other … Victorian is too strict to say, but kind of formal. They provided everything they thought they should provide for children … devoted to the family, but not demonstrative at all. In fact, every one of us children turned out to be much warmer and more demonstrative than my parents … My mother didn't seem to be upset about the fact that she didn't have more say about things. It was just assumed that it was the father's or the husband's role to make certain decisions about the house or about the financial affairs or that kind of thing. I think it wasn't too fair in the bringing up of the children. I don't think he dabbled in that very much.

She then discussed how she and her spouse were different from her parents:

I don't see similarities between my marriage and theirs … but I see a similarity between my husband and my father … that business about being dogmatic, that I see. But other than that, not many (similarities). We're a lot more demonstrative than they were. And that's not just between ourselves. When our son is here or even if we're with friends. You would never find that with my parents. Even though there were times when I had...Well, I have more say about decisions than my mother had. And as I said, she didn't seek a lot of say. So I'm not sure she felt that it was unfair in that she was missing out on a role that she should be playing. But I have a lot more say. And we're a lot more adventurous. My parents were conservative. I'm sure there are probably some similarities, but those are some of the things I think are different.

The observations of this couple illustrated the complexity in understanding the influence that the marriages of parents may have had or not had on the relationships of respondents. Although parents may have served as models for how respondents negotiated their own marital roles, the process of identifying with and incorporating personal characteristics, behaviors and values into their sense of self was usually highly selective. No respondents viewed their relationships as replications of their parents' relationships. For example, Melinda was quite clear in saying that she saw "not a lot" of similarities. She mentioned specifically how different her marriage was from that of her parents, especially in terms of gender roles and expressions of affection. Mark's observations were quite different from those of his wife. He identified with his father's values of commitment to his family and providing for them along with the respect that his father showed toward his wife. At the same time, he talked about specific differences

with his father in their gender roles. Interestingly, Melisa viewed Mark and her father as similar in one important respect although Mark did not mention that similarity in his interview.

One needs to think in terms of selectivity to appreciate the dynamic relationship in how qualities and characteristics in parents as potential role model were incorporated or not incorporated into the sense of self of respondents. In terms of selectivity, respondents, such as Melinda and Mark, illustrated a rather mature level of identification and internalization processes. Parental qualities and characteristics, such as loyalty and respect, that were valued positively were the objects of identification and became internalized as parts of the self (Mackey, 1985 and 2009). Other qualities, such as traditional gender roles, were not valued so positively and did not become parts of the self.

Along with personal and relational similarities and dissimilarities, to parents both Melinda and Mark identified the importance of changing cultural mores, which had a significant effect in shaping their identifications and internalizations. That theme was prominent in the data as we examined the reports of respondents about factors that had an influence in defining their roles in their relationships. The data from this research underscored the importance of social context, especially changing cultural values, in understanding factors that shaped these relationships.

Although parents were the most commonly reported role models for all respondents, gay men and lesbians compared to heterosexuals were more likely to identify one parent as their role models. Seventy-seven percent of lesbians, 67 percent of gays and 56 percent of heterosexuals reported that their role behaviors were similar to at least one parent. Frequently mentioned similarities were: a caring attitude toward one's partner, respect of a parent for a spouse, love,

support, and commitment to the relationship, themes that were evident in the interview with Mark.

Lesbians were more likely to report similarities than were heterosexuals and gay men. In addition to reflecting the reality that lesbian respondents were actually more similar to their parents than were gay men and heterosexuals, we wondered if that finding may also have been associated with the relational orientation of women compared to that of men. In other words, were women more likely than men to be aware of, sensitive to and accepting of potential similarities between their relationships and those of their parents? Lesbian responses may have indicated an orientation to reflecting upon and processing relational experiences compared to other respondents. Of course, generalities in this important dimension of human experiences are dangerous. Not all women are alike nor are all men in their relational orientations and interpersonal behaviors. Yet, the data showed differences by gender in several dimensions of these relationships. We also wondered about the mutually reinforcing effect that women may have on each other in same sex relationships. The data suggest that there was more mutuality for the processing of relational experiences between lesbian partners compared to heterosexual and gay male partners.

It is also important to identify another factor that may have been significant in understanding the differences between groups on the variable of similarity to dissimilarity with parental marriages. The lower percent of heterosexual respondents who identified with at least one parent as a role model may have been related to the ages and "generation gap" between them. That is, heterosexuals were more likely to have parents who were perceived as different from them in educational levels, socio-economic status and life styles. It was not unusual for heterosexuals to have come from families in which their parents were first generation citizens

who were poor and struggling to assimilate into the mainstream. Among homosexual respondents, there appeared to be higher levels of similarity in social, economic and educational characteristics between them and their parents, which may have facilitated the process of identification and internalization.

Although some individuals may think that it is difficult for gays and lesbians to identify with figures, including parents, who have a heterosexual orientation, the sexual orientation of parents of these respondents was not a significant factor in identifying with them as relational role models. The sex and sexual orientation of parents were less important than their human qualities with which respondents identified and wished to emulate in their relationships. The sex of an object of identification was rarely, if ever, mentioned as respondents talked of identifying selectively with qualities, characteristic and values that were perceived as admirable in their parents.

Homosexual respondents who did not report similarities with one or both parents reported frequently that the relationships with their partners were more self disclosing, less conflictual, less abusive and more equitable than the marriages of their parents. As a consequence, they tended not to identify with parents as role models and looked elsewhere for figures of identification on which to develop their relationships.

Some gays and lesbians identified with other heterosexual couples as models for their relationships. These identifications were with specific qualities, such as kindness and commitment to a spouse, which partners admired and wished to adopt in their own relationships. Other gay and lesbian couples as well as heterosexual couples were mentioned by some individuals as influential models for developing roles with their partners. Individuals who

witnessed and identified with the successes of same sex relationships were reassured that they, too, could have a successful relationship.

Table 12 depicts the response frequencies to a question intended to explore how parents and, sometimes, other family members reacted to the decisions of respondents to marry or commit themselves to same sex partners.

Table 12
Family reactions to choice of partner by sexual orientation of couples

Family reaction	Couples			
	Heterosexual	Lesbian	Gay males	Totals
Disapprove/mixed	51/.35	22/.46	13/.54	86/.40
Approve	93/.65	26/.54	11/.46	130/.30
Totals	144/.67	48/22	24/.11	216/.100

$X^2 = 3.9(DF2), p=.14$

There were similarities in the reports of familial reactions, primarily those of parents, to the decisions of respondents to marry or make a commitment to their same sex partners. Not unexpected was the finding that families of heterosexual respondents were more likely than those of homosexual respondents to be supportive of those decisions, although more than 1/3 of the parents of heterosexuals did not approve of the decision to marry a future partner. The parents of gay males were the most disapproving of their sons' decision to make a loving commitment to another male.

In the relationship of Daniel and Dwight, family reactions were the opposite of what

each partner had anticipated. Daniel described the reactions of their parents:

Initially, it was a little different for Dwight's parents because they found out he was gay and living with a man at the same time. It surprised me that his parents reacted more negative and more hostile than my parents. My parents were not educated. My father didn't finish high school and my mother was a farm girl ... they were very conservative but they were much more understanding ... Dwight's parents are more educated ... they're liberals. I think that it's great to intellectually say: "I accept gay people", but when it comes down to being your son, then you lose it ... his mother hung up the phone and didn't talk to him for six months. His father even suggested psychiatric treatment. So it was a very stressful, negative period.

Although parents may have been overtly rejecting when they heard of a son's or daughter's sexual orientation and relationship, as were the parents of Dwight, other family members responded differently.

Daniel continued:

We got a lot of support from Dwight's sisters when they found out. He told his mother first, before he told his sisters, even though they had known and were waiting for him to open up ... after the fact they were like: "Well, why didn't you come to us first because we could have helped you."

The theme of sibling support was reported commonly among families, especially when parents reacted in a rejecting way. Sometimes, entire families were allied against their daughter or son but it was more common for reactions to vary among members as in Dwight's family. If siblings had positive relationships with parents, they were instrumental in bringing about parental acceptance of a same sex relationship. The process of change in the attitudes of parents toward a couple was described by Daniel:

Dwight's sisters were always very supportive to his parents. So, I think his parents grew to understand better because of their input and their feelings about me and our relationship.

The patience of partners and their persistence in reaching out to parents also helped modify their negative responses. That modification also occurred because some partners shared interests with parents, which brought them together. Daniel commented on the relationship in recent years with Dwight's mother:

His mother and I are now very close; we share books and talk. I treat her like I treat my mother, and I think she respects that.

Another familial dimension, which was explored, was the influence that families of origin may have had, either positively or negatively, on the relationships of respondents. The results are shown in the following two tables. Table 13 focuses on the reports of respondents about the influence of their own extended families. Table 14 focuses on respondent observations of the influence of their partners' families.

Table 13
Reports of extended family influence of respondents over the years by couples

Years and Influence	Couples			
	Heterosexual # /col %	Lesbian # /col%	Gaymale # /col %	Totals #/col%
Early*				
Negative	47/.33	25/.52	9/.37	81/.37
Positive	55/.38	15.31	12/.50	82/.38
No Influ	42/.29	8/.17	3/.13	53/.25
Middle**				
Negative	39/.27	22/.46	4/.17	65/.30
Positive	57/.40	19/.40	17/.71	93/.43
No Influ	48/.33	7/.14	3/.12	58/.27
Recent				
Negative	37/.26	19/.40	4/.17	60/.28
Positive	57/.40	23/.48	17/.71	97/.45
No Influ	50/.34	6/.12	3/.12	59/.27

*X2=9.00(4DF),p=.06
**X2=17.45(4DF),p=.002
***X2=16.98(4DF),p=.002

Table 14
Reports of extended family influence of partners over the years by couples

Years and influence	Couples			
	Heterosexua # /col %	Lesbian #/col%	Gaymale # /col%	Totals #/col%
Negative	45/.31	29/.60	9/.38	83/.38
Positive	56/.39	7/.15	10/.42	73/.34
No Influ	43/.30	12/.25	5/.21	60/.28
Middle**				
Negative	38/.26	26/.54	9/.38	73/.34
Positive	58/.40	11/.23	12/.50	81/.38
No Influ	48/.33	11/.23	3/.13	62/.29
Recent				
Negative	33/.23	21/.44	7/.29	61/.28
Positive	57/.40	19/.40	14/.58	90/.42
No Influ	54/.38	8/.17	3/.13	65/.30

*X2=15.54(4DF),p=.004
**X2=16.18(4DF),p=.003
***X2=15.31(4DF),p=.004

The following couple discussed the significance of their parents to them. Kirk talked about his parent's positive reaction to the news that he and Kirsten had decided to wed:

> *I think they spotted in Kirstein right away a person who had good command of herself, and who would be a great daughter-in-law for them. I respected my parents' opinions very much. Yeah, it might have, but there was no way they couldn't approve. They'd seen me go through too many girlfriends – well one or two of them anyway – about whom they had doubts. And I had doubts too. But when Kirstein came along, it was just right. It might have been a little too fast for their liking but I think they were pretty glad to be rid of me. You know, "Get out. Get a family going." Both my sister and brother had married by that time already.*

To the inquiry about the reactions of Kirstein's parents to him, Kirk said:

> *I think very positively. Kirstein's's mother is English and I think she liked the fact that I loved England and could recite stories with an English accent. I think my father-in-law was: " gosh, his daughter could do no wrong." She chose me, and there was never any question. On the whole, I showed a promise at that time to be able to support his daughter in a style to which perhaps she was accustomed., and I think this fit into their value system well.*

Kirk commented on the positive meaning that Kirstein's family had for him, especially since his parents and other family members were deceased:

Kirstein's family is by far the more diverse and all over the map and doing things and getting together for reunions and this kind of thing. I like them all. Some of them can be pretty serious – a little too serious for me, but it's the only family I've got. Yes, I've got a brother and a sister and their children and husbands and wife, and until a few years ago had a few aunts and uncles, but not now. Have they influenced me? I don't know. I like family. I like having them around. We insist that our kids keep in touch with their cousins – keep this line going. Rebecca is very good at this..

Similar to Kirk's family, Kirstein talked about her parent's initial reaction to the news of their engagement and the family's ongoing support of the couple:

They met him, and they found him charming. My parents had gotten engaged in only three weeks. So they knew from experience that this can happen very quickly. And I think the fact that he was a lot older than I ... made them feel a little better. Of course in those days, in the 1960's, 23 wasn't so young for a woman to get married. Nowadays it seems a little young. It didn't in those days, and I'd already been out of college for a couple of years, and I'd lived abroad. So I think they were perfectly happy for me to get married . . . Not only was Kirk a very appealing person, but also he had a career, he'd lived, he'd had experience. I don't think they cared particularly for the fact that he'd had other girlfriends, but he'd lived and traveled, so they felt he was ready.

Kirstein goes on to discuss the reaction of Kirk's family to the marriage:

> *Well, as I remember it, they were thrilled that Ike had finally found a wife. I mean, they were dying for him to get married 'cause he'd had a lot of different girlfriends, and at least one quite serious. And he was living at home at the time … I guess it didn't bother them that I was a lot younger. But they were very welcoming to me, and seemed to approve.*

Kirstein described how supportive both of their families had been:

> *They've actually been very supportive. Kirks's parents … were very careful not to be intrusive. We've lived in this house since we were married, and my mother-in-law could have been over here, dropping in unexpectedly or hovering, and she was never like that. They were not critical. They did not make disparaging remarks. Our parents were supportive both financially and emotionally. They helped us pay the down payment on this house, and Kirk's parents basically supported us for a year while Kirk went back to school. He was basically doing a career change. They've helped us financially really quite a lot over the years without strings attached too. It's felt like any financial help they gave was out of a genuine love for us and a desire to see us flourish. And, my gosh, my parents practically put our two daughters through … school. So I think we were close, but not too close.*

Kirstein shifts the positive tone of her comments to identify a disappointing aspect of their relationship with Kirk's parents:

> *They were never helpful in terms of helping take care of the kids, and I sometimes used to resent that a little bit. I think maybe once or twice Ike's parents babysat. So that was a little disappointing, but hey, nobody's parents are perfect. And they have provided a sense of family. I think the fact that our daughters have grown up knowing two sets of grandparents. And I think that the fact that they've been able to go to Thanksgiving dinner with them in the same town – that's all part of feeling roots and a sense of community and larger family that a lot of people don't have now. I miss Kirk's parents very much. They were extraordinary people, and I'm glad I knew them as long as I did.*

We were surprised by the finding that the families of gay men were more supportive of their relationships than were those of heterosexual and lesbian respondents, especially in view of the initial negative reactions of those families to the choice of a gay partner. Given the relatively small number of gay men in the study, that data needs to be treated with caution. Of surprise, as well, was the finding that extended families of heterosexual couples were reported to be not as supportive as the extended families of gay males. A third piece of data that aroused our curiosity was the relatively low level of support from the extended families of lesbian couples compared to others, although the families of lesbian couples were reported as increasingly supportive as the years unfolded. Through the middle and into the recent years, support of families toward heterosexual and lesbian couples shifted in a positive direction. Even with that shift, however,

the families of gay male couples remained significantly more positive than the families of lesbian and heterosexual couples.

Among many parents that struggled over the years to accept the reality of their children's sexual orientation and same sex relationships, the residuals of homophobic attitudes became visible from time to time. Although the intervention of siblings and the patience of partners helped to move relations with parents in a positive direction, negative feelings were sometimes hidden or obscured by overt gestures of reconciliation. Roberta talked of her mother's struggle to reconcile with her and to establish a positive relationship with both partners:

> *On a gift giving occasion like Christmas, my mother sent this great wool blanket and the next year she also sent something else that was bed related. It was really significant. Like, suddenly how she interacted with me and Regina changed after those two gifts. Something about her coming to grips with my relationship was marked by sending me stuff that was for our bed. I know that she processed a lot of it with a group of women ... Now she is fine ... she and Regina talk regularly, sometimes more regularly than I do.*

Gifts, symbolic of the nature of the relationships between partners, were one means of marking a shift toward parental support. Parents who overtly communicated their acceptance and support of relationships frequently kept their conflicted feelings hidden. Sometimes those feelings emerged on specific occasions. For example, some respondents talked of how the birthdays of their partners were ignored in families that customarily acknowledged such occurrences; others described partners not being "remembered" with a gift at Christmas. Roberta discussed how the residuals of hidden feelings were expressed by her mother:

She has some problems understanding some things. Shortly after our first child was born, I was talking to her about how hard it was to deal with day care and work. She just said: "all the single parents I know say that." It was like: "mom, I am not a single parent, remember? There is another parent!" Then, when we decided to adopt a kid, I was telling mom about that; "we are going to adopt another kid." She said: "oh, that's cool! Will I be this kid's grandmother?" ... she had to ask that question.

Several lesbians commented on the reactions of their mothers, which suggested a triangular dynamic among mothers, daughters and partners. Dana described how jealous her mother was of Diane during the early years of their relationship. The mother and daughter had been accustomed to spending much time together until Dana met Diane. In fact, both Dana and Diane described their mothers as similar and how crowded the psychological scene became whenever they visited with either family:

Her mother was a little jealous of us at the beginning. Dana had been and still is a very close daughter to her mother. They have a very good relationship. But her mother couldn't understand why, all of a sudden, she wanted to be with somebody like me. In the beginning my mother was probably jealous like Dana's mother. My mother would say: "when your friend is here, I can't talk to you" ... When Dana was around my mother would say: "She sat here the whole time and I wanted to talk to you" and I would say: "Ma, you can say anything you want in front of Dana" and she would say: "Oh, no. You can't talk about family things." ... When I finally got the guts to tell her about us, my mother started crying ... I'm hugging her and telling her not to cry that it is OK and I'm

very happy. And she said: "Diane, who is the man and who is the woman?" And I said: "nobody is the man and nobody is the woman. We are two women."

While a majority of families experienced considerable difficulty in accepting and being supportive of their adult children's sexual orientation and relationships, there was less acceptance among the families of lesbians than among gays, as has already been pointed out. The responses of mothers to lesbian daughters were different from the responses of fathers who often seemed to blend into the background. Compared to parents, siblings generally reacted with more support and their acceptance became a vehicle for gradual modifications in parental attitudes. Among lesbians who became parents, their children were a means for modifying negative parental attitudes. Of great importance was the gradual change in attitudes that occurred in parents and other family members as their relationships with both partners developed. That process usually took several years before partners, who may have been "blamed" for the unacceptable lifestyle of a family's adult child, were viewed as human beings rather than as objects shaped by guilt and homophobic stereotypes. As parents and others could "see" over time that these relationships were happy and, except for the gender of the partners, not essentially different from the relationships of heterosexuals, their guilt was abated and they were able to replace rejection with acceptance.

Friends were important to most respondents. Among same sex couples friendships became a primary support system for many couples when families were not accepting and supportive of their relationships. As Ian, who has been with his partner for 26 years, observed, "friends become family; we celebrate Christmas with one group, New Year's with another group and Easter with a third group." For the few respondents who had no friends, they felt that the

relationships with their partners were sufficient to meet their needs and that other relationships might threaten their partnership. For example, after acknowledging that support from friends might "enrich" the relationship with his partner, Brian commented, "it is certainly not fatal if we do not have friends ... they might be supportive but they might also be destructive." His partner, Barry, felt that avoiding friendships kept the relationship "safe."

Having friends and considering them a part of one's support system depended on the historical experiences and patterns of needing and making friends. Gary and George had a small circle of friends who had been loyal to them for years. Gary reported that "we have a very active role with friends and family ... especially friends." George's experience with friends was reported quite differently. “I’ve never surrounded myself with people. I take care of myself.”

Even when couples were surrounded by mutual friends, these friendships may have had a different significance to each partner as the comments of Gary and George illustrated. Grace also spoke of how she "was totally immersed in a lot of primary relationships ... we had a lot of differences in that way. She had a couple of friends and a lot of political acquaintances and work people, but not a lot of close friends." In general, partners shared friends even though several partners said that they maintained separate relationships outside of their circle of mutual friends. Often, these individual friendships were made at work or had been established before partners formed their committed relationships as was the case with Grace and Gwen.

Compared to lesbians, gay men talked of friendships with both homosexual and heterosexual couples. Many gay male respondents spoke of the difficulty in meeting and making friends with other gay couples.

Friendships were affirming of one's sexual orientation and helped to neutralize the social isolation, which was a threat in the well being of these couples. Friends offered acceptance to

partners as human beings who happened to have a same sex orientation. To gay partners, acceptance enabled them to experience a sense of validation about their relationships.

Even when individual partners had their own friends, couples experienced isolation, especially if they were closeted. Ingrid discussed that dilemma:

> *In the early years ... probably one of the things that wasn't so good was we were fairly isolated. That was more of a period when we each had friends outside of the relationship; we weren't necessarily out to those people ... in the last five or six years our ability to make relationships that both of us have with other lesbian couples has been very reinforcing ... to have that support*.

The link between being closeted and the development of mutual friendships was evident in the observations of Ingrid. It was not unusual for partners to have individual friends early in relationships, when partners may not have been open with others about their sexual orientation. Shared friendships developed as each partner became ready to acknowledge her/his sexual identity. That development may have been related to the changing social context in which gay and lesbian organizations were becoming increasingly available and supportive in affirming homosexual lifestyles and same sex relationships.

Friendships were also supportive in taking pressure off relationships. It was stressful for partners to rely on one another as their only source of support. Ingrid's partner talked of friendships in that way:

> *Isabelle's not always there for me the way I want, but that's not realistic. That's why we have other friends ... so that the whole burden of being there isn't just on one person. At*

least that's the way I feel, because that's pretty tough ... We have mostly lesbian, some gay friends ... other people are very important to us. Experiencing ourselves as a couple, I think, is important. When you relate to other people and friends, they experience you as a couple; you experience them as a couple. I think that's important. It's validating. It's just kind of life. It's what people do. It's normalizing. It's what straight people do.

Friends neutralized the potential for social isolation by helping individuals accept their sexual orientations and by acknowledging the validity of their relationships. An important challenge in these relationships was in negotiating mutual friendships, particularly when individuals had different needs for friends. Lesbians developed mutual friends with other lesbian couples over the years, a pattern different from gays who had more friendships with heterosexuals. Friendships were also supportive in enabling individuals to come out about themselves and their relationships. Finally, individuals relied on friends in times of stress when partners were not available, which took pressure off relationships.

In summary, this discussion underscores the dynamics, variability and complexity of understanding the significance of families and friends to the well-being of these relationships. These respondents appeared to be highly selective in identifying with and internalizing qualities of important people, which became valued resources for individual partners and couples as relationships developed over the years. Any discussion of friendships among same sex couples needs to take into account the socio-cultural context of the times. Changing values and mores compared to those of their parents, shaped the qualities that were incorporated into their senses of self. The interplay of culture and personal processes were evident as we listened to respondents tell their stories. For most respondents, family support was important in helping

them to adapt in their relationships. When families could not or would not respond in accepting and supportive ways, especially among same sex couples, respondents and their partners relied on friends to meet important psychological and social needs.

Religion

We explored the meaning of religion and religious practices by asking respondents to discuss how influential and important religion may have been to their relationships. As with other factors, such as family and friends, we focused on how religion may have shaped relational adaptation over the years. Table 15 shows the influence of religion from the perspectives of heterosexual, lesbian and gay male couples from early, through middle to recent years. The reports of individual respondents were very similar to those of their partners with only slight non statistically significant variations so the date in table 15 is reported for couples. The reader needs to be aware that several respondents, mainly among homosexuals, who may have been reared in a religious faith had abandoned that faith and viewed themselves at the time of this study as non-believers, agnostics or atheists. That sub-group, no doubt, accounted for many of the respondents that did not view religion as influential in their relationships.

The data in table 15 show a constancy in responses within each of the three groups from early to recent years. There was little variability in the results over time with the exception of lesbian respondents, one half of whom reported that religion was a positive influence in their relationships during the early years. Among lesbians the reported influence of religion declined appreciably during the middle years but regained its positive influence in recent years. Compared to lesbians, the meaning of religion to heterosexuals and gay men remained relatively steady as partners moved through the middle and recent years of their relationships.

Significant differences were found between heterosexual and same sex couples in their reports of the influence of religion on their relationships over the years. Compared to same sex respondents, substantial numbers of heterosexuals viewed religion in positive terms. Sixty-five to seventy-five percent of heterosexual respondents reported that religion had a positive effect on their relationships from early to recent years. In contrast, 58-67 % of gay male respondents reported no influence of religion on their relationships from early to recent years.

Table 15
Influence of religion on relationships over the years

Years & Influence	Heterosexual # / col %	Lesbian # / col%	Gay male # / col %	Totals # / col %
Early*				
Negative	13/.09	10/.21	4/.17	25/.12
Positive	94/.65	24/.50	5/.21	114/.53
No Influ	37/.26	14/.29	15/.63	77/.35
Middle**				
Negative	15/.10	8/.17	3/.13	26/.12
Positive	101/.70	18/.37	5/.21	124/.57
No Influ	28/.20	22/.46	16/.67	66/.31
Recent***				
Negative	13/.09	10/.21	4/.17	27/.13
Positive	100/.69	24/.50	6/.25	30/.60
No Influ	31/.22	14/.29	14/.58	59/.27

*X^2=28.03 (4DF), p=<.001
**X^2=33.87 (4DF), p=<.001
***X^2=22.48 (4DF), p=<.001

A majority of same sex respondents, with the exception of lesbians in the early and recent years, did not experience religion as a positive resource in their lives. Frequently, they had to contend with very rejecting attitudes of religious figures and organizations, which contributed to their feelings about religion. Those attitudes reflected the prevailing societal mores about homosexuality in the years when the data was collected that unfortunately persist today.

We explored factors that may have contributed to the significance of religion in these relationships during recent years. Cross tabulations revealed that the sexual orientations of respondents, the influence of religion during the middle years, and relational satisfaction during the middle years were related statistically to the importance of religion during recent years ($p=<.001$). Based on the results of a chi square analysis, a theoretical model was constructed and tested with logistic regression (see methods section for a discussion of this procedure). The results suggested that only the significance of religion during the middle years was predictive of the significance of religion in recent years ($B =3.49$, $p= .001$).

We turn now to a discussion of themes from the interview data on which the above quantitative results were based. Three themes were identified that addressed the meaning of religion to these couples after they had been together for many years:

mixed to no significance of religion on relationships,

religion as supportive, and

emerging spirituality.

A minority of respondents reported that religion had a negative influence on their relationships over the years. Among heterosexuals, negative responses hovered around 10% over the years; for lesbians negative responses hovered around 20% and around 15 % for gay

men. Among same sex respondents the negative meaning associated with religion often was connected to two realities:

1. the different belief systems of partners, and

2. the attachment that one partner may have had to religious beliefs and practices that conflicted with a homosexual orientation to life and commitment to a same sex relationship.

Those two factors were evident as Carl and Charles discussed religious conflict between them early in their relationship. Carl talked about his attachment to Catholicism and the importance, yet pain that certain practices, such as confession, had in the early years of their relationship:

> *The only thing personally that was significant was that I was beginning ... in ... therapy ... to ... reconcile my Catholicism with my sexual orientation, which took considerable doing for many years ... religion was been a divisive force between us ...Charles was not religious.*

Charles offered his perspective on the effect of religion on their relationship:

> *Well I'm not a religious person. And I think if anything religion hurt the relationship in the beginning, like I said C. was very hung up about the Catholic Church and the fact that he could not go to a priest to hear his confessions because he was gay. And it was one thing to have sex, and then go to confession, and have the guilt taken away, but the fact that he could not tell the priest -- if he did it with ten people that's fine, but if he did it with the same person then that was a sin. And it was a very big hang-up ... religion was very negative ... I felt that his church was more important than I was, I remember one*

Christmas eve I was home by myself because he had to go to church. I was very upset. And it just seemed like church was always -- and he made the statement when we first met that don't try to take the place of my church because you can't. But things change, he still goes to church, my attitude has changed a lot too, I mean, if religion is important to him, then he should have his religion. He's never tried to force it on me … I think the second five years, all of a sudden it became a non-issue.

We cannot be sure how they were able to negotiate a truce about the conflict with religion. But, something did transpire between them that facilitated a new level of adaptation so that each person accepted their differences and learned to live with them. At least some of the conflict that burdened Carl may have been lightened when he converted from the Catholic to the Episcopal Church.

Even when respondents reported a decline in religious practices, such as attending church or temple services, their religious backgrounds and the values that had been internalized played an important role in the their personal lives and in the development of their relationships. The process of change frequently focused on the inner or spiritual lives of individuals, which will be discussed later in this section.

During recent years, Jewish respondents compared to Catholics and Protestants were more likely to think of their religion as having mixed effects or no significance in their relationships. Seventeen percent of Jews compared to 2% of Protestants and 8% of Catholics viewed religion as having a mixed effect on their relationships in recent years. Conversely, 47% of Jews compared to 76% of Catholics and 75% of Protestants reported that religion had a

positive effect. Compared to Catholics (16%), Protestants (23%) and Jews (27%) were more likely to say that religion had no significance in their relationships.

Grover, a 53 year old Jewish husband married for 31 years and the father of three children, talked about the role of religion in his ralationship during recent years:

> *Gladys and I have very much the same religious beliefs. We are not very religious people as far as the ceremonies and going to temple, but we do have a firm belief in God .... We did join a temple when the kids were starting to get to that age. We wanted to at least give them that exposure. We would go religiously with them. Our kids have the same kind of beliefs as we do to a certain extent in that there is a God, but not in an organized religious way ... We never really felt strongly that you had to go to services and all to be a good religious person. We both felt that way from the first time we met. Maybe that is one of the compatible things about us.*

This vignette illustrated the role that one's religious heritage may have even when religiosity declines. Beliefs and values may continue to be important in one's life and have a positive effect on relationships, even when religious practices, such as regular attendance at services, became less significant. As will become evident in subsequent analysis of the data, the distinction between the categories of "positive" and "no significance" was often not differentiated crisply, especially among Jewish respondents. For example, Grover had integrated values from his religious background while reporting that religious practices did not currently play an important role in his relationship.

Gladys, his 53 year old wife, observed:

I think we both feel the same about religion. We are both reformed Jews. We raised our family to be Jewish. Judaism was not something that was the number one thing of our marriage ... other things were more significant than religion. It was just something that we had in common ... I am glad we are the same religion because it gave us a common bond. I don't think it is what made our marriage successful or not successful. It had no significance on our sense of commitment to the relationship. Although we are Jewish we practice our Judaism in a sense in our own way. I don't think our religion had anything to do with our commitment unless it might have been the way we were raised. It is just part of us.

Gladys underscored the value of assessing the significance of religion at more than one level and in more than one way. She identified the significance of internalized values that she and Grover shared even when religiosity changed or faded into the background of family life. Similarities in values, likely in part coming from their backgrounds that included Judaism, may have helped to maintain and to strengthen the bonds between them, as well as the bonds between other partners. As Gladys points out, any connection of relational commitment to religious backgrounds was very difficult to assess.

Compared to same sex respondents, most heterosexuals talked positively about the role of religion in their relationships. During recent years, three out of four Catholics and Protestants and almost two out of four Jews expressed positive thoughts and feeling about the significance of religion in their marriages. Those ratios about the significance of religion during recent years were similar during the middle and early years. When respondents discussed religion as supportive to their relationships and to their families, they often referred to a structure that had

become an integral part of their lives. Among Mexican American respondents, this theme was evident in the comments of Gonzalo, 47 years old and married for 29 years:

> *I guess its seeing people together in community, love, sharing; you know this is what it's all about. This is what I want, this is what a lot of the Hispanic families around the community want to feel ... Everybody's in a nice mood around here, everybody's real cheerful, you know the priest and everybody like that and it's made us more family, not only in the church, but in the community ... The people in the barrio here have a big respect for the church. There is no graffiti on the seven buildings here and none, but right down the block you'll see it. The church has changed our life, mine and Guadalupe's.*

The positive influence of religion to Gonzalo and to several Mexican Americans was connected to the Catholic Church as an integral part of their communities and their relationships. The church was important as a spiritual resource but also as a means of social connectedness. More than any other ethnic group, Mexican Americans tended to speak, as Gonzalo did, about how religion was a supportive resource in their lives and in their relationships.
Guadalupe, his 43 year old spouse, talked of the significance of religion:

> *I think what has helped out marriage is that we like the spiritual aspect of our lives and got more involved in it and I think that's what has helped us a lot ... We have a deeper need for God in our lives Before, we just needed to do things, but not pray about it ...*

Before we never did bless our food and now before anybody sits down to eat, we bless our food. So it's just a totally different way of life, a spiritual life to fall back on.

For several African Americans, religion served as a meaningful resource in their lives. Their faiths offered a means for coping with racism, which was discussed by several Black respondents. Faith and prayer were mentioned often, as African Americans expressed their thoughts about the meaning of religion in their lives. The themes of faith and prayer are evident in the following passages from interviews with a Black couple, Douglas and Della, the parents of four children, who had been married for 37 years. As Douglas responded to the question about the importance of religion in their marriage, he at first denied its significance:

I don't know if it played a big role in my life. I really can't see where it really did. But I didn't want to do things wrong ... I figured that you should live a certain way, that God expects you to live a certain way. And I knew that I better try to live a certain way, or then I was going to have problems in my life and in my marriage ... I needed so much help in my life ... I needed to go to church. I needed something like that in my life. Today I know that.

Douglas went on to explore the significance of prayer in his relationship with Della:

I like to pray for Della. I pray for her every morning. I get on my knees every morning. I get back down on my knees at night when I go to bed. And so it does affect me and her. I always pray for her. Sometimes I pray for her during the day. So religion is a big part of

our life. I forgot about that ... So religion does play a role. It has gotten more significant over the last years and it's gotten stronger.

It wasn't unusual for religious practices, such as attendance at services, and prayer to be associated with personal problems, such as alcoholism, and other health impairments. For several individuals, like Douglas and Della, religious practices became an important part of their lives from an early age. Della talked about religion as a supportive resource in their relationship, which included the importance of prayer:

My religion, I think, is significant to helping the two of us get along. Me and him both are two Christian people. Not that everybody has to be, but, see, this is the only way that I was presented life with my parents .... I used to hear my mother praying a lot .... It was just something that was embedded in me at a very early age. I went to church with my parents. And I used to hear the things, and hear them praying to God. And they always lived a beautiful life. I said, it worked for them so it can work for me ... I've got my own personal thing with God. And I know that my direct line to him is here and now ... Religion has played a lot in our marriage ... Douglas and I were able to worship together, and I think that's a big step. For me it was.

The changing nature of the meaning of religion was a theme that emerged throughout the data as we tried to understand the meaning of religious practices and belief in these relationships.

The following passages from an interview with Donna, a 57 year old Catholic woman, illustrate the significance of religion from early to recent years. Even though her religious practices and the role of religion in her life changed, the significance of religion remained positive over the years, a theme not uncommon in the stories of other respondents. Married for 36 years and the mother of nine children, this 57 year old woman reflected back on the significance of Catholicism to her and her husband, especially those teachings related to birth control. As a result of conflict with the church on the use of birth control, after giving birth to eight children, an estrangement from the church occurred:

> *I was brought up, you know, whatever God gave you, you accepted and I fully believed that. I didn't think I had choices, which was kind of naive or stupid. But, I think David and I, because of the religion and everything, just felt as though you know whatever God gave us we have to accept and we did. And I can remember very well after (our youngest child) was born there was a period in my life that I didn't go to church for a while because I had gone to confession and wanting to practice birth control after eight children. The priest was telling me no and he wouldn't give me absolution and everything and that really upset me. I stayed away from church for a while because I was very bitter ... I'd talk to myself and I'd say now why am I getting like this ... I learned very late that you can use your own mind and make those decisions on those things; that should be probably between God and you and nobody else. But it wasn't the way I was brought up. Nor the way David was brought up.*

Donna then talked about the positive effect of religion on their marriage and the rearing of their children:

> *I think religion had a very good effect on our marriage. I think it brought us very close. I think we were stronger about it in the first years of marriage. Well, when we first got married and probably while the children were young, we were very religious both of us but our habits have changed a lot. I would never have thought of missing mass years ago, but I would now. David wouldn't. He's probably stronger at it than I am; yet probably to begin with I was stronger. We used to go to mass every morning when we were first married. We always took the kids to church on Sundays and always said grace before meals with the kids and it was just part of our life. I think the kids got a good background in it.*

Catholicism remained an important part of their married and family life. In recent years, its significance changed. Then, Donna appeared to find meaning in the spiritual aspects of her religion and as she became less preoccupied with the structure and rules of the church:

> *I don't know why I have changed as far as religion goes. I still go to mass 90% of the time ... before, I would feel guilty if I didn't go. Now I don't have the guilt feelings if I don't go. I feel as though it should be something you want to do. Religion is still to me a very important thing and I think there isn't a day that goes by that I don't think religion. But the structured religion isn't as important to me as the way I act as a person. Like, one night David and I were going out to mass. There's an old lady that used to live next door.*

She was in a nursing home and I hadn't seen her for a while. We were supposed to be going to mass and I said to David: "I want to go and see Mrs. F instead of going to mass." And he said: "Well, this is the last mass. We have to go tonight." And I said: " I think God would appreciate it just as much if we went to visit with Mrs. F." So we went to see Mrs. F. That's what I mean; another time I would never have done that. You could do both if you organized your time right but that's kind of how I am now. I do what I feel is important.

Although the meaning of religious beliefs and practices changed over the years, Catholicism retained an importance to this woman as an individual, to her relationship with David and to her family. The excerpts reported here offer a sense of the meaning of religion in the lives of many respondents and how the significance of religion evolved from early to recent years. For Donna, there was a spiritual quality to her religious orientation in recent years that emerged from a different attachment to the church in earlier years.

Several respondents, mostly lesbians, talked about their search for spiritual meaning in life. Despite feelings that religious institutions had "no room" for them, many individuals and couples spoke of a need to connect again with their roots. Octavia and Olivia described their spiritual heritage as Jews and their quest in recent years to connect with that part of their identity. Octavia said:

Olivia and I are both Jewish, and we were both fairly disconnected from that when we got together, although, at some gut level, I think it was important to us in terms of similar ethnic backgrounds. But in terms of the religious component, that really didn't become

important to us until somehow we found our way back through a gay Jewish group ... I was raised as an Orthodox Jew and certainly, in that venue, there was no room for my lifestyle as a lesbian. Olivia was raised in a conservative temple but not really participating, so where I had a lot of background, she didn't have very much. We had both given it up ... we both kind of realized that spirituality was important and also a connection. Its kind of hard to separate the religious from the ethnic when you are Jewish. The connection to our roots was very important so we got more and more involved.

Octavia described their search for involvement with a religious group. The availability of groups that explored spirituality did not "speak" to their needs to integrate their identity as a lesbian couple with the cultural and religious heritage they shared. Octavia described their experiences:

Maybe we really had to have the spirituality come through in a Jewish setting ... that affected our relationship in that we could be in a relationship that was recognized at least by this gay Jewish group. We haven't ever gone through any ceremonies or anything like that but it was important. We both grew into it at the same time when our first child was born ... it was actually very beautiful, we created a ritual naming ceremony for him in this group. We had all of our friends. It was very Jewish and it was very gay identified and it was who we were as a family.

She went on to identify another important link between the need to connect with their joint heritage as Jews and their decision to become parents:

Although we were connected to this group before we had kids, somehow having kids made you think about what is my religious identity and what do I want for my kids? ... and a need to pass on some of the ethical lessons that I want to pass on. Soon after becoming parents, we joined a temple ... that continues to do a lot of outreach to the gay and lesbian community and has a lot of gay and lesbian people as part of their larger community... They also have a lot of lesbians with kids now. This is a place where you can be comfortable being who you are and you want to keep going there; it has been very important to us.

According to Olivia, religion had become progressively more important in their relationship since the birth of their first child. Despite their similar religious and ethnic backgrounds, the strength of their values was different. Octavia was raised in an orthodox Jewish family and Olivia by a Jewish mother and a non-Jewish father, both of whom were quite liberal about religious practices. Olivia attended a conservative temple but was much less religiously observant than Octavia. She felt that connection with Judaism "was important to us but not in the religious sense ... it became more important when kids came." Both partners felt that identification with their religious and cultural heritage through membership in a temple that became a significant source of support in their relationship.

A prominent theme about the significance of religion, especially during recent years, was emerging spirituality. More than any other aspect of religion in these relationships were references to one's inner life, values and increasingly less reliance on the structures of religion with which respondents may have been identified in earlier years. Such a change was evident as Donna discussed the change within herself as the years unfolded.

Mark and Melinda, an African American couple in their sixties and married for 32 years whom we met in a previous section, spoke of the development of religion in their lives from its origins in the structure of churches to a spiritual level in recent years. Mark observed:

> *I was Protestant, then Baptist, then Protestant, then Methodist, whatever. The same thing is true of Melinda. We sort of shopped around for churches … But I don't think of religious doctrine influencing us so much as the basic principles of do unto others as you'd have them do unto you type of thing is the type of thing that we sort of have ingrained, but not religion per se. I don't see it as religion is what I'm saying. You do treat people the way they should be treated. I think in terms of the bible … to biblical kinds of things, we are very sensitive.*

Melinda reflected a similar theme to Mark and to the observations of several other respondents. She commented on the evolution of her spiritual values:

> *I just feel that we came up with the basic faith, a respect for religion … but we came up with elders who thought faith was the main thing and that things would happen because right things were supposed to happen and bad things were not supposed to happen. And eventually some being or some force would make everything right … a lot of people think that whatever happens is God's way. I took that faith but I translated it into a faith that I could work with which is that everything that happens is not God's plan; people have a lot to do with it. I have faith that man and woman can change things … I respect basic*

faith and I know that it took people a long way. And I respect it profoundly. But … we have to make our own way.

Although many respondents referred to spirituality, Quakers were noticeably different in how they expressed the presence of Quaker values in their marital relationships (all Quaker couples were heterosexuals). Quaker respondents reported that their religion played an important part in their marriages from the early to recent years. They explicitly linked their Quaker values to their lives together as a couple. Hal, 49 years of age and married for 21 years, said:

The value system is what I like ... It's very free, which appeals to me. It can't help but have affected our marriage. We've both had a pretty good connection with our meeting ... just observing the ebb and flow of the meeting, the diversity issues, all the things being discussed ... can't help but have a good effect on us.

Hal expressed how Quakerism had a positive effect on him and his wife, Hope:

Something that Quakerism does for a person, it opens the mind to understanding and forgiveness and tolerance ... I think that true Quakers should form the best marriages in the world because they are so tolerant and liberal with each other and understanding. I like to think of it this way and I think that underlies Hope's feelings for me. She understands the commitment underneath whatever I show on the surface. She knows that there are still remnants of the man she loved and married in her youth. She honors that … I think that it certainly helped to be in a Quaker meeting, where these issues are

talked about. That really helps in a marriage ...So I think marriage is made stronger by the Quaker principle of openness and discussion about one's beliefs and the issues of the day ... a good guide for all of us.

Hope referred to the Quaker principal of simplicity and then commented on the values of self-reflection and interpersonal honesty that she tried to practice as a Quaker. She expressed how being introspective and "centered" on awareness of herself in the present, both of which had become a part of her, may have had a positive effect on their marriage:

Being open and honest with each other and listening to each other, maybe being a Quaker has affected our marriage … I don't use the word God very much because I don't have a personal God so I'm not that kind of Quaker … But I think trying to focus on the present, to find that island of calm in the midst of tremendous business is something that I practice. People have said to me that they feel that I am a centered person. I'm not thinking about it too much, but I think I probably do it from years and years of doing it. It helps keep me sort of steady. I think that probably helps in marriage as well as in other parts of my life ... When you grow up in a Quaker meeting and are sort of forced to look inward from young age, and you listen to messages about finding that center, it's got to have an effect.

In summary the meaning of religion in these lasting relationships was explored from the perspectives of individual partners. To understand the potential significance of religion, we asked respondents to discuss the importance to unimportance of religion in their lives and the

role that religion may have played in their relationships. Focal question interviews enabled us to explore the richness of individual experiences and the nuances associated with the significance of religion in these relationships. As in other aspects of the research, this approach blended soft and hard modes of research and offered a whole picture of the significance of religion in theses relationships.

There was intra-group constancy to the significance of religion over the years, but considerable differences between groups. Compared to same sex respondents, roughly seven out of ten heterosexuals reported that religion played a positive role in their relationships from early to recent years. The comparable ratio for lesbians was five out of ten and for gay men two out of ten. In contrast to the other two groups, there was a significant decline in the positive meaning associated with religion among lesbians during the middle years. That shift appeared to be related to the search among lesbians for religious meaning in their lives and relationships, which frequently involved giving up attachments to structured religious organizations and the search for mutual spiritual meaning.

An important piece of data in exploring the significance of religion to these respondents was the search for spiritual meaning in the lives of respondents and their relationships. For some individuals they were able to engage in that search while maintaining identification with their religious traditions. For others the search, especially among lesbians, resulted in moving away from organized religions and adopting new belief systems and values. Even when religious practices faded into the background, several respondents reported that they endeavored to lead their lives according to values that had become a part of them from their religious backgrounds. For many people in this study, the spiritual significance associated with religion eclipsed religiosity during recent years.

Satisfaction

There has been a long history of research on understanding satisfaction in relationships, such as those in our research. Most studies, however, have focused on marital relationships that have not lasted as long as those in this research, although, in recent years, there has been increasing attention to satisfaction in marriages that have endured for a long time. Of special interest to our research were studies that explored the potential connection between satisfaction and relational stability (Note: stability refers simply to the length of relationships; an average of 30 years for couples being together in our research were considered stable). There is a connection between being satisfied and staying in relationships although the exact nature of that connection is unknown. Even though many relationships may remain intact because partners feel generally content and happy (i.e. satisfied), other relationships may endure despite dissatisfaction. Finally, compared to heterosexual marriages, there has been less attention to satisfaction and stability in same sex relationships, although that reality has been changing over the past two decades.

The meaning of satisfaction that emerged from our data was based on how respondents talked about what was pleasing and gratifying to them in their relationships. As with other variables in our research, interviewers focused on predominant relational patterns, which was compatible with the goal of developing an understanding of satisfaction. A central theme was the observation of relationships as fulfilling individual needs, so that respondents were usually content and happy about being with their partners. Interview questions used to assess satisfaction were focused on how respondents felt about their relationships from early to recent

years, what the partner meant to them and what was good and not so good about their relationships over the years. The meaning of being satisfied with relationships was captured in the response of this African-American couple. The husband said:

> *Every day ain't peaches and cream but it's a lot better than what it used to be. We laugh and talk about some of the things that almost broke our marriage up ... I know she loves me and she knows that I love her. We just know that about each other ... in my own way of thinking, I loved her all along but I didn't know how to say it ... now I can say it but I still get a funny feeling. I almost drove her completely away from me ... we talk about some of that stuff now, and laugh about it ... the closeness has improved greatly over the last two or three years; we're more understanding and more respectful of one another. We've become like one.*

His wife observed:

> *Most people who go into marriage feel like the storybook romance is going to go on forever. But it doesn't. It's a thin line between love and hate ... I said these vows to this man, and half of them, I didn't mean because that was my ticket for out of the house. My love grew ... We've had good times and we've had bad times. But that's life, you know ... There's been times in our lives when I could say: "I don't think this is what I want out of life. " But we always sit down and we talk about it and we give it another go ... He's my world. That's what he means to me. You know, the world out there is the world, but he's my world.*

Table 16 shows how respondents reported their assessments of satisfaction in their relationships over the years:

Table 16
Relational satisfaction over the years

Years & Reports	Couples			
	Heterosexual # / col %	Lesbian # / col%	Gaymale # /col %	Totals # / col%
Early				
Neg/mixed	39/.27	8/.17	8/.33	55/.26
Positive	105/.73	40/.83	16/.67	161/.74
Middle				
Neg/mixed	51/.35	20/.42	14/.58	85/.39
Positive	93/.65	28/.58	10/.42	131/.61
Recent				
Neg/mixed	22/.15	5/.10	5/.21	32/.15
Positive	122/.85	43/.90	19/.80	184/.85

Table 16 suggests that satisfaction over the years showed a "U" shaped pattern with 74% of respondents reporting being satisfied during the early years, which dropped to 61% in the middle years and rose to 85% in recent years, a pattern evident in the observations of the above couple. The decline in satisfaction during the middle years was likely associated with the increase in major conflict, which resulted frequently in estrangement between partners and an eroding of

relational satisfaction. Although reports of dis-satisfaction during those years were more numerous among same sex respondents, especially gay men,
chi-square analysis revealed no statistically significant differences in reported satisfaction among heterosexuals, lesbians and gay male couples:

* early years: X2=2.94, 2DF,p=.23;

*middle years: X2=4.67, 2DF, p=.10;

*recent years: X2=1.45, 2DF, p=.48.

The increase in major conflict during the middle years had a negative effect on several aspects of these relationships, which resulted in a decline in relational satisfaction. A gay couple spoke about the patterns of conflict in their relationship over the years. Each partner felt that communication had been reasonably good between them from the early years. Frank remembered that:

> *Our communication has always been pretty good; that was one of the things that fit from the onset. Don't ask me why or how, but it just sort of went together. Fred agreed about the quality of communication during the early years: We've always kind of fed off each other, and listened ... we may not like what the other person's saying, but we've listened to each other.*

As the relationship evolved beyond the first few years, their individual modes of dealing with personal differences led to major conflict. Although they felt that their communication was "pretty good" from early to recent years, they experienced significant difficulties during the middle years in contending with their different styles of expressing anger. Frank said that:

We went through a period of time when I felt like I was being abused ... It was just a pattern that he got into that was knifing ... So we had to talk that one out in counseling, to get through that part of it. That process of going to the counseling service to find out about these things helped us to solve things in the future. We were able to not be aggressive toward each other in discussions; to be able to listen and then, maybe not agree, but to listen.

In referring to the middle years of their relationship, Fred remembered that:

... the second five years was: "Well I don't want to deal with this so I'll read a magazine." At that time we were going through therapy. He would have a session and I would have a session and then we'd have one together. I would just go right over and rip a magazine out of his hands and say: "Now we're going to talk. I'm pissed off! The therapist said that you're not supposed to hide behind a magazine any more, so I'm taking' it away." Then the last 10 years, you just work through all that garbage. I'm not one to sit there and fester about something now. When I'm upset, now, it comes out ... I don't want to sit and brood on it for a week. If I'm ticked off, he knows about it immediately.

During recent years, each partner reported changes in their styles of managing conflict, which offset the decline in satisfaction that characterized the middle years. In referring to the modification in their styles of managing conflict, Frank commented about the improvement in

their communication. With several respondents, psychotherapy had a significant impact on patterns of dealing with feelings, especially angry ones, which had become a source of major conflict. In referring to the relationship at the present time, Frank said that " communication is a little better now that we know each other better; we have a tendency to speak in short-hand to each other because we know each other so well." Fred viewed modifications in their relationship differently. In talking about recent interactions, he focused initially on his perception of change in Frank, but then went on to acknowledge his difficulties in adapting to the assertiveness of Frank, which had come about as a result of therapy. Fred reported that his partner had, "gotten better." "He used to just sit there and internalize it." Fred then acknowledged that it was, "still an adjustment for me, when he comes out and confronts me directly. There are times I really like that, but I don't like it when it's directed at me."

Developing effective communication skills was an important part of the process of modifying behavior and restoring satisfaction that had characterized the early years of these relationships. It was most successful when individual partners became aware of themselves in the relationship and took responsibility for confronting feelings that were being avoided. This process happened between Frank and Fred. Each partner described modifications in their individual behaviors, their awareness of how their behaviors contributed to conflict, and an acknowledgment of what it meant to change, all of which resulted in a restoration of satisfaction.

A lesbian couple, together for almost 20 years, spoke of modifications in their relationship from the early years to the present time. Although the content of difficulties between them was different, the underlying themes were similar to Frank and Fred. Maria remembered the early years:

We had a good time together and there were never any fights, problems or anything like that ... we hadn't talked about a lot of things. We just didn't see any reason to talk about them so we didn't ... Initially, it was more conversational. We shared a lot of information and told each other things we did and talked about politics, about hiking, about places, about stuff that was going on and about our work, but not very much about feelings.

Maria identified a critical element in the unfolding of conflict to which other respondents also referred and which contributed to a decline in relational satisfaction. Early years were often remembered as happy ones in which partners were trying to adapt to life together. In the interest of maintaining harmony between them, partners often avoided conflict, which they feared might threaten the mutual sense of harmony –albeit even tenuous - that they wished to preserve. For most respondents, especially those in same sex relationships, these relationships were the most positive and meaningful of their adult lives. Issues that triggered strong feelings that might jeopardize a relationship were avoided. Often, years passed before partners were able to confront feelings that they assumed were a threat to relational satisfaction and stability. Maria described how the relationship changed, as they struggled to find different ways of dealing with conflict:

... we had to face a lot of difficult feelings in which we weren't very graceful talking about and didn't talk about anymore than we needed to. But we did start talking more about what was going on ... our relationship and intimacy were some of the things we

hadn't talked about. She was doing that out of the desperate grasp of doing something for me because she cared for me ... So when we started to face that emotional stuff, we didn't have a history or experience in that and weren't very good at talking about those things even in the best of times. We had never practiced and things began to spiral more and more out of control and was aggravated by the fact that Molly was in a job that she hated and so was I ... we had excuses of why there wasn't time to talk.

Maria identified how difficult it was to initiate discussion about unpleasant feelings, such as anger toward a partner that might threaten the stability of the relationship. Respondents commented frequently on how unprepared they were emotionally to face conflict. In contrast to intellectual discussions, the emotional language used in confronting unpleasant aspects of relationships was neither graceful nor easy. The fear of losing control and ultimately, of losing the relationship, loomed in the background. As Maria and Molly struggled to discuss aspects of their relationship during the middle years, which they feared threatened its stability, they decided to have a child:

The communication sort of changed when we decided to have a child ... it was not something that you can just fall into ... So one of the things that is good about this is it makes you talk about it. It was good for us. We had to talk about it and then actually go ahead and plan it and decided to do it ... all the myriad of decisions that needed to be made ... all the things that we had not explicitly talked about for ourselves. So that has been good. I think it has spilled over in to more explicitly talking about what each of us wants.

For this couple, the joint decision to have a child provided an opportunity to bring them together on relational matters in addition to those of parenthood. To have experienced success in communicating about becoming parents had a positive effect on their confidence in dealing with less pleasant aspects of their relationship. As Maria said, the reality of deciding to become parents was a catalyst for facing matters which they previously avoided discussing.

Molly reflected on the quality of their relationship in recent years:

> *Now, emotional intimacy is probably there, too. It has probably been there throughout. It's not probably as open as some relationships but we certainly rely on each other enormously for our emotional well-being. I certainly rely on Maria to help me out when I am feeling crummy or whatever. The sexual intimacy has certainly gone up and down. A lot of it depends on how well we are getting along. Certainly, there was more of it early on in the relationship ... and then there was not very much sex in our relationship for several years ... now its regaining itself. We are getting along very well these days.*

The observations of the partners in these three relationships illustrated the changes, which took place over the years and their effect on satisfaction. Probably, the most important of these factors was the increase in major conflict as reported by respondents. Major conflict increased significantly during the middle years, especially among lesbian couples, 58% of whom reported major conflict during those years, which fed a decline in relational satisfaction.

We explored further the effects of gender on those differences by examining the reported differences between heterosexual women and men about major conflict and satisfaction with relationships during the middle years. Females more than males (33% and 25% respectively)

reported the presence of serious difficulties in some aspects of their relationships even when other aspects of relationships were conflict free. Forty-six percent of heterosexual women reported being dis-satisfied during the middle years compared to twenty-five percent of their spouses.

To explore the potential connection(s) between stability and satisfaction, we now focus on the recent years of these relationships when 85% of all respondents reported being satisfied with their relationships. No significant differences were found among heterosexual men, heterosexual women, lesbians and gay males (p=.64), nor between heterosexual and homosexual respondents (p=.79). Mexican-Americans were more satisfied than other heterosexual respondents (African-Americans and Whites) with their relationships in recent years (p=.09): 100% of Mexican-American partners reported being satisfied in recent years compared to 86% of African-Americans and 83% of Whites. Other personal and demographic variables (age, religion, number of years together, children or no children, education and income) were also not related significantly to satisfaction during recent years.

Cross tabulations were made between relational factors and satisfaction in recent years and a chi-square was computed for each cross tab. The results of that bivariate analysis are shown in Table 17.

The quality of communication along with reports of psychological intimacy were related significantly to satisfaction as were the severity of interpersonal conflict between partners and the equity of relationships. Other significant associations were found between satisfaction and conflict management style of partners: decision-making, the quality of sexual relations, the importance of sexual relations and physical affection.

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Table 17
Satisfaction with relationships during recent years by relational variables

Relational Variables	Satisfaction with Relationships Negative # /col%	Positive #/col% %	Totals #/col%	X^2(!DF)
Communication				40.91*
poor/mixed	26/.81	44/. 24	70/.32	
positive	6/.19	140/.76	146/.68	
Conflict				53.70*
minimal	15/.47	173/.94	188/.87	
major	17/.53	11/.6	28/.13	
Conflict Manage Style Partner				9.21**
avoid	19/.59	58/.32	77/.36	
confront	13/.41	146/.68	109/.64	
Decision-making				
seperate	9/.28	17/. 09	26/.12	9.18**
mutual	23/.72	167/.91	190/.88	
Equity				15.53**
no	13/.41	23/.13	36/.17	
yes	19/.59	161/.87	180/..83	
Physical Affection				10.03**
no/mixed	21/.66	66/.36	87/.40	
yes	11/.34	118/.64	129/.60	
Psychological intimacy				69.19*
no/mixed	26/.81	25/.14	51/. 24	
yes	6/.19	159/.86	165/.76	
Sexual relationship				10.75*
negative/mixed	25/.78	86/. 47	111/.51	
positive	7/.22	98/.53	165/.49	
Importance of sex				10.07**
not important	14/.44	34/.19	48/.22	
important	18/.56	150/.81	168/.78	

N=216 * p= <.001 ** p= <.002

As has already been discussed, because of the strength of the association between the quality of communication and psychological intimacy, we decided to eliminate communication as a separate variable in a logistic regression analysis. Again, a precise way of identifying the variable, psychological intimacy, is to refer to it as psychologically intimate communication

We have already discussed the meaning of conflict, its management and psychological intimacy, so only the other factors shown in table 17 that were related significantly to satisfaction in recent years will be explored here.

Respondents were asked to discuss their " ways of making decisions." If one partner without the involvement of the other one usually made decisions separately, decision-making was coded "separate." If important decisions were made together, this variable was coded "mutual." The latter involved separate decision-making depending on circumstances and how significant a decision was to both partners. Coding of this variable was based on predominant modes of making decisions about significant matters, such as major purchases.

Equity referred to the sense of fairness in relationships. The questions were framed as follows: Overall, have you felt a sense of fairness in your relationship? Despite differences, have things balanced out? Do you feel that your ways of solving problems, as a couple has been generally fair to each of you? If the responses to these inquiries were in the direction of an overall sense of fairness, this variable was coded "yes;" if not, it was coded "no."

Physical affection referred to bodily touching, such as hugging. If touching was regularly a part of relationships, physical affection was coded "yes" and if not a regular part of relationships, it was coded as "no/mixed." This factor was explored as part of the exploration of sexual relations which included questions such as: How have you gotten along sexually? In terms of non-sexual intimacy like hugging and touching? Respondents were also asked to

assess the importance of genital sex in their relationships, which was coded as "important" or "not important." A gay male respondent who had been with his partner for over 20 years reported:

> *Sex has become more work ... neither one of us are as sexual towards each other. But I think it's an important part of a relationship and we have to work on it ... compared to the beginning when sex was paramount ... now, things have, as we've gotten older, flipped around a little bit, where although I still absolutely believe you can't ignore sex; it has to be an important part of the relationship but it is definitely not as important as it was.*

That response illustrated a common theme in the reports of most partners, regardless of their sexual orientation: sexual relations, while less frequent and less satisfying in recent years, were still considered important. With the decline in the significance of sexual relations to relational satisfaction, psychological intimacy became even more important than it had been earlier in relationships.

A theoretical model of relational factors was constructed and tested with logistic regression. The results are shown in Table 18.

Relative to other variables in the model, psychologically intimate communication and minimal conflict emerged as the most powerful contributors to reported satisfaction with relationships in recent years. Other interpersonal factors (conflict management styles of partners as reported by respondents, couple decision-making, expressing physical affection, equity, quality of sexual relations and the importance of sex) did not emerge as significant predictors of satisfaction in the regression analysis.

Table 18
Logistic regression coefficients for variables associated with relational satisfaction in recent years

Variable	B	S.E.	Sig	Exp(B)
Conflict	-2.88	.66	<.001	.06
Conflict management style of partner	.21	.56	.20	1.24
Decision-making	.16	.73	.83	1.17
Equity	-.002	.61	.996	.98
Intimacy	2.83	.66	< .001	16.98
Physical affection	.15	.64	.82	1.16
Sex relations	.69	.70	.32	1.99
Importance of sex	.82	.62	.19	2.2
Constant	-.17	.71	.81	

N=216
Model X^2 (8DF) = 86.04 p<.001

To test the potential effects of sexual orientation on the regression of relational factors, the sexual orientation of couples (heterosexual, lesbian and gay) was introduced into the model. The introduction of the sexual orientation of couples did not substantially change the values from those reported in the model without sexual orientation, although a higher percentage of lesbians compared to other respondents reported satisfaction with their relationships (B=2.07; p=.07).

To test the potential effects of gender, a separate regression analysis was conducted in which sex (male or female) was substituted for the sexual orientation of couples. Similar to the sexual orientation of couples, the sex of respondents did not have a substantial effect on the original model.

Socioeconomic factors, as measured by educational level and income, were not related significantly to satisfaction with relationships, nor were race and religion. Although those factors may contribute significantly to satisfaction with relationships that have not lasted as long as those in our study, processes within relationships themselves appeared to have a more important effect in shaping satisfaction after couples have been together for a long period of time which, in our study, averaged 30 years. Perhaps, the quality of interactions in relationships that last eclipse factors such as religion, income, education, race, sex and sexual orientation.

The data have implications for understanding the quality of long-term relationships and for developing hypotheses that may be tested in subsequent research. Two relational processes were identified in the logistic regression analysis as most influential in contributing to satisfaction: minimal conflict (Beta = -2.88; p = <.001) and psychologically intimate communication (Beta = 2.83; p = <.001). The power of these factors in shaping satisfaction did not change substantially when sexual orientation of couples and the sex of respondents were introduced into the model.

The data suggest strongly that what we have referred to as psychologically intimate communication (i.e. psychological intimacy) was a crucial element in nurturing and sustaining a positive attachment between these partners. The process of developing effective communication characterized by openness and honesty between partners may have had the critical function of containing conflict to manageable levels. When individuals felt safe enough to be themselves

with their partners and to reveal inner thoughts and feelings that were not customarily part of other relationships, a sense of psychological intimacy developed. More than any other expression, references to one's partner as "my best friend" captured the meaning of psychological intimacy to respondents. Being connected in a close relationship that included having one's inner thoughts and feelings accepted by a partner, if not understood, may, not only have nurtured a sense of psychological intimacy, but also contributed progressively to deeper feelings of satisfaction in recent years (see: Mackey, Diemer and O'Brien 2001).

Achieving a sense of mutual intimacy in relationships may emerge from relational processes that involved past conflict and expressions of negativity between partners. Previous studies have found that behaviors perceived as negative in the present may benefit relationships in the long run (see: Mackey, Diemer & O'Brien 2000). Perhaps, the honest expression of thoughts and feelings associated with interpersonal differences within a relationship, in which mutual acceptance and respect prevail, resulted in higher levels of satisfaction in later years. Our data resonate with the hypothesis that psychological intimacy, at least in several relationships, resulted from interpersonal processes that were not free of conflict. The narratives of subjects in our study often contained reports of earlier conflictual periods, especially after couples had been together for many years.

The key in understanding psychological intimacy between partners after they have been together for many years may lie in how partners deal with differences between them; that is, intimacy may develop when partners find ways of talking about conflict so that negativity was contained. The communicative process that resulted in a sense of being psychologically intimate varied. For at least some respondents, mostly heterosexual males, it may have involved "putting into words" the difficulty in expressing inner feelings, while concurrently not being able to talk

about those feelings, especially when an individual had been reared in an environment that did not support expressive behavior.

The findings and our interpretation of them do not fit well with previous research about the association between conflict management styles and relational satisfaction. Other studies have suggested that avoidance in discussing conflict leads to dissatisfaction with relationships. In our study, over half of the respondents, usually men, reported avoidant conflict management styles during recent years; yet, 85 % of respondents reported satisfaction with their relationships. Among many couples in which there was at least one avoidant partner there was a quality in many responses that we refer to as "communicating about communication." If an avoidant partner could offer what appeared to be an understandable explanation for his/her difficulties in confronting conflict, the process gradually appeared to neutralize the development of resentment, guilt and estrangement associated with festering conflict. As noted above, that hypothesis was connected to how an individual was reared. If one had not been part of a family that was accepting and supportive of direct expressions of feelings about interpersonal differences, it was very difficult to modify avoidant styles of conflict management. Acknowledging that characteristic and "selectively understanding" it was often enough to reduce the insidious process of estrangement between partners. Even when thoughts and feelings about conflict were difficult to discuss, our data suggested that satisfaction with relationships was sustained.

Such a conversation may have had the effect of enabling the other partner to "know" why there were difficulties in discussing differences. As a consequence, anger at perceived withholding behavior was defused and guilt of feeling responsible for the "problem" may have been attenuated. Acknowledgement and acceptance of how difficult it was for individual partners to express their thoughts and feelings about relationships were part of effective

communication, which was an indispensable element in psychological intimacy. By reducing the stress and pressure for change, acceptance was apparently the vehicle for the development of dialogue about relationships, which probably resulted in higher levels of satisfaction in recent years (Mackey, Diemer and O'Brien 2000).

A psychosocial by-product of "communication about communication" and "selective understanding" was the recognition of compensatory qualities in partners, especially in those who had difficulty in confronting differences. Loyalty, kindness, fidelity and sharing equitably in household responsibilities served as balances to difficulties in expressiveness. Those perceived strengths of a partner may have served as a buffer to the development of negativity. The hypothesis of compensatory qualities is important since much of the research on satisfaction suggests that mutual confrontation is an important characteristic of happy relationships. When there is difficulty in mutually confronting thoughts and feelings about differences, the perception of positive qualities in a partner may serve as a balance and compensate for limitations.

Another perspective for understanding satisfaction in these relationships needs to be considered. It is related to the way in which respondents may have needed to frame their perceptions of their relationships after many years together. Respondents may have needed to emphasize positive aspects of their relationships and to de-emphasize negative ones in order to be consistent cognitively about remaining together. Other researchers have hypothesized that people in relationships may need to construct idealized images of their partners in order to contain disappointing realities. Cognitive consistency theory suggests that framing perceptions in that way constructs a rationale for staying in relationships and for containing conflict. We have no way of knowing how much the need to be cognitively consistent shaped the observations of respondents. However, the forthrightness of respondents about sensitive aspects of their lives

such as a decline in the quality of sexual relations, often related to sexual dysfunction, suggest that a need to be cognitively consistent may not have been a significant dynamic in shaping their reports. The stories, which we were privileged, to hear contained a broad range of positive and negative observations about the quality of relationships. Rarely did these reports appear to be shaped primarily by idealized illusions. Of course, such an observation needs to be tempered by the "psychic reality" that negative feelings that might compromise relational stability were beyond the conscious awareness of an individual.

In summary, this study identified two factors, containment of major conflict and psychologically intimate communication, that have a substantive role in shaping satisfaction reported by partners that have remained together for an average of three decades. The data are useful in developing an understanding of satisfaction in stable relationships and in building hypotheses that may be tested in subsequent research. Partners found ways to be satisfied with their relationships even when there were persistent difficulties in confronting thoughts and feelings about conflict. We propose that communication about communication, selective understanding and balances facilitate the containment of conflict through the development of psychologically intimate communication, important factors in nurturing satisfaction with relationships. Apparently, those relational processes may eclipse socioeconomic and other exogenous factors in shaping satisfaction after couples have been together for many years.

Part 3: Concluding thoughts

This final section begins where this monograph started with a review of the rationale on which the research methodology was based. After an extensive review of the professional literature, we identified gaps in the studies of loving or primary relationships. That research was focused mostly on heterosexual marriages and principally on white middle class couples. When our data was collected in the 1990's, relatively little attention had been paid to long-term relationships, to diversity including same sex relationships and to the meaning of marriage from the perspectives of individual partners. Therefore, we decided to focus our efforts on an exploratory study of couples that had stayed together for at least 15 years. In addition to middle-class white heterosexual married couples, we recruited blue-collar, Black, Latino, and same sex couples as well as those of different religious backgrounds. In-depth, focal question interviews with individual partners were designed to explore how they experienced and viewed their relationships over time. Doctoral students in counseling psychology at Boston College, who had strong clinical skills, conducted the interviews. Essentially, the method of data collection adapted clinical interviewing skills to the needs of the research.

The research method was different from other studies, which, for the most part, used quantitative approaches. We utilized the existing research literature on primary relationships, to organize an interview guide that included questions germane to our goal, which was to explore various dimensions of these relationships from the inside out; that is, to ask individual partners to tell us their stories in their own words. The narrative method of data collection fit with our interest in exploring a previously neglected aspect of research on primary relationships that last.

The research began with a study of a small group of partners in 12 marriages (N = 24). Additional subjects were recruited based on the goals of studying a diverse sample, although the interview format remained constant as the sample grew. We added couples to fill gaps in the existing sample; for example, African-American and Jewish couples as well as same sex couples. Over a period of 5 years, the sample grew to 216 partners in 108 relationships.

We think it is important for the reader to be aware of those procedures in order to put the discussion of interview themes and our thoughts into perspective. We were exploring new territory so a qualitative methodology fit with the need to elicit information about relationships that last from individual partners, to develop understandings of factors that correlate with longevity and to derive ideas that might be helpful in future studies.

We explored the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of respondents (i.e. each partner) about their own experiences in these relationships along with their observations of how they viewed the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of their partners. By interviewing respondents separately, we were able to assess and to compare how each partner viewed both their own experiences in these relationships and those of their partners. There was congruence in the responses. For example, for men who reported an avoidant style of managing conflict, a similar response was found among their partners as they discussed their observations of the partners' styles.

We were pleased with the honesty of these respondents about very personal matters. Perhaps, individuals become more comfortable with discussing thoughts and feelings about personal issues, such as those explored in this research, as they grow older. Moreover, the skill and personal qualities of our interviewers were very important in meeting our goals. Each

interviewer was a competent clinician who accepted, respected and had genuine empathy for the individual respondents in this study.

Each interview began by asking respondents to discuss what had attracted them to their future partners. Individuals were attracted by mutual interests, which they sheared, such as common cultural and religious backgrounds. Given the focus of our research, we were especially interested in how personal qualities observed in potential partners, which were manifested in social role behaviors, nurtured attractiveness and how those qualities mirrored or were different from those that respondents viewed within themselves. Of surprise were their reports that we conceptualized as interpersonal fit. When respondents discussed their views of personal qualities in their future partners, they tended to focus on how that person was different from them as interaction evolved in their relationships. Not only different but how differences complemented qualities that they perceived within themselves. For example, individuals who saw themselves as emotional and expressive in dealing with interpersonal issues reported being attracted to someone who was perceived as rational and analytic.

At the same time, respondents reported similarities, often in the values that were shared with that other person. Symmetry - notably in relational values of mutual trust, respect and fairness – offered stability, especially during stressful times, while complementary differences appeared to fulfill a sense of completeness within the selves of respondents, and with several couples, served as a stimulus for further development. .

The reports of respondents about the qualities that brought individuals together when they first met did not change substantively over the years. Complementary fit was the way in which 84% of respondents described role behaviors in their relationships in the early years and declined to only 77% in recent years. The stability of these innate qualities suggest that they may have

been part of the character structure of individual partners, which were not likely to change substantially over the years..

At the level of values, mutuality in trust and respect appeared to offer stability to these relationships, especially during stressful periods. Among gay males, however, trust was compromised during the early and middle years, apparently by outside relationships of one or both partners. Trust and respect may also have been grounded in the character structure of individuals and not as changeable as other values. In other words, if one was trustful and respectful person when one met the person who would become one's partner, one continued to be trustful and respectful as a relationship evolved, except when relational attachments were threatened.

Compared to trust and respect, sensitivity and understanding did modify as the years passed. Considerable modification toward becoming sensitive and understanding was reported by many respondents from early to recent years, although males, both straight and gay, perceived themselves and were perceived by their partners as less sensitive than females. Apparently, sensitivity and understanding were qualities that developed in several respondents from their interactions with partners over the years. Compared to trust and respect which remained quite stable over the years, several respondents learned to become more sensitive and understanding, a learning process that resulted in modifications in role behaviors but not substantial changes.

If one outcome of our research stands out, it is that each factor that was explored needs to be assessed in the context of other factors. A multidimensional perspective is important in attempting to understand how partners adapted to each other as they lived out their lives together over the years. For example, the data indicated a significant difference between lesbian and other couples in how they reported major relational conflict and how personal and interpersonal

differences were handled. The data suggest that gender and the culture of a relationship that emerged between two women from early to recent years may have been more powerful variables in shaping how couples adapted to conflict. Women may be oriented differently than men in acknowledging major differences and how differences were worked out over the years. The culture of lesbian relationships seemed to support a commitment to developing face-to-face modes of dealing with conflict rather than avoiding them.

From a different contextual angle, the findings suggested that lesbians were as adept as heterosexual men at avoiding face-to-face discussions of serious interpersonal difficulties, notably during the early and into the middle years of their relationships. However, lesbian couples were more adaptive than others in developing face-to-face modes of dealing with those difficulties as the years unfold. The culture that developed between two women in a relationship, which included commitment to improving the quality of relationships and mutual collaboration, may have provided the milieu for that type of learning and change to take place. For many lesbian respondents, couples psychotherapy was a valuable resource for enabling their relational strengths to emerge.

Compared to lesbian relationships, modes of handling differences and modifications in those modes were different in several other relationships. From early to recent years, heterosexual women were confrontive in managing conflict with their husbands who tended to be avoidant. Unlike women in same sex relationships, avoidance among heterosexual males was reported by them and their wives to be relatively stable from early to recent years. Although avoidance among gay and heterosexual men was similar during the early and middle years, it shifted remarkably during recent years between gay male partners toward face-to-face discussions of differences. Traditionally, men have not been offered much support to resolve

interpersonal conflict through face-to-face discussions. While women may be oriented from an early age to become skilled at relational issues, which may include conflict resolution, those skills may become compromised if there is a perceived threat to the stability of a relationship. Among many lesbians, there was a fear early in relationships of losing their partners if serious differences were confronted. In order to preserve relationships that were experienced as the most important parts of their lives, direct and open discussion was avoided by many lesbian partners. Several of those respondents said that they feared that discussions of unpleasant and angry feelings would destroy their relationships. While many partners avoided confrontation by withdrawing into silence, others used words to obscure strong feelings even as they continued to discuss their experiences at an intellectual rather than emotional level. The relational orientation of women in same sex relationships was a valuable resource in adopting direct, face-to-face modes of handling differences during the middle and recent years.

Race/ethnicity is another example of understanding behavior in relationships from a multidimensional perspective. African American partners reported more major conflict during the early years of their relationships compared to other heterosexual couples. In fact, reports of major conflict among African American early in their relationships resembled reports of major conflict among same sex couples and heterosexual couples during the child-rearing or middle years. A major source of those serious difficulties was in the non-traditional roles that African-American partners needed to negotiate early in their relationships. Many African-Americans, primarily women, rejected the ascribed roles that characterized the gender roles of married women in that era, which included most heterosexual women in this study. African-Americans reported, more than others, an expectation of equality and mutually in their relationships, expectations that were re-inforced by the necessity that both partners work because of economic

stress, which was fueled by racism in the post World War II years. As a consequence, roles for which there were few social norms had to be negotiated as they were in same sex relationships. Conflict was a by-product of the process of finding mutually acceptable roles with which African-American couples had to contend early in their relationships.

When "traditional" role behaviors were differentiated by sex and internalized by partners as they were in most other heterosexual relationships, major conflict tended to be attenuated; not eliminated but attenuated. When role behaviors needed to be negotiated, as they were in same sex and black relationships, major conflict grounded in individual differences in needs and expectations often resulted. Later, during the middle years of these relationships, when differences in parenting roles became a reality among White and Mexican-American couples, major conflict increased for them but remained relatively stable for African- American couples. The latter may have already worked out many of their significant differences, mainly a higher level of mutuality and integration in roles before the child-rearing years, while other heterosexual couples were facing new challenges in negotiating a new set of roles, child-rearing. These new roles required a new set of skills, which needed to be negotiated especially when their children reached adolescence. Those changes were happening when substantial numbers of heterosexual women became employed outside of the home, which added additional negotiating challenges to the process of relational adaptation.

While those findings are important in understanding how couples adapt, it is equally important to assess the data within the sociocultural context of the era. During that time, most gender roles were ascribed; the prevailing expectations were for married women to stay at home and care for the family; husbands were employed to provide for their families. White heterosexual respondents tended to speak in these traditional terms when they talked about their

relational roles and responsibilities, African-American and gay male and female respondents had different observations about their roles. Given the socio-cultural changes that have occurred in recent decades and the gender role values that have been internalized by women and, to a lesser extent, by men, negotiations of mutually acceptable roles in primary relationships may look quite different form many of the relationships in this research, at least in the early years.

The hypothesis that interpersonal conflict is inevitable in close relationships was supported by our data. Although major conflict was reported more frequently during the early years by black and same sex couples, major conflict increased significantly for most couples during the middle years and then declined in recent years. In addition to the process of negotiating roles in "non-traditional" relationships and the "wearing thin" of complementary qualities in partners, the sources of major conflict in the middle years included differences in child-rearing, money and outside relationships, including sexual affairs. The concept of the "u-shaped" curve that depicts major conflict over the years resulted in a decline in satisfaction with relationships during the middle years. Moreover, when the percentage of major conflict reportedly increased, respondents also reported less trust and empathy (sensitivity plus understanding) between them and their partners. Of equal importance was the undermining of psychological intimacy with the increase of major conflict. The consequences of not finding adaptive ways of coping with major conflict resulted in the deterioration in the quality of relationships.

A focal issue, therefore, was not whether conflict exists or not but, rather, how couples coped with it. Beside ethnicity/race in heterosexual relationships and gender in lesbian relationships, which has already been discussed, the most significant variable about conflict management styles was gender in heterosexual relationships. Females and males were

significantly different in their modes of dealing with conflict from early to recent years, although gay men compared to heterosexual men were more similar to women in their conflict management styles by recent years. As we have already pointed out, lesbians reported an avoidant style in managing conflict, similar to heterosexual males, during earlier years but shifted to a confrontive style in recent years. We are not sure what this data may mean, since the sample of gay males was small so any inferences about the findings need to be considered with great caution. But, the findings about conflict management style (CMS) do raise some interesting questions, such as: Are males compared to females predisposed to be avoidant in dealing with conflict in primary relationships? Is the avoidant style inter-related with the gender of one's partner, since gay men seem to move to more of a confrontive style after many years compared to most heterosexual men who continue to report an avoidant style? Is the mode of managing interpersonal conflict a "learned response?" That is, are males, in general. socialized to avoid face-to-face discussions about conflict in their primary relationships? How does the context of relationships (ie. their culture) shape the CMS and support or not support modification over time? Note the change in lesbian relationships from early to recent years in CMS, which raises the question of what factors shape CMS for males and females?

We have been talking about overall patterns in dealing with conflict in these relationships. It is important to note that there were shifts in CMS from early to recent years among a sizable minority of male respondents: 68% of heterosexual males reported being avoidant during the early years, which dropped to 54% in recent years; comparatively, 62% of heterosexual women reported a confrontive CMS during the early years, which increased to 76% in recent years. That data underscore the complexity in understanding critical aspects of human relationships that last. There was quite a bit of variation in how individual partners adapted in

dealing with conflict. The aggregated data tell only a part of the story; the narratives add a dimension that cannot be captured in the statistics alone. These data suggest a need to study, not only how, but why some individuals modify their behaviors over time while others do not.

Since a majority of heterosexual men (54%) continued to be avoidant in their CMS during recent years, how did couples adapt to that difference? The process of adaptation in this important dimension of relationships appeared to involve three inter-related elements:

communication about communication,

selective understanding, and

balances between partners.

Communication about communication occurred when a partner, usually a male, was able to let the other partner know about how difficult it was to express his/her feelings about differences. To put one's difficulties about expressing feelings about differences into words and to have the communication accepted by the other person was often sufficient to maintain or restore a sense of connection in these relationships. Such a response also helped to neutralize the guilt that many women felt since they tended to take comparatively more responsibility for relational matters than did their male partners, especially when the latter were avoidant. The process of communicating about communication often resulted in selective understanding of the reason(s) for specific interpersonal behavior, such as being raised in a family that did not encourage or tolerate open discussion of feelings about interpersonal conflict. What emerged from communicating about communication and the development of understanding for avoidant behavior was gradual acceptance of (avoidant) behaviors that had been an irritant between partners. When one person in a relationship felt less pressure from the other person to change, a reduction in defensiveness was experienced. Concurrently, the other partner, who was more confrontive in his/her CMS, felt less conflicted about the partner’s avoidance.

An outcome of success at communicating about communication and selective understanding was the recognition of qualities in a partner that may have been obscured by negativity. When individuals were not as confrontive in an angry way about differences, they were freed-up to recognize strengths in their partner that were previously obscured by anger and guilt. Not infrequently, that recognition led to the acknowledgement of balances in relationships.

Building a relationship based on balances was a reciprocal process. In responding to a partner, whether those needs were grounded in traits, developmental differences or both, individuals also experienced a fulfillment of their own needs. As we have suggested earlier, the stability of conflict management styles may have been related to fundamental qualities within the self, which were not likely to change for many people as relationships matured. Communicating about communication and selective understanding enabled many couples to find and maintain relational balances that apparently addressed the needs of each person.

A significant casualty of major conflict was a decline in the sense of psychological intimacy between partners, which occurred mostly during the middle years. Compared to the early years when 57 % of all respondents had positive responses to our inquiries about psychological intimacy, responses to similar inquiries fell to 52 % during the middle years and rose to 76 % in recent years. Comparable percentages for positive reports about sexual relations were: 76 % (early years), 59 % (middle years) and 49 % (recent years). Thus, as the frequency and satisfaction with sexual relations declined over the years, an opposite trajectory was found in psychological intimacy, the sense that respondents had of their relationships as a place in which they could share personal thoughts and feelings about themselves and their relationships not expressed customarily with others. In the words of one respondent: ”I could be myself.” In

exploring this variable, we focused on cognitive themes about the meaning of relationships to individual partners rather than on specific interpersonal behaviors.

Because of the increase in psychological intimacy in recent years as reported by 76% of all respondents, a close assessment was done of the factors that shaped that trend. A chi-square analysis of all research variables with psychological intimacy as the dependent variable revealed that social and demographic factors such as age, race, education, income and religion did not have statistically significant relationships to psychological intimacy during recent years. That finding is important to the process of understanding factors that contribute to the quality of psychological intimacy in committed relationships that last for many years.

Based on a chi-square analysis, factors that were associated significantly with reports of psychological intimacy in recent years were identified and tested with logistic regression. As noted earlier, a substantial correlation between communication and psychological intimacy (phi=.50) was uncovered, so communication was not included as an independent variable in the model; psychological intimacy is actually psychologically intimate communication.

Two theoretical models that were tested with logistic regression. The first model included the sexual orientation of couples (heterosexual, lesbian or gay male) as an independent variable. To assess the significance of gender rather than sexual orientation on reported psychological intimacy, gender was substituted for sexual orientation in a second model (Note: Because of redundancy the two factors could not be included in the same model.).

The results suggest that factors within relationships, themselves, had a more powerful effect in shaping the meaning of psychological intimacy than did social and demographic factors. The data suggested further that a sense of psychological intimacy was nurtured when interpersonal conflict was kept to minimal levels, when one's partner dealt with conflict in the

relationship by initiating face to face discussion of differences (ie. confrontive CMS), when one had a feeling that the relationship was fair and when there were expressions of affection between partners through touching and hugging.

What do these data suggest about the development of psychological intimacy in relationships that have endured for many years? Finding means for the containment of serious conflict through the process identified earlier in this discussion (communication about communication, selective understanding and the emergence of balances), appeared to nurture the development of psychologically intimate communication between partners. Again, we are talking about a dynamic process within which individuals had a sense that their partner was psychologically available to hear their personal thoughts and feelings. Respondents talked of experiencing psychological intimacy when they were able to share their inner thoughts and feelings that were accepted, if not understood, by the partner. Content of those communications varied but a sense of mutual connection between partners appeared to be the essence of psychological intimacy. When respondents talked of being psychologically intimate with their partners, a sense of peace and contentment permeated their remarks.

Interestingly, the variable of a partner's conflict management style and not that of a respondent was significant in the development of psychologically intimate communication after couples had been together for many years. That finding may suggest that directness on the part of a partner, which in heterosexual relationships was usually the wife, acted as a catalyst in the development of psychological intimacy. The catalytic effect sometimes resulted in conflict between partners before they found a route to reconcile and move on to a state of psychological intimacy. The word most often used by respondents in discussing in discussing the meaning of

psychological intimacy in these relationships, notably in recent years, was the partner as a "best friend."

Physical affection between partners was a significant variable in shaping the quality of psychological intimacy in recent years. That makes sense. One way of "showing" psychological intimacy was in being physically expressive with one's partner. Unlike earlier years, being able to communicate about personal issues was more highly valued by respondents as they aged rather than sexual relations, which several respondents said were compromised by physical health factors and the aging process.

A sense of fairness about relationships was another factor that helped to nurture and support psychologically intimate communication between partners. Although personal and interpersonal differences were inevitable, respondents needed to feel that their relationships were fair in order for a sense of psychological intimacy to develop. Respondents talked about "things balancing out" despite differences between them and their partners. Experiencing their relationships as equitable nurtured a deepening sense of relational communion between partners.

We explored the significance of families, friends and religion to these couples. The data underscored the dynamics, variability and complexity of understanding the significance of families and friends to the well-being of these relationships. These respondents appeared to be highly selective in identifying with and internalizing qualities of important people, which became valued resources for individual partners and couples as relationships developed over the years. The interplay of culture and personal processes were evident as we listened to respondents tell their stories. For most respondents, family support was important in helping them to adapt in these relationships. When families could not or would not respond in accepting and supportive

ways, especially among same sex couples, couples relied on friends to meet important psychological and social needs, similar to the roles that families played for heterosexual couples.

An important piece of data in exploring adaptation in these relationships was the significance of religion to these respondents, and the search for spiritual meaning in the lives of many of them. Among several respondents the spiritual significance associated with religion eclipsed religiosity during recent years. For some individuals they were able to engage in that search while maintaining identification with their religious traditions. For others the search, especially among lesbians, resulted in movement away from organized religions and the adoption of new belief systems and values. Even when religious practices faded into the background, several respondents reported that they endeavored to lead their lives according to values that had become a part of them from their religious backgrounds. Quakers differed qualitatively from other respondents in their explicit explorations of how Quaker beliefs were integrated into and shaped the quality of their relationships.

After being together for an average of 30 years, 85% of all respondents reported being satisfied with their relationships compared to 75% in the early years and 61% in the middle years. As with the data on psychological intimacy, there was no evidence that social, economic, and educational factors shaped the quality of satisfaction nor did the sexual orientation of respondents. Using procedures similar to those used for analyzing psychological intimacy, a theoretical model was constructed and tested with logistical regression. Two variables emerged as being most influential in shaping satisfaction in recent years. They were the containment of conflict and psychological intimacy.

This monograph has presented our research focused on how partners adapted in their relationships that had lasted and average of 30 years. The methodology in part 1 has been

discussed in detail for the benefit of colleagues who want to understand the design of the research. In part 2 of this monograph, the central themes that emerged from the data, which are the elements of adaptation, are presented. They include:

*Relational fit of partners: Symmetry to complementarity;

* Conflict and its management;

*. Intimacy: Sexual and psychological;

* Families and friends;

* Religion; and

* Satisfaction.

Finally, a few thought are offered In part 3 that focus on key findings from our explorations with these couples.

In conclusion, we have learned about the complexity of the adaptive process from the perspectives of individual partners who have taught us that there are no simple answers to how individuals survive psychosocially in relationships that last. We have tried to respect that reality. The 216 individuals who have generously shared important parts of their lives with us have had "the final word."

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