Relationship Stability: a qualitative psychological study of long-term lesbian couples

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The Graduate School of Education

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and Research Methods

Counseling Psychology

RELATIONSHIP STABILITY: A QUALITATIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL

STUDY OF LONG-TERM LESBIAN COUPLES

Dissertation

by

ELIZABETH REUMAN-HEMOND

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

December 1994

I.   Title: Relationship Stability: A Qualitative Psychological Study of
        Long-term Lesbian Couples

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IV.   Abstract

This study investigated factors which influenced stable, primary love
relationships among twelve lesbian couples who had been together at least
fifteen years and had not reared children together. Each participant was
interviewed separately in a retrospective, semi-structured interview that
assessed the impact of selected factors over the course of the relationship.
Each factor was examined to determine its influence in the beginning phase
of the relationship (the first 5 years), in the middle phase (5-10 years into the
relationship), and most recently (beyond 10 years into the relationship).
Interpersonal dynamics as well as the influences of culture, religion, values,
finances, and social supports were explored to determine their impact on
relationship stability.

Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed. Interview data were
coded and analyzed independently by two readers for themes relevant to
relationship quality and stability. Consensual agreement on the scoring was
reached in all cases, and the inter-rater reliability was .84.
HyperRESEARCH software was utilized to organize interview data.

Fifteen themes emerged from the data. Four early relationship
themes included initial attraction, early adjustments, family reaction, and
relationship expectations. Five themes encompassing interpersonal
variables included communication, roles, relatedness, satisfaction, and

stability. Six external themes which impacted the relationships included social supports, homophobia and societal attitudes, religion and spirituality, finances, race/ethnicity, and models. Additionally, developmental features were identified. The significance of these findings to women's psychological development, interpersonal fit in lesbian partnerships, and patterns of relationship adjustment over time were discussed.

This study found that long-term lesbian couples developed high levels of intimacy, trust, understanding, and communication in their relationships. Mutuality in decision-making and flexibility in roles were the norm. They valued an ethic of fairness and commitment. Many relationships experienced significant conflict in the 5-10 year period, leading to a deeper sense of relatedness, intimacy, and satisfaction after 10 years. Negative influences included standardized religion, physical and mental health problems, limited social supports, and negative cultural attitudes towards gays, lesbians, and bisexuals.

Date of Defense: September 21, 1994

Acknowledgments

The completion of this project marks not only the end of a year of focused research, but also the conclusion of many years of formal education and training for my professional life as a psychologist. Recognizing all the family, friends, teachers, mentors, and experiences which have shaped me in my development is not possible, but there are a few select individuals towards whom I feel compelled to express my heartfelt appreciation.

Every flower that blooms begins its journey as a seedling in need of water and light. I thank my parents, Bob and Dorothy Reuman, for the models of academic achievement and humanitarian service they exemplified, for the belief they conveyed in my intellectual and interpersonal capabilities, and for the personal and economic resources they provided that allowed me to pursue a fulfilling career. Their passions for music, philosophy, and helping others are brought together in my abilities to be creative, reflective, and caring. These attributes are critical to my personal and professional life. I thank all my siblings for their encouragement, particularly my sister, Andy. Andy and I often shared the stresses and successes of our concurrent doctoral programs, and we lived together amid the insanity of writing our dissertations. I have so appreciated her growth-promoting reflections, her spontaneous and outlandish humor, and a lifetime of support.

The idea for a dissertation topic rarely develops in isolation. I had the good fortune to be involved in my internship while I desperately sought a meaningful focus for my research. Within an environment which celebrated diversity, among positive gay role models, and motivated to pursue a project which might satisfy my idealistic notion of making a difference, I was able to

formulate this study on long-term lesbian relationships. Mostly, I thank Dr. Jeanne Stanley, who deserves significant credit for proposing this idea, for helping me find participants, for feeding me articles and reading my drafts, and, most importantly, for being a true friend through the many challenges I faced during the past two years. For many of the same reasons, I also acknowledge Drs. Natalie Eldridge, Leah Fygetakis, and John Derbort.

The other influence on the development of my topic emanated from research concerning long-term relationships being conducted by Dr. Bernie O'Brien and Dr. Dick Mackey at Boston College. I am extremely grateful to Bernie for agreeing to chair my committee when he was already involved in so many others, for spending such substantive time with me discussing my project, the interview material, and my writing, and for responding to my academic needs beyond what I expected numerous times. Bernie was a model of how faculty members can facilitate the progress of a dissertation and foster a continued interest in conducting research among students.

I also wish to thank the two readers on my committee, Dr. Sandra Crump and Dr. Dick Mackey. Sandra has been personable and supportive to me throughout my graduate career, and has provided valuable insights and considerations both as a classroom teacher and as a member of my committee. I have appreciated Dick's help with organizing my vast amount of data, flexibility with my time constraints, and willingness to let me use his office and computer.

Many people helped with the practical elements of my dissertation. First and foremost, I extend the deepest gratitude to the twelve couples who participated in this project; their willingness to share their personal experiences and the articulate way they did so were fundamental to my dissertation's

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Background of the Study

During the twentieth century, the fact that just over 90% of Americans marry has remained constant (Bjorksten & Stewart, 1984). While relatively stable as a prominent component of the American social system, marriage also has experienced significant changes reflecting shifts in societal attitudes and values. The rise in divorce rates, the changing nature of women's roles in the family unit, the doubling of the number of dual-income families, the delay of marriage until later years, the decline in the number of children per family, the development of different child-rearing practices, and the diversification of marital styles and partnerships have all contributed to redefine the landscape of marriage and the family (Bjorksten & Stewart, 1984).

Both curiosity and the pursuit of interpersonal fulfillment have spurred questions as to what contributes to healthy and happy marital alliances. Over the years, popular interest and scientific inquiry have motivated a significant amount of psychological research directed at understanding the heterosexual marital relationship. Research has sought to identify variables which influence the quality and/or longevity of marriage (Lewis & Spanier, 1979). Few studies, however, have examined these constructs beyond 10 or 15 years of marriage. Amongst a climate of increasing divorce rates, the question of what features are requisite for a marriage to last has sought empirical explanation.

Research in these areas generally focuses on mainstream marriages; samples are often drawn from White, middle-class, highly educated,

heterosexual populations, thus ignoring cultural diversity in terms of race, religion, class, and sexual orientation. Research which follows a mainstream path perpetuates a limited view of what constitutes a healthy, normal, and viable committed relationship and fails to reflect its changing nature in modern society. Studies conducted by Hamel (1993) on African American couples, Kanter (1994) on Jewish couples, and Mengden (1994) on Mexican American couples are exceptions to the trend towards ethnocentrism both in their focus on non-mainstream populations and their scope of examining multiple individual, interpersonal, and sociocultural influences on relationship longevity.

There is a paucity of research on committed gay or lesbian couples in comparison to efforts made in the heterosexual domain. While some attention has been given to features of short-term gay or lesbian relationships, research on non-heterosexual long-term relationships is limited and has focused primarily on the gay male (Peplau, 1982). Although efforts directed at understanding the nature of various partnerships, including long-term lesbian couples, have contributed valuable insights about a broad spectrum of relationships among men and women (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983), there are few studies which investigate the development and nature of lesbian relationships lasting ten years or more exclusively (Dorn, 1991; Johnson, 1991). In the absence of scientific data which describe factors contributing to longevity in lesbian relationships, these partnerships are made invisible, pathologized, or implicitly expected to conform to the dynamics, customs and expectations of heterosexual couples (Rich, 1980). Therefore there is a need for exploratory, qualitative research on lesbians in long-term relationships.

Lesbians have experienced their own shifts in identity as a subculture of American society, and these transitions have impacted on the functioning of their partnerships. One of the most prominent features of gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity development is negotiating self-acceptance in a cultural context which historically espouses a deep-rooted hostility towards a homosexual orientation (Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective, 1987). This hostility is termed homophobia. Background knowledge of the fluctuating tide of mainstream culture's acceptance and discomfort towards lesbians over the twentieth century is critical to the current understanding of lesbians both as individuals and as participants in couples. Societal and internalized homophobic attitudes are interwoven throughout the psychological and interpersonal experiences of lesbians (Zevy & Cavallaro, 1987), as is apparent in the content of much of the interview data collected through this study.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the combined discriminatory practices of the religious, medical, and legal institutions have left a damaging legacy, consisting of distrust on the part of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals and of fear and hostility on the part of mainstream society. The effect was to force gays, lesbians, and bisexuals underground (Faderman, 1991). Through this separation from mainstream society, the gay community congregated and established its own norms, values, and culture, often reflected in dress and music, which have changed over time. In various decades and among different classes, individual identities such as "butch," "femme," "kiki," or "lesbian feminist" reflected particular class values and social constructions and determined appropriate codes of behavior for relations between lesbian lovers (Faderman, 1991). These differences often led to internal political dissension

and separatism, creating opposing splinter groups within the gay community. Within the last decade, the gay subculture has worked towards political unity, increasingly recognizing and affirming its internal diversity.

Since the 50's, the gay community has assumed a presence and power, and recognized itself as a minority group. The Stonewall Rebellion of 1969, a series of riots in which gay men and lesbians revolted against law enforcement officials invading a gay bar in Greenwich Village, began to reverse the trend towards the increasing oppression of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. The combination of the sexual revolution and the feminist movement created more space and approval for lesbian love. It became apparent that "homophobia, and not homosexuality, needed curing," (Faderman, 1991, p. 214).

Throughout these cultural transitions, lesbians were involved in intimate love relationships, but, like their sexual orientation, these partnerships remained invisible. With the recent trend towards tolerance, acceptance, and affirmation, lesbians have felt freer to disclose their identities and relationships. Lesbian relationships appear to have evolved from "romantic friendships" of the nineteenth century, to undisclosed loving and sexual dyads, to visible committed partnerships that have increasingly felt the option to raise children (Faderman, 1991). Yet few efforts have been made to bring the complex nature of lesbian intimacies to light empirically. Lesbian relationships of both short and long-term nature exist. Exploration of the individual, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors which may impact on the satisfaction and longevity of these partnerships helps researchers, clinicians, and lesbians themselves better understand the unique features and the common threads of long-term lesbian relationships.

Statement of the Problem

This study explored variables contributing to relationship stability among lesbians in long-term relationships. The sample consisted of 12 Caucasian lesbian couples of various class and religious backgrounds, together a minimum of 15 years, who reared no children jointly. This study investigated variables, identifed themes and generated hypotheses that contributed to relationship stability within these long-term partnerships.

Marital stability, as defined by Lewis and Spanier (1979), refers to whether a relationship remains intact or ends in divorce. For the purposes of this study, relationship stability referred to whether or not the relationship was seen by the participants as their primary love relationship, and that their continued involvement reflected this commitment. Long-term partnership was defined as a committed primary love relationship between two lesbians with a minimum duration of 15 years. A lesbian was defined as any woman who identified herself as such.

A series of studies conducted at Boston College have explored themes significant to heterosexual marriages lasting twenty years or more (Demment, 1991; Hamel, 1993; Kanter, 1994; Mengden, 1994; Podbelski, 1992). Using a qualitative research methodology developed by O'Brien and Mackey (1990a), these investigations have sought a comprehensive understanding of the psycho-social influences upon the marital bond.

To address the concerns outlined above, this study employed the same qualitative methodology to understand how lesbians get along and adapt in relationships of fifteen years or more duration. Specifically, anecdotal data

were collected through interviews to explore factors previously identified as relevant to relationship stability, including communication, decision-making styles, interpersonal roles, conflict management, intimacy, and sexual relations, and the significance of these issues to the relationship over time.

In addition to focusing on interpersonal dynamics, attention was paid to the role of cultural and socioeconomic influences on the relationship, the historical context in which these relationships developed, and how societal attitudes, particularly homophobia, influenced the relationship. Specific cultural and socioeconomic influences addressed included religion and/or spiritual beliefs, race and ethnicity, income and economic factors, social supports and the influence of extended family, and other values, beliefs, or moral standards identified by the participants as significant.

Further, this study explored the developmental nature of long-term lesbian relationships through two approaches: (1) participants were asked to specify how the above-mentioned factors featured over the course of 3 phases in the relationship, with the first 5 years together comprising phase 1, 5-10 years comprising phase 2, and beyond 10 years comprising phase 3; and (2) participants were asked to identify events and generate themes which described the types of transitions which marked phases of development within their own long-term lesbian relationships and to collect data on lesbian family life cycles.

The qualitative approach adopted for this study allowed for an in-depth exploration of individual, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors and how they contributed to the development of long-term lesbian relationships over time. Partners participated separately in a semi-structured interview, describing their

subjective experiences of their relationships. The depth and open-endedness of the interview was an important aspect given the paucity of information available on long-term lesbian partnerships. Utilizing both HyperRESEARCH and SPSS-X software, the data were analyzed, thus generating themes which contributed to relationship stability.

This study broadened the understanding of factors that contribute to stability in long-term relationships in general by considering variables relevant to lesbian couples. The results were useful for generating hypotheses about interpersonal and cultural influences which disrupt or support lesbian partnerships. This study was valuable in its recognition of lesbian relationships and may improve clinicians' understanding of long-term relationships within a group which has been under-served by the psychological and psychiatric profession.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

The goal of this study was to describe long-term lesbian partnerships and to develop a theory of relationship stability relevant to this population, as there are few role models and a limited understanding of what to expect in the development of lesbians' most intimate relationships. In addition to being an innovative and timely topic, the main strength of this study was its qualitative design. Given the scarcity of previous scientific findings identifying or describing the significant features of long-term lesbian relationships, a qualitative approach provided the opportunity to explore the topic with as much depth and open-endedness as possible. The semi-structured interview format enabled the researcher to address potentially influential factors and to follow-up

on features that seemed particularly important to the interviewees, while simultaneously allowing for participants to introduce additional aspects which they deemed significant to relationship stability. Further, this approach allowed for the collection of information that was dynamic, developmental, and culturally-specific. This method is optimal for generating meaningful, substantive information in an area where empirical knowledge is limited.

The interview format enabled the researcher to explore this topic in a comprehensive manner and to obtain a wealth of information describing the experiences of lesbians in committed partnerships. Traditional objective measures would have limited the quality and quantity of information gathered, given that most objective measures have been developed and normed on heterosexual populations. The information collected from these lesbian couples generated themes and hypotheses suitable for further qualitative or quantitative research.

Qualitative methodology has its limitations. While qualitative methods are optimal for soliciting a plethora of information, such comprehensiveness is made possible through considerable expense of time. The amount of time involved in conducting, transcribing, reading, and analyzing the 24 interviews, each lasting approximately two and a half hours, was extensive. Additionally, given that the focus for this research involved a hidden population, a considerable amount of time also was required to recruit volunteers willing to participate in a face-to-face interview.

Both the strength and weakness of a qualitative design lie in the utilization of the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection. While such an approach yields a vast amount of information, allows for follow-up, and

makes room for the disclosure of unsolicited information from the interviewee, it also lends itself to the subjectivity inherent in any interpersonal exchange (Scharf, 1986). The researcher relied on subjective impressions, feelings, and insights while conducting the interviews. Unavoidably, the structure and content of the interview reflect the interviewer's own values as they relate to the choice of theory and methodology, and thus influence results. Relatedly, any known or perceived cultural differences between the researcher and volunteers, most notably differences in sexual orientation, may have limited the degree to which participants felt open to share features of their relationship. The researcher made various attempts to gain trust and minimize reticence through her own openness, empathy, and gay-affirmative stance.

The qualitative approach used in this study relied on retrospective, self-report data. Self-report data may be prone to error due to the subjects' possible propensities towards socially desirable responses and inaccurate perceptions. As sometimes happens with retrospective analyses, for instance, partners may have distorted information when recalling earlier stages of the relationship. Likewise, partners may have minimized relationship difficulties to present a more socially acceptable image. Such distortions may lead the researcher to identify inaccurate themes and subsequently to incorrect conclusions (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983).

Another limitation of self-report data is that its interpretation is subjective. To minimize this problem, the researcher clearly articulated biases, values, or assumptions before interpreting results to remain attuned to possible interpretive distortions. Additionally, each interview was transcribed and the data were coded quantitatively using a scoring system developed by O'Brien

and Mackey (1990b). The researcher and a male counterpart coded the interviews independently. When disagreements occured, they were discussed until consensual agreement was reached for each scoring protocol. A further solution to neutralize bias would have been to enlist a lesbian consultant to read and score each interview as well, but time and resource limitations made this impossible for a research project of this scope.

Other limitations have to do with size and homogeneity of the sample. Twelve lesbian couples were interviewed. All participants were Caucasian. None reared children together. Most were highly educated. The size and homogeneous demographic characteristics of the sample limited the ability to generalize findings to other populations. This is consistent with the purpose of qualitative research, however, which is to generate hypotheses rather than to generalize results (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It is important that the results of this study are read within the context of White lesbian couples, most of whom began their relationships in the 70's, and who did not raise children jointly. Through the process of "logical generalization," however, in which individuals are compared to a particular sample to determine similarity with the research participants, the findings may be useful (Barlow, Hayes, & Nelson, 1984).

Information gathered from this study suggests avenues for future research on long-term lesbian partnerships. Lesbians who currently have been together 15 years or more are part of a cohort where the inclusion of children often was not considered to be a viable possibility. Trends towards adoption and artificial insemination indicate that today's young lesbians see themselves as having more options with regard to raising a family together. Future research needs to reflect this change in the lesbian family life cycle. Additionally, similar

research should focus on seasoned gay male partnerships, with and without children.

<div align="center">

Significance of the Study
</div>

The concept of the traditional nuclear family is changing. What was once characterized by a mother, father, 2.3 children, and a pet has now developed into a much more inclusive definition. Increasingly, single-parent households, same-sex partners with and without children, and childless couples are living and loving as a family unit.

Western culture prescribes coupling as a valuable and enjoyable aspect of mature adult development. Among heterosexuals, ninety percent of Americans marry (Bjorksten & Stewart, 1984); among gay women, thirty-one percent currently consider themselves participants in a same-sex marriage and forty-six percent over forty have been in a relationship of ten years or more (Hite, 1987). Coupling is important for fulfilling these internalized cultural expectations and satisfying intimacy needs for the population in general; for lesbians in particular, partnerships provide support, validate identity, and nurture self-esteem in the context of a homophobic world (Clunis & Green, 1988). However, more than half of heterosexual first marriages end in divorce (Norton & Moorman, 1987), and lesbian couples are shrouded by a sense of impermanence about their relationships (Tanner, 1978).

It is known that such a substantial societal institution as heterosexual marriage has deleterious psychological effects when it is disrupted or fails (Gottman, 1991). Similarly, interpersonal difficulties with partners have been cited as the second most popular mental health problem presented by lesbians,

and forty-four percent of lesbians with such problems are sufficiently troubled to seek professional help (National Lesbian and Gay Health Foundation, 1987). From a mental health perspective, therefore, it seems imperative that research focuses on factors that contribute to stability and satisfaction in long-term relationships; lesbian couples have been particularly underserved in this regard. A study such as this is important in that it begins to identify factors that contribute to long-lasting relationships. Additionally, the methodology adopted for this study is significant in that it attempts to understand dynamics of long-term lesbian relationships with minimal heterosexist bias.

Lesbians are one of the last groups to be chosen as a focus for research. An important aspect of this study was to select lesbians to provide valuable insights into factors that contribute to relationship stability, thus allowing lesbians a voice and lifting the invisibility that hides their existence and experience. Given that lesbian partnerships both endure in the face of a potentially divisive cultural context and have not experienced the institutionalized legal or religious bonds that contribute to relationship stability, partners in those relationships that have survived have something of importance to say about the interpersonal dynamics that work for the long-term. This study serves to describe and validate lesbian partnerships, to broaden understanding of relationship stability, and to provide successful role models for other lesbians. The findings from this study could be beneficial to the lesbian community and to the mental health professionals who provide services to lesbians and their partners.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Historical Context for Lesbian Relationships

The second half of the twentieth century has witnessed a powerful civil rights movement; oppressed groups such as women and African Americans have fought for recognition and equality. Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals not only have faced battles around social inequality, but also have been pathologized as being abnormal by the psychological and medical community, condemned as being immoral by many religious organizations, and persecuted as anti-American by political leaders and governmental institutions (Faderman, 1991; Morin, 1991).

Organized western religion historically has considered sexual relationships between the same gender sinful. The threat of eternal damnation is a powerful deterrent away from living authentically in accordance with one's sexual orientation, and fosters guilt and self-hatred as societal stereotypes become internalized. The Catholic Church has been inflexible in modifying the judgment of its doctrine, although Protestant sects began to re-evaluate their position in the 1970's (Faderman, 1991).

The early sexologists brought negative attention to same-sex sexual attraction, judging such behavior ill and providing the explanation that lesbians were men trapped in women's bodies (Faderman, 1991). With the advent of psychoanalysis, the therapeutic task was to convert the patient to heterosexuality. Childhood attractions to members of the same sex were cause for clinical concern; therapists feared that such attachments would become

fixated as part of an individual's adult development, an integration of identity which was viewed as unhealthy.

The pathologizing attitude of the medical community is identifiable in research. Psychological research on gays and lesbians during the 1970's suffered from heterosexual bias, apparent in the proportion of research devoted to "questions of diagnosis, cause and cure," (Morin, 1977, p. 636). Clearly, same-sex attraction was viewed as the unhealthy contrast to "normal" heterosexual functioning. It was not until 1973 that the American Psychiatric Association and 1975 that the American Psychological Association removed homosexuality from their official classification of mental disorders (Conger, 1975).

Kinsey's contributions to the understanding of human sexuality shed new, yet controversial, light on the phenomenon of same-sex love. His results reported a higher incidence of same-sex tendencies than was commonly believed, finding that 28% of American women experienced a same-sex sexual attraction at some point in their adult lives (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953). Because his conclusions were reached in a climate of aversion towards gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, Kinsey himself was suspected of subversion (Faderman, 1991).

Same-sex love was seen not only as sinful and as an illness, but also as unpatriotic. In Germany during World War II, gays were required to wear pink triangles and were relegated to the lowest rung of status in the hierarchy of concentration camps (Plant, 1986). During the period of McCarthyism in the United States, gays and lesbians were considered a security risk and persecuted. President Eisenhower's legislation to ferret out homosexuality

among government employees placed members of the gay community in a bind of choosing between self-affirmation or their jobs (Faderman, 1991). This legacy of discrimination reveals itself in the psychological development of lesbians who have internalized hostile societal attitudes and necessarily affects their most intimate connections.

Since the Stonewall riots, the oppression of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals has shifted. Lesbians do not enjoy all the benefits and openness of lifestyle allowed to heterosexuals, but advancements have been made in such areas as domestic partner privileges and parenting. Permanent lesbian partnerships are increasingly recognized as a holy union by some churches, and recent years have witnessed an increase in efforts to provide legal support for gay rights, such as Clinton's proposal to accept gays, lesbians, and bisexuals into the military without discrimination.

The ambivalent tolerance of American society is reflected in the current climate of the psychological community, which has been characterized as "one of cautious acceptance," (Rothblum, 1988, p. 5). Research in the psychological and psychiatric community is just beginning to reflect more affirming cultural trends. In the spirit of valuing "the life-styles and priorities of gay people," Morin (1977) identifies the necessity for research to examine the dynamics of gay male or lesbian relationships, specifically (p. 636). The legacy of discrimination is apparent in the lack of research dedicated to understanding lesbians and their partnerships from a perspective of normalcy.

In the absence of significant research on gay or lesbian relationships, efforts are often made to apply findings from research on heterosexual relationships to the gay/lesbian/bisexual community. While it may be helpful to

review what has been found on stability and satisfaction in long-term heterosexual relationships to provide possible insight into the dynamics of non-heterosexual relationships, it would be erroneous to assume that the relational dynamics are the same without empirical support. Lesbian partnerships exist in a cultural context which impacts them in a way uniquely different from other women or from heterosexuals in general. The brief review of the literature on heterosexual relationships which follows is provided in this spirit.

Marital Themes Among Heterosexual Couples
Theories of Marital Quality and Stability

Much of the heterosexual literature discusses marital quality and satisfaction. Kelly and Conley (1987) proposed that two major theoretical perspectives exist that attempt to account for marital compatibility. The first focuses mostly on internal, personality characteristics and is favored by trait theorists and the psychoanalytic community. The second emphasizes interpersonal aspects of a relationship that determine satisfaction or stability; this view has the support of therapists who adopt a behavioral theoretical orientation. Kelly and Conley (1987) argued that the dynamics inherent within each perspective are significantly relevant to each other, and should not be viewed in isolation from each other. Their dichotomous conceptualization of marital compatibility began to appreciate the complexity of the issue, but failed to include the cultural context in which individual relationships exist, which may further influence quality and stability.

One of the most comprehensive theories of marital quality, based on the accumulation of empirical findings from approximately 300 studies, blends and

builds upon this perspective which emphasized both personality and interpersonal aspects (Lewis & Spanier, 1979). These authors operated from the assumption that marital quality predicts marital stability, and sought to identify the conditions under which marriages remain intact or dissolve. While this assumption appears intuitively sound and is supported by most research (Kelly & Conley, 1987; Lewis & Spanier, 1979), some investigators have argued that not all marriages of high quality remain intact nor do all marriages of low quality dissolve (Landis, 1963). Lewis and Spanier (1979) incorporate good judgment and communication, happiness, and satisfaction with the relationship within their definition of high marital quality.

The theoretical conceptualization proposed by Lewis and Spanier (1979) stressed that the quality of the process of interacting within a marriage and adapting to change are significant to marital satisfaction and stability. They highlighted the importance of the interactive nature of marital relationships and recognized that marriages evolve over time, i.e. that "marital quality is not a static but a dynamic concept," (p. 271). Overall, they theorized that the combination of premarital, socioeconomic, and interpersonal dyadic factors collectively influence marital quality, which in turn contributes to marital stability. Additionally, their emphasis on the developmental and transformative nature of long-term relationships underscored the necessity for examining a relationship at various points in time to assess its quality overall.

The model of a social exchange theory proposed by Lewis and Spanier (1979), with its recognition of the rewards and costs of intradyadic and extradyadic factors on marital quality and stability, is reminiscent of similar theoretical conclusions reached by Nye, White, and Frieders (1969) in their

"Partial Theory of Family Stability" and Levinger (1965) in his "Marital Cohesiveness and Dissolution: An Integrative Review." The former conceptualization identified positive affect toward spouses, constraints against dissolution of the marriage, and unattractive alternatives to marriage as central to marital stability (Nye et al., 1969). Levinger's (1965) theory stressed driving and restraining forces, and suggested that every relationship has sources of attraction, sources of barrier strength, and sources of alternate attraction. Like Lewis and Spanier's (1979) formulation, both these theories identified a composition of individual, interpersonal, and contextual factors which influence stability and quality.

Individual or Personality Factors

Various characteristics of the individual, including emotional and physical health, similarity in demographic characteristics, and particular values and personality features contribute to marital quality. With regard to health, several studies have identified the contributions of positive emotional health and limited neurotic behavior on relationship satisfaction (Kelly & Conley, 1987; Lewis & Spanier, 1979). In one study, over half of the predicted variance in marital stability and satisfaction was accounted for by the neurosis and impulse control of the partners (Kelly & Conley, 1987). Physical health also has been identified as one of the personal resources that facilitates positive marital functioning (Lewis & Spanier, 1979).

Researchers have found that homogamy with regard to particular demographic characteristics was conducive to marital quality (Lewis & Spanier, 1979). These characteristics included similarity in race, socioeconomic status,

religion, intelligence, age, and status. High levels of education also were found to correlate with marital quality (Lewis & Spanier, 1979).

Particular values and personality features appear to influence marital satisfaction. Lauer, Lauer, and Kerr (1990) assessed marital stability and satisfaction through a qualitative investigation of 100 White, upper middle class, college-educated couples who had been together at least forty-five years. These authors concluded that the values of commitment to marriage and the sharing of similar life goals, and the personality features of liking and enjoying the company of the partner and a sense of humor were critical to marital satisfaction. Additionally, personality features such as positive self-concept, the possession of interpersonal skills, and partners' knowledge of self and other before marriage contribute positively to marital quality (Lewis & Spanier, 1979).

Relational/Interpersonal Characteristics

Marital satisfaction is also a function of the quality of interaction between partners. Interpersonal characteristics such as positive regard, emotional gratification, open communication, role fit, and quality and quantity of interaction correspond with marital quality (Lewis & Spanier, 1979). A similar and shared decision-making pattern between partners also has been found to lead to marital satisfaction (Lauer et al., 1990). The importance of mutual respect, fluid communication, and satisfaction of emotional needs is evident throughout the literature.

Socioeconomic Resources

Financial resources, occupational status and stability, and household composition are critical socioeconomic factors that figure into the quality of a marriage. Family income and financial stability, for instance, as well as the husband's occupational status and both spouses' satisfaction with the wife's employment are important signs of occupational stability and the availability of adequate financial resources (Lewis & Spanier, 1979). With regard to socioeconomic variables, Lewis and Spanier (1979) concluded, "The greater the spouses' satisfaction with their lifestyle, the greater their marital quality," (p. 285).

Several authors have commented on the influence of household composition on the quality of marriage, specifically the effect that children have on their parents' relationship (Glenn, 1990; Hicks & Platt, 1970; Lewis & Spanier, 1979; Spanier & Lewis, 1980). In their review of studies examining marital quality throughout the seventies, Spanier and Lewis (1980) noted that the effects both of children and of family stage on marital quality were the two topics which received considerable research attention over the decade. Some researchers have determined that a household composition that is perceived as optimal and is financially manageable impacts positively on marital quality (Lewis & Spanier, 1979), although other authors refute this finding (Glenn, 1990; Hicks & Platt, 1970; Spanier & Lewis, 1980).

Hicks and Platt (1970), for instance, concluded that the birth of a child detracted from the quality of a marriage initially; the added demands on time, finances, and personal energy that children require diminished the time and energy that might otherwise be directed at the partners within the relationship.

With regard to marital career (or family stage), Spanier and Lewis (1980) also noted a curvilinear relationship; that is, over the course of a family life-span, there tends to be a decline in marital satisfaction somewhere in the middle of the family life cycle. Glenn (1990) reached a similar conclusion through his review of marital quality in the eighties. The variables of children and of family stage on marital quality may confound each other, however, leading to the conclusion that the decrease in marital quality may be more of a duration-of-marriage effect than a result from the transition to parenthood (Glenn, 1990).

Familial and Cultural Influences

In addition to individual, interpersonal, and socioeconomic factors, familial, social, and community resources influence marital quality. With regard to family, the marital quality of the parents' relationship, parental approval of their offspring's partner, the liking of in-laws, and the quality of the relationship between a partner and his or her parents influence a couple's marital quality (Lewis & Spanier, 1979). Relatedly, the greater the support and approval for the marriage from significant others and the greater the couple's social network and involvement in the community, the higher the marital quality (Glenn, 1990; Lewis & Spanier, 1979). Glenn (1990) summarized that among older couples, "frequency of interaction with friends was the strongest positive predictor of marital satisfaction," (p. 826). Social support is clearly an important factor in relationship quality and stability.

The second half of this century has brought about significant social and cultural changes that affect the institution of marriage and how it may be defined. The changing role of women in society has created a struggle for

equality both in the workplace and at home. This trend is reflected in a greater emphasis on the need for shared power and egalitarianism within marriages as expressed in much of the current literature on heterosexual relationship quality and satisfaction (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983; Holahan, 1984). Authors warn, however, that ambiguity in gender roles and discrepancies in power distribution among contemporary heterosexual couples leads to conflict and may have a negative impact on marital satisfaction and stability (Bjorksten & Stewart, 1984; Reibstein, 1988; White, 1990).

The concept of the traditional nuclear family is undergoing transition, as single-parent households and same-sex partners are increasingly recognized as family units. Authors have highlighted the need to focus future research on dyadic relationships other than the traditional married couple (Spanier & Lewis, 1980). This mandate from scholars in the field, these cultural transitions, and the absence of pertinent psychological research on lesbians set the stage for examining the relational dynamics operating within lesbian partnerships. Thus, this study focused on women in long-term same-sex relationships to identify factors that contributed to relationship stability over time. A review of the literature relevant to gay and lesbian partnerships follows.

Relational Themes Among Gay Male and Lesbian Couples

Research on gay male or lesbian relationships is in its infancy. Given that 31% of lesbians have been or consider themselves currently involved in a same-sex marriage (Hite, 1987) and that 75% are currently involved in a steady relationship (Peplau & Amaro, 1982), lesbians are being under-served in the research literature. Kurdek, Peplau, and their associates have been significant

contributors to furthering the psychological understanding of gay and lesbian relationships empirically.

In order to identify the distinctions and the commonalities of various types of relationships, Kurdek (1991b) synthesized several similarities and differences between heterosexual and gay/lesbian couples that emerged from research. Gay male and lesbian couples share several similarities with heterosexual partnerships. Both appraise the quality of their relationships equally. Both evolve through phases beginning with passion and maturing to trust and security. Relationship quality in both is predicted by similar psychological variables between the partners, and significant differences in psychological profiles between partners is directly related to relationship distress and dissolution for both heterosexual and gay/lesbian couples (Kurdek, 1991b).

Being a member of an invisible and oppressed group creates a different partnered experience for the gay male or lesbian. Gay and lesbian relationships occur, for instance, in the cultural context of negative societal attitudes and thus partnerships often remain ignored or denied to the larger community. Family members are often a small source of support for the couple. There are few barriers (e.g., legal, religious) that discourage dissolution of a relationship (Kurdek, 1991b).

In addition to differences in the cultural context in which they exist, gay and lesbian alliances vary from heterosexuals in their typical relationship composition and in the emphasis of certain interpersonal values. Gay or lesbian couples are different from heterosexual couples in that they are often likely to remain a dyad throughout the life of a relationship because children

historically have not been a common feature. Partnerships are often characterized by an ethic of equity in roles and distribution of power, and sexual activity outside the relationship is more often permissible (Kurdek, 1991b). Most long-term lesbian couples, however, have discussed the issue of monogamy and agreed that it was not acceptable to have sexual relations outside the relationship (Dorn, 1990; Johnson, 1990).

Individual or Personality Factors

Individual and personality factors that have correlated with relationship quality among gay and lesbian couples include low autonomy, strong intrinsic motivation for being in the relationship, and few beliefs that conflict or disagreement is detrimental to the relationship (Kurdek, 1988). These features suggest that interdependence, openness to the discussion of differences, and commitment to the relationship give lesbian relationships some of their vitality. Self-esteem and life satisfaction also are directly related to relationship satisfaction among dual career lesbian couples (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990). Homogamy with respect to age, income, and education is characteristic of some lesbian partnerships (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987a), although others have concluded that relationship satisfaction for lesbians is not significantly associated with similarity on demographic characteristics, such as level of education or degree of religiousness (Peplau, Padesky, & Hamilton, 1982). Research demonstrates that lesbian partners show more homogamy with regard to relationship beliefs and values than heterosexual or gay male couples (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987a).

Lesbians also bring with them into relationships their identification as women. While traditional theorists view healthy adult development as a progression towards separation and autonomy (Erikson, 1950), feminist theorists suggest that mature development for women is through connection with, rather than separation from, significant others (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1984; Surrey, 1984, 1987). In The Reproduction of Mothering, Chodorow (1978) postulated that girls and boys develop differently because of their differing early relationships with their primary caretaker, typically the mother. Boys sense they are different from their mother, and so separate. Girls sense they are similar to their mother, and so remain connected. As a result, a girl's sense of self demonstrates greater boundary flexibility, relational capacities, and tendency toward intimacy; as adults, then, women are more concerned with affective ties than are men (Chodorow, 1978). Because the White male model of development is so thoroughly instilled, these traits characteristic of female adult development often have been devalued (Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosenkrantz, & Vogel, 1970). There is recent evidence, however, to suggest that this discrimination has changed (Broverman, 1984).

Miller (1984) and Surrey (1984), feminist theorists from the Stone Center at Wellesley College, have further articulated this viewpoint in their self-in-relation theory. These researchers emphasized that the goal of female development was increased relational competence which was developed through empathy and interdependency. The healthy woman is one who is engaged in mutual empathic connection (Miller, 1984). Personal empowerment and self-definition is derived through the mutual relational process of sharing

thoughts, feelings, energies, and resources interpersonally (Surrey, 1987). In her own work on moral development, Gilligan (1982) outlined the difference between men's ethic of justice and women's ethic of care that arises from a woman's psychological development organized around responsibility for others and concern for interpersonal relationships. These psychological features have implications for women's sense of fairness, intimacy, and conflict management in intimate relationships. In lesbian relationships, these socialized features are likely to be mirrored by each partner.

Relational/Interpersonal Characteristics

Various studies on lesbians and their partners have shown that relationship satisfaction is significantly influenced by certain interpersonal or relational variables. Issues around intimacy and equality are two broad themes that surfaced repeatedly in the research. One could speculate that female gender socialization towards connection and fairness (Gilligan, 1982; Surrey, 1984) and the absence of gender-based power discrepancies inherent in heterosexual relationships contribute to the prominence of these themes.

Equity. Equality has been documented as a significant feature in lesbian relationships (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Hite, 1987; Lynch & Reilly, 1986; Kurdek, 1988; Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978; Peplau et al., 1982; Schneider, 1986; Tanner 1978), and more highly valued and present than in heterosexual relationships (Schneider, 1986). Specifically, equity in power (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Kurdek, 1988; Peplau et al., 1982), and fairness in roles and responsibilities as expressed through shared finances, decision-making, and household duties (Kurdek, 1988; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987a; Lynch

& Reilly, 1986; Schneider, 1986) are linked to relationship satisfaction among lesbian partnerships. Holahan (1984) added that a characteristic of long-term heterosexual marriages which are satisfying is increased egalitarianism with respect to marital roles. Given that female socialization instills the importance of fairness (Gilligan, 1982) and that sameness in gender in lesbian couples removes the gender-based power struggles inherent in male-female relations, these findings are not surprising.

There may be a discrepancy in valuing equity and achieving it, however. One study found that while 97% of lesbians espoused the value of equality in their relationships, 36% reported that one partner had greater power than the other (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984). Similar findings were reported by Reilly and Lynch (1990) who computed that 90% of their sample valued the ideal of sharing power, but only 45% agreed that they did so equitably. One area of power imbalance appears to be evident in sexual relations; an examination of roles in sexual relations indicated an inequality in the initiation, satisfaction and frequency of sex (Lynch & Reilly, 1986). These authors theorized that such an imbalance may be explained by lack of models or information on the sexual lives of lesbians, gender-socialized discomfort with the topic of sexuality, or possibly a lack of desire to make sexual relations equal. Inequalities do not appear to be attributable to the demographic variables of age, education, occupation, income, assets, or years spent living together (Lynch & Reilly, 1986).

A discussion of equity necessarily involves a discussion of roles. After World War II, the adoption of "butch" and "femme" role playing, representing masculine and feminine ways of being, predominated, at least in some working

class communities (Kennedy & Davis, 1993). The development of these roles is linked to allowing a "deviant" lesbian relationship to exist in the context of an oppressive, pathologizing society; assuming masculine and feminine roles gave some semblance of normalcy to these relationships, and thus made them more palatable to mainstream society (Martin & Lyon, 1983).

With the advent of the women's movement and the sexual revolution, the butch-femme relationship style was rejected and replaced by a more egalitarian ideal (Faderman, 1991). Restrictive role-playing currently does not appear to be a feature of lesbian relationships (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Lynch & Reilly, 1986). Lynch and Reilly (1986) concluded from their sample of seventy couples that roles, in terms of household tasks, were not divided along traditional lines, and that performance of household responsibilities rested on personal preferences, skills, or available time more than adherence to a particular role. Thus, role flexibility appears to operate currently.

Intimacy. Intimacy, the sharing of personal thoughts, feelings, and experience through dialogue, activity, and physical and sexual closeness, is often prominent in lesbian relationships according to empirical findings. Emotional expressiveness and high trust (Kurdek, 1988, 1991a), equality of involvement within the relationship and the presence of intimacy (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Kurdek, 1988; Peplau et al., 1982) and an interpersonal orientation (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987a) specifically have been correlated with relationship satisfaction for lesbians and their partners. Given that there are two women in a lesbian relationship, and both have been socialized to value interpersonal connection and to work at intimate relationships, the ability to develop intimacy appears natural.

Lesbians report high satisfaction with the physical and sexual intimacy in their relationships. In a nation-wide sample of nearly 500 lesbians, seventy-nine percent reported that the most pleasurable part of their relationship was the combination of talking together and being physically affectionate during special intimate moments; 75% said the second most pleasurable part of their relationship was sex and sexuality with another woman (Hite, 1987). According to Hite's (1987) findings, ninety-six percent of women in gay relationships say they feel loved in a satisfying way by their lover, and that their lover treats them and sees them as an equal.

Other research suggests that lesbians struggle considerably in achieving satisfying sexual lives (Nichols, 1988). Among a large, diverse, carefully selected, nation-wide sample, lesbian couples were identified as engaging in less frequent sexual contact than heterosexual or gay male couples, with 47% of lesbians in relationships of ten years or more having sex once a month or less (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Loulan has termed the absence of sexual activity in mature lesbian relationships "lesbian bed death" (Loulan, 1984). To evaluate the lack of frequent sexual activity negatively, however, may be to pathologize something as deviant or abnormal when it simply is different. Women's socialization and experiences, including women's socialization to repress sexual desires, lesbian's decreased need to achieve intimacy through a physical/genital union in the presence of intense emotional intimacy, and women's greater likelihood for having experienced sexual abuse, may account for differences in sexual desire in lesbian couples as compared to other partnerships and thus lead lesbians to be conflicted about sexual contact

(Nichols, 1988). Little is known empirically about how women negotiate sexual intimacies in relationships of over 15 years.

There is also considerable discussion in the intimacy literature concerning fusion, the emotional merging of self and other thought to be characteristic of lesbian partnerships. Fusion occurs when personal ego boundaries are crossed or blurred, creating an intense sense of psychological and emotional unity, overidentification with a partner, and an alleged loss of individual identity (Burch, 1986; Mencher, 1990). Fusion contradicts the established psychological developmental "norm" of separation and autonomy which is recognized as necessary for adult growth, and thus is often pathologized by traditional theorists. Such a view of fusion and intimacy imposes a male model of development onto women and fails to appreciate both women's development through connection and women's ways of loving (Green, 1990; McKenzie, 1992; Mencher, 1990). Fusion alternatively represents a fully-functioning way of being, one that allows for intimate negotiation in relationships and through such activity, helps one define herself and her individual identity. Mencher and Slater (1991) have argued, in fact, that merger is adaptive in lesbian partnerships in order to define the external boundaries of the couple and to survive in a hostile societal context.

Conflict Management. The manner in which couples negotiate conflict and resolve differences is significant to relationship stability and quality. Inevitably, any continued involvement between two people will eventually expose differences and lead to conflict. Among lesbian couples, relationship satisfaction correlates with infrequent withdrawal when managing conflict, and frequent positive problem-solving (Kurdek, 1991a). Conflict negotiation may be

problematic for lesbians, however, since their socialization as women undermines their ability to engage in conflict directly. Researchers have found that girls, in play, would rather quit than engage in conflict (Lever, 1976), and women have a difficult time maintaining friendships in the face of differences (Eichenbach & Orbach, 1988). According to one clinician, lesbian couples most often enter therapy to address issues of difference, separation, and conflict management, and they may avoid conflict due to fears of being separate or due to lack of skill (Green, 1990).

Familial and Cultural Influences

"Factors unique to the lesbian experience may affect the perceived and actual permanence of the relationship," (Schneider, 1986, p. 238), i.e. relationship stability. This author identified social factors (e.g. lack of cultural support in the form of inability to marry legally) as well as psychological factors related to gender socialization (e.g. women's psychological composition creates a greater risk for problems around intimacy and identity and therefore stresses the relationship), specifically, as being important to relationship longevity. In the absence of broad cultural support for a lesbian partnership, one might theorize that the development of a more immediate social network supportive not only of the selected partner specifically, but of a lesbian lifestyle more generally might contribute to relationship stability. In fact, Stanley (1993) found relationship satisfaction among coupled lesbians to be correlated significantly with the social intimacy experienced through friendships, although these friendships, on occasion, could also present difficulties in terms of partner jealousy. Additionally, women who negotiate relationships based on the actual

identity of self and partner and do not assume roles in relationships based on socialized expectations concerning gender roles or stereotypes may enjoy more stable and satisfying partnerships.

Kurdek and Schmitt (1987b) have demonstrated that gay and lesbian couples do, in fact, perceive less emotional support from family than do married heterosexual couples; that they perceive more support from friends than from family; and that higher degrees of emotional support from friends correlate with reduced psychological distress. One can speculate that the distress that results from limited social support ultimately influences the quality and stability of gay and lesbian relationships, and may contribute to their dissolution. Relatedly, one might expect that lesbian couples that exist in a social and familial context that is supportive of the relationship might have a greater chance for survival.

Longevity in Lesbian Relationships

The absence of literature reflecting the experience of relationship quality in long-term lesbian relationships is noteworthy, given that nearly half of gay women over 40 are or have been in love relationships of ten years or more (Hite, 1987). In the Peplau et al. (1982) study, the median length of time participants had been in their longest lesbian relationship was 2.5 years. The median length of time that participants had been in their current lesbian relationship in the Eldridge and Gilbert (1990) study was 4.4 years. The lesbian volunteers in Kurdek's (1988) study had spent an average of 4.4 years living together as partners in their current relationship; in another study, the mean was nearly 5 years (Kurdek, 1992).

A review of the literature found only one published resource that examined long-term lesbian relationships, specifically those of ten years or more duration (Johnson, 1991). In her qualitative research, Johnson (1991) discussed the significance of commitment, homogamy, sexuality, conflicts, children, and extended families to relationship stability and satisfaction. The couples in her study rated love, common values/goals/interests, being friends, and valuing commitment as the most significant factors in staying together. Findings from an unpublished dissertation revealed that long-term lesbian couples, defined as those living together 8 to 15 years, shared similar socioeconomic backgrounds, displayed complementarity in their interpersonal fit, had a sense of fairness in the relationship, managed conflict skillfully, shared a belief in monogamy, and were similarly open about their sexual orientation with friends, family and society (Dorn, 1990).

Gay and lesbian relationships appear to terminate at a greater rate than heterosexual marriages (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Clunis & Green, 1988; Schneider, 1986), however this is difficult to assess accurately given the hidden nature of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual population. According to empirical findings, cohabiting heterosexual relationships, married heterosexual relationships, and cohabiting gay male relationships are more likely to endure than are lesbian relationships (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Schneider, 1986). Other statistical evidence points to the existence of long-term lesbian love. Findings that 31% of lesbians over thirty and 46% of lesbians over forty have been in relationships of at least ten years proves quantitatively that lesbians do maintain relationships for the long-term (Hite, 1987). Yet, lesbian couples feel a persistent sense of impermanence about their relationship (Hite, 1987; Tanner,

1978). Hite wrote, "Many gay women express a fear that all their lives they will go from one relationship to another, and even if 'one' lasts ten years or so, imply that this is not satisfying or does not feel very secure," (p. 605). Additionally, Hite reported, "The most pronounced problem for gay women/couples - aside from lack of public acceptance and oppression, being forced to hide their lives - is perhaps the increased difficulty involved in establishing gay relationships as permanent relationships," (p. 604).

It often appears as though long-term lesbian couples do not exist. The invisibility of lesbian couples and the speed with which lesbians characteristically consider themselves a couple and subsequently break-up are factors which may contribute to this impression (Clunis & Green, 1988). Schneider (1986) theorized that "the need to explore [self and others] and the ease of cohabitation may result in a series of monogamous relationships," (p. 238), rather than one long-term one.

Lesbian relationships are as likely to experience disaffection and its subsequent termination of the relationship as any other intimate partnership, but some features particular to lesbian relationships may lead to dissolution. These include a pre-mature identification of themselves as a couple which lacks a realistic assessment of compatibility; gender bias which assumes, among other things, automatic understanding and satisfaction of needs because one's partner is a woman; external pressure on long-term relationships to work because they are perceived as so rare and precious and the thought that they could fail may feel intolerable to a group that lacks role models; and the general hostility arising out of a homophobic culture (Clunis & Green, 1988). The lack of a legal contract binding two partners, less likelihood of one partner being

financially dependent on the other, and less probability of having social support for the relationship also have been identified as making the ending of a dissatisfying relationship easier (Peplau & Amaro, 1982). Reasons cited most frequently by gay men or lesbians for dissolution of their relationship include non-responsiveness (e.g., little communication or support), problems with the partner (e.g., alcoholism), and sexual issues (e.g., an affair) (Kurdek, 1991b). Dissolution of a gay or lesbian relationship also may be predicted by negative affectivity, high dissatisfaction with the relationship, high valuing of personal autonomy in the relationship, little time investment or emotional commitment, and limited personal economic resources (Kurdek, 1992).

An older woman quoted in Hite's (1987) book on women and love postulates the following variety of reasons that might truncate the longevity of lesbian relationships:

> The obvious answer, we said, was, well, we had less problems leaving each other than heterosexuals did, because we didn't have to cope with divorce, the legality of it. And we mostly didn't have children. And very rarely did any of us have enough money to have property in common as we do now. It was easier. Also married women may not have left because they were not working and so they couldn't, financially....Gay men stay together longer, and always have, for years and years, because sexual monogamy is not important to them. They stay together because, if it's a compatible relationship, they all mostly let each other go out and screw with other people, having no problems....most women cannot do that emotionally. The whole mind-set and psychology of women is different. (p. 609).

This statement points to the legalities, familial responsibilities, financial arrangements, and sexual expectations that may make it easier to dissolve lesbian relationships than it is to terminate other partnerships.

Developmental Phases of Lesbian Relationships

It has been noted that an understanding of normal family life cycle development is therapeutic for heterosexual couples experiencing conflict, but few such models have been articulated or empirically proven for lesbian families (Slater & Mencher, 1991). Clunis and Green (1988), through a synthesis of developmental models presented by Campbell (1980) for heterosexual relationships and McWhirter and Mattison (1984) for gay male couples, outlined a theoretical six-stage model to describe the developmental passages of lesbian relationships. Their model included prerelationship, romance, conflict, acceptance, commitment, and collaboration phases. Lesbian relationships have been shown to evolve through phases beginning with passion and maturing to trust and security (Kurdek, 1991b). To date, there are no data other than unsystematic clinical reports that identify empirically the natural progressions and transitions of lesbian relationships.

Summary

This chapter outlined the history of lesbian life in twentieth century America and described the impact that negative societal attitudes have had on lesbians and their partnerships. Theories of marital satisfaction were presented, and factors relevant to heterosexual marital quality and stability were identified from the empirical literature. A review of features found in gay male and lesbian relationships followed, demonstrating that equity, intimacy, and conflict management are particularly important features in lesbian partnerships. The absence of research examining long-term lesbian relationships was noted, as was the absence of empirical knowledge regarding the development of

these relationships. An investigation into lesbian relationships lasting 15 years or more was innovative, and critical to the understanding of the development, quality, and longevity of relationships for this population. This study was important in lifting the "great silence...in history and culture" (Rich, 1980) that has obscured the lesbian experience.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

The first chapter provided an overview and rationale for this study, discussed the changing nature of marriage and the family during the twentieth century, outlined a brief history of the gay community within American society, and directed attention to the absence of research regarding committed lesbian partnerships. This background information provided a context for a review of the literature in the second chapter. Chapter Two documented the literature on relationship themes relevant to quality and stability in both heterosexual marriages and gay/lesbian partnerships. The second chapter also provided theory concerning women's psychological development and nascent information on the lesbian family life cycle. The present chapter describes the operational mechanics of this study: the choice and features of the qualitative design, a statement of subjectivity, characteristics of the study's participants, procedures for recruiting volunteers, data collection processes, and the methods employed to analyze the data.

Rationale for a Qualitative Research Design

While considerable advancements have been made over the past few decades in the area of heterosexual marital satisfaction and stability, additional research is needed to understand factors that contribute to intact committed relationships. This body of research has suffered from methodological flaws such as inconsistency concerning construct definition and lack of a theoretical

basis (Lewis & Spanier, 1979). Additionally, self-report measures and quantitative techniques are often subjective and value-laden (Hicks & Platt, 1970; Lewis & Spanier, 1979), and there have been only limited efforts directed at understanding this phenomenon across cultures. Gay male and lesbian partnerships in particular have been overlooked. Given that other cultures may operate with different values and beliefs, it seems important to understand a phenomenon of another culture through an unbiased lens; traditional quantitative approaches may fail to accomplish this.

Researchers have noted the importance of employing a qualitative research approach as an important tool in initial investigations of a relatively unexplored topic (Barker, 1971). Such an approach provides flexibility and breadth in its data collection, allows for the generation of theoretical explanations, and sets the stage for further quantitative analysis (Lofland & Lofland, 1984). Strauss and Corbin (1990) have outlined such an approach that "uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon," (p. 24).

Grounded theory develops through a process which combines data collection, identification of themes suggested by the data, and the postulation of a theoretical explanation that ties the various themes together. In the process of data collection and analysis, interview data that are similar are grouped and given conceptual labels. This interpretive procedure is termed "coding" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Thus, themes and hypotheses emerge. The organization of the themes and hypotheses results in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is a scientific method involving significance,

theory-observation compatibility, generalizability, reproducibility, precision, rigor, and verification (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

As research on lesbians in long-term couples is sparse, this study employed a qualitative research design using the grounded theory method to examine factors contributing to relationship stability among long-term lesbian alliances. Such a phenomenological approach is recommended by authors for both this population (Schneider, 1986) and this topic (Cole, 1985; Lewis & Spanier, 1979).

The goals of this study were to describe features of lesbian partnerships of 15 or more years and to generate new hypotheses about the stability of committed lesbian relationships. Whereas in quantitative research the goal is to test predetermined hypotheses, in qualitative research the goal is to generate hypotheses and to "convey the meanings and the processes of human experience from within the individual's own frame of reference," (Carey, 1984, p. 66). Identifying values, feelings, and beliefs which are culturally-specific is important in appreciating an individual's own frame of reference (Scharf, 1986). The participants in this study were asked to identify their values and beliefs and to discuss the relevance of these values to their relationships.

A strength of qualitative research is its ability to attend to interactive process and change and to identify an individual's role in shaping his or her experience (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As applied to stability in committed relationships, such an approach elucidates the developmental nature of relationships and the interpersonal negotiation processes that hold relationships intact. For the purposes of this study, the qualitative method enabled the researcher to learn about the interaction of individual traits,

interpersonal processes, and culture on the development and stability of committed lesbian partnerships.

The choice of a qualitative design allowed an understanding of this particular population to evolve through descriptions by participants, rather than operate from assumptions of a quantitative design which might have reflected a heterosexual bias and limited knowledge of long-term lesbian relationships. The study focused on presenting an unbiased description of long-term lesbian partnerships, identifying themes related to relationship stability, and developing a theory of lesbian relationship stability.

<center>Statement of Subjectivity</center>

Conducting a qualitative interview involved an interpersonal interaction in which the interviewer and the interviewee impacted on each other. Kvale (1983) stated, "the reciprocal influence of interviewer and interviewee on both the cognitive as well as an emotional level is . . . not primarily a source of error but a strong point of the qualitative research interview" (p. 78). This dynamic process is useful for the collection of rich data, but the interviewer runs the risk of having analyzed the data subjectively if her biases and their potential influence on her perspective and conclusions are not identified and examined. Such biases include the influence of the researcher's own background and values, as well as assumptions and hypotheses about the sample and expected findings.

In light of this, this researcher maintained process notes which reflected her own biases, assumptions, and hunches, and evaluated their possible influence on data collection and analysis. Furthermore, prior to conducting the

interviews, the researcher provided the following statement of subjectivity that identified as clearly as possible the personal perspective that arises from her own experiences, class, and culture.

The researcher is a 32 year-old, married, white female of German descent. She grew up in Waterville, Maine, the fifth and youngest child of college professors at a small private liberal arts college. Waterville has a population of approximately 18,000, and is composed predominantly of faculty and staff connected with the college, a strong medical community, and factory workers employed by a substantive paper industry in the area. The town is predominantly White, middle class, and lacking in diversity. The researcher was raised with two older brothers and two older sisters. The family always lived in the same house in Waterville with the exception of 2 years spent in Berlin, Germany when the researcher was 3-5 years old. The researcher's parents have been married for 45 years and have gradually become part of the upper middle class.

The academic, Germanic background within the family carried with it an emphasis on education, achievement, and intellectual development. Each member in the family has at least a master's degree; four out of the seven have earned or are in the process of earning a doctorate in the humanities or social sciences.

Additionally, as the researcher's father was a conscientious objector and both parents (as well as both paternal and maternal grandparents) were missionaries in China, the importance of nonviolence, community service and humanitarian activity was stressed. Family members were politically liberal and strong proponents for civil rights and liberties. The researcher was raised

Protestant and Quaker, attending Universalist-Unitarian services as a small child and silent Quaker meetings while in high school. Since leaving home, the practicing of religion has been an insignificant aspect of her life.

The researcher is heterosexual, has been married for six years, and has no children. The researcher identifies herself as feminist and gay-affirmative. While politically liberal and committed to causes of equality for gays and lesbians, the researcher recognized that heterosexual biases may run deep and be subtle.

With the exception of sexual orientation, the researcher anticipated many similarities with the sample to be studied, particularly an affirmative stance towards same-sex relationships, support for women's ways of relating, belief in the value of a long-term committed relationship, similar educational ideals (lesbians are found to be more educated than women in the general population), and liberal political and religious views.

Given that two women are partnered in lesbian relationships, the researcher expected that interpersonal dynamics which reflect female socialization and gender roles would operate. Additionally, a lesbian couple is, by definition, non-traditional. It was believed that most lesbians would be liberal and progressive in their functioning and expectations for the relationship. More specifically, the researcher expected that emotional intimacy and expressiveness, mutuality, joint nurturing of the relationship, and equality in roles and responsibilities would be significant aspects of the seasoned lesbian partnership.

Lesbian couples exist in a societal climate of hostility towards their sexual orientation. This homophobia is often present on a communal, familial,

and intrapsychic level. Questions related to the importance and meaning of various sociocultural influences, including homophobic social attitudes, were addressed to determine their impact on the relationship. In long-term lesbian relationships, the researcher expected to find that the individuals in the couple possessed a certain resilience or strength that could withstand negative social attitudes, that they were able to distance themselves psychologically from discrimination of this sort, that they denied or limited their acknowledgment of themselves as a couple (i.e., remain closeted), and/or that their immediate social support network (friends and/or family) was supportive of their lifestyle to survive within a homophobic society. The degree to which a couple was closeted may relate to the level of stress experienced within the relationship, and influence stability. It was expected that most participants in this study would not be closeted, as it seemed unlikely that a closeted lesbian would volunteer for such a personal interview with a stranger, even though anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed.

It was expected that respondents would be guarded when answering questions concerning sexual relations and roles when speaking with a heterosexual researcher. Related questions were asked when it was felt that the interviewee was comfortable, and a trusting rapport had been established. Considerable efforts towards building trust happened in interactions prior to the interview, including particularly the researcher's self-disclosure of her own sexual orientation, marital status, and identification as gay-affirmative. The researcher encouraged discussion to address any concerns these variables raised prior to the actual interview as part of the process the couple went through to decide whether or not to participate.

Research Design and Procedures

Participants

The sample for this study comprised 12 lesbian couples who had been together a minimum of fifteen years and who had not raised children jointly. The sample was well educated, which is consistent with statistics indicating that lesbians as a group are more highly educated than women in the general population (National Lesbian and Gay Health Foundation, 1987). A variety of religious affiliations was represented. All participants were Caucasian and resided in the northeast part of the country.

The age, years together, and religious affiliations of the 24 participants are presented in Table One. All names are pseudonyms. The participants ranged in age from 36-76 with a mean age of 53. Most partners were close in age, although the partners in two couples shared a 5-9 year age difference and the partners in three other couples shared a 10-22 year age difference. The number of years together ranged from 17 to 27, with a mean of nearly 21 years. Participants varied in terms of religious background, with nearly equal representation (25-29%) of Catholics, Protestants, and those with no religious affiliation. Three participants identified as Jewish.

The women in this study varied in educational background, although nearly eighty percent had achieved an educational level beyond completion of a college degree (see Table Two). Two possessed high school diplomas, three earned college degrees, fourteen completed master's degrees, and five had a doctorate or professional degree. Employment fields represented included human services, education, medicine, business, and the arts. Six individuals

Table 1

Age, Years Together, and Religious Affiliation

Couple	Age	Years Together	Religious Affiliation
*Angela	45	20	Jewish
Alice	46		Jewish
Betsy	64	27	Protestant
Beverly	50		Jewish
Claire	49	24	Catholic
Cathy	48		Catholic
Deirdre	65	22	none
Daphne	56		Protestant
Elaine	61	18	Catholic
Emily	63		Catholic
Florence	49	18	Protestant
Felicia	47		Protestant
Gwen	52	18	none
Grace	52		†other
Harriet	48	19	Protestant
Hillary	46		none
Isabelle	40	17	none
Ingrid	42		none
Jennifer	57	23	none
Joyce	76		none
Kathleen	69	25	Protestant
Kristin	65		Protestant
Lucy	58	17	Catholic
Liz	36		Catholic
	$\overline{X}$=53.5	$\overline{X}$=20.8	
	Range=36-76	Range=17-27	

*   all names are pseudonyms

†   affiliated as both Protestant and Wiccan

Table 2

Educational Level, Field of Employment, and Individual and Joint Income

Couple	Education	Field of Employment	Individual Income	Joint Income
*Angela	MS	human services	$25-37,500	$50-75,000
Alice	BS	human services	$25-37,500	
Betsy	BS	† education	< $25,000	$25,000-50
Beverly	MSN	** medicine	$12,500-25	
Claire	HS	arts	< $25,000	$25,000-50
Cathy	HS	business	$25-37,500	
Deirdre	EdD	† education	$37,500-50	$75,000-100
Daphne	MD	medicine	>$50,000	
Elaine	MA	† education	$25-37,500	$50-75,000
Emily	MA	† human services	$25-37,500	
Florence	MBA	business	>$50,000	$75,000-100
Felicia	MA	education	$37,500-50	
Gwen	MSW	human services	$37,500-50	$75,000-100
Grace	MSW	human services	>$50,000	
Harriet	MD	medicine	>$50,000	>$100,000
Hillary	MD	medicine	>$50,000	
Isabelle	BA	human services	$12,500-25	$50-75,000
Ingrid	MA	human services	>$50,000	
Jennifer	MSW	human services	$37,500-50	$50-75,000
Joyce	MSW	human services	$25-37,500	
Kathleen	MA	† education	>$50,000	$75,000-100
Kristin	PhD	† education	$25-37,500	
Lucy	MA	education	$25-37,500	$50-75,000
Liz	†† CAS	education	$37,500-50	

*   all names are pseudonyms
**   full-time student
†   retired
††   Certificate of Advanced Studies is for academic work beyond a master's

were retired; one was a full-time student. The median individual income for the sample was $37,500. The median joint income for the sample was between $50,000 and $75,000.

On a continuum of sexual orientation identity, seventy-five percent rated themselves as exclusively lesbian, with the remaining twenty-five percent rating themselves as predominantly lesbian. All but one individual rated themselves as having only lesbian behaviors and either some or no heterosexual thoughts. On average, participants had identified themselves as lesbian for 28 years and had lived together with their current partner for 19 years. The lesbians in this study marked the beginning of their committed relationship in various ways, including engaging in sexual relations for the first time, buying or sharing a home, or having a conversation or understanding that expressed their commitment to one another. At least eight partners shared a lengthy friendship of as much as 15 years before becoming lovers.

Three participants had been heterosexually married prior to their current relationship. Two participants had children from previous relationships that were not raised as part of their current partnerships, and one couple was about to adopt a child. The absence of lesbian couples with children in this study reflected a concern that the presence or absence of children within the family unit was a significant influence on a relationship, and should be controlled for in research (Schneider, 1986). The absence of couples with children should not be construed as a belief that lesbians do not or should not parent.

The individuals in the sample were mostly uncloseted; it appeared unlikely that closeted lesbians would feel comfortable and trusting enough to disclose personal aspects of their lives to a heterosexual stranger. Since it was

impossible to recruit a random sample from a "hidden" population, this sample is described best as long-term coupled lesbians without children from the Northeast who were willing to participate in the study. Weis and Dain (1979) noted that the best strategy for identifying a sample of gays, lesbians, or bisexuals was to study one specific group at a time (e.g. lesbians without children), being sure to describe fully and accurately the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Recruitment of Participants

Criteria for inclusion in the study were that partners had been together a minimum of 15 years, had not raised children jointly, and were both willing to participate. All participants were volunteers. The researcher used snowball sampling techniques rather than a random sampling method to recruit couples for the study. This approach has been utilized successfully in other studies tapping into a hidden population (Johnson, 1991; Reilly & Lynch, 1990; Schneider, 1986).

Snowball sampling is a procedure through which informal contacts and potential participants are identified and notified. These individuals in turn direct the researcher to other contacts and potential participants, thereby creating a significant network of people who are both aware of the study and connected to individuals who might meet the research criteria and be willing to participate. Given both the impossibility of recruiting a random sample from a hidden population and the importance of establishing a trusting relationship in order to enlist participants in a study of this nature, this more personal procedure enabled the researcher to recruit potential volunteers successfully.

Specifically, the researcher recruited volunteers through local church, recreational, and social groups, gay/lesbian/bisexual newspaper and magazine advertisements, flyers posted in lesbian and women's bookstores, and through informal contacts. Potential referral sources were sent a letter asking if they knew of couples who met the criteria for the study and who might be willing to participate (see Appendix A). The letter briefly described the nature and history of the research project, relevant personal and professional information about the researcher, and that participants would be expected to share their personal thoughts and feelings about their committed relationship in a substantial, in-person interview. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured.

Throughout the course of the recruitment phase of the study, the researcher collaborated with 24 potential referral sources and took advertisements out in 4 newspapers or local publications. Within a week of having mailed the letter to each potential referral source, the researcher followed-up to ascertain whether or not the contact person could direct the researcher to potential couples. This approach, along with the newspaper ads, put the researcher in touch with 24 couples.

The researcher most often made initial contact with these potential couples by phone, having received clearance to do so by the referral source. In about half the cases, the potential couple, responding independently to a flyer or newspaper announcement, called the researcher. The phone call allowed the researcher to provide a preliminary description of the study, herself, and the expectations for volunteers. A guarantee of confidentiality also was emphasized and potential couples were encouraged to discuss any concerns they might have with the researcher and privately with each other. The

researcher then mailed a letter similar to that sent to potential referral sources, and within a week called the potential couple again to discover whether or not they had decided to participate. Once couples verbally agreed to participate, they were sent a final agreement letter thanking them for their willingness to participate, restating some of the information previously shared, describing in fuller detail their rights as a volunteer, and confirming the time of the interviews (see Appendix B). The researcher phoned each couple the night before the scheduled interviews to reconfirm and to get directions to their homes.

Of the 24 prospective couples, 12 ultimately participated. Of the remaining 12 couples, 2 declined to participate due to concerns with invasion of privacy (with 1 expressing discomfort with the interviewer being heterosexual) and 10 were disqualified. The reasons for disqualification included children (4 couples), geographical distance (1 couple), and volunteering after the sample was complete (5 couples). Any couples who had children were directed to contact another doctoral student who was beginning a similar study examining long-term lesbian relationships with children. Of the 12 couples that agreed to participate in this study, 2 were referred by other couples who were participating, 2 responded to posted flyers, 2 responded to newspaper advertisements, and the remaining 6 were generated through the potential referral sources. The recruitment phase of the study overlapped with the interview process. Active recruitment took place over a 5 month period.

Marital Stability Interview

A modification of The Marital Stability Interview (O'Brien & Mackey, 1990a) was utilized to investigate the experience of lesbians in these long-term

relationships. For the purposes of this study, the interview was modified by altering "spouse" to "partner" and "marriage" to "relationship." Additionally, questions related to child-rearing were eliminated and those related to developmental transitions and social supports were introduced. Finally, the interview was reviewed and modified by a lesbian consultant to reduce heterosexist language and bias. Final revisions were made and resulted in the Relationship Stability Interview (see Appendix C).

The interview consisted of open-ended questions addressing various aspects of the relationship over time. Generally speaking, the interview assessed individual and personality factors, interpersonal characteristics, and familial and cultural influences on the relationship. Questions targeted initial attraction, expectations, communication, problem-solving, roles, management of interpersonal conflict, intimacy, and sexual relations. Additionally, attention was paid to the influence of external factors, such as religion, culture, economic status, ethnicity, and family of origin, on the relationship. The broader social environment was examined to elucidate the influence of cultural attitudes (especially homophobia) and social supports on these relationships over time. Participants were asked how these factors related to each of three different phases in the relationship, with the first 5 years together comprising phase 1, 5-10 years comprising phase 2, and beyond 10 years comprising phase 3. Questions also focused on transition points in the relationship to allow theory relevant to the development of lesbian relationships to emerge.

Interview Procedures

All of the interviews took place between December, 1993 and March, 1994. The researcher interviewed each partner separately, as suggested by Gray-Little and Burks (1983), at a mutually agreed upon location. The open-ended nature of the questions from the Relationship Stability Interview both structured the general flow of the dialogue and allowed for freedom and flexibility for each respondent to express herself and to describe her experiences as fully as possible. The interviewer also relied on her own clinical skills and judgment to explore further areas of particular interest that emerged. This occurred both within particular interviews and throughout the data collection phase, so that the interview protocol was slightly altered from first to last interview. These procedures allowed the richest and most accurate data to be generated.

The researcher engaged in initial conversation to ease anxiety, to answer any lingering questions or concerns about the study or the interview, and to establish an environment that felt comfortable and thus most conducive to a substantive and accurate exchange. Before the interview, both partners of a couple read and signed an informed consent form outlining the purpose of the research project, the interview, and how the data would be used (see Appendix D). Participants also completed a background data sheet (Eldridge, 1987) and were instructed that information from it would be used to describe the sample as a whole (see Appendix E). Each interview was audio-taped with the written permission of the participant, and later was transcribed. The interviews lasted between one and three-quarters to three and a quarter hours, with the average interview lasting approximately two and a quarter hours. All but one couple

preferred to be interviewed in their homes; other arrangements were made to interview the twelfth couple at the researcher's affiliated institution. The interviews conducted in participants' homes made it possible for the researcher to glean additional information about the couples' lifestyles.

In general, the interviews proceeded smoothly and without significant interruption. While conducting the interview with the second partner at one couple's home, however, the researcher realized that a cassette tape from the first partner's interview was being recorded over by the second partner's interview. The second interview was completed, and the first partner graciously agreed to redo the 45 minutes of the interview that had been lost. In another instance, the interview took longer than expected, so the researcher returned to the participant's home the next day to complete the interview. In all other cases, interviews with both partners were completed on the same day.

Participants were welcoming, offered whatever assistance might be helpful or required, and were generally warm and appreciative towards the researcher for pursuing this study. In one case, the researcher had dinner with the couple in between the first partner's afternoon interview and the second partner's evening interview. One couple passed on a relevant article regarding lesbian sexual relations. The last couple to be interviewed gave the researcher the gift of a book, having discussed a mutual interest in creative writing. All participants requested a synopsis of the study's findings. The partners in one couple requested transcripts of their interviews.

After each interview was concluded, the researcher wrote notes on her thoughts, feelings, observations, and impressions of the couple and of the interview. Within a week of the completion of the interview, the researcher

hand-wrote a thank-you note expressing her appreciation for the couple's participation and informing them that a synopsis of the findings would be mailed to them once the study was completed.

Each of the audio-taped interviews was transcribed. Six were transcribed by the researcher and eighteen by professional transcribers who were informed of the confidential nature of the material prior to being hired.

Files

A qualitative study generates a large amount of information which requires organization. To facilitate organization, the researcher maintained the following files:

1. Mundane Files. This file was used to store all blank and completed forms and correspondences used in the study: recruitment leads and notes, introductory letters to referral sources, confirmation letters to potential participants, informed consent forms, background data sheets, coding sheets, and the semi-structured interview.

2. Interview Reactions File. All of the researcher's reactions to the interviews and impressions of the couples were documented and stored in this file.

3. Transcribed Interviews File. Each interview was transcribed, assigned a code name and number, and stored in this file.

4. Discussion File. This file included the thoughts, impressions, and insights the researcher had throughout the study including the implications of the study, any assumptions or hunches that developed, and areas for further exploration.

5. <u>Literature File</u>. This file included photocopies of all articles and dissertation abstracts read and referenced anywhere in the written documentation of this study.

<u>Analysis of the Data</u>

Adopting the qualitative analysis method outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990), the researcher reviewed the transcribed interviews to identify major themes. The data were organized both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitatively, each interview was read and coded using a modification of O'Brien and Mackey's (1990b) Seasoned Marital Coding Sheet. Minor adjustments were made to the coding sheet, such as changing "spouse" to "partner" and "marriage" to "relationship." Additionally, the coding sheet was modified by adding items to rate the effects of the gay community, friendship networks, and homophobia on the relationship and to evaluate initial attraction for and family reaction to the participant's committed lesbian relationship. In some cases, new categories were established to classify responses. For instance, item #4 on the original coding sheet requested that the reader rate role expectations as "traditional" or "non-traditional." As these categories were not applicable to lesbian couples, the alternative categories of "no expectations," "shared roles," and "differentiated roles" were created. These modifications resulted in the Seasoned Relationship Coding Sheet (see Appendix F).

Using the Seasoned Relationship Coding Sheet, each interview was read and coded independently by both the researcher and a male research partner who was familiar with the study and the scoring protocol. The two raters

met and reviewed the scores for each item of each interview. When discrepancies occurred, the raters discussed the difference and referred to the original transcript until consensus was reached as to how a particular item should be scored. The inter-rater reliability was .84. Once the interviews were reviewed and consensual agreement reached, the data from the scoring sheets were entered onto a computer and analyzed using SPSS-X software. Frequencies were calculated for each variable over time.

Qualitatively, the researcher organized and analyzed the interview data utilizing HyperRESEARCH software to generate themes relevant to relationship stability. Developed in 1991 by Hesse-Biber, Dupuis, and Kinder of Boston College, HyperRESEARCH software is designed specifically to analyze qualitative research data. Themes established by previous studies (Hamel, 1993; Kanter, 1994) served as a guide for this study, to which additional categories were added as they emerged from the data and were identified by the research team. Results from the quantitative and qualitative analyses are presented in the next chapter. The emergent themes were interpreted, with the goal of generating theoretical hypotheses to explain the development and maintenance of long-term relationship stability among lesbian couples.

Chapter 4

Results

Introduction

This chapter presents 15 key themes related to relationship stability which emerged through interviews with 12 long-term lesbian couples. The collected information was organized into several categories: early relationship themes, interpersonal themes, external factors, and transitions and developmental phases. Each theme is described and discussed, and then illustrated through relevant quotations from the transcribed interviews. Frequencies of responses also are provided whenever possible to support the prominence of these themes. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, consistent with the tables in the previous chapter; pseudonyms of partners in the same couple begin with the same letter to assist in their identification as a couple.

Early Relationship Themes

Several early relationship themes emerged from the participants' responses. These included initial attraction, early adjustments, family support for the partner and a lesbian relationship, and expectations concerning roles and effort needed to maintain the partnership.

Initial Attraction

The women in this study generally felt a positive initial attraction for their partner as a person (n=21), although one felt negatively at first and two were

ambivalent. The most frequently mentioned features which contributed to a positive initial attraction included similar values and common interests (n=12), enjoying talking to each other (n=13), personality attributes such as sense of humor and self-confidence (n=12), and attractive physical features (n=8). In three cases, a participant was attracted to the obvious differences in her partner. Reasons for negative or ambivalent attraction included one partner's apparent arrogance and another participant's concern that she was "falling for a straight woman."

> Kristin: In terms of sexual attraction and passion there was no question in my mind.... I knew her values. I knew her background. I had met her family. I knew what kind of a person she was, where she was coming from. Though we were very different, there was an incredible compatibility in terms of values. We may have some personality differences or some tempo differences, but in terms of the basic, fundamental things in life, I thought we were very compatible.

> Isabelle: What would probably be important to both of us at the time was having someone that you could feel you could talk to. Someone who could accept what it was, no matter what it was. Not just about our relationship, but just in general sort of about whatever one was going through.... Being able to know that you weren't going to be judged.

> Joyce: She used to crack me up constantly. She was very, very funny and she was very powerful. She was very dynamic and I loved the way she thought. That was basically what drew me to her.

> Claire: I started to see Cathy in a different light. Physically what attracted me about her was that she was very model-ish. Tall, slim, attractive. I liked the way she moved. I like the way she does things. I like to watch her movements. So, physically, that was it. She was really attractive.... I would pick her up at the bus station, and she'd get off the bus. There would be guys all turning their heads, and I'd feel like, she's with me fellas. Sorry.

> Felicia: I couldn't function in my daily life, as I recall. It was...kind of overwhelming. It was very different from another almost marriage relationship that I'd had earlier in my twenties. It was so very different from it. It was something that seemed right from the first second and continued to seem more right as time went by and in a very short span of time, too. With her I felt like ... almost immediately it was the only thing

that I could do. It was like there was no choice. When she had such a profound affect upon my functioning, I thought, this is serious. There is something to this. I don't think I'm getting the flu. There's something to this.

Partners' first contact with each other varied considerably. Two couples had student-teacher relationships first and another six were professional colleagues. Four of the couples had substantial friendships of at least 15 years prior to sexualizing their relationship. One participant met her partner when she approached her as a client for therapy; the therapist declined to take her on as a client, recognizing the immediate attraction she had for her.

Regardless of the attributes of their prospective partner, many of the participants experienced some ambivalence over their involvement in a lesbian relationship. In just over half the couples (7/12), one of the partners had negative initial attraction or ambivalence for a committed lesbian relationship; both partners had positive attraction for the relationship in five of the twelve. Women who experienced negative or ambivalent feelings for the relationship initially agonized over crossing the line into homosexuality and/or changing the nature of an existing friendship.

> Alice: We lived together as roommates starting in June of '72. Angela would wake up in the middle of the night and say, "I had a bad dream; you have to come into...my bedroom and sleep in my bed. I'm scared." And I would go, "No. I don't want to. I don't want to." "You have to. I'm scared." "I don't want to. I don't want to." So, I'd go in there. I'd hang off the edge of the bed, until she'd fall asleep, and I'd go back into my room. Torturing ourselves. Because it's very hard to cross that line into homosexuality. Even if you've had the thoughts, even if you've had the feelings, even if you've fantasized, you are presumed heterosexual until you have sex with somebody of the same sex. Then, whsssshh. It just scared the life out of me. Not maybe because I would enjoy it or it would be great. But because of the way other people would think of me, and I thought, people are going to hate me. And I might lose my family. No one is going to want to know me. And I'm going to live a life of shame. And degradation. Well, that's what they promote about homosexuality. Or they certainly did in the 60's and 70's, and certainly before then.

Isabelle: We identified ourselves as a couple, but it wasn't OK. There was a lot of incredible internal homophobia.

Joyce: I didn't know what was happening to me. I kept feeling this pull toward her. So I said to myself, you're feeling about Jennifer how you always felt about men. I was just amazed that this was happening, but I said "Well, that's what I feel." So I acted on it. But you have to remember, I was no little kid.... I had been through the mill in many, many ways.... I wasn't looking for permission from anybody. I didn't have to answer to anybody. So it was very possible for me to say this is how you feel and to be able to act on it.

Early Adjustments to the Committed Relationship

Many lesbians indicated the need to make adjustments at the beginning of the relationship. In some cases, the women had been functioning independently and established in their daily patterns. The introduction of a partner challenged the existing routine. Most often this was accepted readily as part of the initial adjustment to becoming a couple, although many of the issues or differences identified as an adjustment at the beginning surfaced again in later years.

Grace: I had a lot of friends ... and she had to suddenly figure out whether she liked these people or didn't like these people. I was involved in a lot. If she wanted to be with me, she almost had to be with people that she sometimes didn't know at all, in intimate close ways. I remember 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.

The following statements by partners in the same couple illuminated both the necessity of making adjustments and the willingness with which partners did so:

Isabelle: There probably were some [adjustments] but I was totally in love with her. I just thought she was the most wonderful person in the world and I would do anything she wanted me to do. That's kind of how I thought.

Ingrid: She was right out of college. She hadn't had an apartment before, so she missed some of those things that I went through by getting my first apartment, living by myself for a few years. Just the responsibilities of going to a job and paying bills were new to her with this relationship.... So a lot of things were adjustments.

Family Support for Partner and Lesbian Relationship

Participants described family reaction not only to their partner as a person but also to their committed lesbian relationship. Generally speaking, the initial reaction of family members was positive to the partner as a person (n=14); most often the fact that it was a lesbian relationship was either not acknowledged, not discussed, or met with disapproval (n=22).

Just over half of the partners received family approval for their partner as a person (n=14). The families in a third either disapproved of or felt mixed about their daughter's partner choice (n=8). In two cases, the partner was not acknowledged.

Parents and siblings liked the partner's personality characteristics and the fact that the partner would provide companionship to their family member. On the negative side, one parent found a partner to be intimidating, and several family members were identified as being jealous of the time and camaraderie the partner received at the expense of attention to the rest of the family. Families often saw the partner as a friend or roommate, not a lover or spouse.

Hillary: Her mother is really the one who is much more difficult.... She can't be as accepting. I think she likes me. I'm sure she doesn't like the relationship.

Joyce: I never discussed it with my father. Remember I said I didn't look for permission from anybody. But he was very welcoming of her. I think he was very happy I found somebody. Because when my husband died, my mother and father were devastated that it happened ... to me.... So that my father, I think, was very reassured. I think he understood at a

certain level but we never talked about it.... He said, "What is she going to call me?" And I said, "What would you like her to call you?" He said, "Papa," which is what I called him. And that's what he was. And she became his third daughter. And that's how it was. My son, I think, had a harder time.

Lucy: My mother never liked Liz from the start. I think she saw her as a competitor. Liz is very decisive about things. My mother is very decisive about things.... My mother has never liked her and she still refuses to like her.

For a third of participants, the lesbian nature of the relationship was not acknowledged by the family (n=8). Nearly two-thirds received either disapproval (n=6) or a mixed response (n=8). Most often family members simply could not tolerate the idea of same-sex love. Only two participants received family approval for their partner choice in an acknowledged lesbian relationship.

Often the relationship was understood and discussed with siblings before or instead of with parents. Siblings appeared somewhat more supportive than parents, but it was difficult to determine if this was genuine acceptance or attempts at meeting an expectation of being more open than the previous generation. On the other hand, one brother discouraged his sister's involvement with her partner. Another sister disapproved of the relationship on religious grounds. Lack of family recognition was often expected and accepted with resignation, resulting in lower expectations for family support in general.

Cathy: The only person at that ... time who knew, not that I told him, but he sort of got a sense, was my brother. And he was ... violently against it. He was really homophobic. He didn't say an awful lot. He didn't really say anything in front of her that I can remember, but he used to make gay jokes all the time and in front of me. If he knew Claire was coming over, he would take me out somewhere and see that I didn't get back in time.

Deirdre and Daphne had been partners for 22 years. This is what Daphne said about coming out to her parents after 10 years together:

Daphne: I sat down and told my parents. We sat around the dining room table where we sit and talk about things. I told my father I was gay, I was homosexual. There was this long pause, and then he said, "Does Deirdre know?" I prepared for every response on this earth. Believe me, I didn't prepare for that one. So we had a long talk.... They were both wonderful. He said, "Why now?" "Because I'm happy and I don't want to hide it anymore." There was a way that the relationship changed after that. They were really more accepting. She wasn't just a friend anymore, but she was a member of the family. My mother gave her an extra special hug when we left. So, I am very delighted that I came out. They were very acceptant, loving people.

As might be expected, the family reactions to lesbian relationships that were openly disclosed differed from those that were not. Most often, the relationship was rarely discussed again after the initial disclosure. Nearly 90% of participants who disclosed the lesbian nature of their relationship to their family noted that the news was a terrible distress initially, met with tears, silence, rejection, and/or shocked acceptance. Only psychological adjustment over time or complete avoidance of the subject allowed for comfortable family relations around a daughter's lesbianism. Many family members did eventually include the partner in family activities, although more continued to ignore or deny the existence of the partnership.

Gwen: I have a very homophobic mother. She has grown over the years. When I was an adolescent, she would say, "If any of my children are homosexual, I'll kill myself." So I didn't ever level with her on anything at all. I didn't come out to her for ... 3 years.... My siblings were all fine about it actually.... When I told [my younger sister] I was a lesbian, she wrote me a great letter.... My other sister ... had trouble because she was religious at that point in her life, and she had trouble that we wouldn't go to the same heaven. Everybody was always polite and nice, accepting on the surface, but they had their stuff to work on.

Ingrid: I wrote a letter and ... they called me up ... and talked about it. I think my mother was crying. We didn't really say a whole lot other than you know I got your letter and ... we'll need to talk about this more. Well we never have.... On one level they are accepting of it, and in other senses they don't. There are some situations where Isabelle and the

woman my sister was with are always invited to certain family settings and there are others where they're not. So it's open and out, but I'm not totally satisfied with it. I don't feel totally accepted.

Jennifer: It was quite a showdown about how they hated her. They never met her, but they hated her. They were very, very upset with me that she was Jewish. I think they were more upset that she was Jewish than that she was a woman. That was like the worst thing you could have done. And they didn't want me to move because it was so much further away ... and that was a big issue.

Kristin: The next day, I said, "It's time to bury the dead." I thought, "My family has been talking about this for years. It's time to stop the bullshit." My one brother ... the one I'd been really close to, I started with, because [he's] the one I have the best relationship with. "Either you're going to accept me as who I am with no more charades, or forget it, it's off." It's not really realistic, but that's where I was at that point in my life. So I confronted him. I had already told my sister-in-law about my being a lesbian. And I sort of thought she was going to handle that OK. She should have; she's the first woman I fell in love with!... He handled it beautifully. He was wonderful. He was just great, and we've been close.

Lucy: My mother said, "I never want to hear about her. I never want to see her. I hope she dies." She went on and on. The interesting thing was that I had hoped that it wouldn't be like that because I know I got my tolerance for people and my compassion from my mother. It is very hard for me to say this. She had put up with divorces and remarriages. My brother lived with an African American women who had a daughter. All of that to her was acceptable, but it was almost as if she said, "This one thing I am going to hold out on. I will not accept." Even till today.... She always asks about her mother ... asks about her aunts, asks about a mutual friend, asks all around her. She won't ask about her.

Relationships that remained undisclosed to family members or work colleagues witnessed less friction with the outside world, but did so at the cost of living in two worlds and experiencing the internal pain of not having the relationship openly acknowledged. In such instances, participants might not include their partner in work-related social functions or might feel inhibited from discussing the joys or frustrations of their relationship with family members or friends at work. The privileges of being a family member, such as inclusion in family

activities or decisions, might not be realized by the hidden partner. Thus a meaningful aspect of a participant's life was made invisible.

> Grace: They understood her to be a friend.... They were very cordial. I've had friends come home with me before. But it was nothing special. I think they thought at some level that it was odd, but at another level it was never verbalized.

The impact of being closeted from family was experienced somewhat differently by each partner of one couple, as expressed in the following statements:

> Harriet: People made presumptions about our relationship ... and nobody had been told about our relationship. [They] would come to our house and it's ... clear. We didn't chat much about it ... I think that was a rocky time.

> Hillary: I never came out to [my parents] in so many words, although over time there was an understanding that this was my primary relationship. But initially, Harriet was just seen as my roommate, and that was fine. Harriet was always included in family activities and plans. [My siblings were] even more inclusive than my parents ever were.

Expectations About the Relationship

Many lesbians started their relationships with idealized expectations of what their partners would provide. When asked what had changed in their relationship over the years, they voiced the opinion that their expectations for their partner and for the relationship had become more realistic. Instead of the partner saving them or meeting all their needs, participants tempered their expectations for each other over time, recognized the importance of allowing themselves and their partners to be fallible humans, and developed flexibility to allow for change.

> Betsy: I think it's kind of an evolution. What we needed yesterday isn't going to be what we need tomorrow. I think that's something we're both good at. Letting it evolve. If somebody had told me twenty-five years ago that I was going to do well with a lot of changes, I wouldn't have believed them ... I was in my little rut and I liked it.... When it came time to go with

Beverly ... I had some fears about it. But what got me through it was knowing that I had Beverly. You're not going to be out there alone.

Isabelle: At the time I expected that Ingrid, or whomever you're in this kind of relationship with, meets all your needs and is totally there for you. I did have expectations in that sense. And I don't think that that's true anymore. There are a lot of needs that are met, but it's kind of like letting people be human, be real, be themselves.

Jennifer: When I first started out in the relationship, I think I was looking for somebody to save me. Now I think I'm looking for somebody to be with me. I can save myself if I'm going to get saved. I do think my own attitude changed so much. I grew up, really, in this relationship. So my expectations are very different. I want her to be with [me] now and listen to me and I want to have access to her. But I don't expect that she's going to come up with some magic formula for me or take away my pain.

There were some expectations of roles, but nearly a third had no idea what to expect (n=7). Of those that had role expectations, just under half expected to share the same roles and household responsibilities and work together on most things (n=7); just over a half expected to have separate but equal roles, each performing tasks and carrying out responsibilities within different designated areas, usually according to their strengths (n=10). There were a few examples of partners trying to assume butch-femme roles early on, because it was perceived that that was what was expected within the gay/lesbian/bisexual community; those roles often were discarded quickly, if they were adopted at all.

Cathy: We didn't have a clue [about roles]. We didn't know any other gay people. We didn't know what we were supposed to do, what was expected of us. We were just two women who were in love...We weren't expecting anything. We just kind of went with the way it was...It wasn't until we started meeting gay people that we had trouble with roles. Back then, you had to assume a role in the gay structure. You were butch or you were femme.... We did early on fall into the butch-femme thing, because that was what was expected.... Actually, it was kind of funny, because neither one of us falls into either one of those roles.... We decided I would be butch since I was taller.... So when we were with our friends, we followed those kinds of things, but together we really don't.

Later on, we kind of sat back and said, "Wait a minute. What do we want? Why are we doing this? This is stupid." So we went back to just being who we were. And there are certain things that she's good at that she does, and there are other things that I'm good at that I do....I think sometimes that's one of the few things that's actually more difficult for heterosexual couples. Because there are roles that you're supposed to fit into, and you don't necessarily. At least in a gay relationship, you can kind of make your own way. Once you find out what you expect from one another, you just go from there, because you don't have the assumptions.

Gwen: I always fancy myself the butch. We're not heavily into those ways, but I tend to be more aggressive sexually and would do more of the male role -- the garbage, more of those kinds of things.... I guess the role stuff was more pronounced early on. For me it was a met need, wanting to be in that role for a while, having that met and then gravitating towards the middle more in terms of that. I don't maintain it strictly. I just think by nature I am just a little more on that end than Grace and that is part of the attraction I think.

Isabelle: I didn't know anything about relationships so I'm not sure I thought. I was just very young and very immature around that sort of stuff.

Jennifer: I think at the beginning of our relationship, Joyce was the kind of emotional, insight person and I was kind of like the learner. And I was the physical caretaker person. [It] really was kind of bad news when it started out like that. I think if we hadn't gotten that adjusted, we would have never lasted.

These statements highlighted how individuals worked to form relationships in the absence of scripts, or when the only public knowledge available concerned the manner in which heterosexual relationships operate.

Two-thirds of the sample expected to have to work at the relationship (n=16).

Harriet: I don't think I ever really appreciated how important the relationship would be. I think that it does take work, and I expected it to.... It's hard to make a relationship work, you have to compromise and think and listen and adapt and that's hard.

Isabelle: In theory I had been taught that you have to work at relationships but I had no idea what that meant.

A quarter expected not to have to work at the relationship (n=6).

Kathleen: Work at it? No, it never crossed my mind. Work to maintain it. Work to keep it going. I don't think so.

Two of the twenty-four had no expectations about either working or not working on the relationship. Those that thought they would have to work at the relationship clarified that their thought rested in the belief that relationships require work and attention and did not arise so much out of concerns they had about their specific partner or the likelihood of their particular relationship succeeding.

Interpersonal Themes

Volunteers were asked about interpersonal aspects of the relationship and how these features changed over time. How participants viewed communication, roles, relatedness, satisfaction and stability in their relationships are presented in this section. Communication included styles of managing conflict and making decisions. The discussion of roles examined the division of tasks and interpersonal fit. Relatedness encompassed emotional, physical, and sexual intimacy; trust, respect, sensitivity, and understanding; and the values of equity and commitment. Participants discussed how they experienced each of these features during three separate periods of time in the relationship, with the first 5 years comprising phase 1, 5-10 years comprising phase 2, and beyond 10 years comprising phase 3. This allowed participants to specify how each of these features varied over time.

Communication

Twenty-one individuals reported a positive quality in their communication patterns in phase three, compared to only nine in the first phase. In those first 5 years, partners often thought communication was good, but not as deep and honest. Communication was rated as positive by a few more participants in the middle phase (n=11). Volunteers noted that communication improved substantively and was more authentic over time, but was also difficult, particularly around significant conflicts and sorting through differences.

> Hillary: We were least able to communicate when the relationship was most rocky.... When the communication is working well, the relationship is working well.

> Jennifer: I always felt really listened to by her. If I was having a conversation with her and we were interrupted, 12 hours later she would say, you know you were telling me about such and such, but you didn't finish. She really gave a care what the rest of that sentence was, or what I really thought about. I had never had that before in my life that anybody gave a damn what I said with that kind of intensity. That anybody would remember is very compelling when somebody does that consistently.

Sometimes one partner was prone to shutting down, and the other partner worked over the years to bring her out. Four individuals discussed difficulties they had in communicating about emotionally-laden concerns, but once they developed those skills, they felt communication was strong, deep, and genuine.

> Claire: If you were going to define communication within the context of our relationship, I would say that there is difficulty in communicating over emotional things and feelings. But, obviously, it has not been [difficult] when it has come to other things. I shouldn't blanket and say we had difficulty communicating, because there are many things we can communicate about.

> Deirdre: I thought I did a lot of talking.... I may have done a lot of talking, but I didn't talk very much about myself or about my own feelings. I didn't know how to do that.... There wasn't real honest communication until

maybe five years ago. When I think of the way we communicate now, I'm calling it open and honest. I may have thought that was what we were doing back then.

Liz: Maybe a long time ago there were things where I was afraid to tell Lucy or afraid to say to her, but it's been years and years and years. I couldn't think of an instance at the moment. I can't think when it's been that there's been something I've been afraid to tell Lucy , thinking "Oh my God, if I tell Lucy that, she's going to leave me." And there probably hasn't been in a long time anything she's been afraid to tell me....[Communication has] always been good. I think the past couple of years communication has gotten better, at least from my point of view, because I've been trying to be more conscious of finding out what Lucy is thinking! Find out how life is going for her!

Seeking out therapy, using humor, and learning to listen and discuss on both an emotional and cognitive level were tools these women utilized to facilitate communication.

Kristin: We could joke. Humor. Humor has always been my lifesaver. She could laugh about it, then we could talk.

Isabelle and Ingrid shared similar perceptions about the communication in their relationship:

Isabelle: 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. Then we started to talk a little bit about it. But again that was a hard thing for us because neither of us were used to it. It was hard to tolerate that 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 it when there is disagreement.

Ingrid: I would say in the beginning we didn't communicate well about things we were angry about or disappointed in. I was certainly used to holding that stuff in. I would say we probably got over humps by not dealing with it and sort of just getting on with it.... We went to couples therapy and that's really the first time I think that we had looked at how we were communicating or not, and sort of learned some tools about how to talk about things, particularly difficult things. And that was helpful. Isabelle is the more verbal one. Particularly 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.... That's a dynamic that neither of us is really happy with. But we definitely are aware of it and try to address it even when it's happening.

As many women in the study were instrumental in their communication style as were expressive (n=9), with the remainder being a mixture of both (n=6). Instrumental communication is described as being logical, practical, or action-oriented instead of emotional or affect-laden. These findings dispel the myth that women are always emotionally and verbally expressive and begin to point out within-group differences. Jennifer and Kathleen provided the following examples of their instrumental communication style.

> Jennifer: I think I have brought in a lot of homemaking, like I do a lot of really nice cooking. You can't see it now, but I have a really nice garden in the summertime and I think I bring a homemaking kind of quality to things. I think she likes that. And I think I have a generous quality. I think she likes that too. I think that I've contributed to the couple by making a lot of warmth.

> Kathleen: I was never one to show a lot of emotion, anger or particular things like that. That's the way my family was We grew up like that.... My mother was always in there, looking after, being sure that you had enough to eat, this kind of thing, and I tend to be that way.

Nearly half of the couples had one partner who was expressive and the other one who was instrumental (5/12).

> Grace: At the beginning I think I saw her as being more romantic, more verbally attentive about certain things. I am a great card-sender. I would always do cards and gifts. I felt like she was more verbalizing, focusing, talking about the relationship. I think she didn't get that in her previous relationship. She didn't have a partner who really wanted to be out, who wanted to be openly a partner. I felt like she really wanted that and brought that. I felt that was good for me. I really felt good about that. I think I did it more in terms of cards.

There was one instance of both women in a partnership being instrumental, one instance of both women in a partnership being expressive, and one instance of each woman being an instrumental-expressive mix.

Isabelle: I always felt it was important to say to her on a relatively regular basis, to express affection.... I need to make that contact with her, even if we were pretty distant at some point. Then you always have that bridge. And if you have that bridge, it's easier to find your way back when it's time than if you totally cut it.... So that's something that I've always done, and has felt important to me. It's easy to get into a place where you forget, you take things for granted, and I do. We both do. Even if I'm not full of feeling at any particular moment over time, I haven't' been full of "I love you; I think you're the most wonderful person in the world," I still say things, because I think it's important. It's important to say. It's important to hear. It's important to be thinking in those terms, because you can get into some other habits of pulling in, and that's a way of pushing out.

The remaining couples were various combinations of mixed, expressive, and/or instrumental. In general, then, couples were more complementary than symmetrical in their communication style, although not by a large margin. The concept of complementary and symmetrical styles of relating will be discussed more thoroughly in the section on roles.

Conflict Management

Respondents described their ways of handling interpersonal differences as a couple. They were asked to describe both their own individual style and their perceptions of their partner's style of managing differences and conflicts. Styles were categorized as either avoidant or confrontational. Participants who tended to either deny or avoid conflict or disagreement were considered avoidant; those who were direct in expressing thoughts and feelings about differences fit the confrontational style.

Most of the lesbians in this study saw both themselves (n=18) and their partners (n=17) as avoidant in handling interpersonal differences at the beginning of the relationship. Partners grew to become more confrontational over time, and most now consider their own style (n=18) and their partner's

(n=16) to be confrontational. In only one couple could both partners' current style of handling interpersonal differences be described as avoidant.

> Alice: I think that couples who really stay together a lot, one of those things that really helps you is that you have to learn to fight. If you don't fight, then some day you're just going to stop relating. Because you can't be an individual in a coupled relationship without having things that are worth fighting for. There are things that I care about a lot, and sometimes Angela wants to do them differently. And it really makes me angry, and I don't want to do them that way. And I tell her. We negotiate things. We fight verbally and negotiate. We fight fair a lot. We always make up....We fight, but we fight to the point that we resolve things. Neither of us has overwhelmed the other. I think we really are strong individual women, and we are a very strong, committed couple.

> Felicia: Usually we let the problem go for a long time until it drives one of us absolutely crazy and we deal with it. We let things get really to the explosive stage. But until it gets to the explosive stage, things are really fine. Not interfering with life. And then things will go to the point where we have to do something about it. And then we sit down and talk about it. But usually not until it's incredibly critical.

> Grace: She is strong. She is somebody I can fight for what I want and she will fight for what she wants and I can trust that between us, we can figure it out. I don't have to worry about being too strong.

Common issues of conflict included differing styles of managing money; variable needs for sex, intimacy, and/or variety in the relationship; how much attention to devote to the primary relationship vs. friends and/or family; and cleanliness styles around the home. Differing styles of relating, including how conflict was managed, mismatched stages of disclosure of lesbian identity to others, and moving into a new house were other areas of conflict that were mentioned, but by fewer participants.

> Jennifer: My anger is very different than Joyce's. Joyce doesn't get angry very often and I got angry all the time. If something pissed me off, I said it. And she had trouble with that. My anger kind of scared her so she had a tendency to withdraw from me

Partners provided many examples of how they dealt with conflicts, with many focusing on the importance of learning how to fight, talking it through, and learning when to compromise or accommodate. Many couples sought individual and couples therapy to facilitate resolution of these difficulties.

Consistent findings demonstrating the eruption of major conflict in the middle phase were remarkable. Sixty-six percent of couples experienced significant conflict in the middle phase (n=16), as opposed to thirty-three percent in the first 5 years of the relationship (n=8) and twenty-five percent during the most recent phase (n=6).

> Beverly: In the very beginning, we never fought. We were rapturously in love with each other...We adored each other. Then in the first couple of years of living together, which would have been the beginning of the second five years of our life together, those were the hard years. That's when we fought a lot more and we argued a lot more and I would get so angry with her....[Fighting] was not what Betsy had been taught, led to believe. I think that's why she had trouble fighting, because I think she learned somewhere that if you're angry with somebody, you don't love them. And 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 was afraid that I was going to leave. 'I don't want to leave you. I just want to get this settled or get through this, discuss it.' I think I had been much more secure in her love than she has been in mine. In the beginning especially. I think she would say it's better now. I hope so. But in the beginning I think she wasn't really sure all the time and she thought I would leave her. I'm not going anywhere.
>
> Hillary: We probably didn't fight very much in the first few years. Just because it was a period when we'd be willing to forgive each other, as it was a fresh relationship. We were both in the honeymoon period.
>
> Liz: We fought less at the beginning on my part, because I was afraid to fight because I thought if I fought she would leave me. And on her part because I don't think it occurred to her that fighting was an option. So, that was a little different.

Isabelle and Ingrid both commented on the difficulties they had initiating a discussion around conflictual issues, particularly early in their relationship:

Isabelle: I simply had no idea what compromise was. To me it was kind of all or nothing. A lot of times, both Ingrid and I were people who could kind of disappear. You know like if you insisted that things were going to be this way, you'd say OK. Pleasing people. That was common to us.... We've always gotten along well in terms of neither of us like to argue anyway. And we've had to work at that, being willing to argue. So we argue more but we don't argue a lot. Both of us value kind of a peaceful home.

Ingrid: It usually comes to some sort of head if there's something that we've been sort of out of synch about or in disagreement. We might go through a period where we seem to separate and stop talking and maybe be silently angry or disconnected, and then usually Isabelle, I think, rather than me, takes the initiative to bring it up. I think I've done that but I think most typically she's the one who [does].

Kathleen and Kristin described the importance of addressing problems openly

and together:

Kathleen: I guess at some point we both ... came to the realization that we were going to be together from then on, so that whatever conflict, or whatever situation there was, was worth working at. That Kristin was a part of my life and was going to continue being a part of my life, and whatever it took from me and from her to work at that, we needed to do it. There just reached a point where this is the way it was. This is the way it was going to continue to be, and so take the time, give a little, assert yourself or whatever you need to do to get through whatever was the trouble at that particular time. It was worth it.

Kristin: We were always very civilized with each other. Once we got going on some things in therapy, we learned that maybe being too civilized was one of the problems. We never said this really pisses me off!!. But it also was a strength.

Decision-Making Styles

Participants discussed their own personal decision-making style, their

partner's personal decision-making style, and the decision-making style of the

couple. Personal decision-making styles fit into three categories: impulsive,

intuitive, and logical. Decisions reached quickly through reaction and minimal

thought represented an impulsive style. The intuitive style was defined as

decisions arrived at through gut reaction or an internal sense of what to do. Decisions representing a logical style were reached through careful thought and analysis. Personal decision-making styles were consistent over the course of the relationship, with the exception of one woman who shifted from an impulsive style to a logical style in the final phase of the relationship. Seventy-five percent of the lesbians in this study were logical in their decision-making style throughout their relationship (n=18), although twenty-five percent of the sample described itself as either impulsive (n=4) or intuitive (n=2).

> Hillary: I tend to be a slow problem-solver, or see myself as a slow problem-solver. Harriet tends to want to jump in and fix things quickly, and sometimes I disagree with the way she is. I think I'm a little more contemplative.

> Angela: I would say we're both information gatherers ... We talk a lot, and we go on, and we look into a lot of details. We don't have trouble making decisions, but because of the process, it's slow.

> Kristin: Kathleen takes a long time to make decisions.... I wouldn't say [I] fly by the seat of my pants, because anything that's important I won't do diddle until I've gotten several books out, I've researched it, and I've talked to people. On the other hand, there are a whole host of things that I don't feel are very high in my priority list, that I am not going to take that kind of time and effort about, so I'll just go with it (snaps fingers). The fact that we have different timing ... was such a real sticking point. And she would feel like, stop, you're breathing down my neck, leave me alone. I would feel like how deliberative can you be, you're in a paralysis!

The decision-making style of the couple was also discussed to determine whether couples made decisions jointly or separately. Major decisions in social, financial, and vocational realms were explored. Seventy-five percent of couples reached decisions through mutual discussion exclusively by the third phase of their relationship (n=18). No one reported a separate decision-making style in this latest phase, although a fourth described variability in their manner of approaching joint decisions currently. This mutuality in decision-making

developed across more couples over time, but nearly 60% began their relationship by making decisions together (n=14), with each partner having equal input and say.

> Alice: Lesbians are famous for something called processing.... Angela and I process decisions a lot. If anything, we're fairly slow to make decisions, but I think we're very thoughtful. We do a lot of sharing. It's rare when a decision is made only singly by one of us that would affect both of us.... I think that there was some difference in the beginning, but probably into the second 5 years, like the last full 15, I would say we've been very much involved in all the decisions we've made about our lives.

> Felicia: It didn't at the time seem like deciding to buy a house, and not buying it together was such a big deal. But I think over time it may have been something that we should have talked more about or waited. I just went, 'I'm buying a house!' It was almost like I had this urge to buy a house.... Because that has been something that has come up again and again in our relationship, it might have been something that we should have waited a little bit on or we should have talked more about, but I just did it and it's been positive, I think, far more than it's been negative, but it has been something.

> Gwen: Grace took the lead in more things in the beginning all the way around. I was happy to be there and I was, not exactly a follower, but I followed at that point. In the middle phase we got into a lot of, I want to do it this way, no I want to do it this way, a lot of that. The attachment couldn't exactly go forward anyway. I think we probably separated out and I let her take the lead in some ways and I took the lead in other ways. This is a little over simplified, but probably the last stage, it didn't happen quite at ten years, more at thirteen or fourteen, that we are much more able to actually and more totally to do things together, taking both people into consideration.

> Harriet: We're not very good at making decisions. I mean, I don't know how people make decisions. There are times when just deciding what we're going to do for dinner is a horrible thing.

> Ingrid: I guess we're each more comfortable with objecting to an idea, or putting a wet blanket on something rather than maybe going along with something.... I probably feel more comfortable not to agree with something than I used to be.

> Liz: [We] might have been a little more 50/50 on [deciding] things [in the beginning], but that didn't work out so well! Sometimes we'd sit down and we'd make a list, and have a meeting and [say] "I'm going to do this,

and you're going to ..." And we'd try to do things evenly but actually we had the least good results with that. It didn't work. We usually don't try that any more.

Roles

Participants discussed their roles in terms of the division of household tasks, their personality styles, and their behaviors within the relationship. Generally, there appeared to be considerable role flexibility over time, with partners assuming responsibility for aspects in the relationship according to individual needs or strengths rather than fulfilling prescribed or assumed roles. Most couples also demonstrated a complementary style of relating to each other, with one partner's behavior, communication style, and personality features offsetting and balancing the other's. The complementarity evident in communication styles was discussed in the preceeding section.

Division of Household Responsibilities

Nearly a third of the women had no expectations for adopting particular roles in the relationship, as previously mentioned. Nearly another third expected to share similar responsibilities and the remaining 40% expected to be responsible individually for differing household tasks.

> Gwen: Neither one of us expects to fulfill any role.... Women always had to do that. By our natures we don't want that. I've always wished that Grace would cook more because I love to eat and I'm not a particularly good cook. I think it is the only thing I wish she'd like to do more. All the other junky stuff around the house I can do myself or she can do. We kind of naturally take up certain things.... We never expect that you have to do this or you have to do that.

> Liz: If you asked people to look at our relationship from the outside, they'd probably say that I make all the rules and Lucy follows them. But if

you were a fly on the wall, I don't think you'd say that. I think you'd see a lot more bouncing around.

Ingrid: We probably do more of the same things in the relationship ... we both probably do some of everything.... My mother and father were more traditional. There were sort of the male things, and my mother did more of the home-making things and raising the kids. I don't think we break down into those typically male/female things. We're each good at certain things and not good at other things. So they just divide differently.

Daphne: The one thing I didn't see myself doing is cooking. I don't like to cook. I'm not a particularly good cook. I saw myself doing actually everything else. Cleaning and dusting, outside work, mowing, painting. We didn't divide anything up except for the cooking kind of thing.

Felicia: I think my parents did things because of the roles they were in. But we do things because of where our strengths lie.

As new demands were introduced to the relationship or as individual partners changed and developed over time, the roles of the individuals were often modified. The effects of physical and mental illness, for instance, were significant to the flexibility in roles and responsibilities they demanded from the unafflicted partner.

Angela: Its been somewhat of a gradual role change. Early on in our relationship, because of my abilities, my physical abilities, and being very strong and vital and active, I was able to do a lot more than I'm able to do now. And because of Alice's emotional disability ... I used to in some ways take care of her, although not financially. I had the feeling that I was taking care of her and bringing her along to things. Caring about her feelings to such a large extent. Now its been reversed. I don't necessarily like that or want that, but some of that is out of my control, my disability being what it is. It's an accident of life.

The role of care-taker was significant in many of these relationships. Often both partners perceived themselves as nurturing. Sometimes one partner would be a more prominent care-taker, particularly if the other partner experienced a period of emotional or physical illness. The lesbians in this study also often had a care-taking focus directed beyond their relationship, either in

their profession (87% of participants represented the fields of human services, education, or medicine), caring for elderly parents, or providing service to the community on either a small or large scale.

In all instances, both partners were employed, with the exception of periods of being a student, retired, or temporarily laid-off or on welfare. In half of the couples, household expenses were contributed to evenly, thus both partners were equal as economic providers to the family regardless of individual income. In three couples, the percentage contributed by each partner to household expenditures differed significantly, with one partner providing 25% to the other's 75% contribution in two of those cases. The remaining three couples were neither equal nor so disparate that one partner was essentially financially dependent on the other.

Both partners in one couple discussed their ability to balance roles between themselves to accommodate to situational demands:

Kathleen: Anything she gets into, she really gets into. When we were still working, and after we retired for a while, she was very much involved in state affairs.... I think that what I tried to do was help her when she would get so involved like that, by doing some other things around here. By the same token, I got very involved [at work]. So at that time, we sort of switched roles. She did the laundry. She did the things that from time to time I had done for her when she would get so involved.

Kristin: We both seem to be very easy with letting each do the things they like to do. Some of the lucking out is that our interests lie in some different areas. I used to do a lot of woodworking and refinishing of furniture. I like puttering with tools, stuff like that. That's been very hard for me lately. I've just had a diagnosis of osteoporosis.... I think we just always shared gardening, we shared dinner preparation, we shared cleaning. I probably would do more in the way of cooking. I love to cook.... On the other hand, when I'm under the gun ... she would really totally free me from the kitchen.... We either share it, or we've been very able, without giving it a lot of thought or time, to balancing acts.... We still like nothing better, when time permits, to shop together. We have fun with it.

Interpersonal Fit

Responses from participants were examined to discern whether couples exhibited a complementary or a symmetrical style of relating. A complementary style was defined as one in which the personality style and behaviors of one partner offset or contrast with the personality style and behaviors of the other, much as the teeth in one gear mesh with the space of another gear to function. An example of this would be one partner being extroverted, while the other one is more introverted. A symmetrical style, on the other hand, was defined as each partner mirroring the other in personality style and behavior. The couples' interpersonal styles were illustrated in their roles and behaviors within the relationship, in the division of household tasks, and in their expressive and/or instrumental manner of communicating with one another.

Twenty-two of the twenty-four participants indicated they had a complementary style of relating to their partners throughout the relationship. The personality and behavioral differences that were responsible for this complementary fit often went unnoticed or minimized in the first phase, were a source of difficult and often painful conflict in the middle phase, and worked together more fluidly and were appreciated by the third phase. While there was a predominance of complementary styles with regard to behaviors and personality, there was just as consistently the presence of a symmetrical fit when it came to values and beliefs. With regard to interpersonal fit, Beverly had this to say:

> Beverly: I was having problems with Betsy. My feeling was that Betsy was not getting along with some of the people that we were supposedly friendly with. I was real upset about it, and I was upset because I was feeling torn between her and them.... I remember my therapist said to

me, "You're like a rock and the kite, the two of you." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "You're the kite and she's the rock." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, you're the kite and you can fly like you can fly because you've got this rock to hold you down to reality and bring you back. And you're her kite. She's this rock, and she stays in when you go out and do all this stuff, and that makes her life fuller." I really think that's defined our relationship very well in a lot of ways. And that the rock wasn't the bad thing. I think in my mind the rock had become starchy and dull and boring. He said to me, "You know, without her, I don't think you'd be flying the way you're flying."

Gwen: Our similarities prevail along with our differences.... A complementariness has helped.... A complementary relationship is what we have.

Hillary: I think there are a lot of balances that we achieve for each other in our relationship, that we help each other, that we help the relationship to achieve balances because we're different in a number of ways. I tend to like to spend money, she tends to like to save it. I tend to be worried and be early, and she tends to minimize and be late. There are a lot of things in which we kind of balance off things.... I tend to be a slow problem-solver; Harriet tends to want to jump in and fix things quickly. Sometimes I disagree with the way she is. I think I'm a little more contemplative.

Isabelle: To keep a relationship happening and alive and involving, but still working and still there, there's a couple things you've got to have. One thing is practicality, one foot in front of the other. You've got to make sure you take care of the needs, the life needs. It's not that I'm not like that, but Ingrid has that. That's definitely a quality that she has.... I'm kind of more flighty in some ways. It's not that I can't be practical, [but] I'm not in our relationship.... One thing Ingrid has always told me is that she's never been bored with me. Not that I've been bored with Ingrid, but I do think that that's probably more of the aspect that I bring to it.

Jennifer: Generally in this relationship, I'm the ideas person and she's the implementer. That's happened buying houses, starting private practice, getting the dog. All kinds of stuff where I get an idea and she gets all the facts and figures and actually makes it happen in a lot of ways. I may be a little bit more aggressive problem-solver. I may be more aggressive and more urgent and go at it more until it's done. Joyce sort of circles around and sums it up.

Kristin: Though I have catalogued all of the quiet calm things about Kathleen that I find very reassuring and soothing, there are times when I wish she would get fired up. I miss that. We're very very much opposites in a lot of characteristics, style, approaches. It's always amazing to me

that we have a broad number of things that we are alike in underneath all of those more superficial differences. But there are just times where I wish she could be more passionate about whatever the latest thing is I'm being passionate about!

Lucy: When something has to be done in the house, she often knows what to do. Anything technical, mechanical, physical, she knows what to do and I am the one who gets on the telephone. She hates to talk on the telephone. Often she will be the coach in the background. Usually I am the face to the public and she is often the brains behind or we are both the brains.

Relatedness

The concept of relatedness had to do with how partners got along with each other over the course of their relationship. Relatedness was determined through questions inquiring as to how partners got along as well as inferred from participants' descriptions of intimacy, emotional connectedness, and relationship satisfaction and in their discussions of trust, respect, sensitivity, and understanding.

All participants reported that they currently get along positively with their partners (n=24).

Beverly: The last five or six years have been really nice for us.... It's been very hard for us financially, but in terms of the two of us, we've had this wonderful experience of being together so much which could either have driven us crazy or cemented the relationship.... And it's fine.... There's been something very special about this time we've had together. We do feel more alike. We understand each other better than we did.

Florence: We've been in this extended period of caretaking, compared to the first half of our relationship where we were much freer to go wherever we wanted whenever we wanted and not be concerned what was happening with [family members' health]. That's probably been the biggest difference in the last few years.

Most also felt positively about their relatedness at the beginning of the relationship (n=20). Those that experienced a mixed sense of relatedness at

the beginning (n=4) attributed it to the combination of the negative features of

adjusting to their new partner as well as the positive features of feeling

expansive and in love.

> Alice: The first five years ... was a very exciting time. A lot was
> happening. But it was hard to get used to being with each other.
> Although we didn't ever want to be apart. I think there's that jockeying for
> position. From being one to two. And trying to hold onto your own
> identity. I think there's a lot of jockeying for position in gay, straight, or
> lesbian couples.... You try to find out how to be in a relationship and
> yourself at the same time.... It was sort of a creative and exhilarating time.
> But more rough edges to our relationship.

> Deirdre: It took a long time for me to get Daphne off the pedestal that I
> had her on, and it was much better when she became a person. I
> thought she could do no wrong, and it took a very, very long time for me
> to see her human faults. Once I did, it was fine.

In the middle phase, however, only 46% felt positive about how they got along

with their partners (n=11), another 46% felt mixed, and 8% felt they got along

negatively (n=2). How well partners got along at that time appeared to reflect

the increased level of conflict experienced by most participants in the middle

phase of their relationship.

> Beverly: The first couple of years living together which would have been
> sort of the beginning of the second five years of our life together, those
> were the hard years. That's when we fought a lot more and we argued a
> lot more and I would get so angry with her.... I think the middle five years
> are probably the hardest that way. The really working period.

Positive feelings of relatedness stemmed from perceptions of compatibility,

enjoying spending time together, engaging in activities individually outside the

relationship, and sharing a sense of intimacy through conversations and doing

things together.

> Isabelle: We're very compatible. I think a lot of that comes from where
> we come from, our history and what we share. There's a lot of stuff that
> we like to do together. We like to spend a lot of time together. We have

individual friends and we have our own work and that kind of stuff. We
have a pretty common background ... in terms of values and interests.

Liz: Lucy and I can talk to each other. We like to do things together.
Vacationing is important. We don't take a lot of them, but usually once or
twice a year we go someplace together! We like that. We've always
done that. We tend to try to be generous and be charitable and we've
done some incredibly big charity projects together.... It's just nice to have
somebody who says, "Yeah, I want to contribute to the world, and you
want to contribute to the world, so let's go do something about it." That's,
that's actually very important. It takes the focus off of us.

Overall, the lesbians in this study experienced shifts in their sense of

relatedness with their partners over time.

Jennifer: In the beginning ... we had a hard time. I think it was hard in the
sense that we were dealing with me being the dependent kid and her
being the mentor. The middle part was harder on Joyce trying to let go of
that and change and us getting more equal..... In the last 8 or 9 years, we
really have done a great job on this relationship. Even though we're
dealing with this other physical stuff, it feels like it's really ... working.

Daphne: In the beginning, [we got along] terrifically, in the middle phase
it was very difficult ,and now it is back to being terrific again. The
beginning was courtship. The beginning was that sense of being really
quite happy with each other. The middle phase was when I was
progressively more ill.... She was struggling with some of her own
personal issues and problems.... Our work was very demanding and I
was so closeted. We had tremendous stresses in our individual lives.
We were bringing that into the relationship. The relationship was stressful
because the things that were happening did not enhance the dynamics
of the relationship.... We needed to get healthy. I needed to come out.
We needed to take that burden off of the relationship. Out of that has
come this time where there are ups and downs which I think are pretty
difficult in most relationships. We get along well. It is good. How we get
along right now is enormously satisfying.

Intimacy

Three dimensions of intimacy were explored in the interview. The first,

psychosocial intimacy, focused on the verbal expression of thoughts and

feelings between partners as well as any descriptions of emotional closeness.

Touching was the second dimension of intimacy, and had to do with physical but not necessarily sexual expressions of affection. The third dimension was sexual intimacy. Participants described the quality, frequency, and importance of their sexual relations in their partnerships.

Psychosocial. Sixty-two percent of the lesbian partners felt positive about the degree of psychosocial intimacy in their relationship at the beginning (n=15); the remainder felt mixed and none felt negatively. Perceptions concerning psychosocial intimacy dipped slightly in the middle: 54% felt positively (n=13), 13% felt negatively (n=3); and 33% felt mixed (n=8) about their emotional connectedness. This corresponds with the high conflict period when partners experienced more emotional distance as they sorted through differences. This often appeared to be a time of some differentiation in the relationship, finding a balance between sense of self alongside a sense of being in a couple, although when and if this occurred varied from relationship to relationship. Building a shared connectedness as well as preserving each partner's individuality was frequently espoused as a value in these lesbian partnerships.

> Claire: There is no individuality here. A lot of that is me. It's difficult for me to get out and do anything without Cathy. Because of that, Cathy has not been able to get out and do things on her own. If I could change anything in here, it would be that we had more separate lives.

> Gwen: You do a lot of separating out ... after the [first] 10 years. This person is not going to meet every need which you projected in the beginning. I'm just going be me and we'll see what happens, and we'll continue the struggle. You start to build another layer of connection, much more authentic. I honestly don't think that happened until 15 years.... There is certainly the experience of the relationship deepening. It deepens.... The more connected you get the more individuated you get. In that connection you do find your unique self. Grace and I can be very very merged, but we are definitely two separate people.

Isabelle: It's important to me not to be [fused]. 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. It doesn't feel healthy. I don't want to do that. I don't want to be in a relationship like that. It's important to me for us to be individuals as well.

Joyce: In the beginning with Jennifer, while we were dealing with the depression, ... I lost a lot of spontaneity. We got to be very close and we just didn't know anybody, anything. We just stayed together. That was not very good. Then we went to a ... gay conference. It was electrifying. It was unbelievable that there were people like us and the things they were into and all the organizations they had. The poetry and the history and the music and discussion groups.... It was wonderful. And that freed us up. We didn't feel so joined at the hip. I think it freed us up and we got excited because there were resources and we could reach out. We needed that. And I think we felt strongly enough with ourselves to be able to reach out.

In the third phase, all partners in all couples reported positive

psychosocial intimacy, and often discussed the quality of this connection as

having deepened substantively since the beginning. When the question was

posed, "What does your partner mean to you now?" two women responded not

with words, but with tears in their eyes, obviously emotionally moved.

Betsy: I've always thought we were connected. That was the whole thing when we got together, realizing that I felt connected to her, and I've never felt this connected since. It's not like being 'one' like people say sometimes, joined at the hip so to speak. We're family to each other.

Daphne: 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. 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 a while. It has a life of its own. This is what is really so comfortable. I don't think that we would be where we are now without the difficult parts. Not that I have a habit of misery. I do not. It isn't just that we had hard parts, it is how we weathered it.

Felicia: [At the beginning] it almost seemed like life was sort of shallow compared to sharing life now, which involves so much more of each of

us. It's like the sharing was sort of skin deep then, and now it's all pervasive.

Grace: We have certain rhythms of our life that really work well for the two of us. I think we really like being together.... We like connecting, like spending time together, like having our lives be known to the other person. In fact, this year, ... that [has been] a little bit hard because we have been doing some separate things and we don't have quite enough time to catch up. There are whole parts of my life that she doesn't know about and that is really odd. It hasn't always been that way. We usually would catch up and stay in tune. So I think we like that and it works for us to do it that way.

Harriet: It was helpful just to have a soul-mate, dealing with this stuff. It was very important to have another person ... to share my life with. Partly because my life was just so stressful. Her life was stressful too. We were sharing each other's stress. It helped. I can't imagine how it would be to be the spouse of [someone] ... who doesn't understand what you're going through.... She just completes my life. I think we do make a whole together and I think that we're very interwoven.

Isabelle: She's my best friend.... There's a peacefulness about that. We spend a lot of time together, and it's also OK if we're not. I'm happy, I have plenty of things to keep me busy. She's with me wherever. 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 it in. She'll understand where it's coming from.

Kathleen: It was very easy for her to let the way she felt be known. And I had somewhat more difficult time.... As we have matured together and as we've just matured period, that may have changed. Kristin still says ... that she has a hard time asking for something. When she is hurt or sad, it's easier for her to get hurt or get angry, than it is to say, I need you. But hopefully, that has changed somewhat over the years.

The partners in the following couple enjoyed and took pride in their ability to share intimacies, yet also recognized the difficulty of discussing some issues:

Jennifer: I think the emotional stuff, how we communicate with one another and how we take care of our problems emotionally, I think we're much better now than we ever were in our life. This is the best we've ever had it. Now we're struggling with this aging reality.... I don't talk to her about this as much as I should. Losing her is becoming more and more of an issue.... It's just a hard thing to be sitting around talking to somebody about their death. So it feels like there is a thing that's

changed in the last few years ... that I don't talk to her about and it's a major issue. And that's really unusual for us that I'm keeping this to myself most of the time. And she's keeping it to herself most of the time.

Joyce: We talk a lot about everything.... When we go out to dinner with our friends or with the family, ... we miss each other. We love to go out and get dinner together, after all these years, and just sit and talk together. Just being by ourselves together is still very thrilling to us.... It's the way things get shared. Thoughts and feelings and difficulties and everything. It just seems like such a natural flow.

Touching. Physical affection gradually increased and improved over time, with 83 % currently indicating physical touching as being a positive and satisfying aspect of their relationship (n=20). Just over half of the participants described physical displays of affection as positive at the beginning and middle phases (n=15). Various participants expressed discrepancies in their need vs. their partner's need for physical touching and closeness. Many also discussed the automatic filtering process that occurs before they demonstrate affection towards one another, that is, discerning whether or not they are in a comfortable context to touch (e.g. at home) where the surrounding environment won't react negatively, i.e. homophobically.

Beverly: We don't have [sex] anymore, but we do have a lot of loving and cuddling and kissing and touching. It's not sex, a sexual act, but I think there's still a lot of touching or physical things that go between us and we talk about everything.

Deirdre: I think [being physically affectionate] has been a problem area. I think Daphne would like us to be much more intimate.... I don't need to feel close to her physically in order to feel close to her. I don't think she needs that in order to feel close to me, but I think it enhances things for her tremendously.

Grace: Gwen feels I don't touch her as much as she touches me. I think that is probably true. I tend to think my touching comes out of warm feelings or comes out of a heart feeling, but her touching comes out of a need to touch. I think she just experiences it more often or it comes on her more often, to be touched or a sense that she hasn't been touched. For me it doesn't feel so physical.

Isabelle: We're pretty physical. We've always been pretty physical, but I think we've become more so. I'm a pretty physical person. That's something that I like and I think Ingrid likes that too. My sense is I probably drive that aspect, but ... we're both very physical with each other. I'm very physical with other people and Ingrid is less so. It's more comfortable for her. But we're often touching. Not in public. We don't do that in public. But just among ourselves.

Kathleen: Kristin has always been a very affectionate person.... It's a little bit harder for me to show affection. We would view that not as non-sexual, but as sexual - the hugging, the kissing, the caressing. I have an easier time with that than I used to, and I think that there's more of it.

Liz: There's always been a lot [of affection]. A lot more when nobody's around than when we have company or we're in public, but that's always been very high. I think that's partly why our relationship works. It's very important. Especially when nobody's here, I'm more likely to initiate a hug or a kiss or just sit together. Lucy doesn't think of it, but then when I think of it that's fine, that's great.... Sometimes I wonder when nobody's around, "Why doesn't she just come over and give me a hug?!"

Sexual Intimacy. Sexual intimacy often was passionate in the beginning, with sixty-seven percent reporting a positive sexual relationship in the first phase (n=16); None felt negatively, although a third expressed mixed feelings about the quality and/or frequency of their sexual relations initially. Several commented on a sense of prolonged pre-relationship foreplay as they worked through negative feelings around becoming involved in a lesbian relationship while recognizing the strong sexual attraction they had to their partner.

Alice: When we first made love, it felt so natural. It was like, oh my god, I'm home. I'm home. This is where I want to be. It was so wonderful to be with a woman. And I really enjoyed being with men, too. It wasn't like it was better, but it was different. But I really, really loved Angela, and I waited. It sounds like a commercial for teenagers who should wait until they're married, but it is. It's very powerful to finally give yourself in that way... Certainly the first night it wasn't great sex in terms of any kind of technique, because I didn't know what to do exactly.... It was just the emotions and the feeling. I woke up in the morning and I just went, oh my god, I am so happy. I just love this woman.

Sexual intimacy dipped significantly in the middle phase, with more than half of the sample reporting either negative (n=6) or mixed feelings (n=8) about the sexual relationship at this time. This corresponds with the increase in conflict and decline in emotional intimacy commonly experienced during this middle phase, and a few lesbians discussed how when the relationship did not feel emotionally close, there was a decreased desire for sex.

> Claire: I did not know anything about stages of relationships. I thought that what was happening in the first few years continues to happen. For me, it was staying at the same level. I was as interested in her sexually, as frequently, as I had early on. The frequency, as far as I was concerned, was staying at a high level. It wasn't with her. I would say from year 4 on, that's been a problem for various reasons.

> Deirdre: It played an important role in those five years that were so bad, in the middle there. Probably because not only were we fighting, we weren't having any kind of intimacy. We didn't have emotional intimacy, we didn't have sexual or physical intimacy. The lack of that kind of intimacy added to the problems of the relationship, and I think it's probably still a problem for Daphne. It is not something that would drive her out of the relationship, but it certainly is something that she misses. I am aware of it, and it makes me feel guilty.

> Hillary: It was very important initially, and suffered as the relationship had more difficult times in the middle. Now we're pre-menopausal and not as active certainly as we were, but it's still important and nice, but not as frequent.

For 46%, positive sexual relationships resumed by the third phase (n=11), although not to the height of the first few passionate years. Of all 12 couples, there were 2 who are not currently sexually involved at all or are minimally engaged in sexual contact. For both it is a difficulty. In one of those cases, one partner is not sexually interested anymore. In the other case, a partner had a stroke 2 years ago shortly after making love. She now has a psychological block around having an active sexual life with her partner because of this association. Several other couples are currently struggling with

differing sexual needs in the relationship, but have not discontinued their sexual

relationship all together.

> Beverly: It was great in the beginning. There's just very little now. That's not an easy thing for either one of us. The only thing that's been real helpful to me is that I've been reading in the 'Lesbian Connection' that this is apparently not uncommon among lesbians. Which really surprised me. Which was helpful. I thought I was really weird. And that's been helpful for me because I'm the person that's not the sexual one anymore. I don't know why it is with me, because of all the people I've ever had sexual relations with, it's been the best with her. So I can't begin to figure out what it is about. Probably my health and not being very comfortable with my body.

> Jennifer: I did know you had to work on your relationship, but I never knew you had to work at sex. It really pissed me off when I learned that.... I feel like we really have to work at it.... It's still very enjoyable but it's hard to get to it. And it's become a problem for us. Sex itself is not a problem for us but this whole other thing is a problem.

The frequency of sexual relations generally decreased and the quality

improved for most couples. Several women discussed their lack of knowledge

at the beginning around how to have a sexual relationship as a lesbian or

suggested that sexual problems most often reflected psychological discomfort

with their identification as a lesbian.

Generally speaking, the sexual relationship was considered important,

and in the beginning phase was considered very important by a third of the

partners (n=8). It was only considered to be not important at all by 2 participants

during the middle phase. Even when people were struggling with issues

around their sexual relationship, it was not so important that they would

consider terminating the relationship over it.

> Grace: I don't see much difference over time, except for the first couple of years were intensely sexual. It was very very important. We orchestrated our whole life around being sure we could both make love but also have time to do romantic things.... Then Gwen was in school and we moved to more of a work part of our life. It stayed about the same in frequency in

general. We go through peaks and valleys.... It seems like we go through periods where we are intensely sexual. We tend to be more sexual on the weekends or vacations. I think that is reality.

Emotional distance in the relationship, drug and alcohol use, different sex drives, discomfort with identification as a lesbian, being overweight, physical illness and disability, and menopause were all things identified as interfering with the sexual relationship. In one case, a participant openly engaged in a sexual relationship outside of the partnership to satisfy her sexual needs. The partners in the following two couples shared similar perceptions concerning differences and dissatisfactions they experienced in their sexual relations:

> Kathleen: In the beginning, it was very very important and quite frequent. Gradually it's diminished. That used to worry us, that we didn't find ourselves as frequently involved as we formerly had or as we thought we should. And we would talk about it. Now we think about being sexual as something that is bigger than the sex act -- it's the caring, the feeling, the understanding that we have for each other. All the little things you do, the touching.... It's too bad that people, when they talk about homosexuals or lesbians, just think about the sex act, when it's really a way of life. It's a relationship. There's so much more to it really. So, that used to worry us, that we're not that active sexually, but I think it doesn't worry us as much.

> Kristin: I won't even talk about the first 8 months; I was in no state to make conscious decisions and adjustments. Everything was so grand, and I was on such a cloud, that it wouldn't have mattered if I had to walk across coals to get to her! But I think that once that stage was over, the biggest adjustment was that she was not as interested in sex as frequently as I was. That was hard. We were both under lots and lots of job pressures, other pressures, and she would always sort of talk about this in terms of when this lightens up. And I'd say, it's not going to lighten up.... I resented it.

> Lucy: I'm satisfied with our life sexually and I don't believe Liz is. She is a very good lover and I am not sure I am a very good lover. I don't seem to be able to do the things that please her. Our way of making love is not as pleasing to her.... I gave up taking charge in every other way and I just can't seem to be the take charge person in making love.... I like to be laid back and casual about stuff, probably including sex. She is looking for somebody to be strong and take charge.

Liz: The very first few times we slept together I think we both found it very fulfilling. Since then mostly she's enjoyed our sexual relationship and I'm up and down about it, although lately I have been enjoying it more. Every once in a while I'll say "This is ridiculous. I can't take this any more. It's got to get better or I've got to find somebody else." But it's never important enough to me that I really do anything about that because Lucy is just so wonderful otherwise.

Relationship Variables

Each individual was asked to describe the degree to which they felt trust, respect, understanding, and sensitivity were present in their relationship.

Respect and Trust. Both trust and respect were felt to be consistently positive throughout the relationship and trust was often identified as critical to satisfaction in the relationship. Even during the period of conflict and feeling misunderstood in the middle phase, trust (n=20) and respect (n=21) were viewed as positive by most partners in these relationships. This held true both for participants' perceptions of their own trust and respect towards their partner, as well as for participants' perceptions of their partner's trust and respect towards them. In the third phase, all participants experienced the trust and respect shared in their relationship as being positive, with one exception.

Gwen: I always have respect for Grace. I don't think that has changed. I don't think I have ever lost respect for Grace over anything. Even at our worst moments, I have always respected her.

Jennifer: [Respect] was always there. Always a lot of respect for our struggles and a lot of respect to one another for who we are, how we work, who we are professionally. I think we both have a lot of respect for one another. I think that was one of the given things that was always there. Even early, early on.... I don't think that's changed. It's increased I would imagine.

Angela: I have so much trust there's not even a word for it. I haven't had this kind of a relationship with another human being. I really haven't.

Beverly: It's grown. I trust her implicitly. I think she feels that way about me too. That's sort of the bond, the basement of the house.... You have to trust each other with really awful things sometimes. But you have to trust that it'll be all right or you'll work it through.

While some partners experienced a complete and mutual trust from the beginning of their relationship, a few described periods of more precarious trust. In one case, a partner became involved in an outside relationship, which challenged her partner's trust towards her. Respect wavered at times, too, usually in response to learning that a partner was in some way different from herself or from what she expected her partner to be. One participant noted that she didn't respect herself at the beginning of the relationship, identifying herself as immature and drinking too much, and therefore could not imagine that her partner respected her either.

Alice: [Respect] has definitely grown by leaps and bounds as we've gone through things. More than anyone your partner sees how you're dealing with the difficulties in their lives and I've gained more and more respect for Angela. I certainly respected her when I first became lovers with her. I wouldn't necessarily say I respected her when we were friends. We were both sort of silly.

Cathy: I think she's always respected my integrity and my values. She probably didn't have a whole lot of respect for me as a person in the initial stages of our relationship, just because of the kind of person I was. It would have been pretty hard to respect someone like me in a relationship. I think she's grown with that also, as she has learned more about me and my background.

Grace: I don't think I respected certain aspects of things in the middle. I just felt that this person is weird about these things. This is too different, too other, too strange. I would think, mine's better or my family does it right, that kind of power struggle. I don't think it was a basic disrespect but I acted disrespectful. I acted like we were going to do this my way and my way was right.

Sensitivity and Understanding. Participants were asked to discuss the degree to which they felt they were sensitive to and understood by their partner,

as well as to explore their perceptions of their partner's sensitivity and understanding towards them. Overall, understanding and sensitivity grew gradually over time and were high by the third phase of these relationships.

More participants believed they were understood (n=12; n=15) than they were understanding (n=8; n=12) in both the beginning and middle years, respectively. The beginning was characterized by misunderstanding more often than by understanding; however, this condition improved in the middle phase, so that more often individuals felt understood. The women in this study reported being understanding of (n=22) and feeling understood by (n=22) their partners in the third stage.

In the initial stage of the relationship, four individuals felt they did not understand their partners, and twelve felt mixed. Also during the first phase, one individual felt misunderstood by her partner and eleven felt mixed about their partners understanding of them. Women indicated that because they did not perceive their partners as they actually were, because they viewed them through their own frame of reference, and because they were unaware of differences, they were not accurately knowledgeable of each other and therefore incapable of fully understanding each other early in the relationship, although at the time they often thought they were. Participants expressed a strong motivation to try to understand their partner, even if at times their attempts failed.

> Jennifer: I don't think I understood her at all in the beginning. I misinterpreted everything that happened. When ... we had sex problems when we first moved in together, I thought that was me. I think I spent the major part of this relationship in the middle learning about her. And I think I've got it down pretty good now. I think every once in a while I make a mistake. I still do something, I assume it's going to be this way and then I find out from her that's not the way she feels about it at all. And I'm always amazed. But overall I think I've got a pretty good grip on

who she is. You know there's always this part of somebody that you don't ever know. That surprises you.

Kristin: I don't know that I've done as well as she has. It wasn't for lack of trying or lack of desire. I think just as the differences ... in background and experiences have sometimes made it hard for her to see where I'm coming from, those same differences have sometimes made it hard for me to really hear. She is a very private person. Even with me she's a private person.... Because things are not up front with her all the time, I would miss what was really going on. There would be times when I would think everything is just fine, but in fact they weren't. She was in fact needing to reach out, and needing more support. Whenever I could see it, whenever I could hear it, I think I've always been there. But I have come to understand over the years that there have been times when I didn't have a clue.

Emily: I didn't think she understood me much at all the first five years. But I think she understands me very well now, probably better than I do myself.

The following statements by Gwen and Grace illustrated similar perceptions

regarding how and when understanding influenced their partnership:

Gwen: There is that phase where you think you understand the other person and then you find out that this is really who the other person is. I'd say that happened in the second phase. You live with an illusion for a long time, or partial illusion. I remember Grace saying you don't really understand me. I have said that I am sure. You think you do and you think, oh, this is really what you meant. This is different. I've never known that before. I think we both sought to understand each other. I think we have tried very hard to understand each other and I think that we have wanted to enough that we have come to understand each other. We've never given up trying, neither one of us to understand more or to make things better and get through our differences.

Grace: At the beginning I felt she really understood me up until I realized that we were so different. Then I felt she didn't understand me at all.... I can remember the first five years as feeling very understood. In the next five years around some of our differences, I felt very misunderstood. I felt like I was seen as flaky, irresponsible, not sticking to details, lying, trying to confuse her, trying to manipulate her to my way of doing things. I felt very misunderstood in those crisis times. I felt a distance between her and I.

In the most recent phase, respondents most often indicated that they treated their partners sensitively (n=23) and vice versa (n=21). Half of the participants viewed their sensitivity of their partner as being positive in the middle phase (n=12), a slight increase from those that had felt positive about their sensitivity at the beginning (n=10), but not as sensitive as participants currently felt towards their partners (n=23).

Two-thirds felt they were treated sensitively by their partners at the beginning of the relationship (n=16). Participants' positive perceptions of their partners' sensitivity increased by the third stage (n=21), after dipping slightly in the middle (n=15). Respondents indicated that sensitivity was closely linked to understanding, and that the latter needed to be in place for the former to occur. Participants interpreted understanding as gaining emotional and cognitive knowledge of a partner and sensitivity as acting in awareness of that knowledge.

> Grace: Between the two of us I don't mind being mean.... I am not generally ... very accommodating. I feel I am for harmony and I am trying to make the best good for everyone, but if someone crosses my path that is nasty ... I feel like I can beat them right back. I feel like that bothers her.... I think I am always sensitive in that I think I know when things are hard, but I think sometimes I override that sensitivity with it is better to speak up and get it off my chest and get on with it.

> Harriet: I've become more sensitive to her, more understanding of her, the more I know her.

> Alice: I think we're both very sensitive. Then there are times when we do terribly insensitive things, but they're the exception not the rule.

> Claire: Sometimes she'll turn around and do something almost as if she read my mind. It may take a few days. Like if I'm sitting here thinking, we haven't cuddled, or we haven't been affectionate, or we haven't had a night where we just sat and chatted together in a long time. I'll be really thinking about that and it'll be bugging me. Two or three days later, son of a gun, she'll turn around and she says, come on. And I think, is she

tapped in? She can't be tapped in. I must be giving off some sort of signals.

Sharing of Values

In addition to the primary values of fairness and commitment discussed more fully further on, the lesbians in this study cited numerous values as being important to their relationship satisfaction. Values mentioned most often were equality, honesty, loyalty, valuing a long-term commitment, the importance of experiencing growth both individually and as a couple, and giving something to the community. Shared values were experienced as a positive factor throughout the relationship. They were mentioned as significant in attracting partners to each other, in the maintenance of the relationship through difficult times, and in the bonding and exhilaration that comes with sharing similar beliefs with another. Participants appeared to reflect liberal views in general; several described themselves as "activists," "feminists," and "radicals," although others painted a more reserved liberal picture of themselves. In terms of values, all couples exhibited symmetry.

> Gwen: We tended to agree on shared values.... We are definitely not conservative and appreciate family. We look for loyalty and honesty, those kinds of characteristics.... We're both feminists, liberal, radical, political. We have very different personal styles, but I'd say that our standards for a highly liberal life were very similar.

> Hillary: A long-term, monogamous relationships has been something we both value, and I think that's probably the ... most important factor as far as being together, because that's important to us. Obviously we share values. We're both doctors. We share values about what it is to take care of people and be responsible for them and to them. [We] share a lot of similar things. Being able to go to Maine, see the birds, hike, and ski, and the outdoor stuff has been a big, important factor for us.

> Isabelle: Valuing a long-term relationship. Understanding that you ... grow within yourself if you work through what you need to work through

in order to stay in the relationship and keep it one that 's still serving both's needs in a healthy way. It doesn't mean it's perfect. That's something I had to learn, because I didn't know that.

Ingrid: I think it's important to each of us to be as honest as we can be at whatever place we're at, whether we're in a conflict or something else. That sort of honesty ... is the thing to try to achieve.

Jennifer: I guess I have to say loyalty. We have a lot of loyalty to one another. If anything was happening to either one of us that affected the other one, we told them. I think loyalty was a big part of how we were very loyal to the relationship and to one another.

Liz: I think we both try to be good people. We both try to be honest. We both try to be generous. We both have ... this idea of you probably ought to give just a little bit more than you get back. I think as a couple we try to do that.... I think as individuals we try to do that.

Equity and Fairness. Equity and fairness were often spontaneously mentioned as important values to the participants in these relationships, although not always achievable. Partners often took great pains to work towards fairness in the relationship, although fairness was defined in different ways. Equity and fairness issues most often came up with regard to finances, and how income and expenditures would be handled. Eighty-eight percent currently perceive equity in their relationship (n=21), as compared to just under half perceiving equity in the beginning phase (n=11). The presence of fairness and equity in the relationship gradually increased over time.

Beverly: I think it's much fairer now than it was. I think there was a period of time where a lot of it focused on me and what I wanted. I think if you'd asked me about the tenth year of our relationship, I'd have said I can get her to do anything I wanted her to do for me. I don't think that's so anymore. I think she's come into her own a little bit more.... I like it. It feels better that way. The other way feels kind of selfish and a little unfair.

Felicia: Things were pretty fair in a lot of ways, and having things be equal was important.

Hillary: I think that each of us kind of perceives the other one as being more generous, I mean I think that's part of what allows you to keep your

relationship going is to give more than what you see as 50%.... It balances in the end, although I know that I give more than she does, and she knows she gives more than I do.

Ingrid: Sometimes money can be an influence. Sometimes we each have difficulty with the money thing.... She can think ... I have more money so I have more of the power, but sometimes her lack of resources makes me feel powerless because we can't do something that I want to do 'cause we're sort of held back.

Liz: When I want to have more influence, I have more influence, because I'm more likely to have a strong opinion about "I do want to go here, I don't, I do want to do this, I don't." Lucy is more likely so say, "Well, well, OK. We can do it that way." But every once in a while she'll put her foot down and she'll say, "We're going to do this or I'm going to do this! Take your pick!" So, usually if I want more influence I can manage to have it. Lately I've been more interested in maybe trying not to do that so much.

Commitment. Many participants discussed the importance of commitment to the continuation of their relationship. A sense of commitment was felt strongly at the very beginning of the relationship, and often was stated as being necessary before becoming sexually involved in a relationship. Attitudes were mixed around whether or not the initial sense of commitment felt like it would be life-long.

Daphne: When did I know I was committed? In some ways, I really knew right away that this was it. This was the relationship that I had wanted, that I had been waiting for. I wanted it to work. I knew very soon, and yet I didn't know at all then what I know now, and just how committed I can be over all these years. It's a head knowing and now it's a heart knowing. The knowing has deepened over the years. It's a delight that I stuck around for this. It's a wonderful feeling.

Felicia: I felt committed to Florence in probably less than a month. That was the kind of feeling that I had towards her.... It was like going down a slide very fast. It was good though.... I learned commitment is very high on those lists of things that make a good relationship.

Harriet: Within four to six weeks almost of meeting each other. It felt right. I felt committed.

Isabelle: I don't want to stay in there if it's not good, if it's not working, but I think it's unrealistic and immature to think that if things aren't going

exactly as you want them, well, screw this and go off to something else. The growing up part is learning that you make adjustments, and you compromise, and what you thought was so important at one point, ends up being not quite so important. It's life. It's part of growing up. It's like saying, ahh, there's something else I have now that's more important than what I thought when I was younger. There are some things that you do have to have consistently through your life, and that is the basis for deciding whether or not you stay in a relationship. I really don't believe you stay in a relationship if it's not working, if it's not doing you any good. Then you take responsibility for who do I really want to be, and is this relationship helping me get to that place. And can I get to that place within the context of this relationship?

Liz: [I felt committed] the first time we slept together. I just remember saying -- I remember very distinctly saying to myself in my own mind -- that if we do have sex, make love, whatever I said , if we do that tonight, then this is it! Then she's the one and this is forever. I just remember saying it, like think now, 'cause in the morning it will be too late.

Joyce and Jennifer each discussed the sense of commitment in their relationship. Joyce appeared to recognize the commitment early on. Jennifer found her sense of commitment evolved over time.

Joyce: I operated on the premise that when you make a commitment, you're going to make the commitment and you're going to find a way to keep it. I'm not saying it was a fairy tale to be. I knew all about life's realities. I knew things could be very difficult and get down a lot. But that was where I was at.

Jennifer: I guess some transition came to me, some year in the middle of all these 24 years where it never, ever, ever occurred to me to leave it. It certainly occurred to me before that time. I can't tell you what year that was.... But somewhere, it just stopped occurring to me to leave it. I've never thought of it since. So it's not an option. It's just simply not an option. So that really made the relationship last because it wasn't one of the things that you thought about.

Satisfaction with the Relationship

Most participants described positive satisfaction both at the beginning (n=20) and currently (n=23) in their relationships. Half expressed negative or mixed feelings about satisfaction during the 5-10 year period (n=12).

> Alice: I love my love relationship with Angela, having it last 20 years even though we're gay. There's a lot of people who wouldn't in any way approve of us being together, let alone for a long time. They would just think it was totally ludicrous. It's very important that we have support for that, and that we have done it. It's a great accomplishment. It's not a matter of bragging, but it's significant. When people came to our [twentieth anniversary] party, they also saw that it was significant, and it meant something to them too, as gay or lesbian or bisexual people. There were certainly straight people there too. Love that can last is valuable. It's something that people should celebrate.

Partners used various words and phrases to describe what their lover had meant to them in the past, including how happy they made them, how much they admired them, how physically attractive they found the other, what good confidantes they were to each other; how romantic and new and fresh the relationship felt, and how devoted and exclusively focused on one another they were. One participant said, "I thought she was beautiful... I'd do anything [for her]."

When describing what partners meant currently, participants used words which were not much different than those mentioned above, but there was a greater depth and appreciation to the descriptions that emerged. Women sought for various ways to describe the primacy of their partner, the depth of their connection, the bond created through shared struggles, and yet respect the separateness of their individual selves.

> Gwen: She's such an important part of my life ... my partner. It's very primary.... At the beginning it's more the love. Then you find ... all that building and building and building together. Working on it together, that's the partnership. It comes to matter a lot.

> Hillary: She's my partner! She's the person I sleep with. She's the person I love. She's the other person who feeds and walks the dogs. We have our life. I can't imagine not having her as part of my life. It's just something we've worked out, and we've worn in for so long that it's valuable. It's got it's own value now. It's got a life of it's own.

Joyce: She's my life. I love her very much and she's everything to me.... After all the travail and all the years we spent working together, I really know what she means to me. I really do. Even with some of the dissatisfactions we might both have, what outweighs them are the positive things we have that we worked for.

Liz: She's the other half of my soul. That's about it.

The lesbians in this study had this to say about the nature of their long-term

relationships and the satisfaction they experience within them:

Alice: We really really love each other. We fight a lot. We have a lot of problems. We have a lot of disagreements. And we're very different, but I have never ever not loved Angela. All these years. I've wanted to be with her and just go through stuff with her, because she is really like a soul mate. I like to be married.

Beverly: I think it's deeper. We know each other a lot better now. I think it's grown. It developed some sort of a base that just grew as opposed to there being radical differences. There have been changes in our lives since ... we've been more out. It's so freeing for both of us. It really has been just wonderful. But I think the basic stuff ... is there in the beginning.

Deirdre: I see her face and it still makes me smile immediately. When she sees me, I see her face go into a smile that comes right from her heart. It still knocks me for a loop. I love looking up seeing that she is there in the room. The important things were there, and the important things grew. The love, the friendship, the loyalty, the willingness to stick through the hard times.

Daphne: 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. 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. I don't think that we would be where we are now without the difficult parts. Not that I have a habit of misery. It isn't just that we had hard parts, it is how we weathered it.

Hillary: What was good about the relationship was it was new and fresh and exciting when we first met each other and were getting to know each other. It was wonderful. In the middle section we just kind of struggled, with our lives and what we were going to do and settling in.... In the more recent years we've had the sense of what we are, and who we are ... in terms of knowing what we're going to do with the rest of our lives. We're

certainly clear that we have a strong commitment to each other and to a small group of friends.

Lucy: I feel very good about the commitment to each other, the kinds of friends we have around us, the kinds of things we have been involved in, the groups that we have started.... I feel good about owning the house.... Good, in general, how we communicate with each other, how we do things, how we support each other, how we get along.... I am saddened that I am not in a better position right now to be more of a monetary support to her.... I am sad that she is not as satisfied in the way we make love.... I am sad we don't have money in the bank.... I am not as happy about the shape of this house. [it doesn't look] the way I know she wants it to look and the way I really want it to look; I am a little disappointed that she doesn't know that it means as much to me as to her.... Sometimes Liz will say, I don't like you, but I will love you forever. I guess there are things that we don't like about each other. We both have the sense that we will be committed forever.... It has been a wonderful journey.

Liz: I picture there is this see-saw, and on one side of the see-saw are all the things I like about Lucy and the fact that I really see us as being soul mates forever. And on the other side of the see-saw are the things that bug the shit out of me about her. And [the first] side is always heavier. When I look at our relationship, the negatives are outweighed because there are so many positives.

Stability

The lesbians in this study discussed their perceptions of how their relationships had endured despite experiencing conflicts, difficulties, external pressures, and crises. Stability factors that kept these women in these primary attachments included the following: a sense of commitment, liking/loving of partner and her qualities and quirks, a history of sharing and surviving external and interpersonal struggles, desirable personal qualities of the partner, preference not to be alone or with someone else, and dependency/low self-esteem issues.

With regard to commitment, for instance, various women in this study mentioned the determination to make the relationship work, their partner's

doggedness and tenacity, a shared loyalty, and a belief in the importance of the relationship as being significant factors. Participants commented on the ease with which they could spend time with their partners and how much they delighted in each other's company. Many lesbians indicated the necessity of being able to fight, to both argue as well as to be flexible and open to compromise. Several participants highlighted the importance of growth within the relationship; they felt it was critical to have an awareness of problems, an ability to address and fix difficulties, and a healthy openness to change to grow both individually and as a couple to experience a satisfying relationship. Personal qualities valued included a sense of humor and a sense of confidence. A few women mentioned that a factor in their relationship stability, although not the determining one, was a preference for being part of a couple rather than being alone. Two individuals thought that since they were first loves, that was significant; others said that since they were older when they got together and therefore knew themselves better, that was significant to their relationship stability.

> Angela: I think her determination that we stay together no matter what. Any time we have a fight, and I stormed out and ended up in a puddle of tears and said that this wasn't going to work out, she was just determined that we would stay together and it was just a fight and we'd have to work through it and that's that. We're just going to be together. That was her determination.

> Alice: What keeps us together? I think the fact that we waited and that there was a tremendous amount of passion between us....Somebody said that what marriage needs is a combination of lust and trust. The lust, the passion, not just sexual, but a passion for another person, you have to have it for it to be long-term. Because it's going to diminish over the years.

> Claire: We're back to standards. Obviously we are very much in love. We trust one another. We respect on another. I genuinely like her.

She's my best friend. I think the biggie with us has been the ability to compromise. And I don't want to leave out the C word, communication.

Cathy: Her sense of humor. Her empathy. Her ability to bring out the best in me. It took me a lot of years, and she still has a lot of pulling to do, but she has an ability to make me look at myself and make me the kind of person I want to be. And her nurturing. She gives me the things I never had. That's probably more than anything else what keeps us together.

What kept me in this relationship through all the trials was a need that I had for someone to give me what I was lacking in my life. Claire did that. Through everything. No matter what we were going through or what I put her through, that never flagged. She never hesitated to be right there for me, to nurture or to 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 held me over everything else. So, I guess basically what kept us together was my own need for something that's lacking in my life.

Deirdre: Her doggedness in terms of keeping us talking about the things that were important, in pinning down ways in which we could resolve differences. Where I might want to avoid them, she would not let me avoid them. Her loyalty is unswerving, as is mine to her. I think that is terribly important. And that deep abiding love that we each have. It has been there from the very beginning and has grown deeper. It is like a cord from her heart to mine.

Isabelle: The valuing of the relationship. The respect, the importance of treating each other well, and the willingness to learn how to argue. That's a tough thing, but it's allowed us to stay connected.

Liz: Part of it is as simple as going back to the first night we made love and I just said "That it!" I just said "This is Lucy. She's my partner forever. And that's the way it's going to be!" Part of it -- it sounds corny -- is living out of that commitment. Part of it is we like each other. Part of it is ... we like to talk to each other. I don't know if it's any more than that.

Kristin: Her gentleness. Her strength. Her perseverance. Her fairness. And her great willingness to put herself out.... My willingness to work at problems no matter what. My ability to use what we've learned.... My sense of humor. My high energy. My stick-to-it-iveness. My loyalty. When all of the traditional ways of doing something have been exhausted, my willingness to try something different and see where it goes.

External Factors

Participants discussed the influence of external factors on their relationship over time. The factors which emerged included social supports (including the influence of family, the gay/lesbian/bisexual community, and friends), homophobia and societal attitudes, religion and spirituality, finances, race and ethnicity, and the availability of models. The relative significance of each of these factors and their influence on the partnership is presented in this section.

Social Supports

The nature of lesbian couples' social support networks was explored through questions targeting the impact of family, friends, and the gay/lesbian/bisexual community on the relationship. Participants generally found the gay community and friends to be an increasingly positive influence as a source of social support over time. Family relationships were often experienced as more problematic. The necessity of social supports and the fears associated with their absence is described in the following statement:

> Hillary: I think that to be real isolated is to be alone and to have a loss of perspective. To ask one person to provide all your support is impossible. [Social supports] have been tremendously important. As I'm getting older and don't have kids, who's going to take care of me when I'm dottering and forgetful? We ought to get ... a lesbian nursing home.

Family

Families became decreasingly negative as an influence on the relationship, but only a third saw their own (n=8) or their partner's (n=9) extended family as a positive influence on the relationship even in the latest

phase. In these instances, family members liked their daughter's or sibling's
partner, were inclusive of the partner during family gatherings, or recognized
the importance of the partner and the lesbian relationship to their daughter's or
sibling's happiness.

> Grace: [My brother] has always made a point of "doing the right thing." If
> we were taking a picture, he would be the one to say, wait a minute,
> Gwen is not in it. In that way, he has been very accommodating. I fully
> know how he feels about it, as opposed to my little brother. I think he has
> been very accepting and he has been talking to his children about it. I
> feel very comfortable around him.

> Jennifer: [Joyce's] father, her sister and her grandson all died.... All this
> stuff happened in a very short space of time and I was very helpful to
> everybody at that time. I came through. I went everywhere and did
> everything.... So I think they started to see I was really like a family
> member. I wasn't some weird dyke or whatever the hell they thought in
> the beginning.

> Harriet: [Hillary's mother] gave me stuff; she had designated things.
> She knew she was going to die, and she and I had some conversations.
> I said I would take care of Hillary. It was very touching, and I felt really
> included and always felt heard.

> Kristin: We have some extended family in some nieces and nephews
> that we're very close to.... They all know about us and that has really
> been a very nice dimension where we can share and not have any
> pretense.

> Jennifer: I have a cousin who is a nun.... She's very supportive of us and
> very loving and very close to Joyce. She's like my sister. She's a very
> big part of our lives.... She's been a big help to us and a big help to
> some of that resolution of the Catholicism stuff to me because she's so
> supportive of us. So acknowledging of who we are. Wanting to learn
> about it and all that.... She's the only one that really has always been
> very close to me.

At times, lack of or mixed support centered around personality differences or
jealousy, but most often, families had difficulty integrating the participants'
relationships because they were lesbians. The negativity and lack of
acknowledgment for their lesbian partnerships were often cited by partners as a

negative influence on the relationship. This negative influence was often experienced as sadness or tension created by the family's silence, abandonment, or rejection.

> Alice: My mother told me she used to run into Angela's mother in the supermarket, and they'd look at each other, thinking their daughters are together. And her mother used to say to her, 'We have to figure out a way to get them to break up and find nice men for them.' So, I don't think she ever accepted it.

> Beverly: She said to me, 'Well, I think it's really good that you and Betsy don't live in the area anymore, because that's easier for me. That way people don't have to see you and figure it all out.' I thought, everybody knows already but you, Mom. 'I only want to know one thing. Is it sexual or not?' And I said, 'Well, yes, it is.' I went back to New York, and then Betsy stopped existing. She dropped out of my mother's letters. She didn't ever say anymore 'love to Betsy.' It was just like Betsy disappeared. She was not there for quite a few years, which was really very painful for both of us. It kept me feeling pulled between my family and Betsy, and Betsy and my family.

> Deirdre: Neither one of us were very happy with our families. Daphne was more strongly bonded to hers, but there was a lot about her family she didn't like either. What we have done is to get this to develop into the extended family of friends that is very strong. I really feel that if anything happens to either one of us or to both of us, we have a group of people there who will help us. That makes me feel good.

> Grace: I come out to my brothers and sister first and finally came out to my parents. It just felt to me like they must know, which they did not. They were almost proud of the fact that they didn't know. I wrote them a letter saying this is very important to me, I wanted to tell you this, and I want you to accept Gwen, and I want to know what you feel about it. That was too much to ask, I think. They felt fine about it on the surface. They wrote me back a card and said absolutely we do not feel bad about it. There is no problem. They also conveyed a sense that they didn't want to talk about it either. They were surprised but they really weren't comfortable. There has never been much of a discussion of it. They have totally accepted Gwen as my partner.... [but] there has been that kind of partial accepting and dealing with. They go along, connect, and then there are these little pockets where it keeps popping up to be kind of an awkward thing.

Hillary: My father ... made some very clear statements that were painful to me, about the nature of relationships and specifically that relationships could only be fulfilled and completed between a man and a woman.

Ingrid: We've each struggled with our families in each phase of the relationship. The stuff with my family, that's been difficult for me.... It's not always OK to bring along my partner. Although we don't have open conflict in my family, I know that raises areas of discomfort for my parents. That has been difficult at times.

Lucy: The sad thing is that we don't have a set place to go on holidays. I don't know that it has drawn us together or drawn us apart. I don't think it has done either. In a way it is sad that we don't have a place to go on holidays and in another way it has freed us on the holidays. So we have a tradition of going with a group of our friends to hospice.... There is a sadness that my whole family isn't together. They are together, but I am not there.

Gay Community

The impact of the gay/lesbian/bisexual community on the relationship is best represented by the shift from only a third of lesbians acknowledging it as a positive influence in the first phase (n=8), to three-quarters acknowledging it as a positive influence most recently (n=18). Most couples were unaware of or isolated from a larger gay/lesbian/bisexual community in the early part of their relationship, and found this to be either a neutral (n=12) or negative (n=4) experience. As greater connections were established between these partnerships and the gay community, participants experienced validation, felt freer, and removed the burden of being alone with their partners, solely responsible for meeting each others' needs.

Grace: In the seventies there was a much more visible lesbian culture in Cambridge that you could be a part of. You could go to lesbian events. Women's things were just so prominent. You felt like you could be in the company of people who were coping and liking your point of view. This very high camaraderie. I feel like that is practically missing now. I feel like it is very hard to find a group of people together for the same reason

that you feel any kind of connection to. It has become very much more fractionalized and politicized in very different ways. I love inclusiveness, I love people getting together for the common good.

Liz: I can't picture the last ten years of our life without the lesbians in long-term relationships group. We go sit with ten other women and eat and shoot the breeze.... It's just very comfortable. There's something there, or maybe something missing, that's different from the times we're with mixed couples or straight couples or family. There's some degree of comfort that's in that group that is not in other places.... I can't wait for the day when the whole world feels like this group. It's that significant.

Both Hillary and Harriet noted the positive impact of their contact with other

lesbian couples on the relationship:

Harriet: I think it was a very important time for us when we started to make social contact with other lesbian couples. Got more relaxed and could dissipate some of the energy of interacting. We weren't the only person in each other's lives. There were people around whom we could be affectionate without it being dangerous. And with whom we could talk about stresses in our lives and in our relationships. That was very far into our relationship. About ten years.

Hillary: We were members of a lesbian couples group for a while.... It helped [us] to form friendships that have gone on, although the couples group hasn't in a formal way. Those things are tremendously important to me.... When you're a woman, you're gay, your heterosexual families tend not to be. Your gay friends become your extended family to a greater extent.

Friends

Some couples did not involve themselves much in outside friendships,

causing isolation which was harmful at times, and bonding at other times.

However, the isolation became distasteful in the long run, and couples

generally sought out connections either with friends or with the

gay/lesbian/bisexual community. The influence of friends on the relationship

rose from a third perceiving it as positive in the beginning (n=8) to nearly all

participants appraising it positively now (n=21). While disclosure to friends of

the relationship was often freeing, at times it caused a friendship to terminate.

> Daphne: I think the coming out was an important transition for me.... We
> began to create a larger community.... It is a very critical time for us as it
> is for people period, no matter who they are, to be part of a larger
> community where your relationship is being acknowledged.
> Heterosexuals get it all the time.

> Felicia: I can't imagine being a couple without friends. It would be like
> being castaways on an island.

> Isabelle: We have mostly lesbian, some gay friends. As well as straight
> friends. They very much play a role in terms of our own comfort level,
> feeling supported, with a sense of life being less hard.... Experiencing
> ourselves as a couple. I think that's 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
> normalizing it. It's ... very important.

> Ingrid: In the beginning and middle phases, one of the things that wasn't
> so good was we were fairly isolated.... We each had friends outside of
> the relationship, but we weren't necessarily out to those people.... So, as
> a couple we were isolated.... Over the three periods [the friends] have
> definitely grown a lot. I think that's been important. That's a good thing
> now.

> Jennifer: I think the absence of [friends] was very hard on us. I think we
> only had one another to depend on. Having this network of friends has
> been helpful because we have people to talk to either individually or
> together. Plus if Joyce gets sick, they all come out here and help me.
> There's all this kind of community support, family support for me and for
> Joyce.... It's been an enormous help to us. It's taken that pressure off the
> relationship that we have to be all things to our partner.

Homophobia and Societal Attitudes

Twenty-one lesbians had negative or mixed perceptions of the influence

of homophobia at the beginning of their relationship. Currently, only a quarter

felt it had a negative impact on the relationship, but nearly half felt mixed (n=10),

that it both bonded the couple together and added a strain. Participants

perceived that societal attitudes towards gay male and lesbian relationships had changed over time, thus changing the impact on the relationship. At the same time that the culture changed somewhat, the participants acknowledged their own maturity and a decreasing concern for how others viewed them.

Those who perceived homophobia as having a positive influence described the way it bonded partners together in an us-against-the-world stance; those who saw it negatively discussed the many ways homophobia discriminated against them and denied them their partnerships. Participants noted difficulties in not receiving spousal equivalent benefits, not being invited to social functions of the partner, experiencing hassles adopting a child, needing to contain their affection for each other in public, and generally living under a cloud of being exposed or fired if their sexual identity were disclosed. Those who were able to come out to friends, family, or colleagues felt a noticeable difference in the relationship.

Daphne: We all have homophobia. We are raised with it. What happens is when one realizes that one is a lesbian, they are sensitive to the homophobia of oneself. I can't accept this in me. I can't accept me. I must hide this. I must not let anybody know. One becomes not accepting of one's self. That is how I felt for years. Then, in a relationship with Deirdre, when I am being so accepted and so cared about by her and so loved by her that what happens is, you either have to see that for what it is or you have to devalue the person who is doing it. How can she love me? There is a way that over time that acceptance from her helps me to have more acceptance and then I think that this goes around and around and around. I think that in the relationship there is a healing of the homophobia. I think that is what has happened to me. I think Deirdre was much further ahead in all of this than I was. I've learned from her... When I came out and my parents were accepting, that begins to counteract and to heal the homophobic self-image. I think that is critical

Alice: [Homophobia] is a strain. But it doesn't break us. It's more of an annoyance now. I'm more out. Angela was always more out than I was. I'm more uptight because unfortunately I care what other people think.

Claire: There were a number of times when we would have been at a wedding. When other couples are dancing, we can't. I mean, we could, but we're then subjected to possible ridicule. Probable ridicule. We can't show our love. We can't walk down the street hand in hand, unless we go to Northampton or Provincetown, somewhere where it's accepted. There are a lot of things that straight people don't even stop to think about that they take for granted.... Can I express myself in this partnership to this person in this setting? The longing. The wanting to. I love her. She loves me. I'm proud to be with her. I want to show the world this is my partner. I want our love recognized. And accepted. That part is tough. That is really tough.

Cathy: I think that pressure from the outside in any area makes you stronger. It makes you pull together because you have one another, you don't have those people out there. Being gay is being different. It always has been. You tend to be different together, and shut them out.

Kristin: I believe honestly that the voices on the fringes are often the voices of change. Sometimes they have nothing to lose, but nobody has nothing to lose. Everybody who takes those risks are noble, whatever way it comes out. I don't believe in Act Up. I don't approve of it. I don't like Queer Nation. That's not who I am. I'm not leather. I'm not chains, but those also are the people who have done some things for us, so I always felt like I was this moral coward because I wasn't out there.

Gwen: There are a lot of lesbians with homophobia. There are a lot of straight people with homophobia. It is complex. I am talking about the obvious hatred of gays and lesbians that is out there. It feels so awful. It affects me different than Grace. It gets to my very core and I think Grace is much more able to be mad at it. I don't think it plays too much havoc on our relationship. I think it can divide couples. I think about couples that I work with that get divided because they both get so shaken around by it.

Grace: I feel for me personally, going out socially or doing something, you always have to get yourself in a mind set of, how out am I going to be? What insignias am I going to wear? We don't have bumper stickers on our car anymore. We don't invite trouble. I think it has a big effect. The sense that you have to overcome a certain inertia to feel good about certain things. Is it worth kissing her in the car? You start not doing certain things. You think, is this worth it in this neighborhood? Maybe you will hold hands instead. Hold them under something as opposed to on top of something. Always rethinking what is normal to do. Plus it makes you angry. You spend a lot of time in a social setting watching heterosexuals do things that are pretty blatant and feeling like you really want to say, fuck you, give us a break.... You know you are running a risk. In the 90's you can get shot for saying such things.

Grace: I feel the effect it has is stress in [that] you are thinking on it, focusing on it. Subliminal stress. We just don't feel a part of things, open, expansive and connected to the larger community.... If we are out buying something in a community market, hollering back and forth to each other about something, we have to think, how did that sound? What does that mean? You constantly think in terms of living a double life.... Even though I am out almost everywhere in my life, every new person you meet, every new job you take, you have to reevaluate and reassume that somebody will find it a problem. It is a constant mental process, a constant reevaluating. You don't feel fluid. A lot of women go ... to places where they can break out.... It effects your sexuality.... You have to keep thinking of yourself as a sexy person even if someone else thinks of you as a horrible person.... I think it brings Gwen and I against the world. The two of us against these people.

Harriet: This may be where homophobia has had some influence. Factors in our relationship. I think we love each other. I think we really like who the other person is. And I think we are still sexually attracted to each other.... I think that we're willing to work and make compromises to stay together. There may be inertia, too! Inertia is certainly part of this. And that's where homophobia fits in. I think that it's very scary to think of being alone.

Hillary: I think it does certainly provide glue. Sometimes the glue is so tight, that it's stressful. I don't think being gay in this society is something that's easy. You always ... wonder what people are thinking. You worry about yourself physically. You worry about yourself professionally, too. But it hasn't paralyzed us. We haven't sat in the house with the doors closed. We haven't hid the fact from family or friends that this is a long-term relationship of primary importance. We match our call schedules at work, and we let people at work know that we're a member of a couple, and that [the other] member is the same-sex. But we still get nervous. Not as nervous as a lot of people, and not as nervous as we used to be, but still nervous. I don't get comfortable. I don't hold hands with Harriet in public, things like that.

Joyce: I think it bonds you together more. I sail through my life and I don't see it so quickly. I really don't. Yet it's there and I know it.... When I see it, I get very angry. I don't like the pressure of it, that you really can't be totally at ease. But I have a way of standing up and saying this is me and this is Jennifer and this is how it's going to be. Professionally, we both did that. There was never a party that the two of us were not invited to. We just never rammed it down any body's throat. We never talked about it. We never discussed it in any way, but people knew we were together in the same house. I think that in some certain ways we got

different kinds of homophobic behavior, but nothing that was going to kill me. It takes me a while to figure it out. She gets it immediately.

Lucy: Sometimes it hurts us when we have to be so quiet out there and we can't touch each other. It is painful to go to a straight wedding. A couple of cousins invited us to their wedding. We danced a few times with each other. We finally danced a slow dance together with each other. They invited us. If nobody likes it, tough. It is sad.

Liz: There is stress in me [about homophobia], and because there's stress in me, there's stress in the relationship, but it's not stress between us. It's just this thing in me that gets in the way of my being with Lucy.... You know the main reason I wanted the [home] security system? Because there's this remote possibility of gay-bashing. That's the main reason. In a way I feel foolish because the prejudice I have felt directly from another person or another group towards me has been so minimal. But just knowing that it's out there, that I could encounter that, that I could be beat up for being a lesbian, that we could be beat up for being lesbian.... That happens to people. Just because of who they are. I feel stupid because it hasn't happened to me, but I worry about it.

Religion and Spirituality

The influence of religion was consistently mixed. Half of the participants said religion and/or spirituality was a positive influence currently in the relationship (n=12), with the remaining dividing relatively evenly among negative (n=3), mixed (n=5), and no influence (n=4).

Ingrid: [Religion] hasn't at all [been a factor]. Basically. Except that we're both sort of at the same place with it. It's not like one of us was more religious than the other one. It's not very important in each of our lives right now, or it hasn't been.

Distinctions were often made between religion and spirituality, with the trend being that religion was often a negative or neutral influence, but spirituality was a positive influence on the relationship, particularly as a recent addition, adding depth and connection to the partnership.

Daphne: I gave up practicing religion. I was brought up Protestant. Deirdre did too. She was Catholic. I think, in that, we were similar. In

these past few years we have come into really appreciating the lack of and the need for a spiritual dimension in our lives, and I began to investigate that more in meditation and Buddhism. She joined the covenant spiritual community in Maine. These things are sort of coming together with the meditation room in our house.... I think we are getting closer in that area.

Gwen: Religion hasn't [been a factor] at all, but spirituality has.... We both have taken on an interest in spiritual things. The new age movement. There is a lot of fluff there, but learning the tarot and learning about Native American spirituality have been a very important part of our individual growth and in our relationship too. It has been very important. We have both grown in that way. You always wonder if you are going to grow away from the person. We probably both might have grown away from each other if we didn't keep developing certain things along the same lines.

In fact, the greatest change in the influence of religion/spirituality on the relationship is represented in the shift from it being selected most often by participants as having no influence (n=9) in the first phase to it being selected most often by participants as having a positive influence (n=12) in the third. Whether or not religion was viewed as a negative or mixed influence was relatively unchanged over time.

Many struggled with the influence of organized religion on their relationship. Either participants' identification as lesbian and involvement in a lesbian relationship conflicted with their own religious beliefs, or their religious families could not find a place both for their religion and their daughters, or they were unable to enjoy the bonds of holy matrimony by discriminating church officials.

Cathy: Neither one of us is terribly religious. We both believe in god. We were both raised Catholic, which of course is very much against homosexuality. Claire is a little more religious than I am. She honestly believes that homosexuality is wrong, and that she's going to fry in hell. It's a little difficult for her. If she were more religious, we probably would not be together. We don't go to church, although she keeps trying to get me. But she's a relatively religious person. She believes in god. She

prays every night. She certainly tries to be a good person. She is a good person. I believe in god. I'm also Catholic. I went to Catholic schools. I don't happen to believe that I'm going to rot in hell. I think you're born gay or straight, and certainly social influences affect that, but they don't cause it. I think that this is the way you were created and it was done for a reason. I can't imagine that god did that and in the end is going to laugh in you face and say this is wrong. So it doesn't affect me at all. It affects her more than it does me. Religion doesn't play as much a part in my life as it does in hers. I believe if you are a good person and you honestly believe that what you do is right, and run your life the best you can, that if there is life after death, you're going to go there. I will probably end up in hell regardless, but it won't have anything to do with my homosexuality.

Jennifer: Neither one of us practices any religion. But I do think that Catholicism has had an influence on me in terms of shame. And certainly I think that has affected our relationship. I think it's affected everything about me.... I would have ... done a lot of things differently. I think if I had done some of those things, my relationship with Joyce would have been easier. I think if I had come out to my mother and father before I met Joyce and they dealt with it and went through all the horror show, they would not have focused on Joyce as the reason for it. And so they wouldn't have as much to beat her up about. So I do think it colored a lot of how I was in my relationships and I think religion had a terrible influence on me. But as far as the two of us together, religion has never been a part of our relationship. We both kind of avoid it like the plague to tell you the truth.

Two participants were, or had plans to be, nuns. They detailed painful processes of choosing between the mutually exclusive options of their faith and their lesbian identity.

For some, worshipping together in church was a regular and enjoyable aspect of their partnership.

Alice: One of the best things about our relationship is that I became formally Jewish, and then Angela came back to Judaism. Being Jewish is a tremendously important part of our lives.... It has been a tremendous support.... It's only a source of joy, sustenance, and faith.

<u>Finances</u>

Participants discussed the impact of finances, including income, spending habits, and class background, on their committed relationship. Issues concerning finances were a negative influence on the relationship at the beginning for nearly half the participants (n=11); by the third phase, most felt finances to be a mixed influence (n=10) and a third described finances as a positive influence (n=8) on the relationship. Generally speaking, the influence of money improved over time.

> Cathy: I think the fact that financially we always have been and continue to struggle just means that it brings us closer together, as struggles tend to do.

Financial difficulties centered around level of income and spending habits. The women described tight budgets when they were starting off, but most felt monetarily comfortable now. Partners often commented on the differing spending styles that existed within the relationship, and that saving vs. spending was a common difference.

> Angela: When there have been periods of unemployment on her side or my side, the balance gets thrown off. But mostly along the way when Alice and I have worked, we've made similar incomes. It's not so much the incomes. It's the way we spend money. I spend it more. Alice keeps it.

> Beverly: When we first started the relationship, Betsy was working and I was a student. And that became a problem later on in our lives because she had all the money and I had very little money, so she made a lot of the money decisions.... Later, when I started working, I made so much more money than she did, that things really flipped. That was very hard for her to suddenly be in the situation where she was not the biggest money maker. And I've always continued to be so for all the years we've been together. And then, somehow, I began to make decisions about money. We really had to work on that a lot over the years. Not constantly, but it kind of comes and goes, and we have to rework it and relook at it, and discuss it, and get it figured out again.

Isabelle: Money is tough. That's a tension spot.... I love to spend money and Ingrid doesn't spend money. She makes more money than I do, and she doesn't spend money the way I spend money ... She has more influence in actually putting out the money; it's more her money that's going out. If she doesn't feel comfortable doing it, we're not going to do it. But it's not like she just makes an arbitrary decision. We do talk about it. We come to a decision together. But you can see how that might set up some interesting dynamics.

The theme of equity played out in the financial management of couples. Some couples pooled all financial earnings; some contributed to joint expenses equally, others contributed according to what they could afford; some had mine, yours, and ours categories for money; in some couples, one partner made considerable more money than the other and was essentially the economic provider for the family. Often the importance of what is fair was the adage for how to handle money. Problems arose in ensuring that it was.

Gwen: We argued a lot [about money]. We both kind of held out to doing it our own way. Grace wants to spend more money than I want to spend. That has been a big point. We never tried to force the other person to do it our way. We don't. We just try to convince the other one to do it our way.... Money is so complex, how people go about money. We've always chosen to split things 50/50, and that fits both of our needs even though most of the time Grace has earned a little more than me.... We do 50/50, because that's how we both feel comfortable.

Grace: I think we work hard for it to be [fair]. Some of the time Gwen, because she worries about the literal amount, may be less fair to herself. If we divide the bills, she is always very careful. It is always one penny for one and one penny for the other. She is so focused on the detail that I might feel that she is overly giving on things. Her income has been less than mine and she has to make sure that everything stays exactly 50/50. I feel in that way she doesn't get justice.

Race and Ethnicity

Race and ethnicity were generally seen as no influence (n=9) or a positive influence (n=10) throughout the relationship among these all-White

lesbian couples. Partners matched each other on race and often on ethnicity, and indicated that their racial commonality made the relationship easier.

> Daphne: We are both the same race. We are not that different. I am more of a WASP than she is, but we are not that terribly different. There hasn't been a difference in a negative way. I think it is positive in a way. There is not that much diversity in our relationship. I think it has been positive, but there has also been the loss of the diversity.

When ethnic differences were recognized as having a positive impact on the relationship, participants attributed this to the greater diversity and breadth of experience these cultural differences created. One volunteer noted that it would increase their visibility, and so add pressure, if they were not Caucasian. Others discussed the conflicts that arose as a result of having different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and expectations.

> Grace: [Both being Caucasian makes] it is a littler easier passing as lesbians. I feel that when there are inter-racial women living together in a community, people start.[to notice] more than they do two white lesbians.... It is more visible.

> Betsy: Her people were Latvian Jews. We had some conflicts for a while because of my German background. All of a sudden it dawned on me listening to these guys talk that they equated the word German with Nazi. We had some real problems. That was real difficult for me. They were very rigid about that, so I decided we won't talk about this anymore. It was particularly hard for me because I had an uncle in the old country who was a Nazi and who was executed as a result of a war crime. I didn't feel any particular love for him at all but I didn't want to be put in the same classification as he was. I had a terrible guilt about what he did and people like him. Actually it was as close to agony as I've ever experienced in this relationship on account of anything that was related to us.

> Kristin: I don't know that [ethnicity has] had any profound effects.... I think my Italian heritage is some of what Kathleen finds attractive. She's sixth generation white Protestant American, very very very different. Sometimes I find that attractive and sometimes I find that irritating. I don't like going to the country club for lunches and stuff when we're visiting her folks, but I do it. Nobody would know I was not comfortable. But other than that, I don't think it's major.

Models

Participants were asked to describe the models, positive or negative, which influenced their idea of and participation in their committed relationship. Models cited by the women in this study included Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas, Willa Cather, an aunt's lesbian partnership, parents, Mary and Joseph, friendships, and an ideal relationship synthesized through reading.

> Isabelle: My aunt's relationship with her partner was a model in longevity, and a model that women can have relationships with each other, and still survive. So a model in that way. It was not a model, from my point of view, in healthy functioning. They were very fused. They were not separate.

More significantly, the lesbians in this study bemoaned a dearth of long-term relationship models to which they would aspire. Deficiencies in available models included that they were heterosexual, they were unhealthy, and/or they were an ideal and therefore hard to integrate with reality.

> Gwen: There weren't any role models you'd want to follow.

> Harriet: I think that there are more obvious role models for heterosexual relationships. You do this, you have kids, you get them through school, you get to know each other again after the kids leave home, you retire.... There may be [lesbian] models, but we don't know where they are! We don't know where to look for them.

> Kristin: Of all the people I grew up with, I can't tell you of a single relationship ... that seemed to me to be what I would want. Even in situations where both of the people were people I had regard for. What I saw happening to them was not what I thought I wanted to have when I grew up. But I believe that there was such an ideal.

This meant for some frustration, but also the opportunity to create as they went along, and have a relationship that represented the two individuals participating rather than a fulfillment of external expectations or stereotyped roles.

Gwen: Mostly, if you want to know the truth, I think we've been making it up as we go along. I don't think I've drawn from a model nearly as much as it might have helped to be able to do so. We didn't have other lesbian relationships to look for. We've been the oldest ones most of the way along.... I didn't want to look to my family for a model, other than a negative one. Grace's family doesn't quite work for us; they get along so well and they're almost like one person in a way. I just couldn't identify enough with them. The model came from just what I thought it should be. We made it up as we went along. That's how I feel about it. I'm sure there's subtle ways you're affected, a little bit here a little bit there, but I can't say I look to this one relationship as a help.

Many participants did identify their parent's relationship as being most

influential, for better or for worse.

Harriet: I had never had an idealized lesbian relationship to look at as a role model. Our parents, it wasn't perfect, but it was the example I had.

Jennifer: [My parents] seemed to function very well in two different little spheres. He worked. He was a very popular guy. He had a lot of friends. He was a good athlete. He went fishing. He was a great jokester. He had a lot of fun. And she was in the house, working away, raising the kids, talking to the neighbors and going to Church and baking cakes for the Church bake sale. And they never met. They slept together. The ate together. Like dropped in, talked to one another. She paid the bills. He brought home the check.... They didn't fight, but they didn't meet.

Kristin: She loved him dearly. I'd always sensed that. I'd always sensed a loyalty. The most intimate thing I ever saw them do [was] ... she would sit at the head of the table, he would sit to the side, but they would share a platter. They never had their own plates. And we had plenty of plates. The most intimate thing I would ever see them share was a plate. They did this very deliberately. She would serve their platter to them, and they would pick at each other's food. That always seemed to me to be such a wonderful thing. My mother and father eat from the same plate.... I knew there was love, but it was also a very compromised relationship.

Liz: I always think of the two of them as talking a lot, not hearing what the other one was saying. Not budging an inch on their position. [It was] tiring because you knew it was going to be the same conversation they'd already been having for ten years and nothing was going to change. I always felt that if one of them had learned to give -- just a little bit -- that it might have worked out. But they were like these people locking horns for twenty years.

Just over half of the participants thought their partnerships had both
similar and different features compared to their parents' marriages (n=14). One
fourth saw primarily discontinuity between their relationship and their parents'
marriage (n=6), and one eighth perceived primarily continuity between their
relationship and their parents' marriage (n=4). The partners in this study
identified differences in valuing equity, addressing problems in the relationship,
or not fitting into the prescribed roles their parents did, as well as the fact that
they were involved in a gay relationship and their parents were not.
Interpersonal features of the relationship were infrequently recognized as being
similar (e.g. how decisions were made or problems were solved), but many
participants also recognized that much of their parents' intimate relationship
was simply hidden from view and/or rarely discussed.

> Hillary: I think we're much more equal. We're both clearly involved in
> supporting the household, and financially, and we have to work things
> out equally, as equal partners. We're part of a marriage that does not
> follow the cultural norms for the day, because we are not the cultural
> norm. We had to make up our own rules as we go along.

> Isabelle: I think we have less roles.

> Ingrid: Neither of us harbors things that we're angry about in the other
> one, particularly over the long term.... I'm not sure if either of my parents
> is willing to address in the other things that they don't like or are
> concerned about -- in my mother's case, my father's drinking. And for my
> father, maybe my mother's moodiness. They seem less willing to admit
> that they're unhappy or [to admit] what they're feeling.

Similarities in parents' relationship as compared to the participants' tended to
revolve around particular personality similarities and a sense of long-term
commitment. One partner mentioned the importance of going to church
together, which was also an experience that her parents shared.

> Harriet: I tend to be insecure in the same ways as my mother and need
> reassurance in the same way which ends up looking like I'm stronger

and more in control than I feel. Hillary's style and ability to kind of lay back and be supportive and reassuring is very much like my father.

Liz: There was something of a commitment there. I mean, they stayed together for twenty years. They did have some kind of a model of you're in this for the long haul. That's what marriage is. You're in it for a long time. Hopefully forever.

One characteristic that was often a point of similarity between the parents' marriage and the lesbian partnerships was valuing a long-term committed relationship. The importance of a long-term commitment was assessed both through descriptions of the parents' relationship as well as through an exploration of parental attitudes towards divorce or the hypothetical dissolution of their daughter's lesbian relationship. Results indicated that the majority of parents disapproved of divorce (n=22), although several families had experienced marital break-ups. Relatedly, participants' perceptions of current family reaction to the hypothetical dissolution of their own committed lesbian relationship indicated that only a quarter expected family to be accepting of the relationship terminating at this point (n=6).

Gwen: [The family attitude was] you struggle with anything and persevere. At times I had to question, in fact, was I persevering too much because that was the family way to do it. And I needed to break out of that. It prompted me to think should I stay in this relationship.... It was a big influence on me.

Grace: I feel like I got a sense that you can be an opinionated person and you can work it out with somebody. There have been divorces in my family. I feel like there has been a sense that if it doesn't work out, you should move on. Shouldn't be overly accommodating. I think that is positive.

Hillary: Clearly the preference was to have a long-term committed relationship, and anything less than that was a failure.

Jennifer: I think my family would have been very upset if anybody got a divorce. It was so extreme, that if somebody died, there was a [disapproving] feeling if the person got remarried. That's how weird they

were. I think long-term living together, no matter how miserable you were, was very supported in my family. All that Catholic stuff.

Liz: Divorce was basically wrong: you just didn't do it.... You weren't supposed to do it and it wasn't good -- especially as Catholics, it's wasn't good. [If we were to break up,] I don't think they'd care. Well, that's a little too strong. It would not have the same stigma as my cousin who got divorced. He finally got annulled, so now that's OK. He's married again and that's cool. But there was a stigma around his divorce. There is a definite stigma around my mother's divorce. That wouldn't be there. It would be like, "Oh, well, you know it never was right in the first place so it's probably just as well." Now there would be some people who felt bad. I think at this point my mother would feel bad. I think at this point my brother and my sisters would feel bad. But to them, I don't think it would in any way be a divorce. To us, it would be a divorce.

Transitions and Development in Lesbian Relationships

In addition to discussing how internal and external factors impacted on the relationship over time, participants identified particular transitional events they had experienced and described phases they witnessed in their relationship. Transitional events fell into six categories, including initial adjustments (e.g., being in a same-sex relationship for the first time; living together); sharing major responsibilities (e.g., buying a home; inclusion of pets); engaging in conflict and integrating differences; expansion (developing broader social supports; disclosure to friends, family, and colleagues); health changes (mental and physical illness; aging); and adjustments to retirement.

The women in this study described developmental shifts from early relationship bliss; to an increase in conflict, confrontation, and resolution of differences; to recognition of their individuality within the relationship alongside their connectedness as a couple; to inclusion, for many, of a spirituality element into their lives. These phases appeared to exist against a backdrop of a gradual deepening of most features of the relationship and a fuller appreciation

for and commitment to the partner and the partnership. These phases did not occur necessarily in this order nor were they discrete, but this general pattern emerged from a synthesis of participants' responses.

> Grace: The first phase was the high, the sexual high, the emotional high of finding somebody. That was also the accommodating time. Then it went into a little more differentiation, pursuing some individual things and trying to be a part of each other's lives. I was very involved in her work. She was involved in mine. We tried to keep the big picture of 'us' together. Then we went through a phase of being just more oppositional. This is me. That is not me.... Your are odd. I am normal. That was the whole thing of renovation. It was going on in our home and in our relationship at the same time, and maybe even individually in our personal lives. A lot more spirituality things came in then also; we took the tarot class together to try to be more accommodating on a spiritual level. I feel we were trying to keep the fabric together, reweaving it.... Yes, we are together, but we are separate. Yes, we do plan to do these things in the future together, but maybe more separately than we thought.

> Gwen: Things that happen to the individual are big transition points. When I was in school, that was a big transition point for the relationship, just because I was going through so much change. I think when we got animals. We didn't have animals for the first five years. We had much more freedom to come and go easily and less responsibility. Buying a home versus renting. You do take on another level of responsibility in all of those things. There are really subtle transition points. Those subtle times when you really realize that this person is in your life and that you do care about them to the extent that you do. I think a major transition point is when you really decide this person is as important as you are, and that you are going to constantly be juggling between what will make me happy, what is important for me, what will make this other person happy, what is important to her. That is a big change, and I had never had that before.... I had cared about other people and other relationships, but not to this extent and not in such a total way.

> Gwen: There is certainly the experience of the relationship deepening. It deepens. I think there is some level of the more connected you get the more individuated you get. In that connection you do find your unique self.

Initial Adjustments

The transition from a single lifestyle to being a partner in a committed relationship was recognized as an adjustment period by several participants, although most experienced the changes as positive. They discussed adjusting to each other's habits, becoming accustomed to being involved in a lesbian relationship, and sorting through expectations they had of each other. For three individuals and an additional six couples, this relationship was their first committed lesbian partnership.

Felicia: After we spent the first weekend together, there was a shift in my life. It was almost like going from being one person to being two people.

Beverly: We first started living together.... That was a big period of adjustment. Betsy saw me as being able to take care of every wish that she had.... She didn't need a soul in the world but me. I could do everything for her.... I was going crazy.... That may be the way it is for you, but it's not like that for me.... I didn't want to hurt her, but I also needed to let her know that this was not me. So we struggled through those two years around that kind of stuff.... That was a great transition for us.

Joyce: I had to learn what I felt about being with a woman. I had to learn about becoming a lesbian. I had to deal with being straight for so much of my life and making a radical change.

Sharing Major Responsibilities

Once the relationship felt firm, many couples took on responsibilities for joint projects or towards each other, such as caring for pets, buying a home, or designating each other as beneficiaries in a will. The sharing of significant financial or emotional responsibilities enhanced, or reflected the enhancement of, the level of commitment experienced in the partnership.

Felicia: A real significant thing in our relationship was when we got the dog.... I thought having a dog would be fine, but first I thought it would be nice to have a house and yard. I wanted to feel like we were together a

little bit. Getting [the dog] was really significant. It wasn't like having a family, but it was like putting something else into the relationship that belonged to both of us. It also changed what we did. Not socially, but we spent a lot of time doing dog shows and ... dog training.

Liz: Buying the house was significant.... [It brought] some settling in kind of feeling that wasn't here before.

Daphne: I think owning your first house together is a real transitional marker for lesbian couples. It is a statement of commitment.

Negotiating Differences

The period of significant conflicts and negotiating differences, as discussed previously, was a notable phase which generally occurred between the fifth and tenth years in these relationships. This period was characterized by a more fully-defined sense of individual needs, an increased awareness of differences, an ability to confront problems, a decreased tendency towards automatic accommodation, and the development of negotiation skills. During this period, several individuals felt the relationship was seriously at risk of terminating. Resolving these conflicts led to a deeper sense of relatedness and satisfaction.

Alice: We had a huge fight, and in the middle of the fight, Angela took off the wedding ring ... and threw it at me. And I was so angry, I took it and I threw it down the toilet. I flushed it down. It sounds dramatic and violent and all, but it was really wonderful.... It was perfect, because we were really changing. Until I got treatment [for the agoraphobia], I was very pathetic and leaning all over her. Then as I was getting better, we were fighting more than before. It was like the whole balance between us changed. I think it was really good.... After I flushed it, we both were like, ooohh. But we decided that the old relationship, that marriage ended by throwing that down the toilet.... It was a great symbol of this relationship is over. Let's start a different one.

Gwen: There is the phase when you feel that this is too hard to deal with and then you reach a point where it doesn't feel so hard. Acceptance. You have to get to that place where you're fighting the right battles.

Claire: It became important for me to realize that I could perhaps function without her if it became necessary. It was a point in time that we had quite a blow up. We were getting on the verge of separating, or talking about it. It was very emotional.... Somewhere in there, for a brief moment, I had a feeling that I would be able to handle it. I didn't know where I'd get the strength from, but I felt sure that I could do it. That was a turnaround for me. In turn, it changed a part of the relationship. I think that it freed me up to be able to convey to her how I felt, that certain needs were not being met, and that I would like them to be. I made her aware.

Expansion

Branching out beyond the relationship was identified by several individuals as important to the maintenance and health of the relationship. Events such as a partner disclosing her lesbian identity to family, friends, and colleagues or increasing the quality and quantity of outside friendships impacted the relationship positively. Some partners engaged in community service or became active in their church. Participants remarked that this period of expansion allowed for a decreased dependency on a partner meeting all the other partner's needs, brought new vitality into the relationship, and provided validation of their identity as a couple.

Daphne: Probably what's been the best thing about the last five or six years ... is that we're both more out.... I think my being closeted was a tremendous burden.... We had a group of friends that we spent time with, but I wasn't out enough to get into the community at large. That limited our contact, so we were the primary supports for each other. It was too much for any relationship, and it is a real problem for closeted lesbian and gay relationships.... We were asking ourselves and each other to do more than you can do in a relationship. I had to face that, and at some point I really came out. That has been a tremendous turning point for both of us.

Emily: When her family found out about us ... the way they accepted us was another transition point. Being seen as a couple makes a big difference. It takes pressure off of everything. You don't have to say, "My

roommate this ..." That made us much more comfortable with each other in a situation with each other's family.... You're never really a couple if you're not seen as a couple.

Harriet: I think that was a very important time for us when we started to make social contact with other lesbian couples. Got more relaxed and could dissipate some of the energy of interacting, I mean, we weren't just the only person in each other's lives, there people around whom we could be affectionate with without being dangerous--and with whom we could talk about stresses in our lives and in our relationships. That was very far into our relationship ... about ten years.

Health Concerns

Battles with physical and mental illness limited and taxed the relationship in some ways, as well as bonded partners through the shared adversity. Emotional and physical health concerns often affected the balance of power in the relationship, as well as the assumption of particular roles. When one partner became ill, the other often was left to manage her anxiety about the illness alone, to take responsibility for both her partner's care and household demands, and to experience the absence of support typically received from the ill partner.

Six individuals identified specific medical conditions, such as osteoporosis, joint injuries, arthritis, menopause, a stroke, and multiple sclerosis, as physical ailments that had impacted significantly on their partner's functioning and the sense of emotional well-being in the relationship. Relatedly, three participants discussed the effects of witnessing the aging process in their partners or themselves.

Felicia: I really think that the beginning of aging bodies has been a shift in our relationship. It's been a big adjustment for both of us.

Jennifer: The health problems have been harder because whoever is not sick is by herself. I find it extremely difficult because I'm not with

her.... She's in the hospital with a stroke. I can't ask her, what do you think I ought to do? There are things that I have to make decisions [about] that affect her, and I can't ask the person that I ask every time I'm making a major decision. It hate it. It's very, very hard.

Nine women discussed their emotional health problems, including depression (n=6), substance abuse (n=4), and agoraphobia (n=2).

Cathy: Part of the problem was the drugs and drinking and all of that. Our relationship took a major nose-dive at that point. Then it sort of leveled off when I stopped the drugs and she stopped the drinking.

Deirdre: The first time I took Prozac I couldn't believe what it felt like. For me it was a real miracle, and I realized that for 60 something years I had always been depressed.... Once that happened, it changed the stuff between me and Daphne drastically. She wasn't having to cope with my depression all of the time.... That does make a major difference.

Hillary: It's when we've both been more depressed that we've had the greatest difficulties in the relationship, and being able to cope with each other and everything.

Joyce: There was one period of time we had a very hard time. That was Jennifer's difficulty about alcohol. That eventually got resolved.

Both the introduction of illness and the movement towards health, particularly as emotional problems abated, created transitions in these lesbian partnerships. Transitions related to health concerns might be represented in acknowledgment of physical limitations and dependency on the partner or permanent adjustments in sexual relations. In cases where health improved, partners sometimes witnessed an increase in interpersonal conflict, the assertion of individual needs, or improved satisfaction in the relationship. Alice and Angela discussed the process of adjusting to each other's emotional and physical illnesses over the course of their relationship:

Alice: Once I started to get better [from the agoraphobia], there was conflict. I asserted [myself]. I don't care if I lose you. I will not be sick in order to be with you. That's incredibly mentally healthy, I think. She said, "You're right. I don't want you to be sick. And I don't want you to leave

me." And I said, "I'm going to get well. And I'm not going to leave you." That's what changed.

Angela: Early on in our relationship, because of my abilities, my physical abilities, being very strong and vital and active, I was able to do a lot more than I'm able to do now [because of the multiple sclerosis].... We've sort of changed horses here, and that's been a big change. I used to take care of her.... Caring about her feelings to such a large extent, and now it's been reversed. I don't necessarily like that or want that, but some of that is out of my control, the disability being what it is. It's an accident of life.

Retirement

Both partners in two couples and two additional individuals in this study were retired. Of those that identified retirement as being a significant point of transition, most experienced the transition as smooth, enjoyable, and a positive influence on the relationship. In fact, when both partners were retired, they shared an increased focus on their partnership and enjoyed the increased time they were able to spend together, as illustrated by the following comments made by Elaine and Emily:

Elaine: I'm more aware of our relationship now that we've retired. Before, work was the goal. Then it was work and taking care of my father. Then, with her work as a psychologist, she was just worn out with problems. Now the relationship is sort of the center, whereas before our jobs were the center of our lives.

Emily: There's been a kind of excitement to [retirement].... We're both financially secure ... and there's so many more things that we can do now.... I want to travel.... I want to get a scuba diving certificate.... We're much more affectionate, because we don't have this awful feeling [of having to go to work] hanging over our head.... And I don't worry too much about health issues.

In one case, adjustment to retirement was difficult because the decreased involvement in professional activities was experienced as an undesirable loss;

in another, retirement caused a partner to have greater awareness of her mortality.

> Deirdre: Now I am facing ... getting older and dying and how we're going to become. There is no end to the fact that there are problems in every age. I had a hard time with retirement. I thought it was a snap, and that is because I did not face what it was going to mean, and now I am faced with it.

> Kathleen: It's better, really. Being together all the time. We're together much more than we ever were before. Maybe one of the reasons it can be so good is because Kristin is so active. Maybe if she didn't have all these other interests, maybe we would get on each other's nerves. But we don't. As I said, Kristin is still looking. She has such an active mind that she's still trying to find places and things to do. I think we've done very well in retirement.

Summary

This chapter presented salient themes which emerged from the interview material of long-term lesbian couples. There were fifteen themes which contributed to stable lesbian partnerships among the twenty-four individuals interviewed. Of the fifteen themes, there were four early relationship themes, five interpersonal themes, and six external factors which influenced the committed alliance. The early relationship themes included initial attraction, early adjustments, family support for the partner and the lesbian relationship, and expectations about the committed partnership. Interpersonal themes consisted of communication, roles, relatedness, satisfaction, and stability. External factors influencing the relationship were social supports, homophobia and societal attitudes, religion and spirituality, finances, race and ethnicity, and the availability of models. A description of developmental phases and transitional events provided a further understanding of the nature of long-term lesbian relationships.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Introduction

Fifteen key themes emerged from the interview data with 24 partners in 12 long-term lesbian relationships. These findings were presented in Chapter Four. This chapter synthesizes the identified themes, relates them to relevant research, and explains their significance to lesbian relationships. The discussion addresses early relationship themes; the implications of women's psychological development for lesbian partnerships; the significance of interpersonal fit, satisfaction, and sociocultural influences, including homophobia; and developmental processes in lesbian relationships with particular attention to fluctuation in variables over time. The chapter concludes with clinical implications for counseling lesbian couples and suggestions for future research.

Discussion of Significant Findings

Early Relationship Themes

There were several early relationship themes which influenced quality and longevity in lesbian partnerships, including initial attraction, expectations about the relationship, and the influence of family. Similar to previous research findings (Kanter, 1994; Lewis & Spanier, 1979; Mengden, 1994) which identified a link between initial attraction and marital stability among heterosexual couples, this study found that 88% of the participants reported a positive initial attraction towards their partners. These findings differ from

previous research, however, which concluded that physical appearance was the major determinant of initial attraction, particularly for men (Kanter, 1994; Mengden, 1994; Walster, 1966). The personal attributes which were most attractive to potential lesbian partners were the ability to talk freely with each other and a sharing of similar values and interests; this finding was similar to Johnson's (1991) results on long-term lesbian couples. While individuals mentioned the appeal of personality traits (such as confidence and sense of humor) and physical features, these attributes did not appear as high priorities. Therefore, while positive initial attraction was important to these relationships, the particular features which individuals found to be attractive differed from those found among heterosexual couples.

The sharing of similar values and beliefs was reported as a significant feature in both the initial attraction and the maintenance of the relationship. At the beginning, the sense of commitment shared by the partners was identified as a powerful bonding influence, supporting previous findings on lesbian relationships (Johnson, 1991; Kurdek, 1988; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987a). While individuals did not always recognize their initial commitment as a permanent one, they did express a strong intrinsic motivation for being in the relationship. The necessity of a compelling sense of commitment between partners to the survival of their relationships makes sense, given the absence of religious and legal bonds supporting the committed partnership.

Partners' degree of commitment was illustrated further in the percentage of women who expected the relationship would require effort, and who were devoted to working on the partnership. Research has shown that successful heterosexual marriages require work (Altrocchi, 1988), and feminist theorists

postulate that women are more affiliation-oriented and concerned about their relationships than men (Surrey, 1984). The findings of this study support the conclusion that stability in long-term lesbian partnerships was assisted by an initial expectation to work at the relationship, as two-thirds of participants believed. These findings of lesbian couples differ from those found among women in Jewish (Kanter, 1994) and Mexican American (Mengden, 1994) marriages. Kanter (1994) noted that most Jewish couples had no expectations to work at the relationship. Among married Mexican American couples, Mengden (1994) found that expectations to maintain traditional marital roles and belief in Catholic doctrine prohibiting divorce led many individuals to assume that there was no expectation to work at marriage. Lesbian couples, in contrast, exist in the absence of prescribed roles and rarely experience institutional support for the continuation of their relationship. Additionally, lesbians often are made aware of the need to work at relationships from the start, as they immediately face struggles within relationships due to internalized homophobia of one or both partners or negative responses from family. Among lesbians there are fewer situational or institutional structures in place to expect that the relationship could survive without effort.

It is difficult to articulate a definitive conclusion regarding the impact of participants' or family members' homophobia on the early development of the relationship. The fact that homophobia existed was clear. In over half of the couples, one partner felt negatively or ambivalent about becoming involved in a lesbian relationship. Nearly two-thirds of participants experienced either disapproval or a mixed response from family for their involvement in a lesbian relationship. However, what this negative reaction meant for the couples

varied. In some cases, the relationship strengthened due to the shared adversity. In others, there were temporary set-backs because of the added stress. Obviously, in all cases, the degree of attraction for each other and the strength of the relationship outweighed self-doubts or reservations registered through significant others.

In a few cases, negative family reactions were rejected outright because partners experienced an unequivocal sense of personal strength or inevitability about their relationship. In most cases, however, a negative response from parents did create considerable conflict and pain. That pain was often discussed and shared between partners as part of their early relationship, creating an increasingly intimate bond. Similarly, when one partner struggled with the same-sex attraction she had for her partner, the thoughts, feelings, and issues were addressed together, resulting in greater understanding and unity. Thus, negative parental reaction or internalized homophobia often stressed the relationship severely, but couples who engaged in the struggle to address the raised concerns became stronger and endured. These findings are consistent with Adams' (1979) research regarding heterosexuals which concluded that negative reaction of significant others can either strengthen or diminish a relationship.

Implications of Women's Psychological Development for Lesbian Partnerships

Feminist theorists have outlined the centrality of a woman's emotional connections with others to her psychological maturity (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1984; Surrey, 1984, 1987). As discussed in Chapter Two, these authors' theoretical postulations provide explanations for women's

experiences regarding intimacy, equity, and conflict management within relationships. Lesbian relationships offer the opportunity to understand women's development within the unique context of same-sex love, i.e. in the absence of the influence of or comparison with men. Results from this study supported several theoretical notions concerning women's development. Also identified were significant within-group differences which may be minimized when viewing women only in relation to men or when attending exclusively to between-group differences. When women are compared with or contrasted to men, a profile of the "average" woman emerges in relation to the "average" man, and within-group differences are lost. Examination of women in comparison with other women, on the other hand, reveals greater intragroup variability. Results from this study concerning communication, decision-making, intimacy, and conflict management illustrate this point.

Surrey (1984), for instance, theorized that women were more expressive in their style of relating than men; others have long believed that women are communal (Parsons & Bales, 1955). This leads many people to the conclusion that all women are expressive. While the sharing of feelings and insights was a common and valued feature of the lesbian relationships explored in this study, the ability to express oneself emotionally was not a universal skill nor a consistent personality trait. Results from this study showed that as many women were instrumental in their communication style as were expressive: as many lesbians do things as say things to convey their feelings to their partner. Therefore, while it may be true that women are more expressive than men in general, it would be erroneous to conclude that all lesbians are verbally expressive in their partnerships. Several, in fact, discussed the difficulties they

had in sharing their emotions with their partners, and described the process of learning to improve their ability to do so over time.

Results indicating that women vary in their degree of expressiveness paralleled the within-group differences found in personal styles of decision-making. Negating the myth of the universality of "women's intuition," most women (n=18) were logical in their decision-making style, a trait usually considered the domain of men. The other six individuals were either impulsive or intuitive. Those that were logical described a "Consumer Reports" approach to decision-making; considerable effort was made towards gathering information, analyzing options, and considering consequences. This finding that 75% of lesbian women were logical differs from previous research on heterosexual Jewish women, which found only 41% to be logical (Kanter, 1994), but is consistent with conclusions regarding heterosexual Mexican American women (Mengden, 1994).

Because of their socialization, women learn to value interpersonal connection, work at intimate relationships, and develop increased relational competence and capacity for intimacy (Chodorow, 1978; Miller, 1984; Surrey, 1984, 1987). The lesbians in this study universally evaluated the emotional intimacy achieved in their relationships since the tenth year positively. However, positive appraisals of emotional intimacy were not always unanimous; only 63% and 54% described exclusively positive intimacy in the beginning and middle phases, respectively. While these results show an increase in lesbians' ability to be intimate with their partners, they also demonstrate that the ability to be intimate does not occur automatically just because the two partners in a lesbian relationship are women. Women may be

"relationship specialists" in terms of tending to their affective ties (Wamboldt & Reiss, 1989), but lesbian women, like men and heterosexual women, need to develop the actual skills that make relationships work.

There is much discussion in the lesbian literature concerning fusion. Because of women's boundary fluidity, lesbian relationships are thought to be particularly prone to enmeshment, suffocating each partner's individuality (Burch, 1982; Krestan & Bepko, 1980). Others have viewed the intense emotional connection often experienced in lesbian relationships as necessary given the negative societal context in which lesbian partnerships exist (Krestan & Bepko, 1980; Mencher & Slater, 1991), and also as healthy given the inappropriateness of applying patriarchal assumptions valuing separation and autonomy to women's relationships (Green, 1990; Mencher, 1990).

Descriptions from participants in this study revealed the absence of fusion in long-term lesbian relationships, at least in the later stages of the partnership. In their early years, most of the lesbian partnerships experienced an intense sense of connection and were isolated from other social contacts, characteristics often associated with fusion. This experience, however, is not unusual for beginning heterosexual relationships as well. In reaction to such emotional closeness in the beginning phase, partners often experienced a need to differentiate in the middle phase, as evidenced through an increase in conflict, the seeking out of social supports, and a decrease in emotional intimacy. Many partners felt it necessary at this time to work at maintaining both a sense of self as well as a sense of being a partner in a couple. This may point to fusion as a developmental feature of lesbian relationships; the presence of fusion in the beginning may be as necessary for initial attachment, particularly

in a homophobic environment, as its absence is necessary ultimately for relationship survival.

Previous research on long-term heterosexual marriages determined that women were confrontational about addressing problems in their marriages (Kanter, 1994; Mengden, 1994), although other studies suggested that women and girls avoid conflict (Eichenbach & Orbach, 1988; Lever, 1976). The lesbian partners in this study perceived themselves as both confrontational and avoidant in addressing relationship concerns depending on the phase of the partnership. In the beginning, 75% described themselves as avoidant. Currently, 75% described themselves as confrontational. The management of interpersonal conflict through face-to-face discussion appeared to be a developmental feature of lesbian relationships. The avoidance of conflicts at the beginning may allow the couple to create a foundation for their relationship and ensure its birth. Likewise, the confrontation of conflicts in the middle and third phases may be necessary to provide continued vitality and growth within the partnership, thus promoting its survival over time.

Women's psychological development may also be reflected in the findings of this study regarding sexual intimacy. Two-thirds of women experienced positive sexual relations in the first stage, but just over half reported negative or mixed sexual relations in the second and third stage. These findings are significantly different from Hite's (1987) results, which showed that 96% of the gay women in her study reported satisfying sexual relations between lovers, but are consistent with sexual difficulties identified by other authors (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Loulan, 1984; Nichols, 1988).

Sexual tensions that occurred in the early stage of the relationship were often related to psychological conflicts about being sexually active as a lesbian or to ignorance regarding the "how to's" of lesbian sex. These experiences reflect two societal prohibitions which lesbians internalize and need to resolve early in their relationships: women are not supposed to be interested in or knowledgeable about sex, and people are not supposed to be attracted to members of the same sex. Lesbians may feel restricted, therefore, by internalized cultural norms regarding their lesbian and female identity. The influence of cultural expectations on sexual relations has surfaced in other studies on long-term relationships. Mexican American married couples, for instance, demonstrated high levels of physical and sexual intimacy (Mengden, 1994), and it has been argued that this is attributable to the Mexican American cultural norm which encourages the display of affection (Mengden, 1994).

Sexual difficulties arising during later periods in the relationship often occurred in the context of increased conflict in the relationship, decreased feelings of intimacy, and age-related health problems, including menopause. Female-specific biological changes as well as women's socialization, which encourages the repression of sexual desires and promotes the necessity of an emotional bond in order for sexual desire to be aroused, may account for these changes in sexual relations in mature lesbian partnerships (Nichols, 1988). Relatedly, lesbians may deny or minimize an emphasis on sex within their relationships to counter the stereotypical perception that gay male and lesbian partnerships are predominantly sexual. Alternatively, findings regarding the importance of sexual relations may indicate that sexual relations have some importance in a lesbian partnership, but are not of highest priority. That is, a

decrease in frequency in sexual relations may not signify dissatisfaction with the relationship. Rather, lesbians may simply have different standards or attitudes regarding the significance of sexual relations to the relationship overall. In this regard, the lesbian couples in this study were similar to long-term married Jewish couples who described a qualitative shift in their sexual relationships in which touching often replaced intercourse as the relationship progressed (Kanter, 1994).

Finally, the influence of women's psychological development may be apparent in the value given to equity in lesbian relationships. Participants in this study both affirmed the importance of equity and struggled with achieving it. Equity most often was sought with regard to finances, the division of responsibilities around the house, and in decision-making. Eighty-eight percent of the participants currently perceived equity in their relationship, a considerable jump from just under half perceiving equity in the beginning phase. Seventy-five percent made decisions mutually by the third phase of the relationship, a notable increase from the sixty percent engaging in mutual decision-making in the beginning. The results of this study confirmed earlier findings on equity in short-term lesbian relationships (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984; Reilly & Lynch, 1990) but with less disparity between percentages of participants who valued equity versus those who achieved it. This difference in disparity, like fusion and the confrontation of interpersonal differences, may again be explained by the long-term nature of the relationships in this study; over time, valuing equity and the ability to achieve it may converge.

How some lesbian women defined equity was reminiscent of Gilligan's (1982) work in which women operated from an ethic of care which considered

differences in need or ability rather than operating from a more rigid ethic of rules or regulations. The ethic of care was demonstrated in this study by several women contributing to household expenses according to their personal income rather than splitting all costs 50/50 regardless of each individual partner's financial status. This arrangement was not always the case, however. In six couples, joint expenses were split evenly, and whatever each partner had left over was theirs to do with what they pleased. This arrangement, too, supports Gilligan's (1982) view that ultimately women integrate an ethic of care with an ethic of justice, balancing the need for individual integrity with concern for others.

Interpersonal Fit with Partner

Both complementarity and symmetry characterized the lesbian partners in this study. Complementarity was apparent within lesbian couples in several respects. Partners' general manner of relating to each other, including problem-solving, conflict management and communication style, were often opposite. However, lesbian partners were most often symmetrical with regard to values and fields of employment. Likewise, they were often homogamous with regard to demographic variables such as race, religion, and educational level. While at any particular time, partners might exhibit complementarity in roles depending on the situational needs, in general lesbian partners did not adhere to clearly defined roles which were either complementary or symmetrical. Rather, role flexibility developed over the course of the relationship.

Both partners in eleven of the twelve couples described a complementary fit with their partner overall in terms of style of relating and personality. Where one partner was identified as passionate and spontaneous, the other was described as calm and stable. Where one partner viewed herself as methodical in problem-solving, the other viewed herself as quick and strategic. Where one partner was direct and expressive in the relationship, the other was withdrawn. Only three couples were symmetrical in terms of both being verbally expressive (n=2) or both being instrumental (n=1). The remainder were either dichotomous instrumental/expressive combinations (n=5) or exhibited mixed styles of communication (n=4). These general findings support those reached by Dorn (1990), who found that complementarity emerged among lesbian couples after ten years of living together.

Differences between partners may also be evidenced in the demographic characteristic of age. While seven couples were within two years of each other in age, one differed by 4 years and four differed by 9 or more years. These characteristics differ from similarities in age often found both in lesbian partnerships (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987a) and in heterosexual couples which are thought to contribute to marital quality (Lewis & Spanier, 1979). Johnson (1991), however, reported even greater proportions of age discrepancies, calculating that just under half of lesbians were in partnerships where there was a difference in age of at least six years.

The existence and significance of complementarity in lesbian relationships has been addressed by researchers and theorists (Burch, 1993; Dorn, 1990). Burch (1993) proposed that, because a lesbian relationship was between two women, the relationship appeared to be symmetrical. She

posited, however, that beneath the obvious similarities lurked conscious and unconscious differences that were actually a point of attraction which solidified an alliance. Her specific theory focused on the complementarity of primary and bisexual lesbians in partnerships. In the lesbian relationships she studied, she found often that one partner perceived herself as being "born" a lesbian, while the other viewed herself as having "chosen" a lesbian lifestyle. She postulated that complementarity was necessary to bring vitality into a relationship, to promote individual growth, and to balance the propensity towards merger (Burch, 1993). This may be particularly true in lesbian partnerships where the obvious male-female differences in gender and socialization do not exist. Complementarity, then, allows for the integrity of individual identity to be maintained in the context of intense emotional bonding.

There are also significant points of symmetry in lesbian relationships, the most noticeable being in the area of shared values which previous research has also demonstrated (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987a). All women espoused the importance of shared beliefs such as equality, honesty, loyalty, commitment, the importance of growth and of giving to the community. Partners also were homogamous with regard to race, religion, and educational level. All women were Caucasian, eight out of the twelve couples shared religious and/or spiritual convictions, and the same proportion completed similar levels of education. Since lesbians belong to a hidden population, these similarities in demographic characteristics may be more representative of those accessible to the researcher or willing to participate in the study, rather than innate points of similarity within long-term lesbian partnerships. Further research investigating religious, racial, and cultural differences within couples would be valuable.

Many participants speculated that differences in religion, race or ethnicity would have added a strain to the relationship. However, how these differences were handled between partners, like any other conflict, would likely be more significant to relationship stability than simply the fact that these differences existed.

Evidence from this study suggested that lesbian partners were flexible in their capacity for a range of roles, depending on the demands of a given situation or period within the relationship. For instance, both partners often perceived themselves as having the potential for being both economic providers and nurturers of the relationship, domains often found to be separate and gender-specific in traditional heterosexual marriages (Kanter, 1994). In fact, in all instances among the lesbian couples interviewed, both partners were employed, with temporary exceptions. In half of the couples, partners were equal economic providers. Many partners demonstrated their nurturing abilities directed both within and outside of the relationship. All attended to a variety of responsibilities at home, usually according to preference or skill. Partners demonstrated an ability to move flexibly among a range of roles, as has been suggested is characteristic of women (Wolfman, 1984); this also is supported by previous research on roles in lesbian partnerships (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Lynch & Reilly, 1986; Tanner, 1978). Wolfman (1984) further proposed that African American women, specifically, have developed this capacity because of their cultural expectation that they will not be supported by a man. In this regard, lesbians and African American women are similar in that they both recognize the necessity of self-reliance, and so developed capacities to attend to familial/relational needs and to provide for themselves economically.

In their overall capacity for roles, then, lesbian partners appeared symmetrical. However, if examined at any given moment in time, partners more often than not reflected a complementary fit, particularly with regard to household responsibilities. This fit was not divided clearly or consistently along a butch-femme or masculine-feminine division of roles, but there were at least 4 partnerships in which one partner gravitated more towards "feminine" responsibilities (particularly cooking) and the other gravitated more towards "masculine" responsibilities (yard work or mechanical projects). In contrast to traditional heterosexual relationships, however, these responsibilities were not assigned based on gender. Rather, the division of household responsibilities emerged as a reflection of personal preferences or strengths, similar to findings reported by Lynch and Reilly (1986). On the other hand, findings from the current study differ from those described by Lynch and Reilly (1986) in that a third of couples in the present study divided household tasks along masculine/feminine lines whereas Lynch and Reilly determined that roles among their couples did not divide along traditional lines.

Satisfaction

The direct correlation between relationship quality and relationship stability among heterosexual marriages has been documented (Kelly & Conley, 1987; Lewis & Spanier, 1979). Relationship quality is associated with open communication, happiness, and high satisfaction with the relationship (Lewis & Spanier, 1979). In the present study, these themes directly associated with relationship quality were assessed. Findings demonstrated that while communication improved over the years, satisfaction, relatedness, and

psychosocial intimacy dipped in the middle phase before rising to high levels in the third phase. These findings are similar to results reported by Kanter (1994) concerning heterosexual Jewish couples.

Thus, happiness and satisfaction fluctuated, but communication constantly improved, even when (and perhaps particularly when) the relationship felt rocky. Several participants described the importance of developing their communication skills more fully during the middle phase, a period characterized by a decrease in satisfaction and an increase in conflict. These findings support results reported by Kurdek (1988) who determined that an openness to engaging in conflict and discussing differences was related significantly to relationship quality among gay male and lesbian couples.

Liking and enjoying the company of a partner has been found to be one of the most critical factors influencing relationship happiness and success among heterosexual men and women and lesbians (Johnson, 1991; Lauer, et al., 1990). Themes from the present study supported these conclusions. Participants described how happy their partners made them, how much they admired each other, what reliable and enriching confidantes they were to each other, and how enjoyable it was to spend time together. Four couples had shared substantial friendships prior to becoming partners. Many perceived their partner as their best friend and/or soul-mate. The love shared between partners was clearly and often poignantly expressed in the interviews, supporting the previous conclusion that love is the most important affective component of successful relationships (Broderick & O'Leary, 1986).

The lesbians in this study were not completely satisfied with every aspect of their relationship, even currently. Even after fifteen years, couples struggled

with particular issues around differing needs for sex, financial limitations, or health concerns affecting their functioning in the relationship. However, all but one individual currently felt satisfied with the quality of the relationship overall, and most had felt equally satisfied in the beginning of the relationship. Generally speaking, lesbians have fewer reasons to continue their involvement in a dissatisfying relationship; they don't experience societal "bars" which operate to keep heterosexual marriages intact at times (Nye, et al., 1969). Several women indicated that low self-esteem, the undesirability of being alone, and a limited pool of eligible lesbian partners had operated to keep them in their relationship at times.

Sociocultural Influences

"All homosexuality is situational, influenced and given meaning and character by its location in time and social space," (Katz, 1976, p. 7). Most of the relationships in this study began in the mid-seventies, in a societal context fearful and denigrating towards a lesbian lifestyle. Today, gay men and lesbians experience more tolerance than they did twenty years ago, but they continue to be influenced by negative stereotypes, gay-bashing, and an undercurrent of homophobia. Results concerning homophobia, social supports, and religion elucidated the impact of sociocultural features on the stability of lesbian partnerships over time.

While societal attitudes with respect to gays and lesbians have developed in the direction of greater acceptance, homophobia existed throughout the relationships of participants in this study, albeit to varying degrees. Eighty-eight percent found homophobic societal attitudes negatively

affected couples at the beginning of their relationships; only 25% felt that way currently. Nearly half felt mixed about the impact of homophobia in the third phase, indicating that it both bonded couples together and added a strain. These changes in attitude appeared to reflect two related conditions: First, homophobia is not as widespread or as powerful as it used to be in American culture, and therefore does not exert as negative an influence on the relationship; second, partners gave greater validity to their internal recognition of who they are, and so were less impacted by external evaluations of their sexual orientation and relationship. Still, participants lamented the discrimination they experienced, such as denied opportunity to legalize their commitment to each other, no access to spousal benefits, and intense scrutiny should they decide to parent. Such conditions could have created greater struggle and perhaps greater division between lesbian partners, but for the couples in this study the strength of the lesbian partnership, the self-confidence of the individual women, and the development of alternative sources of social validation outweighed the detrimental effects of homophobia.

Nine participants in this study experienced a significant amount of relationship distress due to emotional difficulties or mental illness. There were 6 reports of depression (25%), 2 reports of agoraphobia (8%), and 4 reports of substance abuse (17%). These results vary somewhat from a national survey of lesbian health which determined that 37% of lesbians experienced bouts of depression, 19% suffered from anxiety and fear, and 6% engaged in daily drinking of alcohol (Ryan & Bradford, 1993). Discrepancies between the national survey and this study may be explained best by the fact that questions regarding mental health were not part of the interview protocol for this study;

information related to mental health was offered spontaneously from participants rather than being systematically addressed or assessed through standardized criteria.

Depression, agoraphobia, and substance abuse may be more prevalent among gay men and lesbians because of the unique sociocultural stresses they encounter. Smith (1982) suggested that societal and occupational discrimination, family rejection, limited social supports, low self-esteem, and the strain of leading a double life are all factors that could lead to substance abuse, for instance. Garnets, Herek, and Levy (1993) note that anti-gay violence and societal heterosexism converge in such a way that a heightened sense of vulnerability, negative psychological consequences, and internalized oppression can follow from victimization. However, researchers have determined that the mental health of lesbians and gay males is not significantly different from that among the heterosexual population (Gonsiorek and Weinrich, 1991).

Research focused on any relationships - heterosexual, gay male, or lesbian - has documented the significance of social supports to the quality and maintenance of partnerships (Glenn, 1990; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987b; Lewis & Spanier, 1979; Schneider, 1986). Results from this study demonstrated that lack of acknowledgment or negative responses to the partner or partnership from family, isolation from friends, and no contact with other gay men or lesbians were a stressful, although not debilitating, influence on the relationship.

Each partners' immediate and extended family was only a small source of support, with only a third reporting family being a positive influence even in

the latest phase of the relationship. These findings supported previous conclusions identifying the negative influence of family on gay or lesbian relationships (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987b), but differed slightly from the results of Johnson's (1991) study which determined that 55% and 44% of lesbians in long-term couples rated support from their mother and father, respectively, as positive.

Unlike other racial or ethnic minority groups, who might turn to their family of origin in the face of societal discrimination and find support because of the similar culture shared by all family members, most lesbians were raised by heterosexual parents and so were different and often misunderstood. Even in the cases where a partner had a gay or lesbian sibling, support varied. In some instances the similarity bonded the siblings and strengthened the long-term couple. In other cases, the weight of having more than one child be gay or lesbian in a family caused a partner to be more secretive with parents, as if two lesbians in a family would be too destructive, and thus added a strain to the partnership.

In the beginning of these relationships, family was primarily a negative influence, and contact with the gay/lesbian/bisexual community and with friends was a positive influence in only a small proportion of cases. In the absence of these supports, lesbians initially relied on each other as they struggled with adversity together. The experience of isolation being positive was short-lived, however. In the middle and final phases of the relationship, partners felt an increasing need to connect with friends, affirm their relationship with contacts in the gay/lesbian/bisexual community, and remove themselves from being exclusively dependent on each other. Tanner (1978), too, identified the

importance of broadened social networks to the health, satisfaction, and longevity of lesbian relationships. Additionally, friends and the gay/lesbian/bisexual community were viewed as a necessary buffer from the hostility of the broader society. Eighty-eight percent and seventy-five percent described the impact of friends and the gay community, respectively, as a positive influence on the relationship in the third phase, whereas only 33% had this perception in the beginning. As far as can be determined, this is the first study which explored the changing influence of social supports on stability in lesbian relationships. These findings suggest that those partnerships that do not experience or create some sort of affirming environmental context around them may be less likely to endure.

Finally, the impact of sociocultural variables is evidenced in the particular influence of religion upon the partnership. A variety of religious affiliations were represented by the participants in this study. Two-thirds of participants rated the influence of religion on their relationship as being negative, neutral, or mixed at the beginning. By the third phase, half of the participants perceived religion as a positive influence on the relationship. This change primarily reflected a shift from the dissatisfaction or non-involvement in organized religion initially to the embracing of a spiritual dimension which often was separate from an organized religious group. While the ability to marry in the eyes of god was an issue for some, acceptance as a lesbian, allowing for an integration of their faith and their identity, was mentioned most frequently as a concern relative to religion. Religious beliefs of family members, particularly Catholic views, were also problematic.

Similar to the establishment of supportive social networks, lesbians often searched for spiritual affiliations which recognized the partnership. At times, this took the form of rejecting traditional religion and embracing a less structured but personally meaningful and affirming selection of spiritual ideals. In other situations, individuals sought out gay/lesbian/bisexual support groups within their religions, such as Am Tikva within Jewish temples and Dignity within Catholic congregations. Still other lesbians continued practicing the faith in which they were raised, sometimes keeping their sexual orientation private and other times disclosing their relationship to their religious community.

Theoretically, the establishment of religiously-recognized marriages between lesbians might enhance the chances of a lesbian partnership's survival, by adding a bond to the relationship (Nye, et al., 1969). Findings from this study indicated that such an arrangement was desirable to some but not to others. One couple did arrange a commitment ceremony after five years, and four others planned sizable anniversary celebrations after 10, 20, or 25 years together. Four couples, however, indicated a distinct preference not to have a wedding or commitment ceremony and expressed skepticism that such an event would increase the likelihood of their relationship continuing.

Developmental Processes

Empirical evidence regarding the developmental nature of lesbian relationships is scarce. Participants' descriptions of developmental transitions and phases provided initial data to identify stages of lesbian relationships. Partners identified six categories of transitional events: initial adjustments, sharing major responsibilities, negotiating differences, expansion, managing

health concerns, and retirement. Partnerships evolved through three, and sometimes four, developmental phases: early relationship bliss, conflict, resolution of differences, and (sometimes) the addition of a spiritual dimension. These findings support the theoretical six-stage model outlined by Clunis & Green (1988), if some of their categories are collapsed.

In addition to identifying general phases and particular transition points in lesbian relationships, this study explored how various internal and external factors impacted on the relationship over time. Most notably, curvilinearity emerged as a developmental pattern in these relationships, similar to conclusions reached by several researchers investigating heterosexual marriages (Glenn, 1990; Hicks & Platt, 1970; Kanter, 1994; Spanier & Lewis, 1980).

Curvilinearity refers to the connection between family life cycle and marital adjustment (Hicks & Platt, 1970). Within heterosexual families, this trend is characteristically evidenced by high marital quality when a couple is first married, followed by a decrease in quality when children are born, increasing to high quality again after the children leave home. In the present study, nearly 66% of participants described a curvilinear relationship regarding their relationship adjustment and family life cycle. Four variables clearly demonstrated this overall pattern: incidence of conflict, relatedness, psychosocial intimacy, and satisfaction.

While conflict was experienced throughout the relationship, it was most significant in the middle phase, with two-thirds of the sample describing the eruption of major conflict between five and ten years into the relationship. This result was in contrast to 33% and 25% reporting major conflict in the beginning

and last phases, respectively. Likewise, relatedness, psychosocial intimacy, and satisfaction experienced a high-low-high fluctuation over the three time periods; generally speaking, each of these three variables was described as positive by approximately two-thirds of the participants in the beginning, by only half in the middle, and by nearly 100% in the third phase (see Figure One).

Many participants described the middle period as rocky and uncertain. Whereas in the beginning partners had accommodated to each other and had lived harmoniously, in the middle phase struggles around individuality and differences emerged. As the lesbian partners engaged in the interpersonal conflicts which these differences ignited, many reported feeling distant from their partner, having difficulties getting along, and entertaining thoughts of leaving the relationship. Half of the couples sought couples therapy at this time. As partners continued to struggle with these issues, communication, sensitivity, and understanding increased. Once a balance between individuality and being part of a couple was reached, conflict decreased or felt less threatening, and relatedness, psychosocial intimacy, and satisfaction were appraised positively.

The findings in this study regarding relationship development are significant, in that the couples examined were childless. Curvilinearity in other relationships has been attributed to the influence of the absence or presence of children (Hicks & Platt, 1970; Kanter, 1994). The fact that a curvilinear relationship emerged among these childless couples separates duration-of-relationship effects from the influence of children, suggesting that a dip in relationship satisfaction after several years is characteristic of all relationships, regardless of the inclusion of children. A similar postulation was proposed by Glenn (1990). It is possible that individual differences are somehow played out
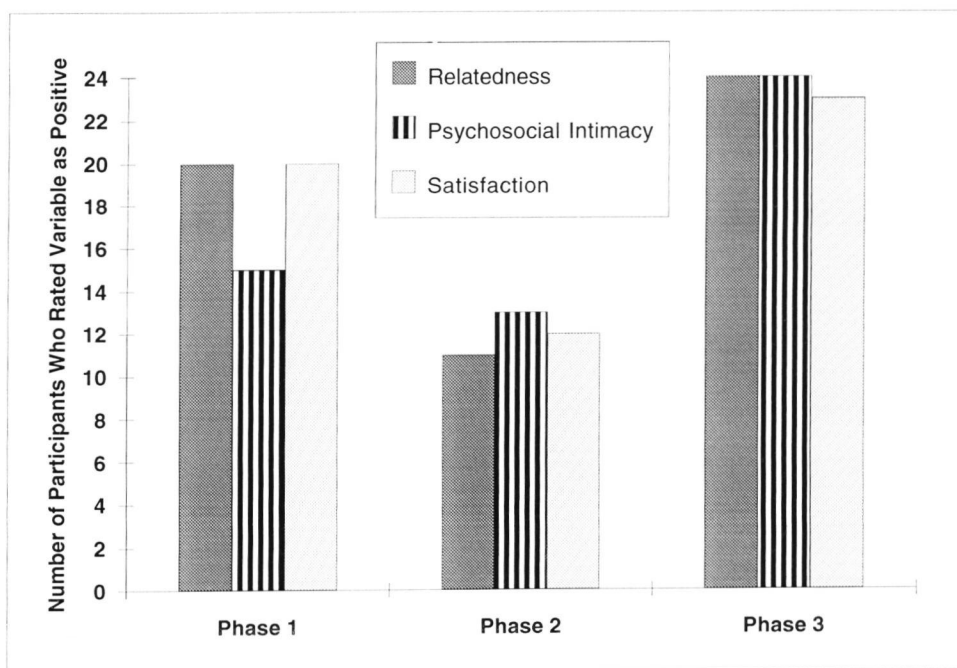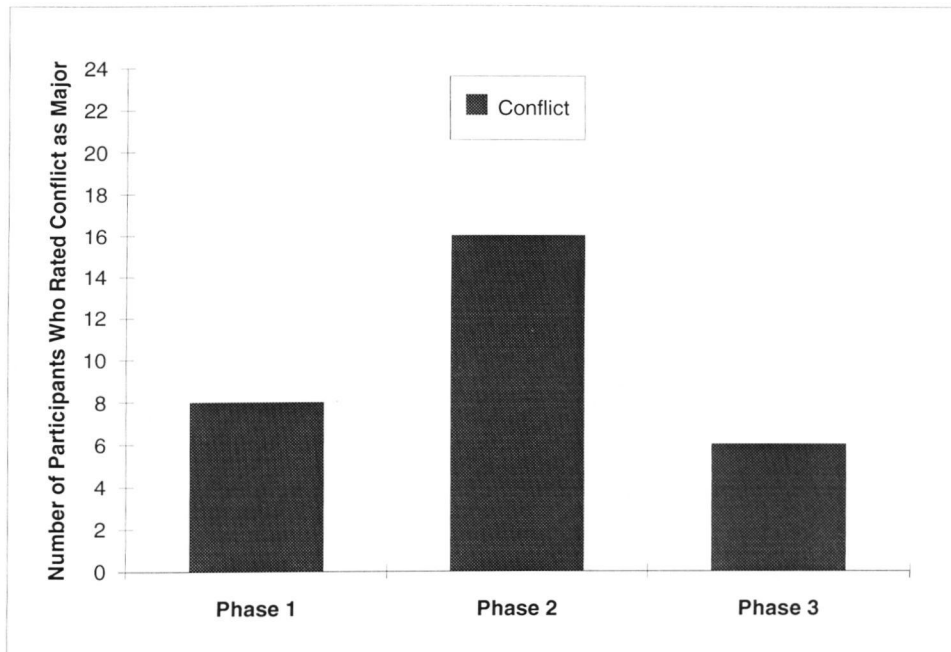
Figure 1. Curvilinearity among Conflict, Relatedness, Psychosocial Intimacy and Satisfaction relative to Phase of Relationship.

in child-rearing practices. The disruption experienced as a result of the influence of children, then, may be more accurately understood as a symptom of underlying dynamics of change occurring within the marital alliance.

As previously noted, the relationship was divided into three phases so that participants could discuss how particular factors varied over time. Although a few participants noted that the transitions in their relationships did not coincide with 5 year intervals, this division appeared to fit well with the descriptions of relationship development offered by the majority of participants. Thus, patterns of relationship development among lesbian couples are consistent both with the notion of the "7 year itch" and with the pattern of curvilinearity identified in other studies (Glenn, 1990; Hicks & Platt, 1970; Kanter, 1994; Spanier & Lewis, 1980). The general pattern emerging from long-term lesbian couples also is reminiscent of the three stages of expansion, contraction/betrayal, and resolution described by Dym (1994). These preliminary findings suggest that there may be some universal truths to the development of all relationships, gay or straight, with children or without.

Implications for Counseling Couples

The absence of models for lesbian relationships was clearly discernible in participants' statements, and has been voiced elsewhere (Clunis & Green, 1988; Johnson, 1991). This is only the third research project known to focus on long-term lesbian relationships. Findings from this study are informative in their exposure of factors which impact on the stability of lesbian partnerships.

Information accumulated through this study identified a number of significant individual, interpersonal, and sociocultural variables which

contributed to relationship stability among long-term lesbian couples. Additionally, how lesbian relationships matured over time was described. These findings are useful for clinicians who wish to understand how various factors influence success and satisfaction in long-term relationships. This study focused not only on identifying important variables, but also provided insights and descriptive examples concerning how partners interacted to ensure the continuation of their relationship. Collectively, these results equip counselors with knowledge about lesbian relationships and effective examples for overcoming difficulties. From this base, clinicians may develop appropriate and effective treatment strategies.

Results from this study aide clinicians in anticipating and recognizing relationship strengths and difficulties which are likely to be experienced by lesbian clients. Findings from this study suggested that struggles with internalized homophobia, differing needs for sex, conflicting styles of communication and money management, emotional and physical illness, and lack of family support were common problems faced in long-term relationships. Relatedly, similar values, the development of supportive social networks, and a commitment to working through difficulties are important features to promote the continuation of the relationship. Finally, findings indicated that most lesbian relationships experienced a stressful period of conflict; it is important that both clinicians and their lesbian clients recognize such a period as a likely developmental milestone.

To focus exclusively on individual characteristics or interpersonal dynamics when working with lesbian clients is to be culture-blind. Effective clinical work with lesbian couples must consider the cultural context in which

they exist. In some cases, features of lesbian relationships, such as fusion, are actually successful coping strategies necessary to negotiate particular stages of relationships within the context of a homophobic society. Clinicians need not only to observe relational patterns, but also to appreciate the broader societal context and its influence at any given time on the lesbian partnership.

Suggestions for Future Research

Findings from this study suggest that there is a complex array of factors which affect the stability of lesbian relationships, and contribute to the existing body of knowledge on marital stability among seasoned relationships (Demment, 1991; Hamel, 1993; Kanter, 1994; Mengden, 1994; Podbelski, 1993). From this broad base, further qualitative and quantitative investigations are recommended to understand more fully the specific themes significant to relationship stability and quality among lesbian partnerships.

The focus for this study was long-term lesbian partnerships. Its intent was to gather data in order to generate hypotheses concerning factors contributing to relationship stability among lesbians. Results reported represent a specific group of lesbian couples. Future research might be directed at lesbian couples who have been together longer, who have raised children together, who are more ethnically diverse, or who live outside of the Northeast. It would also be useful to explore stability factors among seasoned gay male partnerships.

The influence of race and ethnicity on the partnership was negligible among this sample. These findings may be reflective of the general homogeneity of the participants and the fact that they were all Caucasian.

Exploration of the influence of racial identity and ethnic background in inter-racial lesbian couples or in couples representing a variety of races and ethnicities would be informative.

Results from this study begin to provide models of stable lesbian relationships. Many participants in this study identified the absence of lesbian role models, and discussed how they drew on available models, particularly parents, to construct their idea of a committed relationship. Because these models were heterosexual, their applicability to lesbian partnerships was limited. Whether or not this opportunity to create rather than copy is invigorating or frustrating requires further examination. Currently, more gay male and lesbian couples are known to be raising children (Bozett, 1993; Falk, 1993), creating a generation of children raised in homosexual households . Ultimately, it will be possible to compare lesbians raised in heterosexual homes with those raised by gay male or lesbian parents to determine the effects of positive gay/lesbian role modeling.

As the societal context for lesbian relationships progresses, changes in legal and religious policies may impact couples differently than current conditions do. At least four couples indicated that they would not legally marry even if permitted to do so. How do commitment ceremonies impact on relationship stability? Would the influence be different if the commitment were legalized or recognized by religious authorities? Research needs to continue to assess sociocultural factors impacting lesbian relationships as new developments take place.

While a qualitative approach was desirable for this research in a relatively unexplored area, quantitative studies which demonstrate statistical

significance could support further the findings from this project. Additionally, a more reliable, but also time-consuming, approach might be to replace a retrospective analysis of relationships with a longitudinal design. Finally, a research team which included both heterosexual and lesbian women might be beneficial to broaden perspectives and challenge subtle biases. These methodological adjustments would allow for greater specificity and greater assurance of the accuracy of findings.

Literature on theory related to stability in long-term lesbian relationships is nearly non-existent. Results from this study revealed the significance of early relationship themes, women's psychological development, interpersonal fit, satisfaction, curvilinearity, and sociocultural influences on the relationship. Knowledge of these factors is critical to devising clinical strategies to address relationship issues among lesbians. Eventually, the efficacy of such approaches would need to be investigated.

Concluding Remarks

This qualitative study provided a comprehensive overview of the variety of factors and developmental influences working within and around long-term lesbian relationships. Partners in this study illuminated the complex interplay between individual, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors which impact on relationship stability. Couples stayed together because of their commitment, their ability to enjoy each other's company and negotiate conflict, the opportunity to grow, their appreciation of their partner's personal qualities, and because they preferred not to be alone. Most couples valued equity and shared in decision-making, roles, and household responsibilities. Most eventually

found their relationship satisfying and intimate, learned how to communicate, and established a balance between being an individual and being a partner in a couple. Partnerships went through phases, experiencing greater conflict and a decrease in satisfaction in the middle years. Couples demonstrated resiliency and resourcefulness in facing crises and difficulties, particularly in struggles involving homophobia, as expressed through negative family reactions, discrimination, or religious intolerance. Overall, this study elucidated both positive and negative features and influences which impact the stability of long-term lesbian partnerships.

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Appendix A: Letter to Potential Referral Sources

Date

Dear (Potential Referral Source),

I saw your name and organization listed in Bay Windows, and hoped you might be able to help me. I am involved in a research study looking at long-term lesbian relationships. I thought you might be able to put me in touch with potential participants for this study.

Let me elaborate on the nature and purpose of this research. Over the last 5 years, faculty members in the Counseling Psychology Department at Boston College have been examining factors contributing to relationship satisfaction and stability among long-term married, heterosexual couples. Different cultural groups have been examined (e.g. African-American couples, Jewish couples), but no one to date has looked at gay or lesbian couples. I believe this oversight needs to be corrected, and research allowing lesbians to speak about their own experience in long-term relationships would provide useful information to the lesbian community and to mental health professionals who work with lesbians and their partners. The research is qualitative, utilizing a 2 hour semi-structured interview in which participants respond to open-ended questions concerning initial attraction, roles, communication, problem-solving, social and cultural influences on their relationship, role models, etc. It is necessary that both partners in a couple participate. Anonymity and confidentiality are guaranteed. Couples need to have been together at least 15 years and not have raised children jointly.

I am currently a doctoral student in counseling psychology at Boston College. This research project is my dissertation, and my final requirement towards becoming a psychologist. I have a long-standing interest in relationships and women's issues. I consider myself gay-affirmative. I am heterosexual and married.

I am currently conducting interviews. I am willing to find a place and time to conduct these interviews that is convenient with the participants. I would need to interview each partner separately for approximately 2 hours each. Ideally, the interviews would be conducted back to back, but other arrangements could be made if both partners agreed not to discuss the questions between interviews. Upon completion of the study, I am happy to send a synopsis of my findings to participants.

Thank you for circulating this announcement . If you are aware of couples that might be interested, I would appreciate your informing them of my research. Ideally, I would appreciate you contacting potential participants whom you know, informing them of my research, securing their permission for me to

Appendix A (continued)

contact them directly, and letting me then know who they are and how I might reach them. I am happy to answer any questions, and may be reached at home at (xxx) xxx-xxxx.

I am enclosing some flyers, and would appreciate your distributing them to potential participants if possible. I thank you for any assistance you are able to offer and welcome your questions or comments.

Sincerely,

Beth Reuman Hemond, M.S.Ed.

Appendix B: Letter to Couples Agreeing to Participate

Date

Dear (Couple),

I appreciate your willingness to participate in this research on long-term lesbian relationships. I wanted to provide you with further information about the purpose of the study, myself, the nature of the interview, a description of how your responses will be used, and your rights as a volunteer.

Let me first explain the nature and purpose of this research. Over the last 5 years, faculty members in the Counseling Psychology Department at Boston College have been examining factors contributing to relationship stability among long-term married, heterosexual couples. Different cultural groups have been examined (e.g. African-American couples, Jewish couples), but no one to date has looked at gay/lesbian/or bisexual couples. I believe this oversight needs to be corrected, and research allowing lesbians to speak about their own experience in long-term relationships would provide useful information to the lesbian community and to mental health professionals who work with lesbians and their partners.

I am currently a doctoral student in counseling psychology at Boston College. This research project is my dissertation, and my final requirement towards becoming a psychologist. I have a long-standing interest in relationships and women's issues. I consider myself gay-affirmative. I am heterosexual and married.

The research is qualitative, utilizing a 2 hour semi-structured interview in which participants respond to open-ended questions to describe how various factors influence relationship stability. The interview addresses personality and interpersonal factors within the relationship; the influence of family background, values, and other significant relationships on the relationship; and the impact of social and cultural influences on the relationship. The interview will be audiotaped.

It is necessary that both partners in a couple participate, although interviews will be conducted individually with each partner. Anonymity and confidentiality are guaranteed. Your identity will not be revealed in any way in reports generated by this study.

Couples need to have been together at least 15 years and not have raised children jointly. You will be asked to sign a consent form, acknowledging you understand the nature of the research and agree to participate. As a volunteer, you have the right at any time to stop the interview, skip a question, or

Appendix B (continued)

discontinue your involvement altogether. Upon completion of the study, I am happy to send a synopsis of my findings to participants.

I am enclosing some additional flyers. Feel free to distribute them to other couples of whom you are aware that also might be interested in participating. I am happy to answer any questions, and may be reached at home at (xxx) xxx-xxxx. Thanks for all your help; I welcome your questions or comments.

Our interview is scheduled for Monday, February 28 at noon. I look forward to speaking with you then.

Sincerely,

Beth Reuman Hemond, M.S.Ed.

Appendix C: Relationship Stability Interview

<u>Relationship Stability: A Qualitative Study of Lesbian Couples:</u>
<u>Interview Guide</u>

INTRODUCTION

- Thank you for being in the study.
- Brief explanation of the project.
- Read and sign consent form.
- Complete background information
- Explain structure of the interview:
    1. Your relationship as it was when you first identified yourselves as a committed couple and how it has stayed the same as well as how it has changed in terms of roles, expectations, and needs.
    2. A look at your own family background, values and sociocultural context over time and how these influenced your relationship.
    3. The influence of your parents' marriage or other significant relationships on your own relationship in terms of roles, expectations and relating.
    4. Your assessment of the important factors in your relationship over time.

INTERVIEW

I.   The Relationship

A.   Initial attraction, life circumstances, family reactions.

    1. As you look back to the time when you met (partner), what first attracted you to her? What do you think attracted her to you?
        a.   What interests did you share?
        b.   How did you know when you were committed to each other? Was this understood to be a life-long commitment? How was that understood?
        c.   How long were you together before making the decision to commit to each other? If a short time, how were you sure?

    2. How did your family feel towards, react to, and treat (partner)?
        a.   How does your family understand your relationship?
        b.   Tell me about your family's reaction to your committed relationship (feelings of approval or disapproval).
        c.   How does this reaction vary among family members?

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

Appendix C (continued)

4.   What was going on in your life around the time you committed to each other - educationally, vocationally, personally, family, etc.

5.   What kinds of roles, particular functions, or talents did you see yourself bringing into the relationship?
    a.   What about (partner's) role? (Expected, actual, changes).
    b.   Did you expect to have to work at the relationship? Why?

6.   What, if any, adjustments did you have to make in the initial stages of your committed relationship? Feelings about these changes? What adjustments did (partner) have to make?

B.   Roles, expectations, problem-solving. Issues of satisfaction, relatedness and equity in the beginning (1-5), in the middle (5-10), and most recently (after 10 years). Ask how each thing changed over time.

1.   Can you tell me how you and (partner) got along?
    a.   In general?
    b.   How would you describe the communication between you?
    c.   How have you gotten along sexually? How important has sex been to your relationship over time?
    d.   How have you gotten along in terms of nonsexual intimacy, physical affection like touching and hugging?
    e.   What has been important to getting along? (e.g. sense of humor? talking it through? allowing space?

2.   How did you go about making decisions and solving problems? (re: work, friends, recreation, etc)?
    a.   How did you handle differences (values, career, sex, etc.)?
    b.   How would you describe your problem-solving style as compared to your partner"s?
    c.   Is there one particular area of conflict which 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, interpersonal conflicts, etc.)?

3.   How have you felt about your relationship?
    a.   What's been good, not so good and/or bad about the relationship?
    b.   How much understanding did you feel (partner) had of you? (differentiation, separateness, etc)
    c.   How much understanding did you have of (partner)?
    d.   How sensitive was (partner) to you? And you to her?

Appendix C (continued)

     e.   How much respect did you feel (partner) had for you? And you for her?

     f.   How much trust did you feel towards (partner)?

     g   How much trust did you think (partner) felt towards you?

4.   Overall, how much of a sense of fairness did you feel in the relationship?

     a.   Despite differences, did things balance out?

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

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

5.   What do you identify as transition points in your relationship? How would you describe various phases of your relationship?

6.   Have you ever been in individual therapy? Have you ever been in therapy to address concerns in this relationship?

II.   Socioeconomic and Cultural Influences

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

A.   Religion

B.   Extended families

     1.   How have cousins, aunts, uncles, etc. impacted on your relationship?

     2.   What relationships have you had to a lesbian or gay/lesbian community or organization? a woman's community or organization? Friends? How have those impacted?

C.   Cultural factors including ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation

     1.   How have homophobia, social pressures and failures to recognize you as a couple drawn you closer or been divisive in your relationship?

     2.   How have societal attitudes affected your relationship over time?

     3.   How have your ethnic and/or racial backgrounds impacted?

D.   Economic factors, including income

E.   Other values, beliefs, moral standards, or a motto that fits for you

Appendix C (continued)

III.   Parents' Marriage and Influence of Other Significant Relationships

A.   What were family attitudes toward/experience with the break-up of a committed relationship? What attitudes would you expect from family if your current relationship were to dissolve?

B.   What models of relationships did you look to to construct your idea of a committed relationship? What one was most significantly influential? (if respond "parents," skip to 2).

    1.   What did you learn about long-term relationships from this model?
        a.   How did you view this model in terms of roles, relatedness and equity?
        b.   Can you tell me how the partners in this couple got along?
        c.   How did they go about making decisions and solving problems? (Ask for some examples of how a disagreement was solved.)
        d.   Overall, was there a sense of fairness in their relationship?
            - Despite differences, did things balance out in their relationship?
            - 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, recreation, work)?

    2.   What do you think you learned about committed relationships from observing your parents?
        a.   How did you view your parents' relationship in terms of roles, relatedness and equity?
        b.   Can you tell me how your parents got along?
        c.   How did they go about making decisions and solving problems? (Ask for some examples of how a disagreement was solved.)
        d.   Overall, how much of a sense of fairness was there in their relationship?
            - Despite differences, did things balance out in their relationship?
            - 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, recreation, work)?
        e.   What are some important similarities in your relationship compared to your parents' marriage? What are some important differences?

Appendix C (continued)

IV.　Participants Views of the Relationship Over Time and Wrap Up

A.　Factors that kept you in the relationship
　　1.　As you look back, what were the personal qualities of (partner) that kept you together?
　　2.　What personal qualities of yours kept you together?
　　3.　What other factors in the relationship kept you together?

B.　Changes
　　1.　Do you think your relationship has changed or has the relationship remained pretty much the same from the beginning?
　　2.　How have your expectations changed or remained the same?
　　3.　How does what you are currently looking for in the relationship differ from 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/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 me to understand about your relationship, yourself, or your partner?

Thank you!

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

Consent Form

I understand that the interview session with Beth Reuman Hemond is part of the research for her doctoral dissertation under the direction of Dr. Bernard O'Brien of Boston College. The purpose of the research project is to understand how some lesbians keep their relationships together for at least 15 years. The purpose of the session is to share my personal ideas, feelings, and life experiences concerning my long-term relationship.

I understand that the interview will be tape recorded. I realize that I may choose not to respond to any particular questions and that I may request to listen to the tape. The information obtained from this tape will become part of the research material for this study. My identity will be kept confidential and will not be revealed in any reports generated by this study.

I recognize that these interviews are not designed or intended to be psychotherapy or treatment of any sort. I realize that I may ask about various aspects of the study, and that further information on the project will be provided at my request.

I have read this Consent Form and agree to be part of this research study.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Witness: _____ (Interviewer)

Appendix E: Background Data Sheet

This information is being used to describe participants of this study <u>as a group</u>. Please complete the following questions with the knowledge that your responses are completely anonymous.

1. Your age (years and months): _____

2. Partner's age (years and months): _____

3. Your race and ethnic group: _____

4. Your religion: _____

5. Your geographical origins (state or foreign country): _____

6. Your highest educational level (HS, BA, MA, Ph.D, etc.): _____

7. Current employment status:
    _____ full-time employment
    _____ part-time employment
    _____ full-time student
    _____ part-time student
    _____ other (explain) _____

8. If employed, what is your title and field: _____

9. If a student, what is your field: _____

10. What is your average yearly income?
    _____ less than $ 12,500
    _____ $12,500 - $24,999
    _____ $25,000 - $37,499
    _____ $37,500 - $50,000
    _____ over $50,000

11. Approximately what percentage of your household income do you provide? _____

12. Do you think of yourself as (check <u>one</u>):
    _____ exclusively lesbian
    _____ predominantly lesbian, only insignificantly heterosexual
    _____ predominantly lesbian, but significantly heterosexual
    _____ equally lesbian and heterosexual
    _____ predominantly heterosexual, but significantly lesbian
    _____ predominantly heterosexual, only insignificantly lesbian
    _____ exclusively heterosexual

Appendix E (continued)

13. Please also rate yourself on the following scale by choosing one:
_____ only lesbian behavior and thoughts (or fantasies)
_____ exclusively lesbian behavior, some heterosexual thoughts
_____ predominantly lesbian behavior, some heterosexual thoughts
_____ equal heterosexual and lesbian behavior, equal heterosexual and lesbian thoughts
_____ predominantly heterosexual behavior, some lesbian thoughts
_____ exclusively heterosexual behavior, some lesbian thoughts
_____ only heterosexual behavior and thoughts

14. For how long have you consciously considered yourself to be a lesbian? _____

15. Have you ever been heterosexually married?
_____ Yes _____ No

16. What is your current legal status?
_____ Single _____ Married _____ Widowed
_____ Separated _____ Divorced

17. Do you have any children? _____ Yes _____ No
If yes, how many? _____
If yes, what are their ages? _____
If yes, approximately what percentage of time does your child (children) live with you? _____
If yes, please describe the circumstances around your becoming a parent (by previous marriage, adopted child(ren) while single, bore or adopted in current or former lesbian relationship, etc.):
_____
_____

18. Do you want to have a child (or another child) in the future?
Definitely   Most
Not   Definitely
1   2   3   4   5

19. What is the likelihood that you will have a child (or another child)?
                                                   Most
None   Definitely
1   2   3   4   5

20. How long have you been in your current primary relationship?
_____ years _____ months

Appendix E (continued)

21.   What event or experience do you consider the beginning of this relationship? _____

_____

_____

22.   What do you mark (e.g. event, conversation, or understanding) as the beginning of your commitment to each other as a couple (date if possible)? _____

_____

_____

23.   How long, in total have you and your partner lived together? (If you have always maintained separate residences, write 0 in the spaces below.)

_____ years   _____ months

Do you and your partner currently live together?

_____ Yes _____ No

If no, why have you chosen to live separately?

_____

_____

Appendix F: Seasoned Relationship Coding Sheet

interview #	participant's name	partner's name
interview date	income	occupation
education age		# of yrs together interviewer

1   participant's initial attraction to partner
        (0) negative   (1) ambivalent   (2) positive   _____
2   participant's family support for partner choice
        (1) disapproval   (2) approval   (3) mixed   (4) not acknowledged   _____
3   participant's circumstances at beginning of relationship
        (0) no conflict   (1) conflictual   _____
4   role expectations of self at beginning of relationship
        (3) no expectations   (4) role sharing   (5) role differentiation   _____
5   expectation of need for participant's effort to sustain relationship
        (0) no expectations   (1) no   (2) yes   _____
6   participant's perception of the sexual relationship
        (0) negative   (1) mixed   (2) positive

                                        (a) 1st phase   _____
                                        (b) 2nd phase   _____
                                        (c) 3rd phase   _____
7   participant's perception of the importance of sexual relationship
        (0) not important   (1) important   (2) very important

                                          (a) 1st phase   _____
                                        (b) 2nd phase   _____
                                        (c) 3rd phase   _____
8   participant's perception of the presence of intimacy in the relationship
        (0) no   (1) mixed   (2) yes
                (a) psychosocial intimacy

                                        (1) 1st phase   _____
                                        (2) 2nd phase   _____
                                        (3) 3rd phase   _____

                (b) non-sexual physical touching

                                        (1) 1st phase   _____
                                        (2) 2nd phase   _____
                                        (3) 3rd phase   _____
9   participant's personal style of decision making
        (0) logical   (1) impulsive   (2) intuitive

                                        (a) 1st phase   _____
                                        (b) 2nd phase   _____
                                        (c) 3rd phase   _____

Appendix F (continued)

10 external decision making style of the couple
        (0) separate   (1) variable   (2) mutual

              (a) 1st phase   _____
              (b) 2nd phase _____
              (c) 3rd phase _____

11 style of handling interpersonal differences in the relationship
        (1) avoid   (2) confront
              (a) participant's style

              (1) 1st phase   _____
              (2) 2nd phase _____
              (3) 3rd phase _____
              (b) participant's perception of partner's style
              (1) 1st phase   _____
              (2) 2nd phase _____
              (3) 3rd phase _____

12 participant's reported level of conflict in the relationship
        (0) minimal   (1) major

              (a) 1st phase   _____
              (b) 2nd phase _____
              (c) 3rd phase _____

13 participant's perception of the responsibilities for child rearing
        (0) individual   (1) mutual

              (a) child's infancy _____
              (b) latency period _____
               (c) adolescence _____

14 participant's perception of relationship variables: partner to participant
        (0) no   (1) mixed   (2) yes

    (a) <u>sensitivity</u>
        (1) first phase ___   (2) second phase ___   (3) third phase ___
    (b) <u>understanding</u>
        (1) first phase ___   (2) second phase ___   (3) third phase ___
    (c) <u>respect</u>
        (1) first phase ___   (2) second phase ___   (3) third phase ___
    (d) <u>trust</u>
        (1) first phase ___   (2) second phase ___   (3) third phase ___

15 participant's perception of relationship variables: participant to partner
        (0) no   (1) mixed   (2) yes

    (a) <u>sensitivity</u>
        (1) first phase ___   (2) second phase ___   (3) third phase ___
    (b) <u>understanding</u>
        (1) first phase ___   (2) second phase ___   (3) third phase ___
    (c) <u>respect</u>
        (1) first phase ___   (2) second phase ___   (3) third phase ___
    (d) <u>trust</u>
        (1) first phase ___   (2) second phase ___   (3) third phase ___

Appendix F (continued)

16 participant's perception of fairness/equity in the relationship
        (0) no   (1) mixed   (2) yes

        (a) 1st phase   _____
        (b) 2nd phase   _____
        (c) 3rd phase   _____

17 participant's perception of communication within the relationship
        (0) no   (1) mixed   (2) yes

        (a) 1st phase   _____
        (b) 2nd phase   _____
        (c) 3rd phase   _____

18 participant's overall sense of relatedness
        (0) negative   (1) mixed   (2) positive

        (a) 1st phase   _____
        (b) 2nd phase   _____
        (c) 3rd phase   _____

19 participant's perception of other influences on the relationship
        (0) negative   (1) none   (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) participant'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) ethnicity/race
        (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 participant's perception of similarity of own relationship with parents' marriage
        (0) discontinuity   (1) mixed   (2) continuity

        (a) 1st phase   _____
        (b) 2nd phase   _____
        (c) 3rd phase   _____

21 participant's perception of own relationship behavior
        (0) instrumental   (1) mixed   (2) expressive

        (a) 1st phase   _____
        (b) 2nd phase   _____
        (c) 3rd phase   _____

22 participant's parents' attitudes toward divorce
        (1) disapprove of divorce   (2) accepting of divorce   _____

23 participant's perception of interpersonal fit with partner
        (0) no   (1) mixed   (2) complementarity   (3) symmetry

        (a) 1st phase   _____
        (b) 2nd phase   _____
        (c) 3rd phase   _____

Appendix F (continued)

24 participant's overall sense of the relationship as satisfying
            (0) no   (1) mixed   (2) yes

                                                    (a) 1st phase   _____
                                                    (b) 2nd phase   _____
                                                    (c) 3rd phase   _____
25 participant's initial attraction to committed lesbian relationship
            (0) negative   (1) ambivalent   (2) positive   _____
26 participant's family support for committed lesbian relationship
            (1) disapproval   (2) approval   (3) mixed   (4) not acknowledged   _____
27 participant's perception of other influences on the relationship
            (0) negative   (1) none   (2) positive   (3) mixed

    (a) gay/lesbian community
        (1) first phase   ____   (2) second phase   ____   (3) third phase   ____
    (b) friends
        (1) first phase   ____   (2) second phase   ____   (3) third phase   ____
    (c) homophobia/societal attitudes
        (1) first phase   ____   (2) second phase   ____   (3) third phase   ____

28 participant's parents' attitudes towards dissolution of relationship (specific)
            (1) disapprove   (2) accepting   _____

COMMENTS: