9

Same-sex couples: Courtship, commitment, context

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The study of same-sex couples and their relationships has grown over the past several decades. While great gaps in our knowledge still exist, the past 15 years have shown substantial interdisciplinary growth of the literature. The literature has proliferated so much that a comprehensive but brief overview is difficult to accomplish. This chapter will confine itself to a few central themes: courtship, maintaining relationships, dissolving relationships, and several problem areas including AIDS, intimate violence, and the political climate in the United States toward same-sex couples. With a few exceptions, our review is limited to research in the United States on gay and lesbian couples.

Nomenclature is especially difficult in these days of interdisciplinary research, since many disciplines have discipline-specific, nonoverlapping terms. Therefore, we will state our working definitions before our substantive discussion. The term "homosexual" describes individuals with a same-sex sexual preference; "same-sex" refers to all homosexual couples; "lesbian" refers to women with a same-sex preference; "gay" refers to men with a same-sex preference; and "bisexual" refers to individuals who are either sequentially or contemporaneously attracted to same-sex and opposite-sex partners. We ask the reader, however, not to reify these labels. These terms are tools to describe behavior. They do not describe strict categories of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, or the wide varieties of identities in between and among the different social-sexual arrangements people move in and out of over the course of a lifetime.

Orienting themes: Gender, gay culture, and history

Three themes organize our analysis of same-sex relationships: gender, gay culture and subcultures, and historical developments and larger contextual influences.

Gender

It is important to remember that lesbian and heterosexual women share early socialization and life experiences. This means that regardless of sexual orientation, all women can be understood in part by their similarities. This analytic approach also provides insight into gay men, who share values, experience, and socialization with heterosexual men. It is a central tenet of our approach that the profoundly gendered way individuals are sorted by society renders greater continuity between lesbian and heterosexual women and between gay and heterosexual men than between gay men and lesbians. In other words, before there is sexual orientation, there is the socially and perhaps biologically constructed sexual identity we refer to as gender. Some argue against our position and believe that gays are more likely to have been "sissies" growing up and lesbians "tomboys," suggesting that gays and lesbians have a unique gender as well as a unique sexual orientation (Hemmer & Kleiber, 1981; Whitam & Mathay, 1991). However, we believe the weight of present research demonstrates that most gays and lesbians do not have an atypical socialization, nor exhibit early and sustained cross-sex behavior (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Peplau, 1991).

New research suggests that there may be a genetic basis of homosexuality (Bailey, Pillard, Neale & Agyei, 1993; Hamer & Copeland, 1994). This evidence persuasively explains the orientation of at least some proportion of homosexuals. The genetic evidence, however, does not establish a correlation between homosexuality and other behavioral or physical qualities often associated with homosexual orientation, such as effeminacy or being "butch." While there are many different research arenas on the etiology of homosexuality, including brain differentiation and endocrine system differences (LeVay, 1993; Money & Ehrhardt, 1972), behavioral and other studies still find gender, rather than sexuality, central to understanding the values, goals, and practices of lesbian and gay relationships.

Men and women of every sexual preference experience similar socialization into relationship roles and sexual roles. For example, men are not expected to focus on relationships as the center of their lives; women are exhorted to do so. Role models for men stress independence and the

provider role, and equate success in work with masculinity and personal success. Although women's socialization is changing, women are more often trained to link their future adult identity to a good marriage, motherhood, and more modest work achievements. Theoretically, then, men interacting with men, and women interacting with women, share approaches, reactions, and role expectations. Contributions the opposite sex might be expected to bring to a heterosexual relationship may be absent in same-sex relationships. Both homosexual partners may expect the other to balance their role behavior at the same time each person claims role prerogatives. For example, if two men slow-dance, both may expect to lead; if two women are cleaning house, both may hope the other will take on mechanical or automotive projects. Lesbians may seek to reject the impositions of gendered norms of behavior and consciously supplement their past socialization by adopting masculine skills or affect. However, this is a case of the exception supporting the rule. That is, whether one accepts or rejects gendered norms, the decision-making process serves to acknowledge the power of gendered norms.

Homosexual culture

While gender norms tend to create similarity between homosexuals and heterosexuals of the same sex, the culture of the gay community modifies these continuities. Evolving and expanding gay norms influence homosexual lifestyles, ideologies, and values. For example, in some lesbian communities appearance norms support a more masculine or androgynous "butch" look. Over time, lesbians who initially looked more traditionally feminine become drawn to the prevailing lesbian community standard. Likewise, in some American gay male neighborhoods and bars, the standard is a hypermasculine look, including "lumberjack" shirts, bluejeans, hiking boots, and cropped hair. New norms are the basis for an alternative culture that supports and expresses the homosexual community's ideology instead of the values of heterosexual courtship.

Of course, gay culture is not a unitary phenomenon. Subcultures exist that shape a variety of behaviors, defining and diversifying homosexual norms. For example, a growing lesbian "sex-positive" subculture is reacting against prevalent lesbian sexual norms that eschew aggression and nonmonogamy. In this sex-positive subculture, women favor recreational, aggressive, and casual sex. Subcultures are defined by rebelling against a well-understood *homosexual* norm, rather than simply against *heterosexual* norms. The anomalous behavior reinforces the gay cultural norms, demonstrating the extent to which the culture has evolved and defined itself.

Historical context

The historical circumstances and larger context in which homosexuals and the gay community exist also exert influence over gay and lesbian relationships. These effects extend beyond proximal community influences and include larger institutional and social forces. Until the 1960s homosexuals were largely "closeted." In the past three decades great openness has evolved, particularly in major metropolitan areas. While a trend of increased tolerance is evident in the increased descriptive attention (as opposed to "scandalizing" attention) same-sex couples obtain in Western popular culture,[1] the circumstances for gays and lesbians vary tremendously by local community. For example, in Seattle, a liberal, medium-sized U.S. city, the mayor and police chief typically march in the gay rights parade. Because of the high income, education, and class level of the residents, these acts of solidarity are supported by the population.[2] In contrast, lesbians in the southeastern United States and other politically and socially conservative parts of the country are subject to vigorous surveillance and social sanctions imposed by less tolerant communities.[3] Even liberal cities with statutes that promote nondiscrimination in housing and employment practices find individual acts of discrimination and even rage against gays and lesbians, as reported by the Anti-Violence Project report on national trends in violence against gays and lesbians (Dunlap, 1995c). These cities usually find it necessary to use all the resources of the law to enforce these statutes.

National movements have organized to increase heterosexuals' tolerance, understanding, and connection to gays and lesbians, who are increasingly likely to be "out." Such movements must square off against countermovements such as those organized by fundamentalist Christian organizations. The course of a couple's life will be altered depending on whether they live in a community or historical period of substantial acceptance and legal protection, or in one where prevailing sentiment is fearful, hostile, and legally tenuous.

Courtship

There is a spare literature on same-sex patterns of courtship. The research has tended to focus on committed relationships, perhaps because the right to be a couple has been uncertain, and the way to be a couple has been unscripted. Recently, however, research has begun to emphasize homosexual courtship. Partly as a consequence of the AIDS epidemic, the process of partnering has become more salient for gay men and health researchers

alike. The AIDS epidemic has made casual sex a potentially lethal enterprise for gay men, and to a lesser extent for lesbians and heterosexuals. Thus, social scientists and public health researchers are interested in understanding the mechanisms by which sexual interaction carries as little risk as possible. Establishing and maintaining committed relationships is one mechanism for reducing risk. Researchers have discovered that studying courtship patterns has become at least as complicated as studying sexual interaction. Of course, the issue of reducing risk is also salient to the sex lives of homosexuals. For gay men, HIV status has become part of explicit negotiations about who can have sex with whom and under what conditions. Because so many lesbians (approximately 50%) have had sex sometime in their past with a man, many of them gay or bisexual, these women are also concerned with safer sex (Laumann, Michael & Gagnon, 1994).

Generation is an additional reason for the new focus on creating and maintaining committed same-sex relationships. As the baby boom generation has aged, a substantial proportion of the homosexual population has reached the "settling-down age." Indeed, the trend toward more committed relationships actually preceded the AIDS crisis (Siegle & Glassman, 1989). Thus, while in the 1970s surveys showed approximately 95% of gay men preferring nonmonogamy (McWhirter & Mattison, 1984), surveys done in early 1992 showed over 96% of gay men preferring monogamous relationships (Berger, 1990). As we will discuss later in the chapter, gay men report greater preferences for monogamy, but it is not clear that this ideal always translates into behavior.

The dating marketplace

Heterosexual and homosexual women still link sex and love, and seek to establish some level of intimacy before sexual involvement. Lesbians, like other women, tend to emphasize mental and emotional qualities above physical qualities. They often reject male-derived appearance norms of beauty, and especially reject norms of submissiveness that often govern women in heterosexual courting situations. Many lesbians prefer a "butch" androgynous or boyish look, but a more feminine look, often referred to as "lipstick lesbian," has also recently come into style in some lesbian communities. Although as recently as the 1970s heterosexual-like role playing (butch and femme) was quite common for lesbians and gay men, it has since become less common and is counternormative in gay culture. Nevertheless, role playing persists as one among many tastes for homosexuals (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983).

Recently there has been an increase in lesbians' use of personal advertise-

ments (Davidson, 1991). Some studies have demonstrated that lesbians tend to emphasize political and sexual identity issues in their search for a partner. For example, women will state "bi's need not apply," indicating a political as well as personal commitment to a homosexual identity. Lesbians' advertisements also emphasize physical characteristics that do not appear in heterosexual women's advertisements, such as indicating a preference for physical strength (Sociology 481 student project, fall 1994). Lesbians persistently emphasize independence and self-sufficiency as valued characteristics in themselves and potential partners. However, lesbians do not usually emphasize job status or high earning (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). This may be due to the limited access women generally have to higher-status or higher-earning jobs (Ferree, 1987). It may also be a rejection of the heterosexual norm that women ought to "marry well" by finding a "good provider."

Heterosexual and homosexual men have tended to prioritize attractiveness in potential partners. Gay men, in particular, place a heavy emphasis on looks. The preference is for an extremely attractive face, an athletic body, and 9 well-groomed appearance. There is a common emphasis on specific body parts, especially buttocks, but also penis size and chest. Gay men also seek the accoutrements of manliness, including high-paying or masculine careers (Davidson, 1991).

Meeting places

Gay and lesbian populations in the United States and other Western countries are concentrated in urban areas (Laumann et al., 1994). It is easier to meet other gays and lesbians in cities, especially major cities such as Boston, New York, Seattle, San Francisco, Chicago, and Los Angeles, than in smaller cities or rural areas, where there is likely to be a smaller homosexual community as well as less tolerance for nonheterosexuals (Miller, 1989).

For a homosexual who is "out," the variety of places to meet others like oneself has grown. Gay travel clubs, university alumni groups, and gay and lesbian bars of many types have proliferated. Furthermore, information resources such as *Inn Places*, *The Gay Yellow Pages*, and *International Gay Yellow Pages* list gay and lesbian businesses and meeting places in every city in the world (Huston & Schwartz, 1995). For homosexuals who are not out, or who are only partially out, there is less opportunity to find a relationship. In certain locations, including Providence, Rhode Island; Brooklyn Heights, New York City; Fire Island, New York; Provincetown, Massachusetts; Northampton, Massachusetts; as well as Paris, Berlin, Amsterdam, and Copenhagen, there is a concentration of same-sex courting, meeting, and mating, with a diversity of venues for doing so.

While gays may meet one another in bars and clubs, it is more likely for lesbians and gay men to meet potential partners through other homosexual friends. This is particularly the case for lesbians, attributable in part to women's preference for intimacy and familiarity before sexual involvement, and in part to the way that lesbian social life is strongly organized around friendship networks. When matches are made within friendship circles, the breakup can be socially awkward or disruptive. These are intense social groups, and breakups disturb alliances, loyalties, and social interaction patterns. Notably, heterosexual friends rarely engage in such matchmaking, either because they know very few homosexuals or because they are myopic about gay friends' interests or preferences.

A secondary way for lesbians to meet is through political/feminist organizations and activities. These settings encourage pairs to match on values and ideology, which is an important predictor of lesbian pair satisfaction (Howard, Blumstein & Schwartz, 1992). Lesbians who meet in a political setting are often more activist, independent, and radical than others and are most likely to emphasize the value of autonomy. Thus, paradoxically, while lesbian political settings are an important site for meeting partners, politically minded lesbians are less likely to endorse settling down and monogamy as fundamental relationship values (Andrews, 1990; Vance, 1984).

Finding partners

Even in high-concentration homosexual areas, the dilemma of who makes the first move and how it is done remains. Lesbians are particularly reticent, since they have learned feminine gender norms that discourage initiation and sexual forwardness. Moreover, a lesbian cannot always be sure, even in a homosexual environment, whether a woman she meets is available. Lesbians tend to socialize in couples, and there are strong norms against approaching someone else's girlfriend. Furthermore, unlike the presumption of availability at a gay bar, it is not always clear that all women in a lesbian environment are committed to a homosexual identity and lifestyle.

The recent growth of lesbian "sex clubs" designed for casual sex is a remarkable exception to lesbian sexual norms. In recent years, urban centers such as New York and San Francisco have developed lesbian bathhouses and other venues suitable for casual sexual encounters (Huston & Schwartz, 1995). In contrast, gay men have traditionally had the option of a variety of meeting places, including baths, dance clubs, and "tea rooms," that assume availability and are known as venues for anonymous sexual encounters.

Most meeting places are not organized by any similarity other than

sexual orientation. Where the only basis for meeting is sexual preference, couples without shared interests may be paired solely on the basis of physical attractiveness. As a consequence, lesbians and gay men may end up in mismatched couples. A growing number of publications try to bring gays and lesbians with shared interests together, but the problem of haphazard matching continues and tends to generate less stable relationships. In general, homogamous relationships (couples matched by class, education, age and interests) are correlated with higher degrees of satisfaction, and homogamy has positive effects on empathy, communication, and the equitable division of labor (Whyte, 1990). This has implications for homosexual couples as well. For example, Kurdek and Schmitt (1987) found that closeness in age of homosexual partners was positively correlated with satisfaction. Matching on levels of emotional involvement and ability to solve relationship problems is generally a stronger predictor of relationship satisfaction in homosexual couples than matching on demographic variables (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987). Furthermore, while gays and lesbians are more likely to be in nonhomogamous pairs, there is still quite a high rate of homogamous pairing in all features except age (Howard, Blumstein & Schwartz, n.d.).

What gays and lesbians rarely do is meet openly, as they encounter one another in the day-to-day course of their lives. Not only is homosexuality a nonnormative status, it is also an invisible status. Even liberals, who believe homosexuals should have civil rights, jobs, and fair housing, may be embarrassed by hand-holding, kissing, or just obvious mutual interest between same-sex members of a couple. These acts might be interesting or attractive among courting heterosexuals, but they are disquieting to many heterosexuals when enacted by same-sex couples.

It is particularly difficult for homosexual teenagers to court openly. Very few environments are sufficiently liberal, such that gay teenagers can go to the high school prom or openly date in high school. A few isolated cases of same-sex prom dates have captured media attention in the United States in recent years, more because they are an anomaly than because they are a trend. Gay and lesbian teens' minimal level of dating experience is a considerable impediment to acquiring social skills necessary to navigate intimate relationships. While heterosexuals have the freedom to practice having relationships throughout high school, college, and beyond, homosexuals are curtailed in parallel same-sex relationship experiences.

Committed relationships

Should a couple shift from courtship into commitment, several features are prominent in patterns of communication and conflict negotiation,

particularly in problem areas including career, money, housework, sex, and family.

A look at predictors of satisfaction for same-sex couples provides important background to communication patterns. Predictors for lesbian satisfaction and gay satisfaction correspond with gender norms: women seek high emotional intensity while men seek low conflict. Satisfaction for lesbians is correlated with high degrees of emotional intimacy, an equitable balance of power, and high self-esteem (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990). Where differences are found in mean scores of couple satisfaction, lesbian couples have the higher satisfaction scores of all types of couples (Metz, Rosser & Strapko, 1994). For gay men, satisfaction is correlated with low conflict, high appreciation, stability, and cooperation (Jones & Bates, 1978). Just as with heterosexual couples, same-sex couples' destructive arguing, characterized by criticism, contempt, blame, and stonewalling, is negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction (Kurdek, 1993b). Furthermore, Metz et al. (1994) find heterosexual, lesbian, and gay couples to be fundamentally similar in conflict resolution styles. For heterosexual couples the challenge is to balance the difference between male and female styles in the relationship; for same-sex couples the challenge is to counterbalance the similarities in styles.

Patterns in conversation

Since patterns in satisfaction outcomes for gay and lesbian pairs appear to be influenced by gender, it follows that communication styles are also influenced by gender. In addition, we emphasize that power has a strong, separate influence on communication styles. Communication provides a site for evaluating both styles of communication and issues that arise within communication among different kinds of couples (Steen & Schwartz, in press). A gender approach to conversation hypothesizes that men and women use the act of conversing differently (Tannen, 1990). Along with gendered patterns, the impact of power differentials within same-sex couples emerges when "dominance and support patterns" are identified in couples' conversations. Such dominance tactics as interrupting or steering the conversation reinforce or help to create relationship hierarchy (Kollock, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1985; Steen & Schwartz, in press). When "power differentials" and gender are used as distinct predictors of conversational control, power differentials, rather than gender, appear to be a better predictor of who maintains conversational control, although gender plays an important role (Kollock et al., 1985). The gender of the participant exerts a similar level of influence on relationship styles of heterosexual and homosexual couples. Furthermore, the participant's power within the rela-

tionship dictates patterns of influence and accommodation for heterosexual and homosexual couples.

Research on women's approaches to conversation and problem solving demonstrates that women view conversation as part of intimacy. Women work to keep the conversation going, encourage their interlocutor, fill silences, and ask questions. Women seek consensus because it is emotionally rewarding to them (Gilligan, 1982). They will take time in conversation to find or create common ground. Women, more than men, demonstrate a greater preference for emotional disclosure, both as an opportunity for dominating the issue and for winning the point. Men find the "feminine" supportive style weak; they prefer strong tactics such as interruption and conversational leadership. Women tend to dislike verbal challenges because they believe they violate intimacy and civility; men persistently prefer to spar. "Masculine" tactics facilitate expeditious decision making and reduce the length of the conversation or "debate" (Tannen, 1990).

While researchers have often associated males with conversational power and females with conversational submission, Kollock et al. (1985) find that "gendered" styles of communication are more strongly associated with personal power than with gender. The more powerful speaker will have more control over decisions and the decision-making process, regardless of sex. Powerful tactics, regardless of gender, include the use of minimal responses (such as "hmm" or "uh-huh," thus avoiding the effort of substantive verbal exchange); more frequent interruptions; and not asking for other opinions or input by the use of tag questions (e.g., "This is what I think, what do you think?"), which are commonly used by the less powerful speaker. While for heterosexual couples, the more powerful partner is often the male, this is not always the case. Same-sex couples create an environment without gender differences, so that power differences are more evident.

How do these power- and gender-related styles of communication influence same-sex couples' communication? Lesbian and gay couples both aspire to egalitarian relationships, but their conversational styles reflect different strategies. Lesbians, highly sensitized to power imbalances, seek to minimize conflict and avoid power plays in conversation. Instead, conversation is oriented to a shared goal: creating an emotionally close, fulfilling, disclosing conversation. Indeed, of the four kinds of couples Kollock and colleagues studied (lesbian, gay, married, and cohabiting heterosexual), lesbians had the lowest rate of attempted interruptions, and the fewest conversational challenges. Eschewing conventional power tactics is a path to egalitarianism for lesbians.

Like other men, gay men are more likely to jockey openly for power. Gay men are more likely to acknowledge rank and its privileges and use various strategies to claim it. For example, gay men use minimal responses during

conversation more than any other kind of couple (Kollock et al., 1985). While tag questions (e.g., "What do you think?") tend to be used by the less powerful partner among heterosexuals, the more powerful partner uses them among gay men. This means that the man with the obvious advantage is going out of his way to draw his less powerful partner out, and to make him feel his opinion matters and that he has interactive value. Because power and masculinity are prominent issues for gay men, this practice represents an effort to equalize status and curb resentment.

While egalitarianism is the goal, not all same-sex couples achieve it. Conversational problems for lesbians arise from the high levels of emotionality present in woman-to-woman relationships. Such emotionality can generate a high number of relationship issues. This emotional intensity can produce an "implosion" in pursuit of emotional issues. The relationship can collapse under a preponderance of emotional expectations and needs. Interestingly, this potentially claustrophobic environment coexists with what psychologists call an avoidant style (J. M. Gottman, 1994), where the relationship is organized around *not* observing or addressing relationship problems. Because women typically shun conflict, there is a tendency among lesbians to avoid controversial issues, or to have high expectations of partners to intuit or know their feelings without conversation. While emotional expressiveness is high, problem solving may be delayed indefinitely. Problem avoidance may lead to an accumulation of unresolved or seemingly insurmountable relationship problems (Peplau, Cochran, Rook & Padesky, 1978).

The dilemma for gay couples is the inverse of lesbians' high emotionality problem. Gay men, like heterosexual men, engage in a low level of disclosure. When the relationship is troubled, this may become stonewalling, during which no communication occurs. Gay couples may fail to create opportunities to address important relationship issues. Small arguments are avoided, while over time, angry feelings accumulate. By the time a problem is addressed, an explosive argument may erupt, and the enormity of the problem may mean that resolution is much more difficult. Male conversational style may complicate the problem once conflict is identified. Men are more likely to challenge partners without listening to each other. Furthermore, gay men view compromise (Berzon, 1988) as a failure of masculinity, and resolution may be impossible.

Conflicts

The content of same-sex couples' conversations revolves around equality, whether it pertains to career priorities, money, or division of domestic labor. The issues within these categories for gay or lesbian couples, how-

ever, have important differences that relate both to gender norms and the different socioeconomic experiences of women versus men.

Career

Male partners tend to be equally career-centered. The dilemma over whose job gets precedence is a difficult, unscripted decision-making enterprise. Most men accept cultural norms that value job achievement, and may even compete with their own partners, as well as with men in general, for prestige and money. Among lesbians, career issues tend to be a lower priority, and therefore somewhat less polarizing. Furthermore, men are not only socialized to value career achievement as a central part of their identity, but they are also more likely than women to have more exciting job opportunities and to be highly rewarded in prestige and money for job performance.

Women are less often socialized to build their whole life and self-concept around career. They are offered fewer tempting, prestigious, or high-paying job opportunities and advances. As the workplace continues to open up to women, this may change. At present, however, a more common work conflict for lesbians involves resentment over relationship time lost to one or the other's professional endeavors. This is particularly the case for couples mismatched in terms of emphasis on career versus relationship. For the smaller proportion of lesbian couples with "competing careers," the conflicts in these couples revolve predictably around independence and equality. These career-oriented women are defying cultural norms by emphasizing career over relationship, and for lesbians as for heterosexual women they often pay a price in their domestic relationships. Where one partner but not the other is highly invested in career, the conflict is commonly cast in terms of class struggle. Indeed, a strong theme in the lesbian literature is that middle-class women have "class prerogatives" that they use unfairly in life and relationships, and which they should relinquish. How this is accomplished is not clear. More radical lesbian literature advocates avoiding class struggles by dropping out of the larger capitalist work structure to become a lesbian "separatist" and live in a world without men and men's economic and social institutions.

Money

The economic provider role has an impact on heterosexual and homosexual relationships. For heterosexuals, men have traditionally functioned in the

provider role; the "good provider" engages in work for pay, while the "true woman" engages in domestic work, including household labor as well as the expressive work of maintaining relationships. Although in practice only a small proportion of families have ever had a single good provider, these norms have historically been very powerful (Bernard, 1981; Coontz, 1992). Although these 1950s archetypes are hardly the norm today, married women continue to be economically dependent on their husbands, as a consequence of child bearing, fewer workplace opportunities, and lower pay for similar work. Wives' dependence on husbands tends to influence power dynamics in noneconomic spheres of the relationship. Finally, these patterns are very difficult for heterosexuals to overcome or disrupt (Schwartz, 1994).

Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that same-sex couples, because partners' job opportunities tend to be more similar than among heterosexual partners, have fewer financial conflicts than other kinds of couples. However, maintaining relative independence requires fastidious, deliberate money management. Same-sex couples pool financial resources less often than married couples, but those couples who do not pool resources experience higher breakup rates (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Even when great care and equity is emphasized, couples are still vulnerable to tension and conflict over money. Kurdek (1991) finds that negotiating financial matters is central to same-sex couples' stability. Even in couples with high incomes, Berger (1990) found that one-third of same-sex couples mentioned money as a source of conflict.

Both gay and lesbian partners will engage in the provider role, but they each prefer a co-provider situation. Gay men, like other men, do not expect that a provider will take care of them. When one gay partner is the provider, the partner who is being provided for tends to be more dissatisfied with the situation. In contrast, lesbians do not expect to support another person financially, except temporarily. Lesbians are not socialized, as many men are, to take pleasure in a paternalistic provider role. A lesbian who finds herself in the role of provider is likely to be the more dissatisfied partner with the situation. Both gay and lesbian couples are more stable when each partner contributes equally or proportionately.

Money issues are significantly different for men and women. Money heavily influences power relations between gay men. Gay men are more likely to link the couple's economic welfare with relationship satisfaction, and they tend to endorse the belief in the perquisites of the provider role. However, differences in income and attitudes about money can cause long-term tension and conflict. Even if the higher earner in a gay couple does not endorse a power differential that coincides with their economic differences, the lower earner is likely to be sensitive to the difference. Indeed, the

research on reasons for breakups demonstrates that the lower earner in gay couples is more likely to be the one who initiates dissolution (Kurdek, 1991).

Lesbians are highly sensitized to the relationship between power and money. Heterosexual norms are seen as problematic in part because of the way in which they perpetuate the dichotomous provider/domestic roles. Conflicts are not typically tied to the issues of the "provider role" and associated privileges, since lesbians rarely enact this kind of role. Nevertheless, the higher earner is more likely to initiate a breakup. A study of lesbian couples together for 10 years or more shows that money was the second-most conflictual issue (Johnson, 1990). In examining the content of lesbians' money conflicts, Clunis and Green (1988) found that the salient issue tends to become whether to live simpler lives, in defiance of patriarchal norms, or spend money more freely, in defiance of the typically limited economic capacity of women. The conservative spenders wish to challenge mainstream materialism. The liberal spenders seek liberation from second-class citizenship and wish to establish the "good life" in the absence of men.

The money issue for lesbians is exacerbated by the constraints of lower incomes and the difficulties of pink- and blue-collar jobs in which workers are less likely to have control personal autonomy. Peplau reports that lower-income, less educated lesbians tend to be more dependent in relationships because of their disadvantaged personal status and resources (Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton, 1982).

Housework

Housework for all couples is a contentious and increasingly politicized issue. The task for gay men is to accomplish necessary traditionally female jobs while avoiding assumptions about feminine or masculine roles. Like heterosexual men, high-earning gay men expect that their provider role should mostly exempt them from household labor. Hiring outside help is an alternative more often used by gay men than lesbians. Gay men have more discretionary income to hire help. Lesbians are less likely to consider hiring a housekeeper, who is typically a working-class woman of color, an act with ideological implications.

The division of labor for lesbian couples is influenced by task knowledge, rather than income or other power-related factors. However, lesbians do less housework overall than other couples: the work simply is not done. Furthermore, lesbians are more likely than gay men to disagree about who engages in traditionally male versus traditionally female domestic tasks (Patterson & Schwartz, 1994). Housework, which is a visible reminder of

the domestic inequality in heterosexual households, is extremely stigmatized among lesbians who seek to reject such heterosexual problems.

Couples' isolation and coming-out issues

For same-sex couples, the right to be a couple, to enjoy the privileges and community that couple status affords, influences the course of relationships. Legal institutions influence the rights of same-sex couples, but so do cultural institutions. Thus, issues of coming out, family, and children are unique problem areas for same-sex couples.

Coming out

Gay men and lesbians have strong personal feelings about whether or not sexual identity and couple status should be public or private. Circumstances emerge in which one partner has a status position that he/she needs to protect by maintaining privacy with respect to sexual identity; or in which one partner seeks such a position. Enormous tension and logistical complications arise for couples mismatched on their preferred public identity. Typically the closeted person feels that secrecy is critical to protect a job, parents, children, or custody issues. For the uncloseted person, an openly gay status is a statement of identity, self-respect, political commitment, and a rejection of a previously closeted lifestyle. Research indicates that closeted status is related to negative health consequences, mental stress, and deteriorating relationship satisfaction, and perhaps durability of the relationship (e.g., Turner, Hays, & Coale, 1993).

"Out" lesbians have a particularly strong commitment to their identity, representing a political commitment to being homosexual. Lesbians, more so than gay men, are concerned about a partner's bisexual capacity. Indeed, shifting in and out of heterosexuality is more common among women than among men (Laumann et al., 1994). There is every incentive to do so: women who shift into heterosexuality obtain certain benefits in society (economic advantages, social approval) by being with men. Thus when lesbian personal ads emphasize "bi's need not apply," it is indicative of committed lesbians' aversion to women who switch back and forth between sexual statuses.

Family

The incorporation of parents, in-laws, and children is no simple matter for any couple. For same-sex couples the challenges are multiplied when

family relations are already strained, when the couple lacks institutional support, or when the legal system is able to intervene on custodial arrangements.

Berger (1990) found that conflict with family members was the second-most often cited argument in gay couples. However, parents are sometimes supportive of their gay and lesbian children. For example, a national organization, "Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays" (P-FLAG), has acquired a growing presence in the United States and abroad, helping family and friends learn how to be supportive of their homosexual loved ones. Nevertheless, few families provide rituals of inclusion that parallel weddings, anniversary parties, or family vacations. Sometimes parents will support their homosexual child, but will minimize the importance of their child's partner, and see him/her as temporary, threatening, or the cause of their child's homosexuality. Some homosexuals may treat family relationships as private, and not attempt to integrate their lovers into their families. Still others may never discuss the issue with their partners or their families.

Individual feelings about identity and couple status are compounded by the obtuseness with which heterosexuals may deal with same-sex couples. In the popular 1994 movie *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, a tight-knit friendship group concerned with dating, mating, and marriage failed to recognize that two of the male members of the group were already "married" to each other. Heterosexuals may simply fail to find ways to honor and recognize same-sex couple relationships, or fail to see the positive impact legitimacy confers on couples.

Legal risks of being out

Depending upon the country, region, or historical period, being out as a couple may invite legal sanctions or punishments. Different historical periods have shown different levels of tolerance of same-sex couples. Populations can even hold simultaneous and contradictory beliefs about homosexuals, which makes it harder for same-sex couples to calibrate how open or closeted they should be. For example, for the past two decades in the United States, a majority of Americans have consistently responded in surveys that they believe homosexuality is wrong; yet during this same period, a majority, or near-majority, of Americans have consistently opposed discrimination against homosexuals (Laumann et al., 1994).

The contradictions and shifts in attitudes toward homosexuality can be traced through court cases. For example, in *Bowers* v. *Hardwick* (1986; see *United States Reports*, Volume 478, p. 186) the U.S. Supreme Court upheld

the right of the state of Georgia to enforce an anti-sodomy law in a case that involved a committed, same-sex couple in the privacy of their own home. In the United States in 1995, laws pertaining to sexual orientation and military service were under review. The armed services have historically rejected any tolerance for homosexuality as potentially interfering with necessary discipline and obedience. Gay and lesbian activists, including homosexual members of the armed services, sought the right to serve without threat of discharge. President Clinton enacted a "compromise" policy: in the past, disclosure that a soldier was homosexual was reason for dishonorable discharge; new the regulation supported an individual's freedom to "be" homosexual, but not openly or actively so. A federal district court ruled in March 1995 that the "don't ask, don't tell, don't pursue" policy in the military was an abridgment of the right to free speech. However, this decision may be appealed by the U.S. government as far as the Supreme Court if necessary.

Children

Where laws in different places or in different times may challenge a same-sex couple's right to be together, the issue of children challenges same-sex couples' right to be parents. Having or wanting children raises the contextual factors of fertility technology and family law, and the interpersonal concerns related to the impact of children on same-sex relationships and of same-sex relationships on children. Today, the lesbian literature often discusses issues related to having children (Clunis & Green, 1988). If couples wish to have children, they must choose whether to use artificial insemination or intercourse as a method of conception. Lesbian couples must decide who will be the biological mother, or whether they each wish to become pregnant. They may also debate who should be the primary caretaker, although empirically it is usually the biological parent (Moore & Schwartz, n.d.). The routes to parenthood for gay men are to adopt a child, take in a foster child, or continue to parent a child from a previous, heterosexual union. These men face the challenge of allocating tasks that have been traditionally allocated to women. It is not clear who will do the "feminine" mothering tasks when there are two dads.

Lesbians also often have children from a prior heterosexual alliance. No matter how old the children are, they challenge couple stability. Custody battles occur with regularity, and the outcomes vary widely. When the issue in a court battle is fitness of the mother or propriety of a same-sex union, lesbians often must choose between a lover and a child. Even when the custody case is settled in a lesbian mother's favor, the possibility of the case

being reopened remains, especially when the children are younger (Sheppard, 1992).

In cases where there is no custody dispute, children have a complex response to the new partner (as they do in heterosexual stepfamily situations; see Kaiser, Chapter 7 of this volume; Rutter, 1994) that requires great psychological skill to manage. In such cases, children may have difficulty adjusting to new parenting arrangements, and may even disapprove of a mother's choice to be a lesbian, which creates extra problems for the mother. Furthermore, communities may respond negatively to homosexual pairs. Children's response to a parent's homosexual status may be amplified or complicated by a negative response from the child's other parent, from children at school, or from other families or school officials. If both women have children, they may be forced to live in different domiciles (e.g., *Schuster* v. *Schuster*, 1978). Psychological research has shown that children raised by a same-sex couple are no worse or better off than children raised by a heterosexual couple (Gottman, 1990).

Children can influence the balance of power in same-sex couples beyond custodial issues. In married or cohabiting heterosexual couples, the biological mother tends to be in a less powerful position because she is seen as bringing "extra baggage" to the relationship. These women may therefore be less secure and more emotionally vulnerable. Because children tend to be a valued emotional resource to lesbian partners, the nonbiological stepmother is less powerful, less secure, and more emotionally vulnerable. The nonbiological stepmother is likely to have a strong attachment to her stepchildren, which gives the biological mother the power of distributing emotional access to the children (Moore & Schwartz, n.d.). In effect, the children's availability depends on the mother's goodwill. Some couples seek custody rights for the nonbiological stepmother in order to guarantee a relationship, but the courts vary widely on whether such rights are allowed (Leo, 1993). Furthermore, where rights are established, they can always be challenged subsequently, leaving nonbiological lesbian stepmothers in a precarious situation relative to their attachment to their stepchildren.

Sex in committed relationships

Sex requires role innovation for same-sex couples. Since gays and lesbians have been socialized like other men and women into heterosexual sexual norms, homosexuals must create new sexual patterns. They cannot rely on heterosexual sexual scripts. In particular, lesbians must learn to initiate sex; gay men must learn to accept initiation. Similar to heterosexual couples, sexual styles evolved in dating may end up being modified in a long-term relationship.

Initiating sex

The role of initiating sex is largely seen as symbolic in same-sex couples, since there are no gendered norms as there are for heterosexual couples. Egalitarianism is prominent in this domain; the goal is to share the role of initiator between partners. Men view initiating sex as a masculine behavior. Both gay partners will seek to be the desiring partner to confirm their masculinity, and to control the frequency and timing of sexual conduct. The challenge is in learning how to enjoy being desired. Where an imbalance in initiation occurs, one partner will be viewed as usurping the masculine role; ideally partners discover how to share the role. Interestingly, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that when asked who initiates sex more in the relationship *both* partners tended to claim that role, thus highlighting a preference for the initiator role.

Lesbians have trouble with initiation. Initiation tends to be interpreted as a form of sexual aggression associated with insensitive masculine sexual behaviors. Lesbians' sexual task is to engage in careful negotiations for creating completely consensual, mutual sex. The complexity of such negotiation, and lesbians' disdain of sexual leadership as "macho" heterosexual behavior, probably contribute to low sexual frequency among lesbians. Also, since refusal of sex is a legitimate female privilege and is often a method of asserting power among all women, refusal is more likely to happen between lesbian partners. In fact, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that when asked who refuses sex more in the relationship, *both* female partners were likely to claim that role.

Frequency

Sexual frequency for same-sex couples, as for heterosexual couples, can become a problematic issue over time. For many reasons, some of which have already been discussed, lesbians have the lowest sexual frequency of all couples among married, heterosexual cohabiting, gay, and lesbian couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). While aggressive male sexuality is encouraged regardless of the current emotional closeness in the couple, female sexuality in our culture is shaped into more restricted expression. Lesbians' high emotional standards for intimacy tend to create fewer acceptable circumstances for sexual activity. Furthermore, lesbians may be ambivalent about sex because of bad past experiences. For example, women are more likely than men to be victims of childhood sexual abuse or sexual violence in adulthood. However, the detrimental impact of low sexual frequency among lesbians tends to be modified by higher levels of nonsexual affection-

ate behavior, such as touching and cuddling. Nevertheless, lesbians in long-term relationships may end up having sex around once a month (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983).

Rates of oral sex among lesbians vary widely from survey to survey. Some research disconfirms the centrality of oral sex to lesbian sexuality, while other studies support this image. Surveys of rates vary from 39% engaging in oral sex in the early 1980s (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983) and 53% in the 1990s (Lever, 1994) to higher rates in the recently released National Opinion Research Center's social organization of sexuality survey (Laumann et al., 1994). Laumann and colleagues found self-report rates above 90% for giving and receiving oral sex among women who identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual (as opposed to 67% giving and 73% receiving oral sex among heterosexual women). The rates of oral sex for women who engage in same-gender sex but who do not identify themselves as lesbians is lower. Oral sex is an important issue because of its voluntary nature. While heterosexuals very rarely consider intercourse as optional within a sexual relationship, lesbians must negotiate preferences relative to a menu of sexual options. Problems can arise where preferences differ. Importantly, the frequency of oral sex among lesbians is correlated with relationship satisfaction (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983).

Although early in the relationship gay men have more frequent sex than other couples, they tend to suffer declines in activity following the first year of romance. The excitement of the new partner quickly fades, and sexual rewards tend to decrease. Sociobiologists have hypothesized that a taste for variety in sexual partners is a general and pervasive male trait (Van Den Berghe, 1979). Such a taste for variety adds to the challenge of remaining monogamous for gay couples. Gay couples may negotiate nonmonogamy, telephone sex, or use of pornography to maintain passion and satisfaction in the relationship. Often, however, couples end up having less sex than either wants, which tends to weaken the relationship (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983).

Anal sex among gay men has recently become a much less practiced behavior, even with a condom. Not only is anal sex associated with higher risk for transmission of HIV, it is complicated by issues of who is active and who is passive in the act. In a recent survey (Lever, 1994) a third of gay couples reported engaging in anal sex, with partners always taking the same role; a third reported no anal sex at all; and a third said they shared active and passive roles. Laumann et al. (1994), however, report that among men who identify as gay, rates of anal sex (giving and receiving) are between 75% and 81%; rates are around 50% for men who have ever had a same-sex partner. The dilemma of who should give and who should receive is also present with oral sex. Oral sex is more common among gay men than anal sex, with rates around 90%, according to Laumann et al. (1994).

Monogamy

Monogamy has become a life-or-death issue for gay men. As discussed earlier, there has been a reversal in attitudes toward monogamy from the 1970s, when the overwhelming majority of gay men endorsed nonmonogamy, to the 1990s, when the overwhelming majority endorsed monogamy as a relationship ideal. Partners faced with negotiating a consensus related to monogamy actually achieve greater solidarity through establishing shared values. The proliferation of public health campaigns to promote safer sex among homosexuals has contributed to the revision of gay norms related to monogamy. Furthermore, while the tragic incursion of AIDS has decimated the gay community, it has generated a culture of gay solidarity in the face of everyone's mortality and the likelihood of death among one's friends. National-level cultural events in the United States (such as Tony Kushner's touring Broadway play *Angels in America*, which deals with AIDS in the lives of gay men, and the AIDS Quilt, which commemorates AIDS victims in a quilt made of patches memorializing individuals who have died) generate art, community activities, and cultural references for the gay community facing AIDS. *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (1987), by Randy Shilts, documents the evolution of the AIDS community.

Even though attitudes toward nonmonogamy for gay men have changed tremendously during the AIDS era, behavior lags behind attitudes. For example, in one study, self-described "monogamous" couples report an average of three to five partners (Blasband & Peplau, 1985). Monogamous behavior is influenced by age (younger men are less likely to be monogamous than older men) and by context. Gay men embedded in a gay community are less likely to be monogamous than those outside of a gay community. In a gay community more alternative partners and sexual opportunities are available. Longer-term relationships tend to be associated with lower levels of sexual frequency, and this makes intimacy with others more likely. Furthermore, whether a gay relationship is "open" or closed has very little impact on satisfaction, commitment, expectations for the future, or degrees of liking or loving one's partner (Patterson, 1995).

Lesbians, like heterosexual women, value monogamy. Nevertheless, certain social structures make nonmonogamy more likely. For example, the strong friendship networks in which lesbians tend to be embedded make affairs more likely. Conversely, affairs transform friendship networks into "incestuous" and complex settings. Indeed, an affair between friends, rather than strangers, is more likely to threaten the primary relationship. Long-term lesbian couples cite affairs most often as the cause for considering breaking up (Johnson, 1990). Finally, while lesbians tend to have a prefer-

ence for monogamy, some subcultures seek to challenge bourgeois images of female sexuality by engaging in noncommitted nonmonogamy.

Breakups and dangerous conflicts

Early research on gays and lesbians was often done by sympathetic and/or gay and lesbian researchers, and it tended to seek normative ratification for this population. Rather than examining sources of conflict, the literature focused on strengths, successes, and normalcy. Conflict and problem-oriented research was downplayed. Books such as *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* (Johnston, 1973) and *The Homosexual Dialectic* (McCaffrey, 1972) delivered a "gay liberation" message. Other books such as *The Gay World* (Hoffman, 1968) and *Woman Plus Woman: Attitudes Toward Lesbianism* (Klaich, 1974) sought to define and describe homosexuality. Nevertheless, with current, broader, more objective research, same-sex couples appear to experience less conflict than heterosexual couples. Indeed, partners may be unclear as to how much conflict these undersupported relationships can afford or absorb. While we have observed that certain structural disadvantages distress same-sex relationships, it also appears that in some ways living in a hostile world may minimize internal conflict for same-sex couples. Where legally sanctioned marriages have been called a "license to abuse," no such legal sanctioning of conflict is available to same-sex couples. Instead, same-sex couples must create their own rules, based on a common bond rather than on prevailing social norms.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, scholars began to study how the absence of social norms might cause conflict or strain in same-sex relationships. Kurdek (1993b) studied same-sex relationship conflict and its correspondence to instability. He examined stages of vulnerability for same-sex couples, noting that the second and third years are less satisfying than the first year and beyond the third year. Arguments about family, friends, or unequal power are associated with breaking up. As discussed in the section on money, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that lower-earner males and higher-earner females are more likely to initiate breakups. Lesbians may suffer from unrealistic expectations to be empathetic and to prioritize available time for the relationship. Research also indicates that lesbians react with intense levels of jealousy when an affair occurs. This is less true for gay men, who have less rigid definitions of what constitutes intimacy and fidelity, and who are more likely to support norms of nonmonogamy than lesbians or women in general. Same-sex couples also have no guidelines for whose career to protect or advance when conflicts over one partner's job arise. Therefore, they have a higher likelihood of conflict over work and careers.

Gay men often engage in power struggles that revolve around competition. Competition is not uncommon among males regardless of sexual orientation, especially competition related to money and career. In contrast, lesbians more regularly struggle over maintaining personal boundaries, struggling to be intimate and still independent; close, but not fused. These women are faced with finding a delicate balance that maintains hard-earned independence. Indeed, fears of engulfment in the relationship can plague a lesbian couple. In cases where identities revolve too tightly around the relationship, one or both lesbian partners may retreat, rebel, or completely depart from the couple.

Intimate violence

Same-sex couples are not immune from the problem of violent conflict. Early research on gays and lesbians generally ignored this topic (as has much research on heterosexual couples). Furthermore, it is difficult to get accurate rates of violence or to agree upon what constitutes emotional abuse, physical aggression, or systematic battering among more commonly studied heterosexual populations (Koss et al., 1994). Brand and Kidd (1986) found that 25% of lesbians and 27% of heterosexual women report physical abuse in committed relationships; 7% of lesbians report being date-raped by a woman. Waterman, Dawson, and Bologna (1989) studied same-sex sexual coercion and found that about 12% of gay men and 36% of lesbians had experienced some form of sexual coercion. They observed, however, that lesbians were likely to define more acts as coercive.

Interestingly, Renzetti (1992) found that battered lesbians generally had higher levels of income, education, and occupational prestige and had made greater contributions to the relationship than their battering partners. Renzetti hypothesized that violence in these relationships was used to rebalance the distribution of power. Indeed, half of the battered women in the study cited power imbalances as the reason for violence. Sixty-eight percent reported that partner dependency was a source of strain in the relationship. Thus, the more the battered (higher-earning) lesbian sought independence, the more the abuse occurred. In addition, 70% of battered lesbians cited jealousy and accusations of nonmonogamy as a reason for the abuse.

Galvin and Brommel (1991) identify fusion as a source of lesbian violence. They observe that the battering appears to function as a way to intimidate the battered woman into staying in the relationship. This parallels the way a large subgroup of overattached battering heterosexual males use violence against their partners (Jacobson, 1994). Lenore Walker (1986) noted that lesbians tend to fight back more than heterosexual women, citing

the lower size differential typical between lesbians than between heterosexual partners. Battered lesbians are also more inclined to leave a battering relationship than heterosexuals. In addition, because lesbians are often more evenly matched physically, the outcome of a fight is uncertain, and therefore it is more likely for either woman to be either an initiator or an active resistor than in the case of heterosexual women.

Renzetti (1992) established that 10–20% of gay men experience violence similar to heterosexual wife battering. Waterman et al. (1989) found that men are more likely to reciprocate violence than women. One of the reasons for the higher rates of violence reported by lesbians than by gay men may have to do with beliefs about violence. Lesbians are more likely to be sensitized to the issues of physical aggression, and to define more acts as physically aggressive or coercive. In contrast, gay men are more likely to see physical aggression as a normal part of men's reaction to serious disagreement.

AIDS

AIDS has generated a new source of conflict for same-sex couples that deserves further study. It has changed couples' landscape of opportunities and experiences. In both gay and lesbian communities, tremendous, free-floating grief and anger is pervasive. In gay relationships in particular there is widespread fear of betrayal and death. Indeed, when one gay partner is diagnosed with HIV, this can precipitate a breakup and conflict including bitter recriminations from both partners. For gay men who stay together with AIDS, the level of dependency that evolves can be crushing to the relationship (Gochros, 1992; Paradis, 1991). What is seen as the death sentence of AIDS often brings about increased family contact, which may generate conflict for gay partners (Turner et al., 1993). Families move in, take over caregiving, and may marginalize the gay partner. Alternatively, the family may merely assume increased emotional or financial salience, which can destabilize the couple's previous existence. Neurological damage associated with AIDS may also generate symptoms such as paranoia or confusion that weaken gay relationships. It is hard to overestimate the extent to which AIDS has changed gay relationships over the past decade.

Summing up: The legal and political status of same-sex couples

Perhaps one of the most significant ways in which same-sex couples differ from heterosexual couples is that committed same-sex couples do not have

the option to choose the legal sanction and benefits of marriage. This influences relationship dynamics. Noninclusion in traditional family rituals such as weddings and anniversary parties and nonacceptance by church or professions take a toll on same-sex relationships. These patterns also shape material interests of partners. Among the benefits married couples enjoy and same-sex couples are denied are: spousal benefits, such as social security or other public pensions; income tax benefits; estate tax benefits; health insurance in spouse's group plan; inheritance rights; right to sue for wrongful death of spouse; compensation to families of crime victims; protection against eviction from rent-controlled apartments; visiting rights in hospitals and prisons; power to make medical decisions for partner; and power to make funeral and burial arrangements. Some rights can be acquired by contract, but many cannot, and are only available to couples allowed to marry (Dukeminier & Krier, 1993). Long-term committed same-sex relationships are challenged to survive in the absence of social supports. This condition produces a greater degree of instability for these couples. Some lesbians see the marginal status of same-sex unions as cause for some women to leave same-sex relationships for the greater comfort and legitimacy of heterosexual marriage.

The right to legal marriage has been tested in the United States (e.g., in Hawaii, 1993; see Leo, 1993). Interestingly, historian John Boswell found evidence from medieval documents that same-sex unions were sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church at various times in its early history (Boswell, 1994). Some U.S. cities, corporations, and other public employers have experimented with same-sex partner benefits, particularly access to health insurance, but this has developed in few places. In 1989, Denmark became the first country in the world to give legal recognition to same-sex couples (Miller, 1992).

Simultaneously, popular discourse in the United States also suggests ambivalence or even hostility toward same-sex couples. Legal advances may occur in one area while they are undermined in another. Whereas March 1995 saw a U.S. Federal Court advancing the rights of homosexuals in the military (as discussed earlier), a May 1995 U.S. Federal Court decision upheld the right of cities and counties to ban legal protections for homosexuals (Dunlap, 1995b). It is clear from the range of public discourse on homosexuality, however, that the status of same-sex couples is far from resolved. Yet this same evidence also demonstrates that the status, experience, and concerns of same-sex couples are not likely to be so widely ignored as they were until recent years.

Nevertheless, some same-sex couples seek to be outside the mainstream, abstaining from the rituals of heterosexual culture. They seek freedom from roles, scripts, and gendered expectations. Like all "outsider" relationships, the outsider stance provides couples with benefits and costs. While same-sex

couples may prefer or enjoy an outsider status, this status continues to be the only one available to them. The status of same-sex couples changes over time, in relationship to gender norms, to gay culture, and to cultural sanctions, tolerance, or support for same-sex couples. Same-sex couples will be influenced by the region or country they live in, by class, and by their own particular family relationships. Finally, gay and lesbian couples differ in how they conduct intimate relationships, and in the extent to which politics or public health concerns influence their norms of behavior. Gender is a crucial factor in how these couples differ. The recent direction in Western countries has been to allow gay and lesbian couples some freedom to exist, to love, and to hope for a day when they have the choice to obtain all the protections and rights of heterosexual relationships.

Notes

1. For example, the *New York Times* regularly includes articles that address gay and lesbian lifestyles (e.g., a front-page story on Sunday, April 23, 1995, about the impact on both married partners when one partner recognizes that he/she is homosexual).
2. In fact, an openly lesbian black woman was elected a city council representative in a recent (1995) general election in Seattle.
3. In April 1995, the state of Virginia Supreme Court denied Sharon Bottoms custody of her 3-year-old son, awarding custody instead to the boy's maternal grandmother. The *New York Times* reports that "Noting Ms. Bottoms' relationship with April L. Wade, the court said that 'living daily under conditions stemming from active lesbianism practices in the home may impose a burden upon a child by reason of the social condemnation to such an arrangement.'" The case was brought against Ms. Bottoms by her mother (Dunlap, 1995a).

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