

## Chapter 1

# Lesbian Love, Sex, and Relationships

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Lesbian love in the 21st century has entered a new era in terms of how it is perceived and portrayed compared to earlier times. Images of lesbians before the second wave of feminism generally stereotyped women who loved women as sick, immoral, or perverted. These women were not only stigmatized for engaging in supposedly “unnatural” sexual practices, but also for their alleged shortcomings as women (Cameron & Kulick, 2003). Challenges to the model of lesbians as “deficient” women began to occur with the development of a modern lesbian community in the late 20th century, when lesbians began publicly to celebrate the sensuality, danger, intensity, and comfort of love between women. Lesbian scholars also corrected the historical record using evidence from love letters and poetry throughout the ages that showed the passion, warmth, and compassion of lesbian love (e.g., Faderman, 1991). Objective scientific research beginning in the 1970s further served to dispel beliefs that lesbian love was somehow lacking compared to heterosexual love. Summarizing this early research in 1982, Peplau and Amaro concluded that most lesbians tend to be in committed relationships, to value them greatly, to have high levels of



relationship and sexual satisfaction, and to be egalitarian in terms of roles and responsibilities.

A substantial body of research about lesbian love and relationships now exists that permits a more complex profile to be drawn. Much of the research has been limited to questions concerning how a stigmatized identity affects lesbians, such as the consequences of homophobic violence and minority stress or how lesbians compare with heterosexual norms for sexuality and relationships. However, these findings have generated interest concerning not only the nature of lesbian relationships, but also in how understanding lesbian relationships might contribute to insights about human relationships more generally (e.g., Markey & Markey, 2011; Rose, 2000).

In this chapter, we provide an overview of current research on lesbian love, sex, and relationships with an emphasis on five areas: (a) media images of lesbians, (b) gender roles, (c) sexuality, (d) relationships, and (e) Internet communities. We conclude by exploring how the legalization of same-sex marriage might affect lesbian relationships and identifying some interesting questions for future research.

## MEDIA IMAGES OF LESBIANS

Portrayals of lesbians in the mainstream media are relatively new. Until the 1990s, lesbians had virtually no representation; their presence and viewpoints had been symbolically annihilated through their relative invisibility (Corbier & Gross, 1976). On the rare occasion that lesbians appeared, they were likely to be psychopaths or suicidal (e.g., *Basic Instinct*, *The Children's Hour*) (Russo, 1987). In 1993, however, a number of popular news magazines, including *Newsweek*, *New York* magazine, and *Vanity Fair*, featured lesbians on their covers in quick succession. These positive portrayals kicked off a brief era during which it was chic to be lesbian (Ciasullo, 2001). Since then, lesbian characters in the media were more likely to be shown as more stereotypically feminine than as unattractive or mentally ill.

Lesbians in television and popular films now most commonly are portrayed as feminine in body type and dress (e.g., slim, feminine attire), interested in shopping, monogamous, and asexual or sexually passive. For instance, Ciasullo's (2001) analysis of the bodies and images of lesbians in popular television, film, and magazines in the 1990s indicated that lesbians were homogenized and heterosexualized through the exclusive use of femme body types and representations as white and upper middle class. Similarly, a 1995 *Friends* episode featured a lesbian wedding; each woman in the couple was slim, white, and feminine, and at the wedding ceremony each held bouquets and wore their hair in ringlets.

Lesbians as conspicuous consumers, deeply monogamous, and asexual were other images portrayed by the television shows *The L Word*, *Queer as Folk*, and *Ellen*, respectively. *The L Word* began running in 2004 and

followed the lives of a group of lesbians living in Los Angeles. The lesbian lifestyle in *The L Word* was portrayed as an elite, edgy, and worldly life among a group of mostly white women with ample money and time with which to explore and exercise avant-garde tastes (Burns & Davies, 2009). The only diversity displayed was in their appreciation for exotic clubs, art, and political positions. *Queer as Folk*, a U.S.-Canadian nighttime cable television drama that ran from 2000 to 2005 offered viewers an ensemble cast with seven white, middle-class gay and lesbian characters. The two lesbian characters were feminine in appearance and were aligned with monogamy, domestic relationships, and child rearing—all heteronormative practices (Peters, 2009). Unlike the gay male characters, the lesbian characters were rarely shown having sex and were portrayed as being generally uninterested in sex. Indeed, one gay male character, Brian, said that only "dickless fags" imitate lesbians through monogamy.

Finally, *Ellen*, the prime time television show that ran from 1994 to 1998, took a positive step toward dispelling stereotypes when the well-liked lead character, Ellen Morgan, came out as gay. However, Ellen's coming out was very asexual. Although Ellen had onscreen relationships with men before coming out, she did not have any romantic or sexual interactions with women when or after she came out. The Morgan coming out sequence led to the following joke: "Q: What do you call a lesbian that only sleeps with men? A: Ellen Morgan" (Yescavage & Alexander, 1999). The show *Ellen* has thus been characterized as highly consumable and inoffensive (e.g., Ciasullo, 2001), portraying a lesbian heroine who is all-American, clean-cut, and does not flaunt her sexuality or sexual relationships.

## Images in Lesbian Media

Portrayals of lesbians in lesbian-targeted media tell a different story about appearance and desire compared to the sanitized version of mainstream media. For instance, Milillo (2008) examined 150 advertisements from lesbian magazines (*Curve*, *Girlfriends*, and *OUT*) and compared them with a random selection of 150 advertisements from heterosexual women's magazines (*Glamour*, *Elle*, and *Mademoiselle*). In general, the lesbian models were shown as agentic individuals, actively pursuing gratification and connectedness. In contrast, the thrust of models in the mainstream advertisements was on the agency and power of the product being sold. Also, models in popular lesbian magazines varied more in age and weight than mainstream models, were more androgynous in appearance, and were more likely to be shown in full clothing. They were more often shown looking directly at the camera, touching another person, or as active in outdoor and community settings.

Lesbian erotica examined by Morrish and Sauntson (2011) also revealed themes of individuality and agency. They used linguistic methods



to explore representations of lesbian desires and identities from two lesbian magazines published in the 1980s and 1990s: *On Our Backs* and *Bad Attitude*. Analyses of the frequencies of lexical items across these texts revealed that, in terms of sexual activity, there were a large number of verbs that showed attunement to the partner (e.g., *feel, know, say, touch*). In terms of references to the body, the importance of *hands* was primary and of *genitals* was secondary. A bondage and discipline focus also was found reflecting the interests of the specific audience for these magazines (e.g., *leather, harness, cuffs, spanking*); words related to power, dominance, and control also were common (e.g., *pain, power, control*). However, these actions were often qualified by adjectives, such as *gently* and *slowly*, implying that the partner's pleasure was a primary concern. Overall, lesbian sexuality was portrayed as simultaneously powerful and affectionate.

In sum, the mainstream media appears to have moved toward presenting lesbians as being narrowly portrayed, similar to heterosexual women in terms of appearance, interests, and sexuality. Lesbian media allowed more uniqueness of expression and agency that more fully characterized lesbians' individuality.

## LESBIAN SEXUALITY

Although lesbians have gained some visibility in the media as just shown, their sexual identities, gender roles, and sexuality for the most part are unnamed. As a result, what is known about lesbian sexuality has been limited by the heteronormative nature of language that is used in research on sexual behavior. The term "have sex" is a case in point. Three steps are essential for heterosexual interactions to be considered "having sex": (a) preparation for intercourse (foreplay), (b) intercourse, and (c) male orgasm (Maines, 1999). It is likely that when heterosexuals are asked how often they "have sex," the answer reflects the number of male orgasms that occurred, not female orgasms or other types of sexual behavior. In fact, many heterosexuals do not consider oral sex, anal sex or mutual masturbation, or a variety of other forms of sexual contact as "having sex." For instance, Sanders and Reinisch (1999) reported that 19 percent of heterosexuals did not consider penile-anal intercourse to be "having sex" and 40 percent did not view oral-genital contact as "having sex."

Marilyn Frye (1990) eloquently addressed the inadequacy of heteronormative language to encompass lesbian sexuality:

Lesbian sex, as I have known it, most of the time that I have known it, is utterly inarticulate. Most of my lifetime, most of my experience in the realms commonly designated as "sexual" has been pre-linguistic, non-cognitive. I have in effect, no linguistic community, no language, and therefore, in one important sense, no knowledge.... Men's

meaning, and no women's meanings, are encoded in what is presumed to be the whole population's language. (p. 311)

Information about lesbian sexual behavior, then, obviously is constrained by what language is available to frame research questions. A number of studies have concluded that lesbians have sex less often than heterosexual or gay male couples (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Jay & Young, 1979; Laumann, Gagnon, Michaels, & Michaels, 1994). For example, Blumstein & Schwartz (1983) found that among couples together two years or less, 83 percent of married heterosexual couples and 94 percent of gay male couples reported having sex at least once a week, compared to 76 percent of lesbian couples. However, these findings may be contested by the fact that many behaviors relevant to lesbian sex were not included, for example: number of orgasms during "having sex," average duration of "having sex," anal sex, manual vaginal stimulation, use of sex toys or vibrators, types of sexual positions, mutual masturbation, and tribadism (clitoral stimulation obtained by pressing against a partner's body, also referred to as grinding or scissoring). In addition, other studies found no difference in sexual frequency between heterosexual and lesbian women (e.g., Matthews, Tartaro, & Hughes, 2003).

Duration of having sex or sexual intercourse is a particularly relevant factor associated with women's sexual satisfaction. Masters and Johnson (1970) concluded that it takes, on average, about 20 minutes of sustained vaginal penetration for most heterosexual women to have an orgasm. Here, lesbians may have the advantage in terms of providing their partners with orgasm, including multiple orgasms. Frye (1990) explained that lesbians most likely take 30 minutes to an hour to "have sex," something that on average takes heterosexuals about 7 or 8 minutes as reported by Patrick and colleagues (2005). Rose, Cobb, and Pelli (1992) also reported that the consensus within two lesbian focus groups was that their use of the term "have sex" referred to a sexual interaction lasting from five minutes to four hours and involving multiple sexual behaviors and orgasms. Similarly, Nichols (2004) found that lesbians typically spent 30–60 minutes on a typical sexual encounter compared with 10–30 minutes for heterosexual women.

The "more frequent sex is better" represents a heteronormative standard of valuing quantity over quality. One might argue that if quantity is important to adequate sexual functioning, a less heteronormative measure would be prevalence of female orgasm. Using this standard, lesbians would be highly adequate. Lesbian couples have high frequency of orgasm, with from 83 percent to 94 percent reporting they are almost always orgasmic with a partner and 46 percent saying they were frequently or always multiorgasmic (e.g., Douglass & Douglass, 1997; Jay & Young, 1979; Loulan, 1984). In comparison, only 26–29 percent of heterosexual women



report experiencing regular orgasm during heterosexual intercourse (e.g., Hite, 1981; Laumann et al., 1994). Interestingly, many lesbians place less emphasis on orgasm in their relationships relative to other behaviors, such as hugging, cuddling, and fondling (Masters & Johnson, 1979).

Given that heterosexuality is a primary assumption in the construction of gender and sexual identity, how do lesbians enact sexuality and perform sexual and gender identity in their talk? Research by Bolsø (2001) with Norwegian lesbians provides an example of how lesbians reinterpret language to suit their own experience. The 17 self-identified lesbians that were interviewed spontaneously referred to "taking" another woman or being "taken" themselves in sexual acts and interchanges. This discourse was also found in lesbian erotic and romantic reading. Taking is typically associated with heterosexual activity in which the man is active and sexually satisfied, whereas the woman is subordinate and may or may not have an orgasm. However, lesbian participants equated taking with giving another woman an orgasm. As one participant noted: "I have heard . . . that it is important to come simultaneously, but that is spoiling sex for me. I would then have to concentrate on taking the other person and at the same time that person is supposed to take me" (Bolsø, 2001, p. 462). Thus, these women had subverted a heterosexual term for intercourse by redefining it such that taking was the act of pleasuring one's partner.

Roth (2004) provided further examples of the pervasiveness and prominence of language that casually refers to male genitals as signifiers of power and authority (e.g., having balls, getting it up). Roth suggested that lesbians instead adopt a term rooted in the female body to refer to potency, power, and sexual prowess, and proposed the term "engorged lesbian clitoris" or "engorged clitoris" to replace phallic imagery. For example, instead of using a term like balls, one might say "he didn't have the 'engorged clitoris' to take up my challenge" (Roth, 2004, p. 185). This change in the language of dominance and desire would enhance a stable, conscious, and potent sense of self among lesbians (Roth, 2004).

Heteronormative language also affects how sexual and gender identity is performed in conversations. Kitzinger's (2005) analysis of conversations from heterosexual British and American people illustrated how people routinely produce themselves and each other as heterosexual. Conversants automatically created a normative heterosexual world in their speech through the use of heterosexual joking, banter, and the discussion of heterosexual activity without explicitly announcing their heterosexuality. Individuals also displayed their own heterosexuality and their assumptions of a heterosexual world by talking regularly about heterosexual relationships, including discussing marriage-related topics and using the terms husband, wife, and in-laws, in a "taken-for-granted normative default way" (Kitzinger, 2005, p. 229). Perhaps most interesting, however, was that speakers commonly used the pronouns "he" and

"she" as a method for referring to just one member of a couple and for distinguishing one member from another—a feat of language that cannot be used to refer to same-sex couples.

Kitzinger (2005) noted that, in these conversations, "cointeractants are not actively 'being heterosexual' or flaunting their heterosexuality—but are simply getting on with the business of their lives, treating their own and others' heterosexuality as entirely unremarkable, ordinary, taken-for-granted and displaying it incidentally in the course of some other action in which they are engaged" (p. 255).

What does this taken-for-granted heterosexual language mean for lesbians? To start, it demonstrates that same-sex couples are excluded from a vast range of interactional and conversational activities. Second, the pervasiveness of heterosexual self-display in these conversations suggests that anyone who does not reveal him or herself as heterosexual in conversation is unusual. Someone who explicitly identifies herself as lesbian is highly unusual and she is likely to be accused of flaunting her sexuality. Finally, even if a woman does not identify herself as a lesbian, the absence of heterosexual talk by or about her may nonetheless signify that she is not heterosexual. In fact, the absence of heterosexual talk may spark other's so-called gaydar (i.e., the ability of LGBT individuals to identify one another based on thin slices of information).

The remedy to the invisibility of lesbian sexuality, according to Kulick (2000), is to move away from a focus on sexual identity (i.e., from the labeling of individuals as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender) to a focus on desire. Although people differ in their desires and in the manner in which they signal those desires, the desire for intimacy, erotic fulfillment, and recognition are common to all. The vast spectrum of sexual needs and behaviors should be understood as available to everyone rather than being associated with particular sexual identities.

## GENDER ROLES

Interest in the study of lesbian-specific genders, such as butch and femme, recently has increased (e.g., Levitt & Hiestand, 2005; Payne, 2010; Wright, 2008), although these roles continue to be controversial among lesbians (Rifkin, 2002). Historically, butch and femme roles were associated with the 1950s working-class lesbians (Faderman, 1991). Butch lesbians were expected to appear and behave in a stereotypically masculine manner, while femme lesbians were expected to align their performance and appearance with female gender stereotypes (e.g., Lapovsky-Kennedy & Davis, 1993). During the 1970s, many white lesbian feminists rejected these roles as reinforcing heterosexist values and instead favored more androgynous self-presentations (e.g., no makeup, short hair, comfortable shoes, pants). In the 1980s, there was a resurgence of butch-femme roles



among some white urban lesbian communities, partly in reaction to the dogma of the 1970s. Contemporary interest in butch-femme roles has focused on gender expression as a performance that some lesbians choose (Butler, 1990), and researchers have been exploring what functions they serve (Levitt & Hiestand, 2005) as well as how to measure them (Lehavot, King, & Simoni, 2011).

Butch-femme roles are not widely endorsed by white, middle-class lesbians, but a substantial minority of lesbians subscribe to the roles somewhat. In a survey of mostly white lesbian readers of *The Advocate* magazine, Lever (1995) reported that about half the readers rated themselves and their partner as being in the middle of a seven-point scale that ranged from very femme/feminine to very butch/masculine. Another 25 percent indicated that they were in a butch/femme pair, 17 percent said they were in a femme/femme pair, and 8 percent indicated being butch/butch.

Moore (2006) reported that black lesbians endorsed three patterns. About 34 percent were classified as gender blenders (self-presentations combined traditionally masculine and feminine elements, such as comfortable shoes and makeup). About half categorized themselves as femme women who preferred to wear dresses or skirts, form-fitting clothes, high-heeled shoes, and other typically feminine gear. About 18 percent were defined as transgressive women (more masculine self-presentations). The style a woman chose remained fairly stable over time and structured her social relationships with other lesbians.

Contemporary theorists have posited the concept of lesbian gender to describe the roles and performances of self-identified butch and femme lesbians. It is important to point out that these conceptions of lesbian genders do *not* parallel traditional masculinity and femininity. Two major disconnects between lesbian gender roles and heterosexual roles are in the areas of sexual behavior and economic dominance. Both empirical and anecdotal evidence indicates that butch-femme roles do not dictate a sexually aggressive and dominant role for butch lesbians and a passive, submissive role for femmes.

Lesbians who described themselves as butch or femme in the Lever (1995) study indicated that the roles were not related to who was the sexual aggressor in the relationship. Many femmes are aggressive and strong women who take responsibility for actively seeking the partner they desire, whereas butch lesbians emphasize their partners fulfillment in love-making rather than their own (Zimmerman, 2000). In addition, the saying "Butch on the street, femme in the sheets" challenges the myth of the sexually aggressive butch lesbian. In sexual interactions, lesbians who perceive themselves as masculine overall, nevertheless view themselves as more feminine when they are interacting sexually (Rosenzweig & Lebow, 1992). Similarly, studs, or black lesbians who embody masculinity in appearance

and mannerisms, do not follow the traditional male script that places the man's sexual desires ahead of the woman's (Lane-Steele, 2011). Instead, the femme's sexual pleasure is prioritized over the stud's. Some studs do not like to be sexually stimulated at all.

Among lesbians that subscribe to butch-femme roles, a major function of the roles is as a sexual signaling system. For instance, Levitt and Hiestand (2005) examined the meaning of butch and femme genders for 12 butch- and 12 femme-identified lesbians ranging in age from 23 to 62. Each woman was asked: "What does it mean for you to be butch or femme?" The content of these one-hour interviews led the authors to conclude that gender identities, such as butch, femme, or androgynous, helped these lesbian women identify and communicate their attraction to others and structure romantic and interpersonal interactions. Butch-femme flirting, in particular, entailed a process of recognizing and displaying gender difference and different forms of power that led to mutual validation of each other's sexual orientation and agency.

Levitt and Hiestand (2005) concluded that these gender identities created a positive system of sexuality for lesbians that validated their gender, recognized butch and femme power, and encapsulated political resistance through challenging traditional sexual and gender boundaries. Moore (2006) also reported that for African American lesbians, traditional patterns of power and subordination were not part of their physical gender roles. Black lesbians valued their own and their partner's self-sufficiency and autonomy.

Recently, Lehavot and colleagues (2011) created and validated a new scale assessing the multiple components of gender expression in lesbian and bisexual women without requiring participants to specify a gender identity (e.g., butch/femme). The Gender Expression Measure among Sexual Minority Women (GEM-SMW) includes three distinct factors, assessing appearance, gender roles, and emotional expression. Sample items include: "I often wear skirts and dresses" (appearance), "I enjoy activities that involve tools, such as car work or household repairs" (gender roles), and "I cry easily" (emotional expression). This measure successfully differentiates not only butch from femme women, but also androgynous women from those who do not identify with any of the gender identity terms. While the GEM-SMW is among the first gender expression instruments developed specifically for lesbian and bisexual women, it can be used with heterosexual women as well.

Another aspect of butch lesbian roles or lesbian masculinity that has been little explored pertains to how this type of gender performance can serve lesbians in work settings. For example, Wright (2008) used a qualitative approach to explore issues of gender and sexuality in a sample of 12 women firefighters in the United Kingdom (6 lesbian, 6 heterosexual). The U.K. fire service is male dominated and has been characterized as



homophobic, but nonetheless attracts both lesbian and heterosexual women firefighters (Wright, 2008). Semi-structured interviews with these women revealed many differences between the gender-based experiences of heterosexual and lesbian firefighters, though both were construed and treated on the basis of their sexuality.

In general, lesbian firefighters found it easier to be in the male-dominated fire service environment than heterosexual women firefighters. In fact, the representative of the Fire Brigades Union Gay and Lesbian Committee stated: "I believe that it's a lot easier [now] for a female to be in the job, especially if they are gay" (Wright, 2008, p. 108). Part of the reason for this advantage was due to the strict stereotypes applied to female firefighters in this domain; in the fire service, women firefighters are characterized either as masculine lesbians or as heterosexual, sexually predatory "fire tarts." Lesbians who came out to colleagues were, therefore, seen as fitting in more with the dominant culture and were treated "just like one of the lads" (Wright, 2008, p. 107). Lesbian firefighters were also able to avoid unwanted sexual attention by coming out. Indeed, some lesbians felt they had more stress-free relationships with their male colleagues in the absence of sexual tension, benefiting their overall performance and state of mind.

Lane-Steele (2011) also reported that "studs" (i.e., black lesbians who embody masculinity in their appearance and mannerisms) confirmed that they gained access to power and privileges by virtue of their masculine gender performance. Being "one of the boys" enabled studs to increase their position in the social hierarchy where men are in power. Essig (2008) described a similar benefit from her butch image and a penalty when that image changed. Before her pregnancies, men colleagues saw Essig as mannish but nonthreatening. She was treated as one of the boys: "I was slapped on the back, rubbed on the head, pushed along to more and more grants, more and more office space, more and more awards" (p. 117). However, after her female gender was brought to the forefront through her pregnancies, Essig lost her pseudo-masculine power and became the object of disgust and neglect. Her initial status never returned.

The concept and practice of butch-femme roles continue to be controversial within the lesbian community despite recent interest in understanding or measuring these roles. For instance, Rifkin (2002) argued that theorizing butch and femme lesbian-specific genders is ultimately undesirable. Equating heterosexual masculinity to butch lesbian gender and heterosexual femininity to femme lesbian gender reinforces the naturalization of heterogendered desires and relationships. An alternative is to recognize that masculinity exists across a range of sexual and gender identities. For instance, the woman-in-a-suit persona includes lesbians, female-to-male transsexuals, and heterosexual women, and represents various levels of female masculinity and gender subversion.

In sum, recent discussions of butch-femme roles have tended to focus on the performance of gender and to distinguish lesbian genders from traditional masculinity and femininity. Research also has addressed how the roles function as a sexual signal and in the workplace.

## LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

Research on lesbian couples indicates that successful relationships share the same qualities as do well-functioning heterosexual relationships. Thus, many researchers have concluded that lesbians and gay men are more similar to heterosexual women and men than different (e.g., Kurdek, 2004a; Scrivner & Eldridge, 1995). This conclusion has been useful to support arguments that lesbian and gay couples deserve equal status and recognition. For example, regardless of sexual orientation, good relationships involve low costs and high rewards (Kurdek, 1998; Rusbult, 1983), interdependence (Kurdek, 1992), psychological intimacy (Mackey, Diemer, & O'Brien, 2004), a positive communication style (Julien, Chartrand, Simard, Bouthillier, & Begin, 2003), humor and affection (Gottman, Levenson, Gross et al., 2003), and enhanced images or positive illusions about the partner (Conley, Roesch, Peplau, & Gold, 2009). Stability in lesbian couples is related to similar qualities that hold heterosexual and gay men couples together, including a more positive expectancy of the interaction and higher empathy (Gottman, Levenson, Gross et al., 2003). Lesbian couples have similar dissolution rates and patterns as heterosexual cohabiting couples, as well (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek, 1995, 1996).

Less emphasis, however, has been placed on how lesbian relationships are different from other couple types or benefit women in terms of women's subjectivity and negotiation of life stress. Perz and Ussher (2009) provided an interesting example of the benefit of being in a lesbian relationship concerning how premenstrual syndrome (PMS) was treated. Lesbians did not regard PMS as a medical illness or unspeakable pathology as was common in heterosexual women's accounts (Ussher, Perz, & Mooney-Summers, 2007). None of the lesbians used pathological or derogatory terms, such as *mad*, *loony tune*, *bitch*, or *Jeckyll & Hyde*, to describe themselves premenstrually (Ussher et al., 2007), although heterosexual women commonly did so (Cosgrove & Riddle, 2003; Ussher, 2002). Unlike heterosexual women, lesbians felt no guilt or self-blame for PMS and reported few feelings of being out of control. PMS has been described as a culture-bound syndrome because it is not reported in non-Western cultures (Christler & Caplan, 2002). These findings suggest that a woman's relationship with her partner affects the construction of PMS as either pathological, as frequently happens in heterosexual relations, or results in acceptance, as in lesbian relationships.



Similarly, lesbians report more positive experiences of menopause than heterosexual women. Winterich (2003) reported that menopausal lesbians described being more free to act on their desires and openly discuss sex with their partners than heterosexual women. Husbands complained about their wives' menopausal symptoms, but none of the lesbian partners complained (Winterich, 2003).

A growing body of work indicates that lesbian relationships are distinct, positive, and beneficial for women, at least for the white lesbian couples that typically have been studied. Lesbian relationships are more satisfying than those of heterosexuals (Green, Bettinger, & Zacks, 1996; Kurdek, 2003; Metz, Rosser, & Strapko, 1994). Lesbian couples report more cohesion or connectedness than gay men or heterosexual couples (Green et al., 1996) and demonstrate a greater capacity for mutual empathy, empowerment, and authenticity in the relationships (Mencher, 1990). Lesbians are especially effective at working together harmoniously compared to other couple types (Roisman, Clausell, Holland, Fortuna, & Elieff, 2008). Lesbians exhibit greater egalitarianism as evidenced by highly flexible household arrangements and decision making (Connolly, 2005) and are more likely to share responsibility (Mathews et al., 2003; Schneider, 1986). Lesbians report stronger liking of their partners, more trust, and more equality (Kurdek, 2003). African American lesbians indicate that sharing an ethnicity with a partner creates a substantive common bond (Hall & Greene, 2002; Mays, Cochran, & Rhue, 1993). Lesbians are less concerned about their own or their partner's appearance and weight (Garnets & Peplau, 2006), and are free to wear comfortable shoes (Krakauer & Rose, 2002). Overall, lesbian relationships tend to be strong in the areas that predict satisfaction, including emotional competency (Metz et al., 1994); liking, trust, and equality (Kurdek, 2003); cohesion-flexibility (Green et al., 1996); and intimacy, equity, and autonomy (Schreurs & Buunk, 1996).

In terms of conflict resolution, lesbians are less likely than heterosexual couples to exhibit a pattern where one partner demands and the other withdraws and are more likely to suggest solutions and compromise (Kurdek, 2004a). Lesbians resolve conflict more effectively than heterosexual couples, even though they disagree on the same issues (Kurdek, 2004b). Lesbian couples also show more empathic attunement to their partners' nonverbal signals and consciously avoid expressions of contempt (Connolly & Sicola, 2006). Happy lesbian couples are more likely than other couple types to maintain a steady positive state in their communication, use more humor, and show more joy/excitement when discussing an area of conflict (Gottman, Levenson, Swanson, et al., 2003; Kurdek, 2004a).

Some researchers have concluded that the positive aspects of lesbian relationships are due to a "double dose of relationship-enhancing influences" that result from two women in a couple having similar gender roles (Kurdek, 2003, p. 416). However, gender stereotypy cannot fully account

for the success of lesbian relationships because lesbians tend to be less gender conforming than heterosexual women. Lesbians report having the freedom to desire or be desired in their relationships (Rose & Zand, 2002; Usher & Mooney-Somers, 2000); in other words, to be outside the constraints of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990). Although lesbians and heterosexual women are similar in terms of femininity scores, self-ratings of masculinity often differ (Lippa, 2002). Lesbians tend to rate themselves higher on qualities, such as independence, having a strong personality, making decisions easily, being competitive, and acting as a leader, and also showed more interest than heterosexual women in masculine activities and jobs (but less interest than heterosexual men; Lippa, 2002).

Lesbian relationships appear to include at least three defining features that are not gender typed, but that are linked instead to feminist beliefs: (a) a value of equality in relationships, (b) a concern for autonomy, and (c) the expectation to be economically self-supporting. For instance, equality in relationships is a value linked to feminism, not to femininity. Lesbians may be consistently more tacitly feminist than heterosexual women, partially accounting for the strength of this constellation of behaviors. Heterosexual women with feminist identification had greater egalitarian and assertive role expectations for relationships (Yoder, Perry, & Saal, 2007). Heterosexual women also report greater relationship quality, equality, stability, and sexual satisfaction to the extent that they perceived their male partner to be a feminist (Rudman & Phelan, 2007). Support for the idea of feminism as a mediating variable is provided by findings that lesbian and heterosexual women do not differ in masculinity when they are matched for feminist beliefs (Peters & Cantrell, 1993). Thus, feminist heterosexual women may be a more appropriate comparison group for lesbians than heterosexual women in general.

Lesbian couples generally have been found to maintain a high level of autonomy in their relationships, as well as a high level of intimacy. Autonomy refers to acting according to one's own values independent of the social environment or making decisions independent of partner pressure (Schreurs & Buunk, 1996). It also refers to having friends and interests outside of the relationship (Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978). Among lesbian couples, autonomy has been related to lesbian feminist ideology (Peplau et al., 1978) and has been found to be compatible with intimacy (e.g., Peplau et al., 1978; Schreurs & Buunk, 1996). In fact, Kurdek (1998) found that lesbian partners reported more autonomy as well as more intimacy in their relationships than did married couples. Moreover, for both lesbian and heterosexual women, sexual autonomy (i.e., sexual authenticity and freedom) is associated with greater sexual satisfaction (Sanchez, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Crocker, 2011).

The necessity of earning a livelihood is the third way in which lesbians differ from heterosexual women (Peplau & Huppin, 2008). Lesbians



expect to be financially self-supporting and providing for oneself is a common theme in lesbians' descriptions of their lives (Morgan & Brown, 1991). Not expecting to have a male provider may motivate lesbians to seek better paying nontraditional jobs, to pursue higher education, and to seek career opportunities. Evidence suggests that financial power imbalances are actively avoided in lesbian relationships, as is economic dependency for either partner (Burns, Burgoyne, & Clarke, 2008).

Most studies provide incomplete information about both same-sex and heterosexual couples' money management, because they typically use only a two-category measure that is most likely based on heterosexual marriage norms: pooling all resources together versus nonpooling. Using a four-category measure, Burns and colleagues (2008) studied a small sample of lesbian and gay couples, and reported that the majority of couples were committed to a system that provided each partner with access to some money, personal spending, and decision making. Most used a system of partial pooling. For couples with differing income levels, pooling often was done proportional to income, with the higher earning partner contributing a larger share to joint expenses. Unlike breadwinning men and dependent wives in heterosexual marriages, lower earning lesbian and gay men partners did not tend to do more housework.

Overall, the research to date suggests that lesbian relationships are and can be successful and happy. These findings must be qualified by several limitations. First, sampling issues may affect results. For instance, lesbians may be less likely to have children than heterosexual women and this may expand their career options. Thus, lesbians and heterosexual women should be matched in terms of whether or not they have children when studying occupational choice or commitment. Also, as noted earlier, white heterosexual women as a group may not be an appropriately matched sample to compare to white lesbians. Feminist beliefs may partly determine attitudes toward equality, autonomy, and work. However, feminist values may be a less influential factor in comparisons of black heterosexual and lesbian women. Black lesbians are more likely to have developed their same-sex desires outside the ideologies of lesbian feminism that have influenced white lesbians (Moore, 2011). In addition, many black heterosexual women grew up with a model of female economic independence in their mothers and female relatives. Their attitudes about economic independence may not be connected to feminist values.

Second, few studies have been done on ethnic minority or working-class lesbian couples. Occupational interests and self-ratings of masculinity may be affected by cultural values. Lippa and Tan (2001) found larger differences in the masculinity ratings of Hispanic American and Asian American lesbians versus heterosexual women than among white lesbian and heterosexual women. The authors speculated that the traditional gender roles prevalent in Hispanic and Asian cultures may not encourage the

more androgynous alternatives that are more accepted in white culture. Studies of working-class lesbians are similarly sparse and may require unique approaches. In a study of middle- and working-class lesbians in England, McDermott (2004) found that the working-class women were less confident and more nervous in the interview and had a difficult time trusting that their stories were important or interesting. The middle-class and university-educated women spoke with greater ease and certainty and more easily elaborated on their lives. McDermott (2004) advised that the power dynamics in interviews with working-class lesbians must be closely attended to so that they feel empowered to tell their story.

Third, lesbian relationships are not immune from problems. Lesbian couples, like heterosexual and gay male couples, tend to disagree about similar topics, such as finances, affection, sex, criticism, and household tasks (reviewed by Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). Hall and Greene (2002) also described differences among African American lesbian couples in social class backgrounds that brought them into therapy. Conflicts arose from clashes between the working- and middle-class values of the two partners over whether to pay for middle-class vacations, to stay with relatives versus in a hotel when visiting family, or to pursue a higher education. Additionally, some lesbians engage in domestic violence in a pattern that is similar to escalating violence in heterosexual relations (Kelly & Johnson, 2008; West, 2002). These issues and the unique contribution of discrimination and minority stress to relationship problems are being studied (e.g., Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011; Mohr & Daly, 2008).

In sum, despite the many positive features of the average lesbian relationship, lesbian relationships are as unique and varied as heterosexual relationships, and research and theory on sexuality should recognize this variation.

## INTERNET COMMUNITIES

Internet chat rooms, search engines, online personal advertisements, and the like have recently permitted lesbian women, many of whom were otherwise isolated, to find communities of similarly identified women and to share about various issues, such as sexuality, sexual activity and health, and sexual discrimination. On the Internet, women can remain anonymous if they choose to, permitting them to gain education and experience without the fear of being "outed" in their local communities or to prejudiced individuals.

Xenasubtexttalk, an interesting online community, was created by three lesbians in 1998, to provide a space for fans to discuss the lesbian subtext woven throughout the television series, *Xena Warrior Princess*. Online postings, examined by Hanmer (2003), revealed that women members and visitors engaged with other fans about how they came to discover



their same-sex desire and how they related to Xena, the heroine protagonist of the show. Computer-mediated interviews with participants also revealed that watching the show and participating in the Xenasubtexttalk community influenced many women to embrace their lesbian sexuality for the first time. Thus, the show and Internet community offered women the opportunity to explore their own and others' sexual narratives in a safe environment.

Media outlets also can help lesbians to unite and to challenge dominant practices. Henrickson (2007) examined the use of the Internet for constructing lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) communities and facilitating sexual contact among community members in New Zealand. Participants (1,023 women and 1,233 men) were asked how they made contact with LGB communities and how they used the Internet to hook-up (i.e., to find sexual partners or relationships). The Internet was the third most frequently used means of making initial contact with the LGB community, following contact through friends or school or job. For immigrant men and women living in New Zealand, the Internet was used even more frequently as the first point of contact. Lesbian and bisexual women who were married to and living with a man were proportionately the highest users among women. About 23.3 percent of women used the Internet for hooking up.

Lesbians in British Columbia also were found to use the media as a means for negotiating multiple identities, communities, and social networks (Bryson, MacIntosh, Jordan, & Lin, 2006). Open-ended, in-depth interviews using a sample of 63 women who identified as "lesbian, gay, bisexual, dyke, queer and/or transgendered" revealed that participants commonly used media spaces and materials to construct and practice their identities as lesbians. The Internet was used to locate and belong to communities of "like others" (e.g., Asian queer women, queer folks living with mental health issues, members of the Xenaverse, fat dykes, leather dykes, etc.).

Overall, research indicates that the Internet is a major vehicle for connecting lesbians with lesbian communities and as a means to find sexual and relationship partners.

## LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS AND THE LEGALIZATION OF SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

Legal changes resulting in the availability of same-sex marriage have raised questions about what impact greater social acceptance will have on lesbian relationships. The legalization of same-sex marriage in some states also has made it possible to identify and survey lesbian couples such that research with this population is increasing. In general, surveys indicate that most lesbians endorsed the belief that legal recognition of same-sex marriage represents an aspect of legal equality for LGBT people that is a

positive change (e.g., Lannutti, 2005). The majority viewed it as marking the end of discriminatory practices and second-class citizenship.

The two greatest perceived benefits were financial, including health insurance for family members, tax breaks, recognition of joint property, and increased security for families in terms of making medical decisions and protecting the legal rights of couples, parents, and children. However, views of whether it will strengthen couples or the community were mixed. Some contended that it would provide validation for couples, and thus help to reduce internalized homophobia. Marriage also was expected to create barriers to dissolving relationships that would stabilize couples. Others anticipated that same-sex marriage would heal the relationship between the LGBT and heterosexual communities; heterosexuals will perceive same-sex couples to be more similar to themselves, which will in turn lead to greater acceptance. In contrast, others reported that its availability might create a fad among lesbians to get married without serious intent. Some argued that if legal marriage becomes the norm in the LGBT community, unmarried couples would be stigmatized or that as lesbian couples became assimilated into heterosexual norms, the community might lose its unique culture.

Research suggests that legal and social recognition may be associated with different outcomes. For example, Fingerhut and Maisel (2010) surveyed one member of couples from California who had made a formal legal or social commitment to a partner and compared them to those who had not. Legal recognition in the form of a domestic partnership was associated with making greater investments in the relationship, but was found to be unrelated to life and relationship satisfaction. Social recognition in the form of a public ceremony was associated with life and relationship satisfaction but not to investments. Causal associations could not be determined. Longitudinal research would be needed to understand if recognition leads to well-being, well-being leads to recognition, or whether both are caused by other variables.

Some feminists have been more skeptical about the likely impact of legal same-sex marriage. For instance, Ettelbrick (1999) argued that the marriage equality movement represented a fight for the right to conform and assimilate—to be just like heterosexuals. A goal of feminism, however, is to challenge the organization of society around heterosexual norms, such as marriage (Clarke, 2003). Marriage is rooted in patriarchal values and perpetuates the idea that the nuclear family is the best and most legitimate form of relationship; accordingly, it should be disputed. Otherwise, legal same-sex marriage will reinforce marriage as the gold standard for relationships and will marginalize lesbians who choose to remain single or couples that choose not to marry. In other words, as Clarke (2003) argued: "lesbians and gay men who want to be just like heterosexuals lack ambition" (p. 528).



Despite these concerns and criticisms, the trend toward legalizing same-sex marriage appears to be strong in the general population and within the LGBT community. Proponents of same-sex marriage frequently frame it as a straightforward civil rights issue, in that same-sex marriage would give LGBT people equal opportunity to participate fully in civil society (American Civil Liberties Union, 2011). In addition to expanding civil rights and reducing legal discrimination against LGBT people, legalizing same-sex marriage may have the added benefit, over time, of loosening the rigid, gender-based dictates of marital roles. For example, the current trend for families and married women to adopt patrilineal surnames may be reconsidered and relaxed once the field of marriage includes individuals who do not (indeed cannot) abide by this rule.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

A major limitation for understanding lesbians and lesbian couples is the general tendency for researchers to use heterosexual relations as the anchor position by which others are judged. Heterosexuality remains an unremarked norm for interpreting human experience (Kitzinger, 2001). Research concerning same-sex couples often centers around if and how lesbians and gay men are as capable of having as intimate and loving a relationship as heterosexuals. However, research reviewed here suggests that lesbian relationships "manage to endure without the benefit of institutional supports" (Kurdek, 2005, p. 253) and to embody certain relationship strengths. New directions for research might focus on what accounts for the strength of lesbian couples and if they might be a model for heterosexuals instead of vice versa.

If lesbian relationships were used as the anchor position or baseline, instead of as an alternative or counterpoint to heterosexual relationships, fruitful new research questions and perspectives might result. For instance, lesbians differ more from heterosexual couples in terms of equality than any other relationship variable examined (Kurdek, 2001). This suggests that heterosexual relations might benefit from more equality. Men's position of dominance in heterosexual relations has been linked to the finding that men derive more benefit from marriage than women, particularly in terms of health (e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). Power-status differentials between husbands and wives may partly explain why spousal conflict has a greater negative impact on the physiology and health of wives. For instance, wives instructed to interact assertively with a dominant husband had elevated cardiovascular responses (Brown, Smith, & Benjamin, 1998). In contrast, lesbian relationships provide a model of equality in terms of interpersonal dominance, which is predictive of high levels of relationship quality (Markey & Markey, 2011), effective conflict resolution (e.g., Gottman, Levenson, Swanson, et al., 2003; Kurdek, 2004a),

and perhaps health as well. Finally, research has indeed shown that partner equality promotes relationship happiness and longevity in heterosexual couples (e.g., Cooke, 2006; Frisco & Williams, 2003). Thus, to the extent that lesbian relationships are good models of relationship equality they hold practical as well as theoretical value for all.

The expanding body of research on lesbian sexuality and relationships, especially comparative research with other couple types, indicates a maturing of the field in lesbian and gay studies, away from an earlier focus on gender identity, attitudes, and psychopathology and more toward normal development. This is a promising trend. However, a possible downfall of comparative research is that it will limit the questions asked and measures used to what applies equally to women and men and not what applies uniquely to women versus men. The risk also exists that, even within lesbian and gay psychology, men will become entrenched as the normative category. Lee and Crawford's (2007) analysis of research on lesbians and bisexual women from 1975 to 2001 indicates this is already the case: lesbians were indexed less than gay men and research on lesbians was more likely to be published in specialty journals, not the top psychology journals.

## CONCLUSION

Much scientific progress has been made in the last 20 years toward better understanding lesbian lifestyle, identity, and sexual expression. Recent research has shown lesbian relationships to be distinct and cohesive entities with many positive and beneficial properties, such as mutual empowerment, mutual sexual gratification, autonomy, and effective conflict resolution. Butch-femme gender roles are now better understood as positive signaling and identification systems for attraction and expression rather than being exclusively tied to sexual dominance or subordination. And lesbians' unique use of language and Internet communities reveals how lesbian women continue to subvert heteronormative culture, challenging sexuality researchers to focus on desire and fulfillment rather than sexual categories or boundaries.

Progress has also been made in media portrayals of lesbian sexuality and in some social beliefs about lesbians. Images of lesbian sexuality in mainstream media have been increasing and are more positive now than in the past, although these images remain narrow. Lesbian media gives a more broad portrayal of lesbian sexuality and one that is imbued with agency. Endorsement of legalizing same-sex marriage has also been steadily increasing in the United States (Silver, 2011), with some polls now showing a majority in favor of the practice, though the consequences of legalizing same-sex marriage for lesbian women and gay men are still unknown.



Ultimately, however, the lion's share of work required to thoroughly understand the lives of lesbian women has yet to be done. In light of the vast amount of research on sex and gender that has been produced in the last decade (for a review, see Eagly, Eaton, Rose, Riger, & McHugh, 2012), very little has been focused on lesbians. Moreover, research on lesbian sexuality continues to focus on small samples of racially-homogenous "out" lesbians in networked lesbian communities (Rothblum, 1994). Larger samples of more racially and ethnically diverse lesbian women are needed to fully understand lesbian life and sexuality. Given that broad acceptance and viability of lesbian sexuality is increasing, this large-scale research can and should be promptly pursued.

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## Chapter 2

# Bisexual Women's Sexuality

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Though a hot topic for many, discussing the sexuality of bisexual women in one chapter is challenging. Many complexities exist within the bisexual women's community, even in the definition of *bisexual* itself. If one were to ask 10 people on the street to define what being bisexual means, one might get 10 different answers. And though gay and lesbian communities have slowly gained more acceptance in the United States, bisexual men and women have received much less esteem or even acceptance. A myriad of unkind stereotypes run rampant in the media about bisexual people in general, including being confused, greedy, or promiscuous. For bisexual women in particular, TV and movies generally showcases them cheating on their partners, having threesomes, or eventually going gay or going straight. This, of course, lends to stereotypes about the unfaithful, slutty, or again, confused bisexual woman.

All these mixed messages and media untruths mar an honest, in-depth understanding of this community. It also doesn't help that these negative attitudes come from both the straight *and* gay world. When internalized, these fabricated stereotypes potentially damage the development