Lesbian Love and Relationships

Editor Suzanna M. Rose
Lesbian Love and Relationships

Lesbian Love and Relationships has been co-published simultaneously as Journal of Lesbian Studies, Volume 6, Number 1 2002.
This page intentionally left blank
Lesbian Love and Relationships

Suzanna M. Rose, PhD
Editor

Lesbian Love and Relationships has been co-published simultaneously as Journal of Lesbian Studies, Volume 6, Number 1 2002.
Lesbian Love and Relationships

CONTENTS

Introduction: Lesbian Love and Relationships
   Suzanna M. Rose
   1

“Having a Girlfriend Without Knowing It”: Intimate Friendships
   Among Adolescent Sexual-Minority Women
   Lisa M. Diamond
   5

Against All Odds: The Dating Experiences
   of Adolescent Lesbian and Bisexual Women
   Diane E. Elze
   17

The Impact of Group Membership on Lesbians’ Physical Appearance
   Ilana D. Krakauer
   Suzanna M. Rose
   31

Butch/Femme in the Personal Advertisements of Lesbians
   Christine A. Smith
   Shannon Stillman
   45

Lesbians in Love: Why Some Relationships Endure and Others End
   Kristin P. Beals
   Emily A. Impett
   Letitia Anne Peplau
   53

Not Any One Thing: The Complex Legacy of Social Class on African American Lesbian Relationships
   Ruth L. Hall
   Beverly Greene
   65
A Butch Among the Belles  
*Bonnie R. Strickland*  
75

Lesbian Dating and Courtship from Young Adulthood to Midlife  
*Suzanna M. Rose*  
*Debra Zand*  
85

Beyond “Lesbian Bed Death”: The Passion and Play in Lesbian Relationships  
*Suzanne Iasenza*  
111

Lesbian Intimate Partner Violence: Prevalence and Dynamics  
*Carolyn M. West*  
121

Couples Therapy for Lesbians: Understanding Merger and the Impact of Homophobia  
*Maryka Biaggio*  
*Suz Coan*  
*Wendi Adams*  
129

Young Sexual Minority Women’s Perceptions of Cross-Generational Friendships with Older Lesbians  
*Jeanne L. Stanley*  
139

Building Bridges: Examining Lesbians’ and Heterosexual Women’s Close Friendships with Each Other  
*Jacqueline S. Weinstock*  
*Lynne A. Bond*  
149

Index  
16
ABOUT THE EDITOR

Suzanna M. Rose, PhD, is Director of Women’s Studies and Professor of Psychology at Florida International University. She received her degree in 1979 from the University of Pittsburgh, where she first became involved with feminist psychology by team-teaching a course on the psychology of women. Her research focuses on how gender, sexual orientation, and race affect relationships and sexuality, as well as on general gay and lesbian issues.

Dr. Rose has published extensively on love scripts and friendship in professional journals, including the Journal of Social Issues, Psychology of Women Quarterly, the Journal of Homosexuality, Violence Against Women, and American Behavioral Scientist. She is co-author (with Barbara Winstead and Valerian Derlega) of Gender and Close Relationships (1997) and has edited two books on academic women’s careers. She is currently on the editorial boards of Psychology of Women Quarterly, Sex Roles, Women & Therapy, and the American Psychological Association series Contemporary Perspectives on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Psychology. In addition, she is a member of the grant review committee for the American Psychological Foundation’s Wayne Placek Award, which funds research on lesbian and gay issues. In 1992, she received the Cheryl Ladd Frankin Award for contributions to feminist psychology from the Association for Women in Psychology (AWP). She also served as both Chair and Board Member or AWP for several years. Dr. Rose is a Fellow in the Society for the Psychology of Women and Division 44 of the American Psychological Association.
This page intentionally left blank
Introduction:
Lesbian Love and Relationships
Suzanna M. Rose

A new era of understanding concerning lesbian love and relationships is beginning. Lesbians now, at least occasionally, are portrayed as “normal” by the media. It might even be said that lesbians have “arrived” in terms of achieving a limited positive visibility within the larger culture. In the past decade or so, Ellen DeGeneres came out as a lesbian on her top-rated television comedy show and lesbians were featured on the covers of national magazines. Documentaries dealt sympathetically with the topics of same-sex marriage, lesbian moms, and violence against lesbians and gays, such as the murders of Teena Brandon and Matthew Shepard. To some extent, lesbians even began to be perceived as having an advantage over heterosexuals in certain areas. For instance, in 2000, two authors published a book called Lesbian sex secrets for men: What every man wants to know about making love to a woman and never asks (Goddard & Brungardt, 2000). The book was advertised in men’s fitness magazines and, apparently, sales were brisk.

Positive representations of lesbians, although still not the norm, are a welcome shift away from the mental health model of homosexuality that dominated the twentieth century. The mental health model—or rather, the view that lesbianism was a mental illness—meant that research on lesbians focused primarily on one of two areas, either the causes of sexual orientation, or the psychological abnormality of lesbianism. A strong research tradition launched by Evelyn Hooker in the 1950s debunked the idea that homosexuality was a mental illness (Hooker, 1957). Later research showed that lesbians were quite sim-
ilar to heterosexual women in terms of psychological functioning, gender roles, sexual behavior, and relationship priorities (e.g., Thompson, McCandless, & Strickland, 1971; Peplau, 2001; Peplau & Garnets, 2000). This allowed new perspectives on lesbians to flourish. Instead of focusing on “why” a woman was a lesbian, sexual orientation began to be used in research in much the same way as gender. Lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals alike were studied to see how both gender and sexual orientation affected relationship development and sexual behavior (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek, 1994). These comparative studies sent a message that lesbianism was a sexual variation rather than a pathology.

What has not been fully accomplished, however, is an exploration of lesbian experience from the perspective of what lesbians view as important. Most current research on relationships contains embedded heterosexist biases that continue to guide what is asked and, subsequently, what is known about love, attraction, and mating (Rose, 2000). For instance, among heterosexuals, same-sex friendships tend to be defined as platonic relationships and researchers tend to ignore or deny other possibilities by not asking questions about sexual feelings. In contrast, lesbians often report that sexual desire arose within a deeply felt same-sex friendship. Thus, from a lesbian standpoint, the nature of sexuality within same-sex friendship would be an important area of study. The area of sexual signaling also plays out differently among lesbians than heterosexuals, but research on sexual attraction is dominated by justifications and explanations for heterosexual sexual displays (e.g., Buss, 1994; Kenrick & Trost, 1997). Heterosexual women use at least 52 nonverbal flirtation behaviors to signal their interest in men (e.g., skirt hike, hair toss, neck presentation) (Moore, 1985). These exaggerated feminine gestures do not seem to be utilized extensively by most lesbians. How then do lesbians discern sexual interest from another woman? This is an issue that routinely surfaces in commentaries and humorous descriptions of lesbian life, but about which we know little. A second aspect of lesbian experience that has been neglected concerns not what is unique but what is common to both heterosexual and lesbian relations. For instance, lesbians are not immune from problems such as intimate partner violence. Like heterosexuals, lesbians may seek therapy to help their relationships. These issues recently have begun to be addressed.

In this volume, original research explores what are compelling issues for many lesbians, including friendship, dating, butch-femme roles, staying together, sexuality, concerns of African-American lesbians, violence in relationships, and therapy. The assumption that lesbian relationships are natural and normal underlies our approach and reflects the new era of research on lesbians that has begun.
REFERENCES


This page intentionally left blank
“Having a Girlfriend Without Knowing It”: Intimate Friendships Among Adolescent Sexual-Minority Women

Lisa M. Diamond

SUMMARY. This article provides a qualitative analysis of the intimate friendships of 80 adolescent and young adult sexual-minority women who were interviewed as part of an ongoing longitudinal study. Many reported having participated in a same-sex best friendship that they considered as committed, intimate, passionate, and intense as a romantic relationship. These “passionate friendships” typically combined components of the normative heterosexual friendship script with components of...
the normative romantic relationship script. For example, although passionate friendships rarely involved sexual contact, they frequently involved forms of physical intimacy (such as cuddling and hand-holding) that are usually considered exclusive to romantic relationships. Although such intense friendships are typically interpreted as unrequited love affairs, this misrepresents the unique nature of these bonds. Because such relationships challenge conventional notions about the distinctions between friendship and romance, as well as distinctions between heterosexual and sexual-minority women, they have important implications for understanding the interplay between emotional and sexual feelings in the close relationships of all women.

**KEYWORDS.** Lesbian, adolescence, friendship, romantic relationship, bisexual women, sexual minorities

**INTRODUCTION**

Friendships and romantic relationships loom large in most people’s recollections of their adolescent years, and for good reason. These two types of relationships take on particular importance during the second decade of life. Researchers have found that youths become increasingly skilled at negotiating reciprocally intimate interactions as they mature, deepening and enriching their close friendships. When they eventually form romantic relationships that combine heightened emotional and physical intimacy, the results can be unusually intense.

Stereotypes and media images of adolescent girls’ relationships reflect this view. Young women’s same-sex friendships are portrayed as especially intense and important during the high school years, yet their first full-blown love affairs with men are supposedly more so. The assumption underlying this view is that although both friendships and romantic relationships may be emotionally intimate, the sexual “charge” of a romantic relationship gives rise to a heightened intensity that never emerges between platonic friends, no matter how close. Thus, friendships and romantic relationships are presumed to be fundamentally different types of social ties with correspondingly distinct spheres of affect and behavior.

Does this “separate spheres” model apply to all young women? Previous research has found that some sexual-minority women recall intense but platonic
adolescent friendships containing many of the feelings and behaviors typically associated with romantic relationships (Diamond, 2000a). Although these “passionate friendships” might seem to challenge the separate spheres model, the conventional interpretation of such relationships is that they are not, in fact, platonic at all. Rather, they are reinterpreted as unrequited romantic relationships whose special intensity stems from repressed sexual longing.

The main problem with this tidy explanation is that the women describing such friendships frequently refute it. Although some sexual-minority women admit to having harbored secret sexual desires for their closest same-sex friends, others claim that the passion they felt for such friends was exclusively emotional (Diamond, 2000a). Clearly, the separate-spheres perception of platonic friendships as fundamentally distinct from and less intense than romantic relationships does not do justice to these unique relationships. Rather than re-interpreting passionate friendships as repressed romantic relationships in order to shoehorn them into the separate spheres model, we should carefully attend to sexual-minority women’s own descriptions and interpretations of these bonds.

Toward this end, I present a qualitative investigation of the most intimate adolescent friendships of 80 adolescent and young adult sexual-minority women who were interviewed as part of a longitudinal study of female sexual identity development. Extensive detail on the methods and results of this ongoing research can be found elsewhere (Diamond, 1998, 2000a; 2000b). My aim here is to provide a more descriptive account of these women’s adolescent relationships that highlights the challenges they pose for conventional interpretations of the links and distinctions between sexual and emotional intimacy. Finally, although a small proportion of these women developed passionate friendships with young men, I limit the current discussion to same-sex friendships (see Diamond, 2000a for a discussion of male-male and male-female passionate friendships).

BACKGROUND AND METHODS OF THE STUDY

Participants were 80 lesbian, bisexual, and “unlabeled” women between 18 and 25 years of age who were interviewed over the phone as part of an ongoing longitudinal study of female sexual identity development. Sampling took place across a wide range of settings, including (a) lesbian, gay, and bisexual community events (i.e., picnics, parades, social events) and youth groups in two moderately-sized cities and a number of smaller urban and rural communities in central New York state, (b) classes on gender and sexuality issues taught at a large, private university in central New York; and (c) lesbian, gay,
and bisexual student groups at a large private university, a large public university, and a small, private, women’s college in central New York.

The recruitment strategy succeeded in sampling sizable numbers of bisexual women and nonheterosexual women who decline to label their sexual identity, both of which are underrepresented in most research on sexual minorities. However, the sample shares a chronic drawback with other samples of sexual minorities in that it comprises predominantly White, highly educated, middle to upper class individuals. Nearly all of the college-aged participants had enrolled in college at one point, and 75% came from families in which at least one parent had completed college. Sixty-three percent of women came from families in which at least one parent had a professional or technical occupation, and 84% were White.

I conducted scripted, 30-minute telephone interviews with each participant focusing on her most intense adolescent friendship. Participants were asked to describe the type and frequency of physical affection in the relationship, whether they became sexually attracted to the friend, whether the friendship ever involved sexual contact, whether they ever became preoccupied or fascinated with their friend, how frequently they spent time with their friend, and how important the friendship was—relative to their other close relationships at the time—as a source of support and emotional security. Finally, participants were asked to reflect on the specific similarities and differences between this friendship and typical romantic relationships.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF SEXUAL-MINORITY WOMEN’S CLOSEST ADOLESCENT FRIENDSHIPS**

It was like having a girlfriend without knowing it. We spent 100% of our time together—my other friends used to call her “the Queen” because they knew I wouldn’t go anywhere without her. We used to sit on each other’s laps, sleep in the same bed and stuff. Sometimes it freaked me out how intense it was, and the amount of physical closeness. My other friends said “Well, do you think about her sexually?” And I didn’t, so they said “Then don’t worry about it.” I tried to go to college near her, but it didn’t work out. When we said goodbye, I was crying so hard my whole body was shaking. We talked to each other on the phone every day that first year of college.

This young lesbian’s narrative is typical of the descriptions these women provided of their closest adolescent friendships. Most notably, the emotional tenor of these relationships often resembled romantic love, a state described by
Leibowitz (1983) as involving feelings of excitement, desire for self-revelation and mutual understanding with the love object, fascination and preoccupation with the love object, possessiveness and idealization of the love object, and a sense that losing the love object would greatly diminish one’s life. Many—and sometimes all—of these features emerged in women’s descriptions of their adolescent passionate friendships.

For example, over three-fourths of women reported that they were strongly possessive of their friend’s time and attention and chronically fascinated or preoccupied with their friend’s behavior and appearance. As one woman noted, “I was always so tuned in to her—I would notice little things, like if her purse strap fell off her shoulder, and I would just quietly put it back.” Another described her preoccupation with her friend as “borderline obsession,” and described the type of continuous and intrusive thinking about the friend that characterizes the early stages of romantic infatuation (Tennov, 1979). Possessiveness was also common. Participants reported being oversensitive to the real or imagined threat of the friend’s attachment to a boyfriend or to another close friend, and often sought reassurance that the friend continued to prize their friendship above all other bonds.

Given that such feelings and behaviors are so much more typical of romantic relationships than friendships, it is not surprising that women’s friends and family members frequently misinterpreted their intense friendships as love affairs. As one young woman described,

> When I left for college she made me a goodbye tape of songs–love songs. A friend of mine found the tape and said “What guy made this for you?” It must have looked weird, because most people don’t feel so strongly about their friends. But it didn’t seem strange to me at the time—I did love her, that deeply. A day without her was unimaginable.

Perhaps the best example of how such relationships blurred the boundaries between friendship and romantic love is that of two friends who sought out a couples counselor to repair the tension in their relationship that developed during their first year of college-induced separation. At first, the counselor assumed they were a lesbian couple; after receiving a lengthy explanation of the depth and long history of the friendship, the counselor finally remarked, “I see—what you have is like a marriage, so that’s how I’ll treat it.”

Physical affection was another common feature of these bonds. As one woman said, “We were always a lot closer, physically, than I was with my other friends. We would sometimes sleep together in my twin bed, sit on each other’s laps—I didn’t really do that with anybody else.” Another noted that “We were so physical with each other that I feel like it made us more able to read