



INSTITUTE FOR  
PERSONAL  
GROWTH

Margaret Nichols, Ph.D.

Director

***Lesbian Sexuality: Issues and Developing  
Theory***

## **Lesbian Sexuality: Issues and Developing Theory**

I am a Sexually Incorrect lesbian. For years I've hidden it, but now I intend to share my dirty little secret with the world. My favorite sexual fantasies have always been bisexual S/M fantasies, and although for years I refused to tell anyone else in the women's movement about this for fear some Women Against Pornography type would excoriate me for my retrograde thoughts, I've never really tried to repress them — frankly, doing so ruined my sex life — nor have I ever felt terribly guilty about them. On the other hand, I'm not yet prepared to march in the Gay Pride parade in full leather drag carrying a "No Pain, No Gain" banner, and thus the "new wave" of bold young lesbian sexual outlaws considers me hopelessly fainthearted and old-fashioned. I've always harbored a secret love of makeup and dressing up, even during the period in which I never wore any and let the hair on my legs grow I think it comes from the fact that I was such a failure at dress-up as an adolescent. On the other hand, I am aghast at the thought of calling myself a femme, in the manner of the new lesbian butch-femme liberation movement. As a woman who was married for many years and lived a heterosexual life in which everyone from my mother to my boss to my husband insisted that I be a femme, I must admit that this trend really does baffle me sometimes.

If this is not enough to convince you that I am truly S.I., consider this: I repudiate politically correct lesbian lovemaking. P. C. lesbian lovemaking, for the uninitiated, consists of the following: Two women lie side by side (tops or bottoms are strictly forbidden—lesbians must be non-hierarchical); they touch each other gently and sweetly all over their bodies for several hours (lesbians are not genitally/orgasm oriented, a patriarchal mode). If the women have orgasms at all—and orgasms are only marginally acceptable because, after all, we must be process, rather than goal, oriented—both orgasms must occur at exactly the same time in order to foster true equality and egalitarianism. (I'm not kidding about this orgasm stuff: A "feminist" critique of a paper I published in the journal *Women and Therapy* included the charge that my thinking was "male-identified" because I talked about treating anorgasmic lesbians. The critic charged that orgasms shouldn't be important to lesbians, only to men. I've given up a lot for the lesbian-feminist movement, but this is where I draw the line.)

I think my own struggles with my S. 1. nature, the fact that wherever I turned I could find little writing or thought about our sexuality either within the mainstream field of psychology or even within the lesbian-feminist movement, my observations of recent very interesting sexual trends within the lesbian community, and my (somewhat prurient) fascination with gay male sexuality led me eventually to do some theorizing and writing of my own. This essay is best viewed as a work in progress. I am an old-fashioned lesbian feminist from the school of thought that believed that the "personal is political." This concept didn't just mean that housework was oppressive to women. It really had to do with a methodology of political (and I would argue, scientific as well) discovery. The idea was that in any new, unexplored area of human (female) experience, the first stage of research must of necessity be self-exploration, and the next has to be a public sharing of that self-exploration in a forum wherein participants are nonjudgmental and noncritical (critical in the condemning sense of the word) while remaining critical in the Socratic, questioning sense. In my opinion, lesbian sexuality is just such an unexplored field, and so I write here in the spirit of "the personal is political." This work has come from my own personal ruminations about my own sexuality as much as it has come from reading, observations of clients and friends, and ideas of colleagues. I hope what I write can be a springboard for the ideas and self-revelations of others, and that our

community can allow now for a nonjudgmental fact-finding stage in our discovery of our own sexuality. We simply do not know enough about lesbian sexuality, or about human sexuality for that matter, to reasonably do anything else right now.

### **Lesbian Couples and Lesbian Sex**

Some of the most startling information about lesbian sexuality has come from a study by sociologists Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, published as *American Couples*. These researchers used a large and well-chosen sample and compared heterosexual married, heterosexual unmarried, gay male, and lesbian couples along a number of dimensions including sexuality. They found, for example, that lesbian couples have sex far less frequently than any other type of couple. Gay men have somewhat less sex in their primary relationships than do either type of heterosexual couple; on the other hand, gay males have the highest rates of extramarital sex. This means that lesbians in couple relationships are less sexual as couples and as individuals than anyone else. Only about one-third of lesbians in relationships of two years or longer had sex once a week or more; 47 percent of lesbians in long-term relationships had sex once a month or less. This is in striking contrast, for example, to heterosexual married couples: Two-thirds of these couples had sex once a week or more, and only 15 percent of long-term married couples had sex once a month or less.

Blumstein and Schwartz also report that the lesbians they interviewed preferred nongenital physical contact such as hugging and cuddling to genital sex. However, one-half of lesbians in couples with a low frequency of genital sexual contact said they are dissatisfied with their sexuality. (My guess is that this is the half of the couple that wants sex more than once a month.)

Lesbians in the Blumstein and Schwartz study seem to be more limited in the range of their sexual techniques than are other couples. For example, 61 percent of lesbian couples have oral sex "infrequently or not at all." This finding corroborates similar data from Karia Jay and Alien Young's *The Gay Report*. Lesbians have about the same rates of nonmonogamy as heterosexuals (28 percent report at least one extramarital episode), although they have far less "outside" sex than gay men, for whom nonmonogamy is the norm rather than the exception. But lesbians, like heterosexual women and unlike both gay and straight men, are likely to have affairs rather than just sexual encounters. Moreover, both lesbians and gay men, as contrasted to heterosexual couples, are likely to be open with their partners about their extramarital activity. And lesbians who are nonmonogamous are more likely than gay males and even heterosexual men and women to be, at the same time, dissatisfied with their primary relationships and with sex in their primary relationships. Thus lesbian extramarital activity seems to be qualitatively quite different from heterosexual nonmonogamy, which tends to be furtive and not necessarily related to unhappiness within the primary relationship; and it is different from the nonmonogamy of gay males in that its form is affairs rather than "tricking," and may often be related to dissatisfaction within the primary couple.

And finally, as reported at an eighteen-month follow-up of all couples, lesbian couples had the highest rates of break-up of any couple type. Moreover, the pattern of breakup was that of nonmonogamy (in the form of an affair) followed by the nonmonogamous partner leaving for a new lover.

What are we to make of this? One conclusion, of course, is that lesbians clearly spend more time discussing the political correctness of sex than they spend doing

sex. More serious is the fact that these findings fit a very common pattern that I see in my practice and in the community at large: Two women couple, often very shortly after each has decoupled from a previous relationship, and frequently move in with each other after the briefest of courtships. The women pledge undying love for each other, feel perfectly matched, and enjoy ecstatic lovemaking. Two to four years later, the couple's frequency of sex has dropped off drastically. One partner may complain, but often neither really complains, and usually they claim that the rest of the relationship is "fine." They may rationalize the lack of sex in their relationship with political ideology about genital sex being patriarchal and so forth. They may make a conscious and overt decision to "open up" the relationship, because "monogamy is patriarchal," or nonmonogamy may "just happen." In either case, what ultimately happens is that one partner becomes sexually involved with a new woman, "falls in love" with the new person, and the couple breaks up, with the nonmonogamous partner forming a new couple with the third woman.

What is happening here? I believe that lesbians, like heterosexual women, are essentially sexually repressed. We are at least as repressed as our straight sisters, perhaps even more. We have more sexual conflicts than do men, gay or heterosexual, lower sexual desire, and fewer ways of expressing our sexual needs. Our relationships represent the pairing of two relatively sexually inhibited individuals; thus it is no wonder that the frequency of sex in our relationships is less than in gay male or heterosexual relationships. Inhibited sexual desire is the most common clinical problem of lesbians presenting for sex therapy. Moreover, our sex is less diverse and varied than the sexual techniques of gay males and possibly even of heterosexual couples.

On the other hand, despite our rhetoric about sensuality versus sexuality, sex does matter to us, as individuals and as couples. For most people who are coupled, sex is a significant if not all-consuming part of the relationship. It can be considered for many as part of what holds a relationship together during those periods in which it seems that little else is going well with the partners. Genital, orgasmic sex is indeed important to us, and our sexual inhibitions thus interfere not only with our individual enjoyment of sex, but also with this significant aspect of coupling. When a part of a relationship is missing, the couple is more likely to come undone. And the way our couples often become undone, through nonmonogamy and one partner subsequently leaving the relationship for a new lover, is not accidental and is related to our sexual repression. We leave one relationship with an unsatisfactory sex life for a new relationship that promises better sex.

What are the reasons for our relative lack of sexuality, and how are our sexual concerns related to the recent debates in the lesbian feminist movement over sexual issues such as S/M, butch-femme roles, bisexuality, and nonmonogamy? Before exploring the answers to these questions, let me issue some caveats and make clear some of the premises upon which I base my thinking. First, I do not mean to imply that I believe that lesbian relationships dissolve only, or even principally, for sexual reasons. Blumstein and Schwartz feel that the legitimization of marriage is the primary factor involved in relationship longevity. Even though lesbian relationships had the highest dissolution rates at follow-up, the chief difference in couples was between heterosexual married couples on one hand, and all other types of couples on the other. Social sanction seems to be the strongest bond that holds relationships together. Aside from legitimization or lack thereof, surely other factors besides sex lead to the break-up of lesbian relationships. In fact, an alternate way to view the data I gave earlier is to say that the basic problems lesbian couples have is that they

couple prematurely, and that the later falling off of sexual desire is a sign that the couple never should have been together in the first place-. I mean to point out only that sex is one powerful factor, and a factor that is almost never considered by lesbians themselves as a possible reason for relationship failure. Second, I do not imply that longevity in relationships is always desirable, or that all people should be permanently coupled. Certainly some lesbians will not want to be coupled at all, and others will consider serial monogamy to be preferable to a quasi-married state. But I do not hear many lesbians saying this. What I hear is lesbians professing to want to make their relationships work in a long-term committed way. Because this is what lesbians say they want, it is relevant to examine why they so rarely—more rarely than other couples—get it. My position concerning whether longevity is practical or useful in a relationship is that longevity combined with quality in a couple relationship of any kind is uncommon but attainable, and because so many of us lesbians seem to aspire to that combination, it is worth our while as psychologists and clinicians to figure out how to help our community achieve this goal for those of us who wish it.

There are some premises upon which I base my work, assumptions that I should make explicit for the sake of clarity and honesty, I quite frankly consider the average lesbian and gay male relationship to be generally more advanced than the average heterosexual relationship. In my experience, far too many heterosexual relationships become bogged down in the mire of sex-role conflicts and never transcend these conflicts to a point where both partners see each other as full human beings. I do not mean to imply that lesbian and gay male relationships are without conflict, simply that the conflicts are of a more human, universal, less gender-based order. And they are certainly much less likely to exhibit the vast power differentials that can be found in many heterosexual relationships; what power differentials do exist are most often psychological rather than real, that is, backed up by concrete power in the world such as financial or legal power. I am not saying that heterosexual relationships never transcend gender; surely some do. I only mean that depressingly large numbers of heterosexual relationships never get beyond this level to a more authentic and genuine intimacy. They may be perfectly good partnerships on a business or child-rearing level, but not necessarily very intimate or, as C. A. Tripp says, they are not very "finely tuned" relationships." Because of this, I believe that the study of homosexual pairings has great tutorial value for heterosexual relationships: To some extent, we represent what they would face were they not so busy dealing with sex-role conflicts.

Moreover, studying lesbian versus gay male relationships gives us a splendid opportunity to examine the "male principle" and the "female principle" as they are currently culturally defined and as they operate in pair-bonding. That is, gay men represent "unmitigated maleness," both alone and in couples, while lesbians represent "unmitigated femaleness." This is indeed a very useful thing; by comparing these two types of couples with each other and with heterosexual couples we can learn a great deal, for it is only by contrast that we discover constancies. It also can be useful to contrast the sexuality found in gay male versus lesbian couples. On the other hand, gay-men have more sex, both within their primary relationships and outside, than do lesbians. Their sexual forms are more diverse, more than any other type of couple, they manage to successfully incorporate nonmonogamy into their relationships. Thus in one view gay men have achieved the most advanced state of sexuality within the pair-bonding known to humankind. (I say this despite the knowledge that gay male sexuality has also brought with it sexual excesses with sometimes disastrous results, for example, AIDS, and that AIDS itself has modified

gay male sexual behavior as described in Dan Bloom and Michael Shernoff's Work. I vehemently disagree, however, with the line of reasoning that says that AIDS was brought about by sexuality. AIDS is caused by a virus, not by sex, and it is important that we not let the tragedy of AIDS reinforce sex-negative homophobic attitudes.) Lesbians, on the other hand, are very good at closeness and intimacy: Our pairings probably contain, in general, more closeness, sharing, and intimate contact than any others. These differences of course correspond to what Carol Gilligan and others have spoken of as differences between connectedness and independence, or expressiveness versus instrumentality\* My view is that lesbians and gay men have much to learn from each other and teach each other about sex and relationships. Perhaps, together, we can create relationships with gay men's sexiness and lesbians' connectedness.

**The Sexual Repression of Lesbians** Let us begin by considering, in no particular order, some of the reasons why lesbians might experience greater sexual repression than gay or heterosexual men, and perhaps in some cases even greater inhibition than heterosexual women. Some of the following forces affect lesbians as individual women; some operate in lesbian couples as a particular type of union.

On the simplest level, one thing that accounts for a relatively low frequency of sex in lesbian relationships is that lesbians, by virtue of socialization as women, are less likely to play an active role in requesting sex and are far less likely to pressure a recalcitrant partner. Thus to some extent the low level of sex in lesbian pairings is probably just a result of neither woman asking for it rather than a particular inhibition. As women, we are not only taught to wait for our partner to ask for sex although we may want it; but we are also taught not even to pay attention to our own sexual desires unless or until we are approached by our partner. In a sense, our sexual response is cued to our partner's request in almost Pavlovian terms. Two women together, each primed to respond sexually only to a request from another, may rarely even experience desire, much less engage in sexual activity. And this may all very well be completely unconscious.

Moreover, it is almost certainly true that we are less likely to pressure a reluctant partner to have sex with us, especially compared to men. In fact, we are likely to see sexual pressure as male behavior and thus assaultive and abusive. One of my first sex therapy cases was a couple who had been together for more than ten years and had no sex for the last seven. Remarkably, they had never once had a fight over this, even though for at least several of those years, one partner had been rather upset over the lack of sexuality. One is extremely unlikely to see this pattern in heterosexual, or even gay male, relationships that suffer from low levels of sexual intimacy. In fact, a common clinical issue with such couples is to get the unhappy partner to take some of the pressure off the other partner. We might reflect on the fact that, contrary to our feminist beliefs, perhaps a little pressure is good for a relationship; pressure can simply reflect the desires of one partner rather than be evidence of assaultive behavior.

Another consideration is that sex and love are fused for women in general and lesbians in particular. Sex and love may be even more fused for lesbians, who, again in the absence of male pressure, have no countervailing force attempting to get them to separate the two. When I speak to lesbian lay audiences, some women now bemoan the fact that they can rarely find other lesbians who are interested in purely sexual liaisons; these women find themselves accused of being male-identified for wanting such liaisons. I first got in touch with the power of this fusion when I realized that in all my sexual fantasies, even those involving "stranger sex,"

invariably I found myself saying, "I love you" as though this declaration were a necessary part of sexual enjoyment. I contrasted this to a gay male friend's sexual fantasies of making love to the image of disembodied penises; we seem at opposite ends of the spectrum of sexual stimulation. As another lesbian therapist I know puts it, "Lesbians can't fuck unless they are married." We are the last of the modern-day romantics, and although in some ways this is charming, it has some untoward effects. For example, it does help to explain our alarmingly brief courtship periods; we are just like the Victorians who married in part to have a legitimate source of sex. It certainly explains why our extramarital liaisons are affairs rather than the less relationship-threatening tricks. But it explains some of our sexual problems within relationships as well. Because sex and love are intertwined for us, our sexual desire is very vulnerable to interference from relationship problems. Few of us can keep the bedroom separate from the rest of our lives as a couple. Moreover, many of us have problems expressing anger. Again, this is because of female socialization to be nice, not to get angry, a deadly combination. In fact, I use lack of fighting in a lesbian relationship as a diagnostic clue to detect low-level sexuality when the partners have not directly told me of this problem, and I am almost never wrong. For us to enjoy sex or simply to feel sexual, our relationship must be going very well indeed. This dynamic can create problems in two ways: First, it is unrealistic to expect couple relationships always to function at a high level, and perhaps more significantly, sexual connection itself can at times improve a faltering relationship.

In addition, we are less "looks-ist" than are men or heterosexual women, another finding confirmed by the American Couples study. Often, as a reaction to the way men have defined us only by our looks, we reject ideologically and practically the reliance upon physical attractiveness to form pairings. Unfortunately, what may be good politics may make for bad sex. Human beings, like other animals, do seem to rely at least in part upon visual attractiveness to cue sexual stimulation. To the extent that we feel guilty about that reliance, to the extent to which we avoid cultivating our own physical attractiveness out of the misguided belief that to preen is to be sexist, we detract from our own sexuality. We need surely to redefine physical beauty in our own feminist ways, but we cannot simply reject physical attractiveness and our response to physical beauty as somehow politically incorrect.

Other sources of sexual repression derive from early female sex-role socialization. As women, we already have a built-in acculturated tendency not to recognize our own sexual arousal. From the earliest age, our organs of arousal are hidden from view, less easily seen and less easily stimulated. And the powerful cultural forces that teach us to deny our sexual impulses probably take effect ultimately upon a physiological level. Julia Heiman's classic study is perhaps the best illustration of this/ Heiman exposed both female and male subjects to sexually explicit audiotapes at the same time that she had these subjects connected to instruments that measure physiological arousal. She found no differences between men and women in the extent of arousal as recorded by her instrumentation. When she asked her subjects to report on their subjective experience of arousal, however, all male subjects who were physiologically aroused reported feeling aroused, whereas only half of female subjects who were aroused experienced this. It is as if the connection between our crotches and our heads have been severed; we are sexual paraplegics.

In addition to the forces already cited, lesbians may suffer acculturated inhibitions in the form of internalized homophobia. Betty Berzon, a lesbian psychologist who talks about the stage-wise development of lesbian/gay identity, suggests that at one point in its evolution, women who want to love and be loved by other women, but do not

want to consider themselves gay, psychologically defend against this identity by eliminating genital sexuality from their female relationships. In other words, women can have loving, close, and intimate relationships with other women but pretend to be straight as long as there is no genital sexual contact. Berzon hypothesizes that lesbians may retain vestiges of these psychological defenses long after they have become unnecessary by virtue of our coming out to ourselves, just as neurotic conflicts are frequently the result of leftover defenses that were once, but are no longer, useful. Her view is worth considering, especially in the light of the almost uncanny resemblance between this description of early woman-to-woman contact and later lesbian relationships with sexual difficulties. She also suggests that gay males, at this early stage, defend against a gay identity by allowing sexual contact without intimacy, and again, this bears a strange resemblance to the intimacy difficulties gay men often experience in later life.

Lesbian sexuality is undoubtedly affected by lesbians' early experience with men. In a culture where an estimated 25 percent of all women will experience some sexual assault by men by age eighteen, surely all women have their sexuality somewhat damaged because of the unfortunate connection of sex with violence and exploitation. But lesbians experience additional troubles. The vast majority of lesbians have had some sexual involvement with men before coming out: More than 90 percent have had sex with men, and one-third have been married." For some lesbians, these sexual relationships have been pleasurable. For others, however, who experience no sexual desire for men but simply had sex in the interests of passing, sex was inauthentic, possibly painful, certainly distasteful. We have no reason to believe that negative conditioning to sexuality automatically disappears when women switch to female partners. Moreover, we are just beginning to explore the incidence and effects of incest upon lesbians as young girls; some studies report a higher incidence of earlier incest among lesbians." Virginia Apuzzo has suggested an interesting theory regarding incest: She suggests that incest may be perpetrated upon young tomboy girls (who are somewhat more likely to grow up to be lesbians, as reported by Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith) as a way of punishing them and "keeping them in line."

According to Tripp and others, sexual desire requires a "barrier": some kind of tension, a taboo, a difference of some sort, a power discrepancy, romance, the excitement of newness or the thrill of the chase—some form of disequilibrium." This hypothesis has some important implications for lesbian relationships. First, it helps to explain why our romanticism is a problem. Our romanticism can be seen as a type of barrier to create sexual excitement; that is, we are romantic because it is sexually exciting to be so. The problem is that this appears to be the only acceptable form of tension or barrier we have, and thus the sole method we have for creating sexual excitement. This explains why we must fall in love to be sexual: It is the only thing we allow ourselves to be turned on by. It also explains why our extramarital relationships are affairs rather than tricks: Casual sex doesn't excite us. Moreover, it explains why sex dies in our relationships; when the romantic, or limerant, first stage of our relationships passes, we have no other mechanisms to generate sexual tension. Only falling in love produces sexual desire, so we fall in love again, with a new partner, and the limerance of this new relationship revives our flagging sexuality. Clearly, we need to expand our repertoire so that there are more tensions or barriers available to facilitate sexual desire.

In addition, the barrier theory suggests that, paradoxically, intimacy may hurt sexual desire within a relationship. Lesbian relationships, in part because they are



"advanced" relationships, sometimes suffer difficulties of overinvolvement, called fusion or merging. To some extent, intimacy involves the lessening of differences between partners; certainly it is more difficult to maintain a purely independent sense of self within a very intimate relationship. As intimacy increases and individual differences decrease, so may the very distance, mystery, and unpredictability necessary to maintain sexual tension. The softening or disappearance of individual differences may serve to decrease sexual desire in another, slightly different, way as well. Tripp suggests that one of the functions served by sexual intimacy is that of "importation" of the loved object's characteristics and "exportation" of one's own." One desires another who possesses characteristics that one either feels deficient in or would like to have more of. Sexual contact is a way of feeling that you have incorporated within yourself the desired characteristics of the love-object—importation—at the same time that you export to your partner characteristics of your own that are desired or admired. We can see immediately how this process will tend to happen less frequently as two partners become more similar and thus have less to export to the other. It is a truism within family and marital therapy that the characteristics that attract someone to a partner initially are precisely those that one tries to eradicate later in the relationship. This is another way of saying that differences not only initially attract and are in part responsible for sexual desire, but also make it difficult for people to live together. Paradoxically, it is to some extent true that the more successful we are in obliterating those differences, the more successful we are in creating wonderful roommates (people who can live together easily because they are so alike) but lousy lovers.

Heterosexual relationships exhibit such problems of fusion less often because the partners often have trouble being intimate enough. Those of us who are lesbians need, perhaps more than other couples, to find ways to introduce other types of barriers/tension/difference into our relationships. But as women we are more sexually inhibited and less free to experiment with our sexuality. The result of this bind may be loss of sexual desire.

To find such ways of introducing new barriers, we can look to our gay brothers. By experimenting with new sexual techniques, through the use of sex toys and props, through costume, through S/M (which maximizes differences between partners), by developing sexual rituals with our partners, by introducing tricking into our relationships, we may be able to find other barriers that enhance sexuality once limerance is gone.

**Sexuality and the Contemporary Lesbian Community** What do the issues being debated and acted upon in the lesbian community teach us about our sexuality? First, although I make light of our endless discussions of the "political correctness" of sex, I also recognize the need for these discussions. In fact, for women in general and lesbians specifically, our sexuality is political: It has always been used against us to oppress us." Think of the major issues that feminists have fought over in the last several decades, and it becomes obvious that many of them, such as abortion, birth control, rape, incest, lesbianism itself, and clitoral versus vaginal orgasms, have involved our sexuality. Thus it is essential that we be mindful of the political implications when we talk about sexuality.

Second, the debates that have raged in the lesbian-feminist community over such sexual issues as sadomasochism make more sense if one keeps in mind the concept of a dialectic. This concept suggests that when two political ideas or forces are in apparent contradiction, the answer to which of the dichotomy is correct lies in achieving a higher-order level of thought from which it is apparent that the

dichotomous forces are not really in contradiction, but are merely two aspects of the same issue. Let us see if we can view some of the recent politic-sexual differences within our community in -just this way.

S/M versus Women Against Pornography. First, a summary of the two positions regarding sadomasochistic behavior. The forces against S/M, epitomized by the stance of the group Women Against Pornography as explicated in the book *Against Sado-Masochism*.<sup>5</sup> seem to see polarized role-playing in sex as leading to violence in other parts of the S/M participants' relationship. They believe the roots of S/M to be firmly ensconced in heterosexism and patriarchal modes of domination; they decry the addictive, cult-like aspects of S/M, at least as it seems to be developing among some segments of the lesbian community; and they particularly object to the view, promulgated by some lesbians within groups like Samois and the Lesbian Sex Mafia, that S/M liberation is a political cause comparable to lesbianism or feminism. WAP appears to view the entire emergence of S/M as an issue within the lesbian community as basically retrograde, reactionary, and a symptom of the Reagan eighties.

The viewpoint favoring S/M is best exemplified by the West Coast lesbian group Samois (named from a lesbian-run estate in *The Story of O*) in the book *Coming to Power*.<sup>6</sup> Lesbians who are proponents of S/M practices emphasize the consensual aspects of this relationship and point out that unlike the oppressive power relationships, control in a S/M relationship is really exerted by the "bottom" or masochist. They assert that S/M practices free sexual energy and allow the partners an almost spiritual transcendence of self through "power exchanges," that is, the voluntary giving over or taking of power from one partner to another. More than anything, S/M proponents emphasize the enhancement of sexual experience through S/M, apparently taking the view that as far as sex is concerned, the ends clearly justify the means. "But why do you do it?" asks a rhetorical questioner in "Reasons" from *Coming to Power*. "Because it is erotic" is the answer.

Let us examine this seemingly dichotomous view of lesbian S/M. First, it is clear that the points made in *Against Sado-Masochism* cannot be dismissed simply as puritanical ravings. Any clinician who has worked with clientele who engage in S/M practices knows that S/M can at times have all the worst properties of an addiction. Like drug or alcohol use, or for that matter like some other forms of sexual conduct, S/M behavior can become compulsive, out of control of the participants. People can develop a tolerance for certain pain levels as their thresholds get pushed higher and higher and can, if not careful, get to a point where only dangerous levels of pain excite. Moreover, the S/M movement as it is currently constituted within the lesbian community does have some cult-like aspects, and like all radical or fringe groups, has picked up some borderline personalities along the way. It is also certainly true that for some people sadomasochism can have deep and destructive meanings. A client of mine with a long history of self-destructive and compulsive behaviors that included self-mutilation, drug addiction, and suicidal gestures joined the New York-based Lesbian Sex Mafia group with disastrous results. At one point she told me she had "progressed" to staging "scenes" (pre-arranged encounters that, for her, revolved around being whipped) that no longer were sexual in content and that were so severe that she bore multiple welts for days afterward. Shortly after this, she hanged herself with a rope and came within inches of succeeding in her suicide attempt. Based on my own and others' experiences, I have no trouble believing that some people who engage in S/M do find inequality slipping into other aspects of their relationships, with unfortunate results. Moreover, I admit I find myself agreeing with

the WAP group when they object to S/M liberation: I am hard put to see how the proponents of a particular sexual technique can really compare themselves to women, racial minorities, or gay people as a minority (can we next foresee anal sex liberationists or cunnilingus liberationists?). Although S/M enthusiasts understandably feel oppressed because of their preferences, I am inclined to see this as merely a special case of oppression that results from the generally sex-negative views that we all, especially women, hold in this culture. I also admit to being suspicious of anyone who defines herself solely or primarily in terms of her sadomasochism, as do some of the more visible and vocal proponents within the lesbian community. Finally, it is undoubtedly true that some portion of the power of S/M does derive from patriarchal roots. Some of the imagery of S/M is clearly heterosexist in origin; some of the force that makes so many of us sexual masochists is undoubtedly related to our powerless role in society.

But WAP fails to distinguish between the excesses of S/M and the normative practice of S/M. Although we do not know exactly what normative S/M practices are, we can guess that most S/M practiced by lesbians is practiced quietly, perhaps with some embarrassment, behind the closed doors of committed couples' bedrooms. Just as most drug and alcohol users do not become addicts, so it is also probably true that most S/M practitioners do not become compulsive, out-of-control self-destructive users. Among lesbians, there are probably more silk scarves, mild spankings, and fantasy being used than whips and chains, probably more talk than action. On a pragmatic level, the WAP people make the mistake of listening to those for whom S/M has created problems, and ignoring the vast majority for whom it is merely an interesting variation in their sex lives.

The theoretical level is more complex and requires a synthesis of both views and transcendence to the next level of analysis. Let us acknowledge the inherent heterosexism in at least some of the imagery of S/M. Does this mean we must discard and repudiate these practices? I have two objections to assuming that S/M should not be practiced or supported as a sexual variation. One is that I fear that at this point in our culture, so much of female sexuality may be contaminated by heterosexism and patriarchal oppression that if we reject aspects of our sexuality upon this basis we will have little left. I consider this serious because I think the larger issue of the wholesale repression of female sexuality is more important than whether some areas of our sexuality have been contaminated by patriarchal modes. That is, it is more important at this stage in history to support women being sexual, however they are sexual, than to judge which aspects of their sexuality are non-patriarchal and which are male-identified. But beyond that, I object on the basis that we do not yet understand sexuality sufficiently to make pat pronouncements on the origins of various types of sexual interests or drives.

Many alternative explanations of the origins of sadomasochistic sexuality, for example, have nothing to do with patriarchy, or are even positive ways of coping with patriarchy. Tripp points out that on a cross-cultural level, there seems to be little relationship between sadomasochistic or violent sexual practices and violence in the practicing couple. He uses as an illustration a Pacific Island tribe noted for its peace-loving ways and gentle relationships, whose sexual practices include biting one another on the ear until blood is drawn. There appears to be a universality to the fusion of sex and aggression, to the sexiness of power differentials, that is completely unrelated to the aggressiveness/oppressiveness of the practitioners. If this is true, then perhaps heterosexism determines in a somewhat arbitrary way some of the content of S/M erotic fantasies, but not the form itself. One can imagine

that the conditioning for S/M eroticism takes place in childhood in ways that might explain this difference in content or form. Bernie Zilbergeld and C. R. Ellison have suggested that, particularly in childhood, sexual arousal is virtually indistinguishable from other arousal states, including physical activity arousal, anger, or fear.' This is particularly noticeable in young boys, who have penile erections under many circumstances that could be considered sexual only by great stretches of the imagination, but we have no reason to believe it is not also true of girls. Thus a frightened child, or a child receiving a spanking, may also be experiencing sexual arousal, and it is quite easy to imagine a classically conditioned response to this type of stimuli becoming entrenched at an early age. If this is true, then the root of S/M is the parent-child power differential, and only incidentally the male-female power differential. Even if this is not precisely how S/M becomes conditioned, it is useful to remember how similar physiological arousal states become. If we keep this in mind, it is not hard to see how some people could find pain (a heightened stimulation that increases general body arousal) an enhancement to sexual arousal. In this sense, S/M can be seen as a means of pushing the body's limits rather than unpleasant pain. Most of us can instinctively sense how this might be true. If we have ever engaged in rough sex, if we have ever scratched, clawed, or bitten our lover in moments of passion, if we have ever enjoyed unpleasant stimuli during sexual arousal (e.g., the scene in Rita Mae Brown's *In Her Day* during which the young heroine places an ice cube on her lover's clitoris just before orgasm)," then we have used pain for pleasure and can understand this connection. We can see that this aspect of S/M, at any rate, has little or nothing to do with sexism but probably has more to do with the physiology of sexual arousal, an aspect of biological functioning that we are only just recently beginning to understand.

But the aspect of S/M that involves physical pain is only one part of the picture that is disturbing to many feminists. Perhaps more upsetting is the connection between S/M practices and shame and humiliation. Much S/M, at least as practiced by lesbians currently, seems to involve humiliation and subjugation more than it involves actual pain. These aspects of S/M seem more connected to patriarchal conditioning.

This may be so, but it is useful to remember that patriarchy is not the only source of shame for a young girl growing up. Shame is a fairly typical concomitant of certain stages in the development of a moral conscience, or superego in young children. Shame is a concomitant of many types of religious upbringing, particularly religious teachings about sexuality; for example, the Catholic term for masturbation is self-abuse, which itself suggests a type of S/M activity. It may be true that many people who practice the types of S/M that involve ritual shaming, humiliation, and subjugation partially rework and psychologically overcome early, frightening experiences of shame, guilt, or domination. And these earlier experiences themselves may have become "sexualized" in childhood through the connection between fear-arousal and sexual-arousal.

Intuitively this explanation makes some sense. In therapy, we recognize the value of ritually acting out old, frightening dramas in our lives; we call it revivification, catharsis and abreaction, psychodrama, and so on. We also recognize the extent to which neurosis itself involves the playing out of ritual scripts and scenes, sometimes from very early childhood. Why should not our sexuality, the origins and functioning of which we understand so poorly, also make use of some of the same kinds of ritual reliving and undoing? If so, we can begin to understand, for example, the observation of an old therapist of mine that it seemed her female clients' S/M

fantasies became stronger the more assertive they became in their everyday lives, as though confining their subjugation to the bedroom allowed them to "work it out" there and overcome it. Another therapist commented that a masochistic client avowed that he always felt guilty about sex and had to punish himself afterwards until he figured out that he could punish himself before, get it over with, and then enjoy the sex.

There are four points I want to make about this. First, although it may be true that S/M eroticism is, in part, fueled by sexist power differentials and subjugation of women by men, it is also just as likely to be fueled by sex-negative religious messages or memories of subjugation of children by parents. Second, such eroticism may very well represent, at least for some people, a healthy working out of such early traumas rather than an unhealthy giving in to them. Third, it is quite likely that much of what we find sexually erotic has reached the status of functionally autonomous behavior by the time we reach adulthood. Fantasies and objects that may have become eroticized in adolescence or earlier for whatever psycho/social/sexual reasons—whether to work out conflict, because of familiarity, or however else things become eroticized in the first place—tend, often through repeated masturbation, to become solidly entrenched in our psyches as erotic material long after the relevant precipitating causes have ceased to be salient for us. This explains why humiliation, shame, or pain could be erotic to someone who is no longer religious and is an assertive, feminist adult. It is also likely that such functionally autonomous erotic material is not easily changed once we reach adulthood, and that attempts to eliminate such material from one's sexual repertoire will more likely constrict rather than liberate sexuality.

Fourth, although I have no pretensions to having thoroughly explained sadomasochistic eroticism, I do hope that I have demonstrated that S/M fantasy and behavior, and indeed human sexuality in general, is too complex to defy simplistic analysis, and that attempts to condemn any such type of sexuality in the individuals who practice it result more frequently in sexual constriction than in liberation. If this is so, then the ultimate truth about the S/M controversy within the lesbian community at this point may be that although its roots may be partially in patriarchy and it may carry the danger of excess, it may represent a freeing of our sexuality, an attempt to open up, expand, and embroider our sexual technique and erotic potential, and as such, it may be just what we need right now. Even those lesbians for whom S/M and its variants hold no interest may eventually benefit from the sexual openness that this trend in our community may portend.

**Butch-Femme Roles** Along with the rise of publicly advocated (as opposed to privately practiced) sadomasochism has come the advocacy of butch-femme roles. The advocacy of such roles appears to be a throwback to the fifties, when heterosexuals and homosexuals alike were busy polarizing men and women (and, more important, masculine and feminine). At first glance, butch-femme lib makes the average feminist's hair stand on end.

But a closer look at butch-femme advocacy shows that it is not so much a throwback to past times as it is a reaction against the lesbian-feminist clone look of the past decade. Most of us know the style: work boots or Frye boots, jeans, work shirt or flannel shirt, man-tailored vest (with or without tie), short hair, no makeup, preferably unshaved legs and underarms, perhaps even facial hair that is emphasized rather than bleached or removed. In an attempt to reject male-defined concepts of women's beauty, many of us ended up looking like teenage boys. Like many other things in our movement, a concept that started out being liberating for

many of us ended up being just one more confinement.

In addition, it was sexually boring. Marge Piercy, in the novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*, pictures a feminist society of the future that includes concepts of costume and body adornment, not as means of objectifying one class of people or as ways of physically confining that class (the intent of much of women's fashion throughout history), but as methods of play-acting, variety, and sexual enticement." The butch-femme proponents seem to recognize the importance to sexual desire of physical attractiveness and diversity of physical looks created by costume and adornment.

They also recognize an age-old concept of limerance, that which is popularly known by the truism "opposites attract" C. A. Tripp would characterize this as an aspect of the "import-export" theory of sexual attraction, and it indeed probably has been used historically to promote heterosexual attraction. That is, we can speculate that one of the functions of polarizing gender roles—assigning some personal or physical traits to one sex and others to the other sex—has been to reinforce heterosexual attraction along the lines of the import-export, "opposites attract" principle of sexual attraction. If we are male, for example, and are not permitted to be emotional, tender, nurturing, or "weak," then we may need a stereotypical female to provide us with those traits. If we are stereotypically female, we may need a male to provide us with the strength, emotional control, or aggressiveness not allowed by our role. Along the same lines, lesbians and gay men, although clearly not attracted to the opposite sex, may sometimes be attracted to the opposite sex role. That is, a butch lesbian, one whose gender-role identification has never been with stereotypically feminine interests or traits, may be drawn consistently to a femme lesbian, or one whose gender-role identification has been more traditionally feminine. The butch-femme advocates instinctively recognize this and address it in their rhetoric.

This is a very sensitive topic politically. Lesbian feminists have not wanted to acknowledge that there are some differences within our community in the extent to which women have identified with a traditionally male or female roles, and that lesbians may be attracted to each other on the basis of these differences. We have been afraid to look at these issues, I think because of the heterosexual stereotype of us that we are all divided into butch or femme, and because in our not-too-distant past we ourselves enforced those rigid roles upon ourselves.

The politically correct lesbian feminist line has been that butch-femme roles were essentially imitations of heterosexual culture, and that once we liberated our thinking through gay pride and feminist thought we rejected those roles and discovered that we are really all alike, that there are no roles. There is a good deal of truth to this. Certainly the rigid role-playing in lesbian culture of the past was a caricature of mainstream culture to a great extent, and certainly we are all a good deal more complex than the roles allowed us to be.

On the other hand, it has also probably always been true that there are differences among us in the extent to which we identify with traditionally male or female roles. In Radclyffe Hall's day, these differences were seen as dividing "real" lesbians, those with a male identification, from "imitation" lesbians, those who were more stereotypically feminine. Real and imitation also meant those who were exclusively homosexual (Kinsey 6's) versus those with some heterosexual experiences and impulses (Kinsey 4's and 5's). The two dichotomies were seen as related, and perhaps they are. One still hears echoes of such thinking. In my community throughout the 1970s some gay women maintained that the only real lesbians were born lesbians, meaning those who had an early identification as not female and who

had never had attractions to or experiences with men.

The point is that at least for the last fifty or sixty years these differences have existed in the lesbian community, and we have always been a bit baffled and disquieted by them. The butch-femme advocates, it seems to me, are beginning to acknowledge the differences and celebrate, rather than repudiate, them. On the whole, I suspect this is very positive. These women are acknowledging that physical appearance is important to sexuality, that at least sometimes, opposites attract, and that these opposites may be, to an extent, modeled after gender roles, affirming that it is all right to have different tastes and preferences, that we do not need all to act or look alike. They are also saying that it is all right to have different sexual tastes, not just in what or whom one is attracted to, but in what one does in bed: It is all right to prefer an active or passive role, to enjoy making love to or being made love to more. Our community has had a peculiarly ambivalent attitude toward sex roles. On the one hand, the greatest criticism one could make of another woman has been that she is male-identified. On the other hand, we despise the traditionally feminine as male-defined. This has left us very little room to maneuver, and has surely been one of the factors constraining our sexual selves. The butch-femme stance rejects these political limitations and enthusiastically supports diversity regardless of whether a particular behavior seems to be male-defined or patriarchal. I am sure that this has been liberating to many women. I have found it freeing to decide for myself that I like to wear dresses and makeup sometimes and that my lover hates them, and to acknowledge that indeed these apparently gender-linked traits were part of what attracted us to each other in the first place. Lesbians have always privately joked about butch-femme. "She's the butch in that relationship," someone might say jokingly and then look a little guilty, and it is undoubtedly healthy that this troublesome area is beginning to come out of the closet at last.

Indeed, at best the butch-femme position can help us transcend sex roles. It has been symptomatic of our gender conditioning that we always see these differences as gender-linked: The fact that our culture has typically defined a desire to paint one's face as female and a swaggering walk as male does not mean that these are biologically sex-linked traits. At best, we can learn to separate traits and behaviors from gender. Just as I believe that anything women do together sexually is lesbian sex, so it can be true that any behavior a woman engages in can be female behavior. Just as we can define intercourse from a male point of view as vaginal penetration or from a female point of view as penile containment, just as we can define a dildo as a penis substitute or a penis as a dildo substitute, we can redefine traits and characteristics as neither male nor female, but rather human idiosyncratic differences.

The danger of butch-femme, however, is that such redefinition will not take place, but that this trend will simply become a reintroduction of the same tired old sex roles from which we have been trying to escape. This will happen if we begin to see these differences as not merely interesting preferences that perhaps originated in childhood as modeling of gender roles, but as differences that should fit together as cohesive and integrated roles. An example: In my relationship, I am usually the femme in terms of appearance, although this role is by no means rigid, because I enjoy wearing men's jeans as much as I enjoy dresses. In bed my role is less clear. In other areas I am clearly the butch: I can use a hammer or a saw, and my lover cannot. Thus to label me the femme on the basis of differences in our appearance or abilities is misleading, because there exist in our relationship no such rigidified roles as exist in many heterosexual relationships. My fear is that the use of the terms

butch-femme will inevitably lead to such rigidification and will serve to imprison rather than to liberate us: I already see these trends. I had a client last year who was in a butch support group and who told me that she was feeling confused because she wanted to cry sometimes and "butches aren't supposed to cry." Humans seem sorely tempted to simplify life's complexity, and sex roles are the supreme simplification. I would feel more comfortable with butch-femme if we could find other terms for these contrasts that are less connotative of male-female sex roles. We need to create new terms that represent our striving toward a goal of celebrating difference that is fluid, changeable, and multifaceted, rather than terms evoking the origins of our differences in roles that are static and confining.

Monogamy versus Nonmonogamy. As Blumstein and Schwartz point out, lesbian couples handle outside sexual relationships in a unique way. Like their gay male counterparts, lesbians are open with their partners about extramarital sexuality. Like their heterosexual female counterparts, lesbians' outside relationships are affairs, rather than tricking." The combination is deadly. The lesbian-feminist community began debating the issue of monogamy in the mid-1970s, at about the same time, interestingly, that books like *Open Marriage* became popular among heterosexuals. The political rhetoric that developed was that monogamy was a patriarchal form originating from male ownership of women and children, and jealousy was the correspondingly retrogressive emotional concomitant of monogamy. In a matriarchal society, we would not want to own our partners, we would not split sex and love, we would see sex as a natural extension of all loving relationships, and therefore we would have sex with our friends with no consequences to our primary relationships. We then proceeded to put this theory into practice. Many relationships and friendships split up as a result.

It is time we viewed this issue realistically. I have earlier discussed other, not so idealistic motives that might induce a lesbian to engage in extramarital affairs. We need also to consider the possibility that the female tendency to fuse sex and love is not always an idealistic goal but rather a consequence of stereotypic role-conditioning. We are going to have to admit that very few of us are actually capable of negotiating prolonged emotional, sexual affairs with a new lover without damage to our primary relationships. Sex changes things, including friendships, and no matter where jealousy originated, it seems to be pervasive. If we are really interested in preserving, rather than jeopardizing, our primary relationships, we need to reconsider both monogamy as traditionally practiced or nonmonogamy as practiced by gay men. Gay male relationships are nonmonogamous more often than not, frequently without damage to the primary commitment, but the extramarital sexuality is almost always casual (even anonymous), brief, and recreational rather than emotionally intense. Moreover, gay male couples have rules for their nonmonogamy, rules that may seem to limit spontaneity but that surely serve also to limit the potential threat that outside sex poses to the relationship. These rules basically serve to prevent the partners from establishing precisely the kind of outside relationships that lesbians have hoped to achieve: relationships that combine both sex and love. The rules may be explicit or they may be nonverbal and merely understood, but they almost always exist. Most lesbians (as well as heterosexual women) reject this concept of nonmonogamy for the same reasons they reject all casual sex: It seems wrong, distasteful, immoral, and cheap. Many women who do not reject the notion of tricking on theoretical grounds are simply incapable of being turned on by sex without a relationship attached. If this is the case, we may have to live with monogamy until we can change our sexual preferences so that we are less romantic.



In recent years, I see one other interesting alternative, especially among some of the lesbian sex radicals who are experimenting with S/M, butch-femme roles, and other expansions of sexuality. Some women are redefining romance as an erotic game, rather than as ideal love. Instead of attempting to separate sex from romantic love, these women view romantic love as entirely different from the kind of love that is exhibited in a committed primary relationship. This concept, like the concept of tricking, has already been developed by some gay men. In its mildest form, it might involve an acknowledgment of the kind of intimacy that can be present in even a one-time sexual encounter. The gay male erotica writer John Preston writes eloquently of this." Another form of this concept is exemplified by a gay male friend who says that he tries to keep in touch with most of his tricks, even if he only has sex with them once or twice, as part of his friendship network. Yet another acquaintance has explained to me that he and his tricks almost always love one another, but that it is clearly understood from the beginning that there will be no commitment between them that will disturb my acquaintance's primary relationship. And finally, each member of a male couple I know that has been together fifteen years has a boyfriend. These boyfriend relationships themselves have each lasted several years. I am beginning to see women trying to emulate these different forms of relationships.

What new ideas or techniques of handling relationships are involved in these modes of nonmonogamy? First, there is an acknowledgment that the feelings of infatuation that constitute what we call romance are feelings that are totally separate from committed love. In a sense, the gay men and a few lesbians who do this are able to take romance less seriously than others. That is, they see romantic feelings as a variation of sexual feelings and are able to enjoy them without seeing them as a reflection upon their primary relationship. Second, people who negotiate these kinds of nonmonogamous relationships are able to have intimacy that is intense but limited. Third, these individuals (and couples) see the function of a primary relationship as a good deal more circumscribed than do most lesbians (and most heterosexual women). Most people in this culture, and women more than men, are taught to view primary relationships as all or nothing. We expect that our main partners will fulfill all of our intimacy needs as well as sexual needs. We may recognize that we have intimacy needs that must get fulfilled by friends rather than lovers; we may know that we have sexual needs that must get met by people other than our primary lover. It is difficult to comprehend that we might have intimate sexual partners with whom we might want to be intensely involved in a limited way at the same time that we maintain a primary relationship. Our dualistic thinking leads us almost inevitably to compare and choose one or another relationship.

In addition, it takes a great deal of maturity to recognize that the intense passion of the initial stages of such an outside relationship is no indicator of what is to come, and to keep in mind that the apparent perfect fit of such new relationships is an illusion that will pass in time. To negotiate such multiple relationships takes an ability to circumscribe and compartmentalize one's life in a way that most women are unable or unwilling to do.

**Bisexuality** The lesbian community, like the gay male community, has always been fairly intolerant of bisexuality for some reasons that are understandable. Indeed, the label bisexual has frequently been a cover for gay individuals unable to tolerate the homophobia of society and who found the label more acceptable than the homosexual one. Women and men who embraced the label gay have been a bit contemptuous and suspicious of those who refused this designation: Bisexuals were

seen as people who wanted to have their cake and eat it too, who wanted the freedom to have same-sex sexual activities while retaining heterosexual privilege. Probably many people who called themselves bisexual were attempting to do just that.

But in the last few years our community has witnessed the emergence of a new phenomenon. Ironically, as some of us have evolved as gay individuals we have continued to explore our sexual preferences and, once our gay identities were secure, have found a significant bisexual component. This group of people, who have identified as gay and who later decide that the bisexual designation is more appropriate, are being joined by younger people just coming out, who feel comfortable with gay relationships and a gay identity, but who simply feel that the label bisexual describes their feelings more appropriately. Thus a bisexual community, marginal to but connected with the gay community, is now developing, at least in larger urban areas and in academic communities.

It is possible, of course, that some members of this emerging subgroup are merely playing radical chic, identifying as bisexuals with no real intention of ever permanently giving up heterosexual privilege. But my estimation is that many of the people now identifying openly in this way are trying to acknowledge the fact that no matter what their preference (and I know of few people who maintain that they can simply ignore gender or that their attractions are exactly fifty-fifty), their attractions both to men and to women are real and important in their lives.

Why, then, are so many of us threatened by bisexuality? Partly for the reasons I have outlined, but I think for other reasons as well. I cannot speak for men, but I think that many lesbians are threatened because they are afraid that they, too, may need to reopen the issue of their choice of partners. The issue of choice is a sensitive one for lesbian feminists. Many of us would like to believe, on one hand, that we chose to be with women rather than men for reasons that are part emotional and part political, while at the same time we believe that we were always lesbians. It is uncomfortable for us to realize that what is chosen can be unchosen. Particularly in those moments when the heterosexist and homophobic burdens of society press down upon us most severely, it is not necessarily a comfort to feel that our lesbianism may be a product of our own free will. I have a lesbian friend who says, only half-jokingly when pressure and tension mount, "I'm going to find some nice man who will support me and get married." It may be that we have all chosen to be lesbians, consciously or unconsciously. For all or most lesbians, sexual preference may be indeed connected to gender role in a quite political way. This hit home for me recently as I read an article in Ms. magazine entitled "Two-Career Couples: How They Do It." I had picked up the article because my lover and I are just such a couple, with a small child to boot, and I thought I could get a few pointers. I was disappointed to find that the gist of the article, entirely about heterosexual families, was that these couples survive, by and large, because the woman still does the bulk of the housework and childcare. Study after study was cited showing that more than two-thirds of such couples are nonegalitarian in work distribution, and that in the one-third that are, husbands leave the wives eventually in depressingly large numbers. I reflected on how unknown this phenomenon is among lesbian couples; whatever problems exist among lesbian couples, nonegalitarianism is rarely one of them. And it struck me again that this aspect of our life-style is not coincidental, not merely a felicitous benefit reaped from our sexual attractions. It is an integral part of our lesbian choice. Many of us, for example, liked sex with men but still chose to be with women because of the quality of relationships with women, but primarily

because we were able to attain deep and truly egalitarian relationships with women. Some of us have a highly significant, occasionally even primary, erotic attraction to men but still identify as lesbians for the reasons I have cited, reasons that are personal to be sure, but that are also political inasmuch as they derive from the inherent inequality of many heterosexual relationships. Others of us experience our lesbianism as more unconscious, as a given rather than as a choice. But is this really so? How many of us who experience our sexual identity in this way ("I was always a lesbian, I was always different") remember our earliest lesbian identification, not necessarily as an erotic attraction but rather as dislike of and rebellion against heterosexual female roles. Perhaps those of us who were always lesbians simply blocked off our heterosexual options at such an early age that we no longer remember ever having such options; perhaps we were tomboys who looked around us at the adult war between men and women and said, essentially, "Hell, no, I won't go." Many lesbians who feel they were always lesbian also remember always feeling that they didn't/couldn't/wouldn't fit into the traditional feminine role. For these women, lesbianism is one option that is an alternative to the feminine fate, and thus is a type of political choice, albeit one made unconsciously at a very early age. Incidentally, this is an alternative explanation of Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith's data linking adult sexual orientation and nonconforming gender behavior in childhood. These researchers make the very sexist interpretation that the link suggests a genetic explanation for both homosexuality and gender-role behavior. I am clearly suggesting something very different.

The point I am making in relation to bisexuality, however, is that if my theory is even partly accurate it suggests that there is more choice involved in lesbianism than many of us would like to think. If that is the case, it is clear why bisexuality is a threatening phenomenon. To believe that one's sexual identity is a choice does seem to re-open options, a not always comfortable prospect; as a friend once said, "I struggled so long and with so much difficulty to develop a positive gay identity, I don't want to have to reconsider now." Choosing to move from a lesbian to a bisexual or heterosexual life-style involves loss for many women. Women I have counseled who moved from a lesbian identity to a relationship with a man did indeed lose some gay friends as well as their sense of community, activities, and involvements. Finally, the issue of choice implies a moral issue to many. That is, many straight people and some gay people feel that homosexuality is acceptable if it is a given, something unchangeable, preferably genetic, like left-handedness. Gay people who feel this way are able to feel positive about their gayness only by saying, in essence, "I can't help it." Seeing homosexuality as a choice destroys this psychological defense against guilt. Despite these discomforts, we must objectively examine the issue of bisexuality, not only out of fairness to those within our community who are increasingly making a bisexual identification, but also because understanding bisexuality may be critical to understanding the nature of sexual orientation itself. New work on bisexuality suggests, for example, that women may be more bisexual than men, perhaps because our sexual desire is less cued to physical visual stimuli, and that there are many different types of bisexuality. Examining male-female differences in bisexuality and analyzing types of bisexuality (e.g., some bisexuals say that gender doesn't matter, and others describe their relationships with men and women as qualitatively different) can teach us a great deal about sexual and romantic attraction in general.

**The Origins of Lesbian "Erotophobia"** Amber Hollibaugh has coined the term erotophobia to describe our reaction to sexuality, and indeed it does sometimes seem that we are afraid of intense sexual desire and passion." One evening while

watching our great gay playwright's work about women, men, and sexual passion, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, it struck me that Tennessee Williams had an instinctive sense of the terrible bind in which our society places women regarding their sexuality. Despite the sexual revolution, despite the change in women's sexual behavior, it is still generally true that men encourage women to be sexual and then hold them in complete contempt when they really are and dare to be truly lustful and passionate with whomever they choose. In the worst case, women's sexuality becomes an excuse for sexual assault, just as Blanche Dubois found that her sexual promiscuity both provided an excuse for Stanley Kowalski to rape her and then became the reason why no one believed her story of rape. Think of the stereotypical cry of the rapist who maintains that the victim "really wanted it," or the defense of the child molester or incest perpetrator who claims the child seduced him; and think of the culture that believes these violent men and asks victims to prove their sexual purity as proof of innocence.

Lesbians are women first, and we have been socialized as heterosexual women for at least a portion of our lives. What has been our response to viewing our culture's attitude toward female sexuality? Like other women, our sexuality is contaminated by these conflicting messages: Be sexual/don't be sexual/be a whore/be frigid/be a virgin/be innocent/be experienced/be passionate/be a slut. Our culture allows us only a narrow band of appropriate sexual behaviors, certain techniques practiced within the setting of a committed, loving relationship, and as much as we can and still be lesbians, we obediently comply. More specifically, because our sexual passion has been used as one of the excuses to perpetrate violence — rape, incest — against us, we protect ourselves against this violence in a way that must seem logical to our primitive instincts: by shutting off our sexual desire. We join in blaming the victim—ourselves. As Maryjane Sherfey maintains, we limit what may be a very wild and enormous capacity for sexual pleasure out of a misguided sense of self-protection." Because few of us as lesbians have escaped heterosexual conditioning, we carry this universal female ambivalence toward sex over into our gay lives. And because sexual power has so often been used against us, we try to take power out of our sex, and by doing so make it frequently so ethereal as to be so nonsexual, soft, warm, and cuddly as to eliminate passion.

Tennessee Williams, in the same play in which he portrays the awful price women pay for being sexual, also shows us why women might seek sexual contact despite such strict sanctions. Williams writes that sexual desire is a life force, an affirmation of life, and that sexual women are magnificent as well as tragic. Lesbians, more than heterosexual women, have the opportunity to divorce female sexuality from its heterosexist contest and to transcend male-dominated attempts to control, reduce, and constrain our passion. It is important that lesbians seize our opportunity to open up and expand our sexuality. This is the time for lesbians to explore our passion and the paths down which our sexual desire leads us, and to do this exploration without judgment except when absolutely necessary, when our sexuality is either clearly coercive or clearly self-destructive. Now is the time to affirm that anything that lesbians do sexually really is lesbian sexuality, to affirm all our sexuality as politically correct sex.

NOTES 1. Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwarz, *American Couples* (New York: William Morrow, 1983). 2. Karia Jay and Alien Young, *The Gay Report* (New York: Summit Books, 1977). 3. Margaret Nichols, "The Treatment of Inhibited Sexual Desire (ISD) in Lesbian Couples," *Women and Therapy* I (Winter 1982): 49-66. 4. C. A. Tripp, *The Homosexual Matrix* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1975). 5. Dan Bloom and

Michael Shernoff, "The Impact of AIDS upon the Urban Gay Male Community," paper presented at the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex, San Diego, Sept. 1985. 6. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). 7. Julia R. Heiman, "The Physiology of Erotica: Women's Sexual Arousal," *Psychology Today* 8 (Nov. 1975): 90-94. 8. Betty Berzon, "Positively Gay," presentation at American Psychological Association Conference, New York, Sept. 1979; Betty Berzon and Robert Leighton. *Positively Gay* (Millbrae, Calif.: Celestial Arts, 1979). 9. Alan P. Bell, Martin S. Weinberg, and Sue K. Hammersmith, *Sexual Preference: Its Development in Men and Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981); Jay and Young, *The Gay Report*. 10. Judith L. Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). 11. Virginia Apuzzo, personal communication, Feb. 1984; Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith, *Sexual Preference*. 12. Tripp, *The Homosexual Matrix*. 13. *Ibid.* 14. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sandra Thompson, *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984). 15. R. R. Linden, D. R. Pagano, D. Russell, and S. L. Star, *Against Sado-masochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* (East Palo Alto, Calif.: Frog in the Well, 1982). 16. Samois, *Coming to Power* (Boston: Alyson Press, 1982). 17. Bemie Zilbergeld and C. R. Ellison, "Desire Discrepancy and Arousal Problems in Sex Therapy," in *Principles and Practices of Sex Therapy*, ed. Sandra L. Leiblum and L. Pen-in (New York: Guilford Press, 1980). 18. Rita Mae Brown, *In Her Day* (New York: Daughters, 1977). 19. Marge Piercy, *Women on the Edge of Time* (New York: Fawcett, 1981). 20. Tripp, *Homosexual Matrix*. 21. Blumstein and Schwartz, *American Couples*. 22. John Preston, *I Once Had a Master* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1984). 23. Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith, *Sexual Preference*. 24. Fritz Klein and Timothy Wolf, *Bisexualities: Theory and Research* (New York: Haworth Press, 1985); Margaret Nichols and J. Paul, "Some Theoretical Issues Regarding Types of Bisexuality and the Original 'Bipholsia,'" paper presented at the Eastern Regional Council of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex, Philadelphia, April 1986. 25. Amber Hollibaugh, "The Erotic Voices of Lesbians," *New York Native*, vol. 3, 1983. 26. M. J. Sherfey, "The Evolution and Nature of Female Sexuality in Relation to Psychoanalytic Theory," *Journal of the American Analytic Association* 14 (1966): 28-128.