



Margaret Nichols, Ph.D.

Director

***Lesbian Relationships: Implications for  
the Study of Sexuality and Gender***

## **Lesbian Relationships: Implications for the Study of Sexuality and Gender**

In large part because of the legacy left by Kinsey and his colleagues at the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction (formally the Institute for Sex Research), research on homosexuality in the last two decades has evolved beyond the "pathology" model that, aside from its moral judgmentalism, inappropriately restricted the study of sexual orientation to an overly narrow domain of interest. We have a growing body of work that, instead of asking "what pathology has produced this aberrant behavior," asks the far more relevant question "how and why does human sexuality diversify in such interesting ways, particularly regarding the gender of the sexual or romantic partner?" The new researchers in sexual orientation recognize the foresight of Kinsey's conceptualization of a continuum of attractions based on the gender of object choice, and they recognize the limitations of this 40-year-old model. They understand not only that attractions to same and opposite sex can exist side by side in the same person; they are beginning to catalog the many ways in which both heterosexual and homosexual attractions have been manifested in different time periods and cultures and by different individuals within a culture. Because issues of sexual orientation are so complex, they are also linked to topics of gender and gender role socialization and questions about human love and sexual relationships. Thus the study of any subsegment of homosexual or bisexual expression has the potential to enlighten us about human sexuality in many ways.

Lesbianism has always been less understood than male homosexuality, in part because of simple sexism, in part because most research has found the incidence of lesbianism to be lower than rates of male homosexuality, women who love other women are less frequently studied. And yet ample evidence exists to suggest that lesbians are not simply female reproductions of gay men. In fact, because lesbians seem so different from gay men at times, contrasting gay male relationships with lesbian relationships with heterosexual relationships, as Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) did in their highly creative work, gives us exciting opportunities to observe the interaction of gender, sex, and relationships. Such study yields important knowledge about the social construction of our sex roles, our sexuality, and our loves.

To emphasize what we can learn about socialization does not exclude the possible contribution that biology, including genetic and prenatal influence, plays in the development of sexuality. Yet certain social forces seem undeniable. To anyone studying lesbianism in any depth, the role of sex role socialization and cultural attitudes toward women seems unmistakable. One of the thrusts of this chapter will be to highlight what lesbian relationships have to tell us about all women.

Indeed, even the lower incidence of homosexuality in women may be in part a reflection of the socialization of women. For example, it has been amply documented that lesbian women, when compared to gay men, tend to recognize and act upon their same-sex attractions at a later age. Higher percentages of lesbians have had heterosexual sex and a higher percentage marry heterosexually (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Jay & Young, 1979). However, married gay men stay married longer and report being happier in their marriages, prompting Bell and Weinberg to say:

"Women were less likely to behave sexually in accordance with their true interests . . . It is possible that lesbians' greater heterosexuality simply reflects a history of accommodation to males in a sexual context or of conformity to social expectations" (p. 60)

In other words, the relative ratio of gay men to lesbians may reflect men's relatively higher rates of all kinds of sexual activity coupled with women's relative lack of personal freedom to live their lives as they choose. Women in this culture have generally fewer life options than men, including the option to openly live out one's homosexuality. In order to elucidate some of the ways in which lesbian relationships can cast light upon our knowledge of women, this chapter will consider four aspects of female homosexuality: a historical overview of the various forms lesbian relationships have taken in this century, a discussion of research findings of bisexual women, the dynamics of lesbian couples, and breakthroughs of the emerging lesbian sex radical movement.

When one takes even a cursory look at historical and anthropological evidence, it becomes clear that the "essentialist" view of sexual orientation, which regards orientation as an almost immutable trait like skin color or height, cannot encompass all the variations of same-sex behavior that we know to exist and to have existed in the past. Three illustrations of the forms that lesbian relationships have taken in this country in the last century and a half will clarify this point. For example, Lillian Faderman's fascinating book *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981) describes the "romantic friendships" common among upper-middle-class women of the previous two centuries. During these years, a number of single, childless women lived in lifelong companionships with other women that often enabled them to live more career-oriented or at least intellectually oriented lives than would have been possible in traditional wife/mother roles. From accounts that some of these women have left behind (diaries, letters, and so on), Faderman concludes that many "Boston marriages," as they were often called, were emotionally passionate, intimate relationships comparable to heterosexual marriage but often probably without a genital sexual component. The women involved in these companionships did not consider themselves "lesbians;" indeed, for much of this time period neither the word nor the concept for lesbianism existed. Nevertheless, Faderman, who has since drawn parallels between these women and today's radical lesbian feminists (1984), argues that they be considered "gay" relationships on the basis of their romantic/emotional component and their structural similarities to heterosexual marriage. Faderman's analysis raises interesting questions about how one defines sexual orientation (Is a relationship lesbian if genital sexual contact is absent?), but also highlights the interaction of sexual orientation/sexual identity with the sociopolitical functions served by the homosexual role. It is extremely important to recognize that women in romantic friendships were, by virtue of their "lesbianism," able to be free of many of the social constraints experienced by heterosexually married women. Thus, seen in this context, sexual orientation means far more than the seemingly neutral choice of gender of the romantic or sexual partner. When cultures use gender as a primary organizing principle for the structuring of nearly every aspect of an individual's life, then the choice of gender of partner must of necessity be laden with social meaning and implication. As we will see in the next section, there is increasing evidence that at least for some people, sexual attraction is not immutably determined from birth. Given this, it is almost irresistible to conclude that the social meanings, roles, and functions attached to gender must in some way influence the development and expression of sexual orientation.

Looking at history shows us that the theme enunciated by "romantic friendships"—that of escaping the traditional roles culturally assigned to women—repeats itself over and over again in lesbian relationships. Jonathan Katz (1976) documents the phenomenon of "passing women" in America around the turn of the century. During this era, a number of women dressed as men and used male names, taking on male

identities and roles and often "marrying" women. They disguised themselves in this way and often assumed a male persona for their entire adult lives, unknown as women to their closest associates, and sometimes even to their "wives." Some achieved great prominence in business and politics, holding elected office as men, and they were not discovered to be female until after death, upon autopsy or preparation of the body for burial. What we know of these individuals comes largely from newspaper accounts after death revealed their true identities, less frequently from personal diaries. The few accounts they left behind in their own words strongly suggest that "passing women" were motivated at least as much by their desire to escape the limited social roles available to women as they were to actualize their same-sex erotic attractions. Again, the social meanings attached to gender appear to interact with sexual orientation.

The third piece of historical data we can consider is the growth of lesbian-feminist culture in the 1970s (Faderman, 1984). During this decade, many women seemed to come to a recognition of their same-sex attractions through the vehicle of the women's movement. Typically, the lesbian who "came out" in this way was largely unaware of her same-sex impulses until adulthood. Often she had married heterosexually and was dissatisfied with her relationships with men for a variety of reasons that found articulation through the political philosophy of feminism. Many such women began actively pursuing a lesbian life-style only after a personal political transformation and after seeing lesbianism validated by women's groups and organizations. They often consider their lesbianism a "choice" and rationalize their new life-style with the rhetoric of feminism:

Women who came to lesbianism reject the notion that lesbianism is a sexual identity. This is not to say that sexual expression is usually absent in the new gay women's lives; rather, sexual activity is for them generally only one aspect and perhaps a relatively unimportant aspect of their commitment to a lesbian lifestyle. Lesbianism in this context, or, more precisely, lesbian-feminism, is defined as a political choice more than a sexual preference . . . less a personal choice about who to sleep with than a uniting of women against patriarchal power. Lesbian feminists deny that the choice to be lesbian arises from sexual interest or sexual proclivity . . . Instead, lesbian feminists define lesbianism in much more inclusive terms: a lesbian's entire sense of self centers on women. (Faderman, 1984, pp. 86-87)

In some ways, lesbian feminists have articulated in defiantly political terms what "passing women" articulated in an individualistic framework and what remained without voice for women in romantic friendships (Nichols & Leiblum, 1986). It is not suggested here that sexism is the sole determinant of lesbian relationships. In addition to personal, interpersonal, and family dynamics, biologic or innate predisposition is quite likely to play a role in the unfolding of sexual orientation. For some individuals, the cultural loading of gender may have little or nothing to do with their expression of sexual identity. Moreover, it is just as likely that for many people the social functions assigned to gender may shape the manifestation of sexual orientation but not the initial formation of erotic attractions. For example, lesbians in the 1950s often assumed rigid "butch-femme" roles in their couple relationships, and the butch-femme phenomenon seems more related to an imitation of existing heterosexual models of relationships than to the formation of erotic attraction (Nichols & Leiblum, 1986). As we shall see in the section on lesbian couples, sex role socialization may influence the dynamics of female-female pairings in a way independent of the origins of same-sex erotic pull. Nevertheless, the study of the differentiation of sexual orientation can be greatly enhanced by considering the

various functions, roles, and meanings that directly or indirectly accrue to a homosexual versus heterosexual life-style. Same-sex erotic attraction is probably a necessary but not sufficient condition for homosexual behavior or identity. For some lesbians, the cultural roles assigned to women seem to influence the expression of attraction.

### **Bisexuality in Women and Its Relationship to Lesbianism**

Additional insight about sexual orientation in women can be achieved by reviewing some of the newer research on bisexuality in women. The study of bisexuality is made more difficult by lack of a precise definition. Do we use as our criterion fantasy, attraction, or behavior, and do we attend to quantity or quality of contact, sexual versus relationship aspects, history over a life span or recent behavior? Masters and Johnson (1979), for example, found what they termed "cross-preference encounter" sexual fantasies to be quite common for all their subjects. Lesbian sexual fantasies were the fifth most common fantasy among women who identify as heterosexual, and heterosexual fantasies ranked third for self-identified lesbians. Bell and Weinberg (1978) reported that only half of lesbian women rate their feelings and attractions as exclusively gay. Hyde (1982), in interpreting data from both the Kinsey surveys and the Hune survey of the 1970s, estimated that on the basis of same- and opposite-sex behavior in adulthood, approximately 15% of women are bisexual and less than 10% exclusively homosexual. Bell and Weinberg additionally estimated that more than one third of their lesbian sample exhibited what they called a "partial bisexual style," that is, some current pleasurable heterosexual activity and attractions despite a predominantly gay life-style and lesbian identity. Moreover, even among their "heterosexual control group," 10% of women were behaviorally bisexual. These statistics suggest that (1) far more women behave bisexually and/or experience bisexual fantasies and attractions than are self-labeled as bisexual; (2) lesbianism is something of a residual category in this culture, that is, large percentages of women who self-label as gay are in fact both erotically and behaviorally bisexual, not just in terms of life history but also with regard to their current behavior and feelings. Lesbian means "not exclusively heterosexual" as much as it means "exclusively homosexual." In a sense, these data make lesbianism an even more interesting phenomenon. Clearly, lesbianism is not merely a matter of an overwhelming, single-focus sexual attraction. These facts about bisexuality make the nonbiologic factors operative in lesbianism even more relevant and give insight into the claim of some gay women that they "chose" their sexual orientation.

Three more pieces of research on bisexuality shed additional light on the complexity of sexual attraction and orientation in women. Nichols (1985) asked gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual subjects to rate themselves on a series of Kinsey-style scales with regard to various dimensions of behavior, fantasy, and emotional attractions for both past and current time periods and related these dimensions to self-identified sexual orientation. Gays and lesbians, but particularly lesbians, showed little internal consistency in their ratings. Among lesbians, it was not at all uncommon to find "heterosexual" ratings of fantasy and behavior; only much more in the last year was highly related to self-label. Again, this work suggests that women often identify as lesbians and live a lesbian life-style for reasons more complex than merely strength of erotic attraction. Two other studies of bisexual women in marriages suggest that erotic attraction itself may be more fluid and variable in women than has previously been believed. Both Coleman (1985) and Dixon (1985) found fewer than half of these married women to have been aware of homosexual feelings prior to marriage. Many appeared to make dramatic swings in

Kinsey ratings of both behavior and fantasy over the course of the marriage. These findings cast doubt upon the widely held belief in the inflexibility of sexual orientation and attraction over a lifetime, as well as the assumption that homosexual attractions are developed and "fixed" in early childhood or adolescence. For some women, at least, sexuality is fluid and changeable over time. Dixon, who studied women in "swinging" marriages, found that few of her subjects reported homoerotic fantasies or attractions before engaging in lesbian activities during "swinging" scenes, but most reported such fantasies and attraction after pleasurable lesbian sex. It seems, then, that for some women, fantasy can follow pleasurable behavior rather than be an antecedent to it. From a cursory examination of bisexuality in women, we see that female sexual orientation, at least for some, can be fluid and dynamic and that by implication lesbianism is a multifactored life-style, not merely the expression of a biological imperative or of some intransient orientation fixed early in childhood.

### **Lesbian Couples: Implications for the Study of Relationships**

If we examine the loving relationships that lesbians form with each other, we discover that although in many ways lesbian couples are like any other kind of couple, there are several interesting differences that illuminate not only the dynamics of woman-to-woman pairings but also other kinds of relationships as well. Lesbian relationships represent, above all, the interactions of women with each other in the absence of a male influence, or at least in a setting that is as free of male influence as one can get given the early sex role socialization that affects us all.

What do we know of contemporary lesbian relationships? First, because lesbians as a group have been underresearched, we know less about lesbian couples than about any other kind of pairing. For example, there is no work on lesbians to compare with the pioneering research on gay male couples conducted by McWhirter and Mattison (1984) or Silverstein (1981). But we do know that like heterosexual women, lesbians value relationships very highly. For example, Bell and Weinberg (1978) found that 82% of the lesbians they interviewed were currently living with partners. In addition, they found that a majority of lesbians rated being in a committed relationship as the most important value in their lives. Like other women, most lesbians have been socialized to value relationships more highly than careers or other life goals. Furthermore, lesbians idealize their relationships in a way that is somewhat different from others in the culture. Peplau, Cochran, Rook, and Padesky (1978) found that lesbians value egalitarianism in their relationships more than do others, although they may not always achieve the egalitarianism. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) noted that lesbians are less concerned with physical beauty and age of a partner. Thus, it appears that many lesbians cherish committed relationships as the most important aspect of life and attempt to incorporate feminist values of equality into their partnerships, although not always with more success than heterosexual women or gay or heterosexual men.

The most striking differences between lesbian couples and other kinds of couples have to do with sexuality and sexual frequency. Single lesbians have less frequent sex and fewer different partners than do gay men (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Jay & Young, 1979). This is not surprising because at least until the advent of AIDS, gay men were probably more sexually active than anyone else in the culture. And some research suggests that, overall, lesbians may be more sexually responsive and more satisfied with the sex they do have than are heterosexual women (Goleman, Hoon, & Hoon, 1983; Masters & Johnson, 1979). Masters and Johnson speculate that the sexual techniques of lesbians, which tend to be sensuous, less genitally and orgasm focused, and less oriented to vaginal penetration, are generally more suited to the

sexual needs of women than is heterosexual sexual activity. Lesbians do not seem to have pervasive sexual problems. Clinical reports do not suggest, for example, that gay women have significant rates of orgasmic dysfunction, and dyspareunia and vaginismus are almost unheard of among gay women for reasons probably related to sexual technique. But lesbians do seem to have strikingly low rates of sex within long-term committed relationships.

Most clinicians and sex therapists working with lesbian couples have noted the high prevalence of sexual desire disorders among such couples (Burch, 1982; Decker, 1984; Kaufman, Hamson, & Hyde, 1984; Nichols, 1982, 1987, 1988; Roth, 1985). Sociologists Blumstein and Schwartz (1983), comparing heterosexual married and unmarried couples, gay male, and lesbian couples, have given us the most comprehensive data we have on this topic. They found that lesbian couples in long-term relationships have sex far less frequently than any other type of couple studied. Only about one third of lesbians in relationships of 2 years or more had sex once a week or more. Forty-seven percent of lesbians in relationships of over 5 years had sex once a month or less. This is in striking contrast, for example, to heterosexual married couples: two thirds of these couples together more than 5 years had sex once a week or more, and only 15% had sex once a month or less.

That this dynamic is related to lesbians' status as women rather than to their homosexual nature of the coupling is evident from the Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) data on gay male couples. Gay men have slightly less sex in their primary relationships than do heterosexual couples; on the other hand, gay males have the highest rates of extramarital sex. This means that lesbians in couple relationships are less sexual both within and outside the relationship than any other group, just as uncoupled lesbians have less frequent sex and fewer partners than do gay men. Moreover, Blumstein and Schwartz's findings indicate other differences as well. Their lesbian subjects preferred bugging, cuddling, and other nongenital physical contact to genital sex, reminiscent of reports from heterosexual women in such surveys as the Hite Report (1976). Similarly, both Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) and Jay and Young (1979) found lesbians to be more constricted in their range of sexual techniques than other couples. For example, 61% of lesbian couples have oral sex "infrequently or not at all," leaving the repertoire of the majority of couples limited to manual stimulation and tribadism. Lesbians have about the same rates of nonmonogamy as do heterosexuals (28% 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. Moreover, both lesbians and gay men tend to have sex in the context of an "open" relationship in contrast to the secretive "infidelities" common among heterosexuals. But lesbians, like heterosexual women and unlike both gay and straight men, are likely to have "affairs" rather than just sexual encounters. Finally, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) reported that one half of lesbians in couples with a low frequency of genital contact said that they were dissatisfied with their sexuality. And in an 18-month follow-up of all couples, lesbian couples had the highest rates of dissolution of any couple type. The pattern of breakup was significant: one partner had an outside affair and subsequently left the primary relationship for the new lover.

How are we to explain these findings? They fly in the face of not only the belief that women culturally form the "glue" that holds relationships together but also findings showing the high value lesbians place on relationships, the high percentages of lesbians that are members of committed couples at any given time, and the general level of satisfaction lesbians report about the sexual encounters they do have. It

seems clear, given the dissimilarities between gay male and lesbian couples, that we must interpret these findings as dynamics of woman-to-woman pairings, the effects of female socialization multiplied rather than concomitants of homosexuality. Given that, what sense can be made of the data on lesbian couples to shed light upon femininity as expressed in this culture?

It appears, first, that the recognizably feminine values of relationship orientation and egalitarianism may influence the tendency to be coupled but not necessarily the ability to make a relationship last. On this point, it is important to stress that we have only one study—the Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) research—that gives us hard data on longevity of lesbian couples. Moreover, Blumstein and Schwartz themselves are quick to remind us that the variable of social sanction seems to be the predominant factor correlated with relationship longevity. That is, heterosexual married couples stay together longer than any type of unmarried couple, be it heterosexual, gay male, or lesbian, and the differences between longevity of married versus unmarried couples are far greater than differences among any type of unmarried couple. Nevertheless, it is safe to assume at this juncture that lesbian couples do not experience more longevity than other types of couples, which is what one would assume from the stereotype that women provide the "glue" of relationships. Further, although lesbian sex may be more pleasurable and intrinsically/biologically "right" for women than more genitally/orgasmically focused sex, this does not seem to contribute to frequency of sexual encounters within a long-term relationship.

To an extent, the data on frequency of sex within lesbian relationships forces us to examine our beliefs about the significance of sexual interaction within any committed relationship. Just as Faderman (1981) argued, in her work of "romantic friendships," for a definition of lesbianism that did not necessarily include genital sex, so it is probably true that some lesbians are not disturbed by the infrequency or even total absence of genital sex in their relationships. Trip? (1975) and others have observed numerous long-term lesbian relationships devoid of genital sexual contact without apparent disturbance, and Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) revealed that many of their lesbian subjects expressed a preference for hugging and cuddling over genital physical contact. Some lesbians simply do not place a high priority on sex, and in this regard they resemble some heterosexual women. Schreiner-Engel (1986), for example, reported that even among heterosexual subjects who define themselves as suffering from problems of low sexual desire, men and women differ markedly, with men reporting situational or secondary desire disorders and women reporting primary problems: half of these women report never experiencing sexual desire. And all surveys of sexual behavior show women, overall, to be less sexually active than men. To an extent lesbian couples may simply enact the sexual desires of women in general. While it may not be true that women provide the "glue" in relationships, it is possible that men tend to provide the major push for frequent sex in long-term relationships.

Thus, one interpretation of the data on sexuality in lesbian relationships is that the low frequency of genital sex coupled with a relatively constricted sexual repertoire and high frequency on nongenital physical expressions of affection represents a "true" expression of female sexuality. For some lesbians this is undoubtedly the case. However, just as some women have high sexual needs and desires for a broad range of sexual/genital activities, some lesbians clearly are dissatisfied with the sexual patterns that predominate in their long-term relationships. Some evidence for this is direct: many lesbians report dissatisfaction, and low sexual frequency is often noted



as a complaint of lesbians seeking couple counseling. Other evidence is indirect: we can infer that the relatively higher dissolution rate for lesbian relationships found by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) may be related to low rates of sexual contact. In fact, the pattern found in the Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) study is one frequently noted by clinicians working with lesbian couples. That pattern consists of a sharp decrease or even absence of sex in the couple after a few years, followed by one member seeking an outside lover and eventually leaving her partner for that lover.

This evidence suggests that we need to consider the low rates of sexual expression found in long-term lesbian relationships as a problem for at least some gay women rather than simply an expression of female sexuality in its "natural" form (i.e., not influenced by a male presence). What might be the source of this sexual dysfunction? The sources of low sexual frequency among lesbian couples have been discussed elsewhere in depth (Nichols, 1982,1987,1988), but a brief discussion of three of these causes will illustrate points about female sexuality as well as lesbian relationships.

To an extent, the behavior of lesbians in couples may reflect an extreme example of the general approach women take to sexuality and relationships. While it is true that women tend to value committed relationships highly, it may be that at times they choose to be in relationships at the expense of individual differentiation and the development of personal autonomy and emotional self-sufficiency. Moreover, women, somewhat more than men, tend to fuse sex and love, expressing their sexuality primarily in the context of an emotional pair-bond. Thus, it is not surprising that lesbians, manifesting these female tendencies, tend to be coupled in such high numbers. Many gay women spend little of their adult lives as single women, moving directly from one love relationship into another. Moreover, lesbians often tend to interpret sexual attraction as love and move very rapidly from the initial limerent stage of a relationship to a live-in commitment within weeks or even days. This quick progression from attraction to commitment allows little opportunity for partners to explore the practical feasibility of the relationship, that is, to ascertain differences that might lead to conflict. Thus, the high dissolution rate of gay women's partnerships probably reflects to an extent the initial inappropriateness of partner choice, an inappropriateness that might have been discovered before a commitment was made had the women been a little more comfortable with their status as single adults and a bit more at ease with the idea of sex without commitment. These twin tendencies—to value relationships at an extreme over being single and to express sex only within the context of a relationship—partially account for lesbians' patterns of nonmonogamy and movement from one relationship to the next. When lesbians are dissatisfied with a primary relationship (often because of low sexual frequency), they seek outside outlets but seem able to do this only by "falling in love" with a new woman, breaking the old commitment, and rapidly recommitting to the new lover.

A few other factors that influence the low sexual frequency in lesbian relationships are worthy of mention. The first is that the low sexual frequency and constricted sexual repertoires of lesbian couples probably reflect the general socialization women receive in this culture to fear sex and thus to devalue it and repress their own sexual desires. As Carol Vance (1984) has written: Women—socialized by mothers to keep their dresses down, their pants up, and their bodies away from strangers—come to experience their own sexual impulses as dangerous. Self-control and watchfulness become necessary female virtues. As a result, female desire is suspect from its first tingle, questionable until proven safe, and frequently too expensive when evaluated within the larger cultural framework which poses the question. Is it really worth it?

When unwanted pregnancies, street harassment, stigma, unemployment, queer bashing, rape, and arrest are weighed on the side of caution and inaction, passion often doesn't stand a chance, (p. 4) We see no reason to believe that lesbians have escaped the conditioning Vance describes, which seems ironic in light of the fact that some lesbian feminists maintain they have "chosen" their lesbianism in part precisely in the hope of escaping these dynamics.

Finally, low sexual frequency in lesbian relationships is often a correlate of what has been noted by clinicians as the phenomenon of fusing (Kaufman et al, 1984; Nichols, 1982; Roth, 1984, 1985). Kaufman et al. (1984) described fusion, which appears to be very common in lesbian relationships, in the following way: [This] relationship distress is characterized by excessive closeness between women, extreme and intense ambivalence, and a failure to establish emotional, territorial, temporal, and cognitive space for each individual . . . These lesbian couples . . . appeared to be too closely merged and symbiotic. . . For these couples the initial merging that occurred with the early stage of falling and being in love would not yield to increasing pressures from the environment. The oneness, a kind of narcissistic failure to allow for separateness or a defense against difference, had become the norm or the expected state they would strive to achieve and maintain through more and more closeness. . . Each ignored her own needs for space as well as those of her partner, (p. 530) Kaufman et al. proceeded to describe a cluster of behaviors typical of fused lesbian couples. These behaviors include attempts to share all social, recreational, and sometimes professional activities; the absence of individual friendships; little or no separate physical space or belongings, including clothing; regular telephone intrusions into the workday so that partners rarely spend even a few hours without being in contact with each other, and communication patterns that indicate assumptions of shared thoughts, values, and ideas (e.g., sentences started by one woman may be completed by another).

These couples represent an extreme version of the kind of closeness and intimacy in which all women are trained so well. In one sense, lesbians achieve what many other women idealize. Or, as Kaufman et al. (1984) suggest: "These behaviors are strongly reinforced by cultural descriptions of the idealized romantic relationship of lovers riding off into the sunset, escaping worldly pressures and reality in their isolation, making promises of lifelong fidelity, and believing that they belong to one another, (p. 531)"

To an extent, lesbian couples achieve what is represented in women's pulp romantic novels, and in doing so they show us the "down side" of intimacy, what the need and desire for intimacy can do when it is unmitigated by the more typically male attitude that emphasizes distance and autonomy. Individual differences are suppressed in favor of the dyad, and closeness comes to be defined as sameness. This need to suppress individuality, although it can be comforting and can enhance a certain kind of egalitarianism, often produces tension and ambivalence, which are expressed by avoiding intimate genital sexual contact. Avoidance of genital sexuality can be seen as a way to achieve distance in relationships severely in need of space. Additionally, if one sees sexual contact as a method couples use to achieve oneness, it is clear that this mechanism is simply unnecessary in fused relationships. And finally, to the extent that sexual desire is sparked by difference between partners and the desire to overcome the boundaries established by difference, this means of fueling desire is absent in fused lesbian couples. Thus, the examination of these dynamics in lesbian relationships can potentially teach us a great deal, not only about female socialization regarding love and sexual behavior but also about the negative and positive

contributions this type of socialization makes to sexual and relationship dynamics.

### **The Lesbian Sex Radicals**

To conclude this review of lesbian relationships, let us mention one of the most recent movements to develop out of the lesbian community, one that stands in contrast to much of our discussion of lesbian couple dynamics. In the late 1970s some lesbians, borrowing from the gay male sexual liberation activities that proliferated during that decade, began to organize groups and organizations to radicalize sexuality for women. Activities of the lesbian sex radicals have included the production of written, auditory, and visual erotica; the dissemination of information regarding a broad range of sexual techniques; the exposition of theoretical tracts about female sexual liberation; and the development of support groups for women wishing to experiment with casual sex, multiple sexual partners, bisexuality, and unusual sexual practices such as domination/submission, bondage, and so on. If traditional female sexual conditioning emphasizes the fusion of sex and love, the lesbian sex radicals quite consciously emphasize the separation of the two, but in an atmosphere that stresses female-oriented values such as equality of power, consensuality, safety, and emotional nurturance. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to detail or describe this movement, it is worth noting that some lesbians themselves seem conscious of the pitfalls of feminine cultural socialization regarding sex and love and are deliberately attempting to change traditionally held values and behaviors. This movement is without parallel in the heterosexual female culture at large. It will be interesting to see whether it can survive and what role it will play in shaping the character of lesbian relationships in the future.