

Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Relationships

Intimate same-sex relationships have existed throughout history and in places across the globe. This entry presents scientific knowledge about gay and lesbian relationships in contemporary society. Although the relationships of bisexuals are not well understood, key findings are highlighted. A notable limitation of current knowledge is that most research has been conducted in the United States with primarily White, middle-class people.

About 1 percent of adult women self-identify as lesbian and 2 percent of adult men self-identify as gay. Many of these individuals have an intimate relationship. In an illustrative project, demographers Christopher Carpenter and Gary J. Gates analyzed representative surveys and census data from California. They estimated that about 40 percent of gay men and more than 50 percent of lesbians age 18 to 59 are currently living with a same-sex partner. In comparison, about 60 percent of heterosexuals age 18 to 59 are currently living with an other-sex partner. At the time of this study, same-sex couples in California could register as domestic partners with rights and responsibilities similar to those of married heterosexuals. Carpenter and Gates found that almost half of cohabiting lesbians are registered as domestic partners, compared with less than a quarter of cohabiting gay men. U.S. Census data show that gay and lesbian couples can be found in all parts of the country.

The experiences of same-sex couples in the United States are influenced by the social stigma of homosexuality. Although social attitudes are becoming more tolerant, many gay and lesbian individuals and couples report incidents of social rejection, prejudice, and discrimination. In national polls, only half of Americans say that same-sex couples should be allowed to form legally recognized civil unions or domestic partnerships. The topic of same-sex marriage continues to be a source of heated controversy.

Despite the differing social contexts for same-sex and heterosexual relationships, there are many commonalities in the close romantic relationships of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual individuals. Human needs for intimacy and the capacity to form strong emotional attachments affect all of us. Most adults want to have a committed love relationship, and lesbians and gay men are no exception. In one national survey, three of four lesbians and gay men said that if same-sex marriage were legal, they would like to get married at some time in their lives. Whatever their sexual orientation, most individuals seek similar qualities in a romantic partner, including affection, dependability, shared interests, and similarity of religious beliefs.

Relationship Satisfaction

Researchers have compared gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples using standard measures of love, intimacy, and relationship satisfaction. The consistent finding is that same-sex couples do not differ significantly from heterosexual couples on these measures. This does not mean, of course, that all same-sex couples have satisfying relationships but, rather, that lesbian and gay couples are no more likely to have good—or bad—relationships than are their heterosexual peers.

Further, the factors that enhance or detract from satisfaction in same-sex and heterosexual relationships are similar. For example, regardless of sexual orientation, relationship quality is greater when partners trust each other and have effective communication skills. On average, same-sex and heterosexual couples do not differ on these predictors of relationship quality. Relationships also benefit when partners receive support from people in their social network. The support experiences of same-sex and heterosexual couples do sometimes differ. When asked to name the individuals who provide them with help, advice, and emotional support, lesbians and gay men are more likely than heterosexuals to name friends and less likely to mention family members as support providers. On balance, however, same-sex and heterosexual couples usually receive comparable levels of social support, but from different sources.

No relationship escapes at least occasional disagreement or conflict. Lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples generally report disagreeing about similar topics, with finances, affection, sex, criticism, and household tasks heading the list. They also report arguing with similar frequency. Same-sex couples face some unique problems, however, such as whether to disclose their sexual orientation or the intimate nature of their relationship to other people. Another central issue is how successfully partners are able to solve problems that arise in their relationship. Both self-report surveys and studies observing couples in laboratory settings indicate that lesbians and gay men are at least as good as heterosexuals in solving relationship problems.

Sexuality

In general, gay and lesbian partners report levels of sexual satisfaction comparable with those of heterosexuals. Greater sexual satisfaction is usually associated with greater overall relationship satisfaction. There is wide variability in sexual frequency and a general decline in frequency the longer a couple is together. On average, lesbian couples report having sex less often than either heterosexual or gay male couples. Early in a relationship, gay male couples have sex more often than other couples do. The reasons for these differences in reports of sexual frequency are not well understood. Some speculate that gender socialization leads women to repress sexual feelings, to have difficulty initiating sex with a partner, or to define sexuality differently than men do. Others suggest that men are generally more interested in sex than women, leading to

more frequent sexual activity in a couple with at least one male partner.

A consistent finding is that gay men differ from both lesbian and heterosexual couples in their attitudes and behavior about sexual exclusiveness. Data from the large American Couples study conducted by Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz are illustrative. Only 36 percent of gay men said it was important to them to have a sexually monogamous relationship, compared with 71 percent of lesbians, 75 percent of heterosexual husbands, and 84 percent, of wives. In actual behavior, only a minority of lesbians (28 percent), husbands (26 percent), and wives (21 percent) had engaged in sex outside their primary relationship, compared with 82 percent of gay men. Sexual fidelity is positively related to relationship satisfaction for lesbian and heterosexual couples, but not for gay male couples. One reason is that some gay male couples have agreements permitting sex outside their primary relationship.

Gender Roles

Western societies have traditionally defined heterosexual marriage as having distinct gender roles: the husband is the head of household, economic provider, and chief decision maker, and the wife is the homemaker and follower. It is often assumed that same-sex couples adopt similar husband-wife roles as a model for their relationships. Actually, most contemporary lesbians and gay men reject these roles.

Most gay men and lesbians are in dual-earner relationships. Both partners are employed, and neither is the exclusive breadwinner. When same-sex couples live together, the most common division of household work involves flexibility, with partners sharing domestic activities or dividing tasks according to personal preferences. Although the equal sharing of household labor is not inevitable in same-sex couples, it is more common than among heterosexuals. Lesbians and gay men generally favor power equality in their relationships. Not all couples achieve this ideal, however. In summary, research shows that most contemporary lesbians and gay men avoid husband and wife roles, instead constructing a more egalitarian pattern of shared responsibilities and decision making.

Creating Enduring Relationships

Many same-sex couples desire long-lasting relationships. How successful are lesbians and gay men in attaining this goal? This question is difficult to answer with precision. Public records of heterosexual marriage and divorce provide standard estimates about marital stability over time. For same-sex couples, comparable records do not exist. Several studies have documented the experiences of gay and lesbian couples who have been together for 20 years or longer. The recent analyses of representative data from California by Carpenter and Gates found that gay men currently living with a same-sex partner had been together for an average of 10 years; gay men who had registered as domestic partners had been together for 12 years. Lesbians' relationships were slightly shorter: 8 years for women living with a partner and 9 years for women who had registered as domestic partners. On average, these gay men and lesbians were in their early 40s, indicating that they had spent a substantial proportion of their adult lives with their current partner.

Another approach to understanding the longevity of same-sex relationships is to conduct studies that follow couples over time. Lawrence A. Kurdek compared gay and lesbian couples with married heterosexual couples with and without children. During more than 10 years, the breakup rates for same-sex and heterosexual couples without children were similar: about 1 in 5 couples ended their relationship. In contrast, married heterosexuals with children had a substantially lower breakup rate of only 3 percent. In these comparisons, relationship stability was affected by the presence of children, rather than by the partners' sexual orientation.

To understand why there may be differences in the longevity of same-sex and heterosexual relationships, it is helpful to consider factors affecting partners' commitment to their relationship. First, positive attractions such as love and intimacy make individuals want to maintain a relationship. Second, the availability of attractive alternatives to the current relationship, including other possible partners or the prospect of being alone, reduces commitment. Third, barriers to leaving a relationship are important. Barriers include investments that increase the emotional or financial costs of ending a relationship, as well as moral or religious feelings of obligation to one's partner. Research shows that these same factors affect commitment in both same-sex and heterosexual relationships. One difference is noteworthy, however. Gay and lesbian couples consistently report fewer barriers to ending a relationship than do heterosexual married couples. Same-sex couples are less likely to own joint property or have children together. In contrast to married heterosexuals who must pay for and go through a legal divorce, most gay and lesbian couples do not need legal proceedings to end their relationship. It is possible that as legal and social recognition for same-sex relationships increases and more same-sex couples become parents, the barriers to ending same-sex relationships will become more similar to those of married couples.

Couples' Counseling

When relationship problems arise, couples sometimes seek the aid of a counselor. Although many issues are common among all types of romantic relationships, therapists who work with lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients should be knowledgeable about the unique issues these clients may face. In 2000, the American Psychological Association adopted "Guidelines for Psychotherapy with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients," designed to improve the education of mental health professionals and the quality of the services they provide.

Some therapists adopt approaches to therapy that affirm the value and legitimacy of gay, lesbian, and bisexual lifestyles. These affirmative therapies emphasize the potential impact of societal prejudice and acknowledge the importance of same-sex relationships. Although many gay affirmative therapists are themselves gay or lesbian, an affirmative approach can be used by therapists regardless of their own sexual orientation.

Relationship Dissolution

When people are asked why a recent romantic relationship ended, gay, lesbian, and heterosexual partners mention similar problems. These include a partner's frequent absence, sexual incompatibility, mental cruelty, and lack of love. Other common reasons are a partner's nonresponsiveness (e.g., poor communication or lack of support from the partner), a partner's personal problems (e.g., an alcohol problem), or sexual issues (e.g., the partner had an affair).

The ending of a serious romantic relationship is often difficult. When asked to describe their emotional reactions to ending a recent same-sex relationship, lesbians and gay men describe similar emotions. Emotional reactions to a breakup differ for the partner who initiated the breakup (who may feel guilt but also relief and happiness) and the partner who was left behind (who may feel lonely, angry, and helpless). The reasons for the breakup may also make a difference.

After a relationship ends, former partners may experience such problems as financial stress, deciding on the nature of their continuing relationship with the ex-partner, and difficulties finding a new partner. Although partners' reactions to the ending of same-sex and heterosexual relationships are generally similar, there may also be distinctive issues for lesbians and gay men. For example, because gay male and lesbian communities are often small, there may be pressure for same-sex ex-lovers to handle breakups tactfully and to remain friends.

The death of a loved partner is often traumatic, and the emotional aftermath of bereavement appears to be similar for surviving partners whatever their sexual orientation. However, the social context of bereavement often differs for same-sex and heterosexual partners. Gay and lesbian survivors may receive less social support for their loss, especially if they have concealed the nature of their relationship from family or friends. The lack of legal protection of the rights of same-sex couples can also pose problems. Under U.S. federal law, a gay or lesbian surviving partner is not eligible for spousal benefits from Social Security or the Veterans' Administration. Without wills or other legal documents, the survivor may have no claim to the estate of a long-term partner that they contributed to building. If children are involved, there may also be issues about child custody. For gay men, the effects of the AIDS epidemic have been devastating. The social stigma surrounding AIDS can heighten the difficulties of bereavement for the survivor.

Relationships of Bisexual Men and Women

Some individuals are attracted to both men and women. What are their romantic relationships like? A problem in answering this question is that the term *bisexual* is used in several distinct ways. One approach focuses on individuals who self-identify as bisexual, in contrast with those who identify as gay, lesbian, or heterosexual. Another approach characterizes a person as bisexual if his or her lifetime history of sexual behavior includes partners of both sexes. In a recent U.S. national survey, only 0.8 percent of adult men self-identified as bisexual, although 4 percent said they had had sex with both male and female partners since age 18. Similarly, only 0.5 percent of women identified as bisexual, but 3.7 percent had had sex with both male and female partners since age 18. Personal identity and behavior do not always correspond. Consequently, understanding the relationships of bisexuals requires studies that focus on specific subgroups of individuals who differ in their patterns of bisexual identity and behavior. Although there are many anecdotal accounts about the relationships of bisexuals, scientific research is extremely limited.

In the 1980s, Martin S. Weinberg and his colleagues interviewed self-identified bisexuals in San Francisco. Most of these White, college-educated individuals were permissive in their sexual attitudes. This and other studies permit a few generalizations about the relationships of self-identified bisexuals. Most bisexuals who are in a primary relationship have a partner of the other sex, and some are legally married. Most bisexuals have partners identify as heterosexual, lesbian, or gay, rather than as bisexual. This can create relationship problems. Some heterosexual partners may view bisexuality as a sign of immaturity, indecisiveness, or promiscuity. Lesbians and gay men may also have negative stereotypes about bisexuals, believing that they are denying their true homosexual orientation or that bisexuals are likely to desert a same-sex partner for a heterosexual one. The extent to which bisexuals' experiences of satisfaction, conflict, and commitment differ depending on the gender and sexual identity of their partner is not known.

Another focus of research has been the experiences of teenagers and young adults who are developing their sexual identity and relationship preferences. A large-scale survey of more than 20,000 U.S. adolescents found that 3.9 percent of girls and 6.3 percent of boys reported romantic attractions to both males and females. Longitudinal studies have documented that some young people change their sexual identity and behavior over time, a pattern that has been termed *sexual fluidity*. Research by Lisa M. Diamond is illustrative. She interviewed women age 18 to 25, all of whom identified as not being heterosexual. Some women initially identified as lesbian or bisexual; others said they were questioning their sexual identity or rejected labeling themselves. During a 10-year period, more than two-thirds of these women changed their sexual identity, for instance, shifting from questioning to lesbian or from bisexual to heterosexual. The reasons for identity change were varied and included changes in whom the women were dating and pressure from friends or partners about their sexual identity. Research suggests that sexual fluidity is found among both women and men, but is more common for women.

Other patterns of bisexual behavior have also been studied. Many adults who currently identify as gay or lesbian have had heterosexual relationships in the past. Indeed, some individuals now in same-sex relationships were formerly in a heterosexual marriage and have children from that relationship. These individuals are typically included in research on same-sex relationships. In addition, some adults, typically men, identify strongly as heterosexual yet have casual sex with men. Public health researchers concerned with sexually transmitted diseases often include these individuals in studies of men who have sex with men. Some social settings such as prison can lead individuals who view themselves as heterosexual to form romantic or sexual relationships with same-sex prison mates.

Conclusion

Scientific research on the relationships of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals is growing. Many lesbians and gay men create satisfying, long-lasting relationships, even in the face of societal prejudice and discrimination. Although the social contexts for same-sex and heterosexual relationships differ, the internal processes affecting same-sex and heterosexual couples are

remarkably similar. Limitations of available studies should be noted. Most research on the relationships of contemporary lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals has investigated the lives of White, middle-class Americans. Much less is known about the experiences of working-class or ethnic-minority couples in the United States or the experiences of individuals from other cultures.

Letitia Anne Peplau and Negin Ghavami

Further Readings

- Balsam, K. F. , Rothblum, E. D. , Beauchaine, T. P. , and Solomon, S. E. *Three-year follow-up of same-sex couples who had civil unions in Vermont, same-sex couples not in civil unions, and heterosexual married siblings. Developmental Psychology* vol. 44 (2008). pp. 102–116.
- Bieschke, K. J. , Perez, R. M. , & DeBord, K. A. (2007). *Handbook of counseling and psychotherapy with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender clients (2nd ed.)*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Blumstein, P. , & Schwartz, P. (1983). *American couples*. New York: Morrow.
- Carpenter, C. and Gates, G. J. *Gay and lesbian partnership: Evidence from California. Demography* vol. 45 (2008). pp. 573–590.
- Diamond, L. M. (2008). *Sexual fluidity: Understanding women's love and desire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kurdek, L. A. *Are gay and lesbian cohabiting couples really different from heterosexual married couples? Journal of Marriage and Family* vol. 66 (2004). pp. 880–900.
- Laumann, E. O. , Gagnon, J. H. , Michael, R. T. , & Michaels, S. (1994). *The social organization of sexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Moore, M. R. *Gendered power relations among women: A study of household decision making in Black, lesbian stepfamilies. American Sociological Review* vol. 73 (2008). pp. 335–356.
- Murray, S. O. (2000). *Homosexualities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Peplau, L. A. and Fingerhut, A. W. *The close relationships of lesbians and gay men. Annual Review of Psychology* vol. 58 (2007). pp. 101–102.
- Peplau, L. A. , Fingerhut, A. , & Beals, K. P. (2004). *Sexuality in the relationships of lesbians and gay men*. In J. Harvey , ed. , A. Wenzel , ed. , & S. Sprecher (Eds.), *Handbook of sexuality in close relationships (pp. 350–369)*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Weinberg, M. S. , Williams, C. J. , & Pryor, D. W. (1994). *Dual attraction: Understanding bisexuality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
-

Entry Citation:

"Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Relationships." *Encyclopedia of Human Relationships*. 2009. SAGE Publications. 30 Sep. 2009. <http://www.sage-ereference.com/humanrelationships/Article_n238.html>.



© SAGE Publications, Inc.