

15. Gay and Lesbian Couple Relationships

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The study of personal and social relationships blossomed during the eighties. Scholars in a variety of disciplines studied the factors that lead to the initiation, maintenance, and deterioration of the relationships we have with others. Many investigators concluded that it is the communication between partners that accounts for the stability and satisfaction experienced in the relationship (Fitzpatrick 1988; Gottman 1979).

Within the field of communication, the study of communication in relationships has had three main traditions: Relational topoi, relational communication, and relational typology. Relational topoi work has concentrated on examining how different types of relationships manifest different affect, power, and involvement states (Burgoon and Hale 1984). Relational communication work has examined dialogues between partners for what these dialogues say about the essential power relations between them (Rogers-Millar and Millar 1979). And relational typological work has discriminated communication patterns and sequences in types of couples based on their levels of interdependence, ideology, and expressivity (Fitzpatrick 1988).

In this chapter, we adopt the relational typological approach because it subsumes the other two perspectives. The relational typology has been able to predict patterns of relational control in couples (Best 1979; Williamson and Fitzpatrick 1985) as well as patterns of conversational involvement,

affect, and self-disclosure (Fitzpatrick 1988). Although we argue for the theoretical inclusiveness of the typological approach, this approach suffers from the same major limitation of the other two traditions. That is, all three have limited their application to ongoing heterosexual relationships. The purpose of this paper is to report the first in a series of typological investigations designed to uncover patterns of communication in ongoing homosexual relationships.

The study of homosexual relationships is important for both conceptual and pragmatic reasons. Society does not provide support for gay couples (e.g., recognized marriages, joint income tax, and so forth). Yet even without these supports, significant numbers of gay men and lesbians have entered into and established ongoing, healthy, functioning relationships. How they have done so, and the varieties of relationships they have maintained, can enrich our understanding of social and personal relationships. In addition to the conceptual richness afforded by studying homosexual relationships, understanding the factors that hold couples together as well as those that drive them apart may help in dealing with the AIDS crisis. Although AIDS represents a serious medical problem, successful interventions require an understanding of relationships.

We review and critique the recent research conducted on homosexual relationships and then present the strategy we employed to study ongoing homosexual relationships.

The Nature of Homosexual Relationships

Although scholars throughout the twentieth century have pursued the study of heterosexual marriages, interest in the investigation of homosexual couples did not begin until the late 1970s. Research with gay men and lesbians was limited because of the difficulty in securing research samples. Many individuals feared participation in research because of concerns about confidentiality. Consequently, many studies sampled only openly gay populations who frequented gay bars (Tuller 1978).

Although sexual activity is only one of several factors that accounts for the development and maintenance of homosexual relationships (Peplau 1982), the most popular means of classifying homosexual couples has been through sexual exclusivity. That is, to what degree are partners sexually

faithful to one another? Primarily, researchers have used this variable to create a dichotomous typology. Couples were categorized as either *open* (not sexually exclusive) or *closed* (sexually exclusive).

Bell and Weinberg (1978) used the open-closed dichotomy to explain a number of individual differences. For instance, gay males in closed relationships reported higher degrees of self-acceptance. Those in open relationships were significantly more depressed and tense than their counterparts in closed relationships. In terms of relational variables, Blasband and Peplau (1985) found no differences between open and closed couples in their level of satisfaction with, or commitment to, the relationship.

In sum, gay male couples who were sampled in research showed little evidence of relational exclusivity (Harry 1982; McWhirter and Mattison 1984; Tuller 1978), yet clearly had committed relationships (Lewis et al. 1981; Peplau and Cochran 1981). Indeed, Kurdek and Schmitt (1986a) found that both sexually open and closed couples appear to have negotiated satisfying relationships. What appeared to matter was the degree of agreement between partners about sexual exclusivity.

In addition to sexual exclusivity, other relational variables have been examined. For instance, researchers have measured relational cohesion and role adaptability (Zacks, Green, and Marrow 1988), commitment (Lewis et al. 1981), autonomy and attraction (Peplau and Cochran 1981), adjustment (Dailey 1979; Kurdek 1987), relational quality (Kurdek and Schmitt 1986a; Kurdek 1989), satisfaction (Duffy and Rusbult 1986; Kurdek 1988; Kurdek and Schmitt 1986b), and equalitarian decision making (Harry 1982). Similar variables have also been used as a basis for comparing individual differences within homosexual populations (e.g., McWhirter and Mattison 1984) and for comparing heterosexual to homosexual couples (e.g., Blumstein and Schwartz 1983) and lesbian to gay male couples (e.g., Tuller 1978).

Despite the information generated from these studies, much of the research has been limited to exploring only one or two variables. And few papers explore gay male and lesbian relationships with the same framework. To expand our understanding of homosexual relationships, we adopt a polythetic classification approach. Such an approach begins with the assumption that within any sample of couples, a few discrete types exist. And these types of couples communicate in different ways with different outcomes.

A Typology of Marriage

Relational typologies constitute a major breakthrough for therapists/counselors based on the advantages (conceptually and methodologically) of integrating clinical practice, research, and theory. By focusing on couples defined along multidimensional criteria rather than on one or two variables, researchers identify more meaningful and stable relationships between variables. These results can be more easily translated into clinical interventions. Despite the utility of the construct of a marital or family typology, however, many of these typologies are not as helpful because they tend to be intuitively rather than empirically derived (Fitzpatrick 1984). A decade of research by Fitzpatrick (1976, 1977, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1988) has established empirically a typology for characterizing heterosexual couples. (For a comprehensive discussion of the typology's development and validation, see Fitzpatrick 1988.) Briefly, the procedures followed by Fitzpatrick in the typology's development were: (a) identifying significant conceptual areas in marital and family life, (b) developing measures that delineated dimensions of marital life, and (c) comparing spouses' relational definitions to determine types.

The Relational Dimensions Instrument (RDI) identified three dimensions of married life: ideology (e.g., relational beliefs, values, and standards), interdependence (e.g., degree of connectedness), and conflict (e.g., behaviors of avoidance/ engagement). By comparing spouses' responses to the RDI, couple types were characterized as traditional, independent, separate, or mixed. If both spouses agree independently on their relational definition, they are categorized as pure types (i.e., traditional, independent, or separate), whereas husbands and wives who diverge in their perspectives of marriage are classified as mixed couple types.

Traditional couples hold conventional ideological values about relationships (e.g., wives change their last names, infidelity is unacceptable), demonstrate interdependence (e.g., share time, space, companionship), and describe their communication as nonassertive but engage in rather than avoid marital conflicts. By contrast, independents espouse nonconventional values about relational and family life (e.g., relationships should not constrain individual freedom), exhibit a high degree of sharing and companionship that qualitatively differs from traditional couples in that independents maintain separate physical space (e.g., bathrooms, offices), and do not keep regular time schedules yet tend to engage in rather than avoid con-

flict. Finally, couples who define themselves as separates are conventional on marital and family issues yet at the same time uphold the value of individual freedom over relational maintenance, have significantly less companionship and sharing (e.g., maintain psychological distance, reflect autonomy in use of space), and describe their communication as persuasive and assertive, but avoid open marital conflicts.

Mixed couple types include spouses who define marital life differently according to ideology, interdependence, and communication. Approximately forty percent of couples surveyed fall into one of the mixed types and no one mixed type predominates numerically (Fitzpatrick 1988).

The delineation of a typology of marriage through the use of a carefully constructed and thoroughly tested self-report device that questions spouses about important dimensions of relationships would scarcely be worthy of notice without the variety of methods that have been employed to explore its ramifications. In particular, direct observations have been made of conflict, control, and disclosure processes within marriages of the various types. Expectations about marriage reflected in the typology can help to describe the communication behaviors of the traditional, independents, separates, and mixed couple types during conflicts. The following picture of the various couples emerges from the research on conflict interactions.

Traditionals tend to avoid conflict more than they realize, but in general are cooperative and conciliatory. For these couples, conflicts are somewhat easier to resolve because traditionals tend to argue about content rather than relational issues. Traditionals value parenting, spending time with each other in close proximity, and place marriage (duality) over independence. Of particular note is that although the husband in this marriage is very sex-typed in his interpersonal behaviors, this husband is able to self-disclose to his wife.

Independents are constantly renegotiating relational roles and each spouse resents a partner's attempt to avoid conflict by withdrawing. Independents value their careers, coworkers, and friends outside the relationship and need their own personal space. These couples can disclose both positive and negative feelings to their spouses. The downside for independents is that because of their high expressivity, they experience serious conflicts with each other.

Separates touch base with partners regularly but maintain both psychological and spatial distance. Most separates seek emotional support/rein-

forcement outside the relationship. Overall separates experience little direct conflict in their marriage, for two reasons. First, since separate couples agree with one another on a number of basic family issues, they have less potential for disagreements. Second, separates appear unable to coordinate their interaction effectively enough to engage in a direct open discussion of disagreements. A separate spouse may display outright hostility but quickly retreat if a partner disagrees. In other words, separates rarely discuss conflict and withdraw immediately when spouses introduce stressful topics.

The conflict patterns of the mixed couple types depend on the particular combination of relational definitions under scrutiny. Separate/traditionals rarely argue and when they do the burden of attempting to open the field for the discussion of difficult issues falls to the wife. In the traditional/independent pairing, the wife is more likely to engage the conflicts and the traditional husband more likely to be conciliatory and prone to compromise.

The mere presence of marital conflict, however, is not an unconditional sign of relational dysfunction. As Fitzpatrick (1988) has shown, many couples (e.g., up to one-third of large research samples) not only agree to disagree, but actually look to their conflict as an important indication that their individual identities have not been subsumed in the relationship. The difference between the conflict-tolerant independent couples and the more conflict-avoidant traditional couples for whom conflict is problematic is one of meaning. Independent couples have established a shared understanding that within their relationship conflict equals success, or at a minimum, conflict is unrelated to love and relational satisfaction.

A Typological Study of Relationships

We began our examination of communication and conflict in homosexual relationships by attempting to categorize a sample of gay male and lesbian couples with the Relational Dimensions Instrument. We believe that in any sample of couples we will find traditional, independent, and separate relational definitions.

In this study, we wanted to examine how the distribution of the relational definitions in a homosexual sample compares to a major random sample of heterosexual couples (Fitzpatrick and Indvik 1982). And we considered

differences across the various types of couples on a number of factors such as demographics, sexual exclusivity, and so forth.

Participants for this study were contacted through Couples National Network, an organization formed for purposes of providing social, educational, and humanitarian outreach services to individuals participating in homosexual relationships. With no religious or political affiliation, this organization has chapters in Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Phoenix, San Bernardino/Riverside, San Diego, and Tucson. In October 1989, packets were sent to each chapter chair. Each packet contained two questionnaires, two postage-paid return envelopes, and a cover letter explaining the study and asking each person to complete the questionnaire without help from the partner. To ensure complete anonymity, chapter chairs addressed the packets to their members.

In addition to the anonymity assurances, newsletters of the various associations contained requests to participate in the study and an endorsement of the study by the National Network. Packets were provided for about three hundred members. Of these, 163 participants completed our mailed questionnaire. A majority of our respondents were white (92 percent) and middle class (63 percent).

Participants completed the Relational Dimensions Instrument. Using the statistical procedures discussed by Fitzpatrick (1988), 85 participants were categorized as traditionals (51 percent); 33 as independents (20 percent); and 47 as separates (29 percent). How do these percentages compare to a major random sample of heterosexual couples? For gay males, there are approximately the *same* proportion of traditionals, yet significantly *fewer* independents and *more* separates than in the random, heterosexual sample. For lesbians, there were significantly *more* traditionals, *fewer* independents, and *fewer* separates than in the random, heterosexual sample. As we expected, the same three basic definitions of relationship occur in both the homosexual and heterosexual samples. Differences between the two samples occur in the number of traditionals. There are more traditional individuals in the homosexual than in the heterosexual sample.

Of the 163 participants, 15 partners did not respond, leaving us with 74 couples to compute couple type. This sample has the 60 percent agreement rate (i.e., both members assign the relationship to the same type) we find in other samples, indicating that the couples did not compare responses before returning them to us. Of our 74 couples, 28 are traditional, 6 are

independents and 10 are separates. The rest are evenly split among the mixed couples (e.g., traditional/independent). Again, in comparison to the random sample of heterosexual couples, traditionals predominate and there are statistically fewer independent couples.

We compared the various types of couples on a variety of sociodemographic factors and found no differences on how long the couple had been together, how they met, age, race, social class, or educational background. Across the couple types, there were no differences in political orientations, in religious faith, in locus of decision control, or in income. Traditional couples were, however, more likely to share their incomes entirely with one another in contrast to the other types. The few sociodemographic differences among the couple types parallel those of the major random sample of relationships. Couple type is a description of the psychological interior of a relationship and is not a measure of social status or demographic factors.

The majority of these couples have a life-long commitment and a high degree of relational satisfaction. Interestingly, however, when there are differences among the couples, the traditionals have somewhat less commitment and relational satisfaction than do the couples with other relationship styles. In other work, the traditionals have the highest level of commitment and satisfaction (Fitzpatrick 1988). In another sharp contrast with previous work, the separates spend significantly more leisure time with one another (91 percent) than do couples in any type of traditional arrangement (58 percent).

Although there were no significant differences by couple type, the majority of individuals we sampled had experienced significant discrimination in reference to family related issues as a consequence of their homosexuality. The majority of our respondents felt discrimination related to hospital visitation rights, adoption, employment benefits for partners, and so forth.

Sexual Issues

There are significant differences across the couple type as to views on monogamy (chi-square = 18.51; df = 10; $p < .05$). Sixty-eight percent of the total sample are monogamous, although 25 percent of the sample are monogamous with agreed exceptions. Traditionals and traditional/independents have the highest percentage of agreements about nonmonogamy (66 percent and 50 percent).

Our previous comparisons across couple types have grouped the lesbian and gay male couples. We have no theoretical reason to hypothesize, for example, that traditional lesbian couples will be significantly different than gay male couples on the degree of happiness or satisfaction they experience in their relationship. On issues related to sexuality and AIDS, however, we have examined both couple type and sex differences. Notably, for example, a significantly higher proportion of lesbian couples are monogamous (94 percent) in contrast to gay male couples (64 percent).

There are no differences across the couple types as to how many times the partner has broken the monogamy agreement in the relationship, although there are differences among the types concerning how many times the respondent admits to breaking the agreement on monogamy (chi-square = 36.26; $df = 15$; $p < .05$). Seventy-two percent of the individuals say they never break their monogamy agreement, although 38 percent of the independents sometimes or occasionally break their agreement. As for sex differences, 70 percent of the gay males and 80 percent of the lesbians have never broken their monogamy agreements. Data from surveys of heterosexual unions indicate that approximately 50 percent of heterosexual couples have broken the monogamy agreement. Thus we could argue that this sample of homosexuals is significantly more conservative about sexuality than similar samples of heterosexuals.

There are differences in the amount of sexual satisfaction experienced in the couple types (chi-square = 42.01; $df = 20$; $p < .03$). Only 5 percent of the separates rate their sexual relationship as unsatisfactory, whereas 75 percent of the separate/traditionals see their sexual relationship negatively. There are strong sex differences in discussing levels of sexual satisfaction in the relationship. First, 74 percent of the lesbians rate their sexual relationship as excellent, whereas only 33 percent of the gay males consider their sexual relationship to be excellent. Fourteen percent of the gay men see their relationship as unsatisfactory, compared to 6 percent of the lesbians.

AIDS and Relationships

Although none of the couples were more likely than others to see AIDS as having an effect on the formation of the relationship, there were significant differences across the types as to the effect that AIDS had on intentions to stay together (chi-square = 23.30; $df = 15$; $p < .08$). Sixty percent of the

couples say that AIDS had no effect on their intention to stay together. The data also suggest that traditionals are more likely to assign AIDS a major role in their intention to stay together. For lesbians, AIDS appears to play little role in either forming (86 percent say none) or maintaining their relationship (89 percent say none). In contrast, about 33 percent of the gay men ascribe to AIDS some role in establishing their relationship and almost 50 percent say that the disease has some role in maintaining their current relationship.

In general, AIDS is of little concern for lesbians in this sample. Overall, 77 percent of the sample is not at risk, although 8 percent rate themselves or their partners as HIV positive or with ARC/AIDS complex. There are significant differences by couple type concerning self risk (chi-square = 24.84; $df = 15$; $p < .05$) and partner risk (chi-square = 27.10; $df = 15$; $p < .03$). A majority of traditionals (50 percent) and traditional/independents (66 percent) see themselves as at risk.

Sixty-six percent of the subjects had no sex outside of their primary relationship this year, and 63 percent believe this is true for the partner, although 13 percent say they do not know whether or not their partner has had sex with another person in the past year. Only 1 percent say they have had unsafe sex, and less than 1 percent of the respondents believe that their partners have had unsafe sex.

There are significant differences across the couple types in reports of practicing safe sex outside the relationship (chi-square = 32.15; $df = 15$; $p < .006$) and perceptions of the partner's practice of safer sex (chi-square = 38.92; $df = 20$; $p < .007$). Fifty percent of the traditionals and 50 percent of the traditional/separates have had safer sex outside their relationship within the past year. Sixty-six percent of traditionals say their partners have had safe sex outside their relationship in the past year.

Discussion

There has been little effort to examine homosexual couples by applying typological frameworks developed within the literature on heterosexual couples. Our initial investigation is very promising. First, we have been able to clearly and unambiguously categorize couples using the RDI. Second, this categorization has discriminated couples on specific sexual and

relational variables although not on the sociodemographic ones. This pattern of findings is in line with our previous work on heterosexual couples. That is, couple type measures different states of relationship and not a couple's place in the demographic strata.

The homosexual sample differs from previous samples in that there are significantly fewer independent couples in the homosexual sample than in previous heterosexual samples. Since our sample was not a random one, what can account for this difference?

One explanation may be that our respondents were significantly more likely to be integrated into the homosexual community. Since we contacted these individuals through an organization that supports positive aspects of relationships, we may have tapped a sample of individuals with close network ties. In a classic study, Harry and Lovely (1979) found that individuals who were most integrated into the gay community were in relationships that were more "marriage-like." That is, they tended to live more often with their lovers and had monogamous arrangements and more emotional intimacy. Their social lives were also more likely to include relationships with other homosexual couples.

Within the terms of the typology, such individuals are more likely to have traditional orientations toward relationships. Some of those will pair this traditional orientation with a close interdependent bond (i.e., traditionals) and others will pair that ideology with a less connected bond (i.e., separates).

Alternatively, in the absence of socially provided supports for relationships, homosexuals may be more likely to "act out" traditional understandings of ongoing relationships. Rather than define new relationship patterns for same-sex couples, homosexual couples may be more likely to "act out" their understanding of a stable relationship first presented to them in their birth family. Same-sex couples may have discovered that relationship stability is facilitated by traditional patterns. Thus it is not surprising that traditionals report the greatest role that AIDS has in maintaining their relationship. The threat may reinforce the need to maintain the relationship pattern.

It is particularly pointed, then, that the areas of reported discrimination are in the areas of traditional "family" rights (i.e., hospital visitation, adoption and employment benefits). Society may have become more accepting of individual gay men and lesbians, but it may ironically still reject gay

couples who are more likely to be traditional in values and roles than heterosexual couples.

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