

CHAPTER 4

## “Boston Marriage” among Lesbians

*Are We a Couple If We're Not Having Sex?*

Esther D. Rothblum

A discussion about lesbian couples raises a number of questions. First, recent research and writing have emphasized the fluidity and multidimensionality of the term “lesbian.” Not all women who self-identify as lesbian are currently sexually involved with women; some are celibate, whereas others may be in sexual relationships with men. Women may be sexually involved with women and identify as heterosexual, bisexual, or lesbian or eschew all labels about sexual orientation. Although sexual behavior and self-identity may or may not be congruent, the general public views lesbians as women who have sex with women, so that sexual activity is a critical part of the definition of who is a lesbian.

Secondly, it is not always clear what “counts” as a couple. When couples cannot legally marry, sexual activity may assume importance in defining couple status. Yet women may have romantic and passionate relationships that do not involve genital sex. Are such couples “just” friends? This chapter will examine the overlap among the concepts of sexual orientation, sexual activity, coupled relationships, and nonsexual relationships among lesbians.

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### WHO IS A LESBIAN?

In 1993 the feminist periodical *Off Our Backs* published a review of the diaries of Anne Lister, an English scholar and traveler who wrote at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Johnson 1993). The quotation that was highlighted in italics at the center of the page stated: “In short, there can be no doubt that Anne was a *genuine* nineteenth century lesbian” (23, italics mine). What was “genuine” about Anne’s lesbianism was that her diaries contain evidence of genital sex with other women, in contrast to many other historical documents where sex has had to be inferred from love or passion.

How do we decide who “counts” as a lesbian? This question has been particularly challenging for historians, as language about gender, sexual activity, sexual identity, friendship, relationship, and community has changed over the course of the century. Historians Estelle Freedman and John D’Emilio (1990) pose this question as follows:

What, however, is sexuality? Given its changing meaning over time, what is one looking for in records of the past? The very term “sexuality” is a modern construct which originated in the nineteenth century. As we explained in our book *Intimate Matters*, it is only in the twentieth century that American society became so “sexualized” that the term had clear meaning throughout the culture. In the contemporary era, Americans have come to use “sexuality” to refer to the erotic, that is, to a state of physical attraction to either sex. In the past, however, there was no language of “sexuality” per se. Rather, in pre-industrial America, what is now called sexuality was largely embedded within a reproductive language. (483)

The research on lesbians has not only been sparse, but there have been different (if overlapping) conceptualizations of who is included in studies of lesbians. My recent research has begun to examine the interrelationships of components of the lesbian experience, in order to answer the question “Who is a lesbian?” Most of the psychological studies of lesbians have recruited survey participants by placing announcements in lesbian or gay newsletters, distributing surveys at lesbian organizations or events, or leaving questionnaires at gay bars, feminist bookstores, gay or lesbian churches, or lesbian restaurants (see Rothblum 1994 for a review of methodology). The assumption underlying such recruitment methods has been that women who fill out surveys asking about lesbian issues are lesbians. Jessica Morris and I (1999) obtained

a national sample of 2,393 lesbian (89 percent) and bisexual (11 percent) women, of which one-quarter were women of color. We examined the degree to which women who answered a Lesbian Wellness Survey are distributed on five aspects of lesbian sexuality and the coming-out process:

1. Sexual orientation—numerical rating of sexual identity from exclusively lesbian/gay to exclusively heterosexual;
2. Years out—length of time of self-identity as lesbian/gay/bisexual;
3. Outness/disclosure—amount of disclosure of sexual orientation to others;
4. Sexual experience—proportion of sexual relationships with women; and
5. Lesbian activities—extent of participation in lesbian community events.

Statistical analyses found only mild (but statistically significant) overlap among these five aspects, indicating that being lesbian is not a homogeneous experience. For example, women who rated themselves as exclusively lesbian were not necessarily out to lots of people or involved in the lesbian community.

Closer examination by the demographic characteristics of race/ethnicity and age revealed a diversity of experience. African American, Native American, and Latina respondents had more overlap among the five aspects of the lesbian experience. For white and Asian American respondents, the dimensions hardly overlapped at all. The results indicate that researchers who are studying one aspect of the lesbian experience (e.g., outness to others) need to ensure that they are not assuming such behavior based on other dimensions (such as frequent participation in lesbian community activities or years of being out), especially among white and Asian American lesbians.

#### WHAT IS LESBIAN SEXUAL ACTIVITY?

What is sex? In our society, *sex* is commonly defined as heterosexual intercourse. JoAnn Loulan (1993) has described how adolescents who have engaged in a number and variety of sexual activities but have not had intercourse will say that they haven't "gone all the way." The first time women have genital sex has a powerful definitional value, because

it distinguishes the relationship from other, nonsexual relationships (e.g., friend, colleague, acquaintance, neighbor). Even when women recall their first experience of heterosexual intercourse as somewhat disappointing, they know that the experience "counted" (and in fact, most people can recall the number of sexual relationships they have had more distinctly than the number of friends, relatives, and co-workers they have had).

Women in the United States and other Western nations live in a culture of sex. Girls' toys and products for female adolescents focus heavily on their future roles as sexual beings. Susanna Rose (1996) has described how books and magazines intended for girls and women have a romance narrative in contrast to the adventure narrative for boys and men. An enormous amount of attention is focused on women finding the ideal male romantic/sexual partner, celebrating this with a lavish ceremony (the wedding), and staying with that same partner for a long time, preferably "forever." (Of course, since women live longer than men and tend to marry men who are somewhat older, "forever" means that many women will be alone in their old age.) Sex and romance are the themes of songs, movies, and television programs and how-to books and advice columns, especially those intended for women.

It is vital for the appearance-related economy that women feel responsible for their own sexual attractiveness, so that they will purchase products and engage in practices (e.g., dieting, cosmetic surgery, exercise) to enhance sexual appeal (see Rothblum 1992, 1993 for reviews). Billions of dollars are at stake in the media portrayal of women's sexuality. The U.S. economy alone includes an annual \$33 billion diet industry, a \$20 billion cosmetic industry, a \$300 million cosmetic surgery industry, and a \$7 billion pornography industry (Wolf 1991). The culture of sexuality and its correlates, the cultures of fashion and pornography, portray women almost overwhelmingly as European American, young, extremely thin, middle or upper class, able-bodied, and heterosexual. For the majority of women who do not fit this narrow demographic profile, privilege comes with being as close to this image as possible. The economy would have much to lose if women stopped being influenced by its messages. This culture of sex, not surprisingly, prioritizes sexual activity, sexual attractiveness, and sexual relationships to the exclusion of all other ways of relating except perhaps for the mothering of children.

How does the culture of sex affect lesbians? Lesbians, too, are socialized as girls and women to value sexual attractiveness. Most lesbians

work and socialize with heterosexual people and are similarly influenced by the sexual messages in the media. Lesbian books and magazines, like those for heterosexual women, focus on the romance narrative (Rose 1996). For example, in the Naiad Press novel *Never Say Never*, two co-workers, Leslie who is a lesbian and Sara who is heterosexual, become close friends. Though it is obvious to the reader and to both women that they are sexually attracted to each other, the suspense builds as to whether or not Leslie and Sara will "consummate" their relationship—that is, become genitally sexual. Whether or not the women do "it" will affect the reader's perception as to whether the book has a happy ending (they become lovers) or an unhappy one (they remain "just friends").

What is lesbian sex? Sexual activity, as defined by lesbians, is greatly affected by heterosexual definitions of sexual activity. Two women are considered to have engaged in sex if they perform mutual genital stimulation. A lesbian who has never engaged in this activity will probably not believe that she has had sex with another woman. A lesbian who had an orgasm while watching or kissing another woman, for example, has not "gone all the way."

These definitions of sexual activity, both the heterosexual and the lesbian/bisexual versions, focus on genital activity and thus ignore other, nongenital, sexual experiences that women may have had (Loulan 1993; Rothblum and Brehony 1993). We have no terminology for the early sexual crushes that some girls develop on other people, usually a female friend or female teacher. We have no language for the sexual feelings that arise between adult friends, even when both friends are in sexual relationships with other people. In contrast, if the friends engage in genital sexual activity with each other, we immediately have language; they are having an affair.

A major survey of sexual activity among twelve thousand people (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983) indicated that lesbians are less likely to have genital sex than are married heterosexual, cohabiting heterosexual, or gay male couples. Loulan (1988) surveyed more than fifteen hundred lesbians and found the majority (78 percent) to have been celibate for some period of time. Of those who had been celibate, most had been celibate for less than one year, 35 percent had been celibate from one to five years, and 8 percent for six years or more. The results of both surveys were interpreted as reflecting women's lack of socialization to initiate sexual encounters.

What are the implications of lesbians engaging in genital sex less than heterosexual women or than men, yet at the same time using a genital-

based definition to define "sex"? This raises a number of issues. Why do lesbians engage in genital sex less frequently, and what does this say about women's sexuality? Is there a way that lesbian communities should discuss the relative devaluation of alternatives to genital sex? Can we reclaim erotic, nongenital experiences as "real" sex?

#### WHAT IS A LESBIAN COUPLE?

Heterosexual marriage is defined by a legal ceremony. A married couple is considered to be in a relationship until there is a legal divorce. This is the case even when the married couple is not engaged in genital sex, when one or both partners are engaged in sex with other people, or when the couple is living apart. This is not the case for nonmarried couples. Cohabiting couples, whether heterosexual, lesbian, or gay (as of this writing, lesbian and gay couples cannot legally be married in any U.S. state, with the exception of civil unions in Vermont), are defined as a couple if they are having sex.

This sex-focused definition of a relationship has a number of implications for lesbians and bisexual women in female-female relationships. It focuses on an aspect (genital sexual activity) that is less frequent among lesbian couples than nonlesbian couples, thus overemphasizing sexual activity when this may not be what is important to lesbians in a relationship. Lesbians may feel pressure to have genital sex in order to provide a definition for their romantic feelings for another woman. They may feel pressure to continue having sex in order to view themselves as still being partners. If genital sex ceases, and if one or both partners tells close friends about this, the lesbian community may view the couple as having ended their relationship, and the members of the couple may be considered sexually available by other women (Brown 1993). Lack of sexual activity may be interpreted (by the couple, the lesbian community, and their therapist) as a sign that something is seriously wrong with the relationship, even if all other aspects of the relationship are satisfying.

Often women tell me that I am using a very narrow definition of "sex" and say that they define sex in broader terms. Surveys also indicate that lesbians, being women, place more focus on love, affection, and romance, than on genital sexual activity (e.g., Klinkenberg and Rose 1994). Nevertheless, ask any lesbian couple who are celebrating the anniversary of their relationship what, in fact, they are celebrating—that is, what happened on the day they are counting as the anniversary—

and the majority (but not all) will say it was the day they first had genital sex (actually, they say sex, not genital sex, but we have a very specific social construction of what we "allow" to be included in the word "sex").

Further, the sex-focused definition of what constitutes a lesbian relationship ignores the reality of women's ways of relating. For centuries of recorded history, women have felt strong love, affection, and intimacy for other women, even when both women were married to men. When two unmarried women lived together as "spinsters," they were considered to be in a "Boston marriage," a term that reflected the presumed asexual nature of the relationship (the city of Boston was home to many colleges and universities and thus to some highly educated women who lived together). Lillian Faderman (1981, 1993) has described the passion and love between women in the nineteenth century: "It became clear that women's love relationships have seldom been limited to that one area of expression, that love between women has been primarily a sexual phenomenon only in male fantasy literature. 'Lesbian' describes a relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other. Sexual contact may be a part of the relationship to a greater or lesser degree, or it may be entirely absent" (1981, 17-18).

Interestingly, the lesbian community often assumes that women who expressed love for each other in past decades or centuries were, in fact, genitally sexual. The lesbian novels *The Ladies* (Grumbach 1984) and *Patience and Sarah* (Miller 1969) are fictional accounts based on real women who lived together in past times. Although their sexual activities are unknown (and would have been hidden from society if they existed), the authors have introduced a sexual component into these relationships.

Lesbians may not have genital sex as often as nonlesbians, but we certainly spend a great deal of time thinking about, talking about, and being in relationships. Several years ago, Kathy Brehony and I reclaimed the historical term "Boston marriage" to describe current-day romantic but asexual coupled relationships among lesbians (1993). There are women in our lesbian communities who live together and share long histories together. They may have been sexual in the past, or they may never have had genital sex. They are "lovers" in every sense of the word except for the absence of current genital sexual activity. They are usually viewed as couples by the lesbian community, which may in fact idealize the couples for the longevity and romantic nature of their relationship.

Often, in marked contrast to Boston marriages in previous times, these lesbians keep their asexuality hidden from the community. In order to illustrate some of the diversity of these romantic but asexual relationships among lesbians, I will briefly describe some of the ways in which lesbians form romantic but asexual relationships (from Rothblum and Brehony 1993); all names are pseudonyms.

Lesbians may become sexually attracted to heterosexual women who do not reciprocate the desire for a genital sexual relationship. A young lesbian, Laura, moved to San Francisco and became attracted to her heterosexual roommate Violet. Violet seemed to encourage the relationship in multiple ways, such as having heart-shaped tattoos made with each other's names and telling Laura it was okay that people mistook them for lovers. Laura refers to their relationship as: "When we were whatever we were: Whatever it was that we had." When Laura suggested they become lovers, Violet said she couldn't do it; Laura was devastated.

Lesbian ex-lovers often remain friends (see Becker 1988 for a review), and the passion of the friendship may have the eroticism of the prior genital sexual relationship. Elizabeth and Marianne were briefly genitally sexual, then Marianne broke that off saying that the age difference of twenty years was too great for her. Marianne, the younger of the two, became involved sexually with another woman, Eve, and Elizabeth decided to move away. Elizabeth and Marianne continued their relationship over the telephone, and both agree that they are the most important people in each other's lives.

A lesbian couple may "drift" into celibacy without much actual discussion about this. The following example also illustrates how the lesbian community may view a member of a couple as sexually available when she is no longer genitally sexually involved with her partner: Angie and Cedar met at a women's music festival, became lovers, and were sexual for six months. They moved in together and slept in the same bed. Then they slept in separate rooms one night a week, then half the time, then they slept together only one night a week. They stopped having sex. After three years of celibacy, Angie had an affair. Cedar was devastated, and Angie broke off her affair with Linda. Linda was confused since as soon as she found out that Angie and Cedar weren't having sex, she didn't think they were really a couple. Angie and Cedar entered couples therapy, but decided to lie to the therapist that they were doing the homework assignments to be sexual when in fact they didn't want to be sexual. They have recently celebrated their eighth anniversary

and are still "monogamous" (that is, not having sex with each other or with anyone else).

Boston marriages can exist today in multiple ways. Pat is a sixty-year-old retired teacher. She was involved with Cathy for sixteen years, and they were sexual the first four or five years. Cathy has a niece whom they called "Little Cathy." Pat and Cathy often wondered whether Little Cathy and her roommate Barbara were a lesbian couple. One day, Pat discovered that her lover Cathy had become sexual with Barbara (Cathy's niece's roommate). Little Cathy was extremely upset that her aunt had become sexual with her roommate and was considering suicide (even though Little Cathy said she had never been sexual with Barbara). The last Pat heard, Cathy and Barbara had moved to Texas and were currently asexual but still together. Three Boston marriages exist among these women: between Pat and Cathy, between Little Cathy and Barbara, and between Cathy and Barbara.

On the other hand, some lesbians may be open about the asexual nature of their relationship. When Janet and Marty met, they soon became lovers, had sex a few times, and moved in together. Suddenly, Marty announced that she did not want to have sex. The couple built a log cabin together, tells everyone they are asexual and a couple, and have been celibate for eighteen years.

When couples are not genitally sexual, they may need to find new language for sexual activity. Ruth and Iris call what they do together in bed "bliss." Ruth is involved sexually with a man, and Iris with another woman. Both Ruth's and Iris's partners want them to remain monogamous. Consequently, Ruth and Iris have an agreement that they have only a spiritual (rather than physical) connection and say it is ecstasy. Ruth says, "It's like coming to the goddess." They say that it is the most important relationship in their lives, more important than their respective partners, yet they have trouble with people taking it seriously. They see the same therapist, and Iris says of her, "Bless her heart, she's trying!"

Not having genital sex may create confusion about whether women are "really lesbians." Sarah is in her midtwenties and in love with Hannah, who is in her thirties. They have a primary relationship but without sex. They have an agreement that they can have other lovers, but only men. Sarah is confused because she is a lesbian, and now her friends see her only with male lovers. It has shaken her whole identity as a lesbian. Hannah is primarily heterosexual. They are both afraid that sex would make them even more intense, given their closeness already.

These examples raise the issue of what sexual activity is. When the two members of a couple disagree on what constitutes sex, and thus whether or not they are having sex, they may also differ on whether or not they are in a "real" relationship. Even when both members of the couple agree that their genitally asexual relationship makes them a "real" couple, the lesbian community may disagree with this definition of the relationship. The couple will need to decide whether to disclose their lack of genital sex to other people and what to do if the lesbian community views them as sexually "available" or otherwise denies the reality of their relationship. Validation of a relationship by the lesbian community as well as by the heterosexual macrosociety is important, given the lack of acknowledgment that lesbians have received for their sexual feelings and behaviors as they were growing up or while coming out.

These relationships raise questions about *monogamy*, a term that is difficult to define when the members of a couple are not genitally sexual. In contrast to lesbian relationships during the so-called sexual revolution of the late 1960s, norms of many lesbian communities today idealize lesbians who are in monogamous couples. Is it a "real" relationship when one or both members of a lesbian couple are not genitally sexual with each other but are engaged in sexual relations with other women (or with men)?

When I was doing the interviews for my book *Boston Marriages: Romantic but Asexual Relationships among Contemporary Lesbians*, I began to feel like an imposter because most of my friends told me that they and their partner had sex often, "all the time." Then, when a few of these friends broke up with their lovers, they told me it was because they "never had sex." These were the same women; how could their stories have changed so much? Marny Hall (1998) has written about this phenomenon in her book *The Lesbian Love Companion: How to Survive Everything from Heartthrob to Heartbreak*. She argues that we create stories to make sense of our lives and then change these stories when our lives change.

#### NONSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

One group that continues to have close, passionate, and nonsexual relationships today are female adolescents. Lisa Diamond (1997) has described what she terms "passionate friendships" among adolescent and young adult women. These friendships are portrayed as "love affairs

without the sexual element" (5), with elements of romantic love, idealization, obsession, exclusivity, possessiveness, and sexual desire. Nevertheless, such relationships may be viewed (by the young women and by those around them) as a prelude to a future partnership with a man. Similarly, Janice Raymond's (1986) book, *A Passion for Friends*, includes descriptions of women's intimate friendships in non-Western cultures in which women, even if married, spend most of their lives in close contact with other women. Oliva Espin (1993) has portrayed close, intimate but nonsexual relationships among unmarried women in Latin American cultures.

In contrast to a sexual relationship, a friendship is presumed to be independent of sexual behavior and, to a great extent, of sexual feelings and fantasies. Friendships are so secondary in importance to sexual relationships that many women (including lesbians) have had the experience of a friendship decreasing in intensity when one or both women became sexually involved with someone else. When friendships between women are especially close or intense, outsiders suspect the presence of sexual feelings or behavior. One reason for the greater acceptance of nonmonogamy in sexual relationships in the women's communities of the 1970s was the idea that feminists could be close to several other women in the spirit of "sisterhood."

Friendships and sexual relationships are not mutually exclusive. Lesbians often feel that their lover is their friend, even their best friend (as do some heterosexual couples). Similarly, friends may have sexual feelings for one another, though they may or may not acknowledge these feelings to each other (or even to themselves). Discussion of sexual feelings between friends may interfere with the friendship, given the high salience of sex over friendship in our society. Lesbian ex-lovers often remain friends (see Becker 1988 for a review), and the passion of the friendship may have the eroticism of the prior genital sexual relationship.

I have argued previously (Rothblum 1999) that in contrast to the coupled model for sexual relationships in Western society, friendships are permitted to be more permeable. Perhaps this greater flexibility in friendships is precisely because friendships are less salient than sexual relationships.

Being part of a "couple" connotes being part of a twosome, not more and not less. Women who are not coupled may rush into a new relationship just to avoid the stigma of the word "single." Given women's relational capabilities and the multiple ways in which women are interconnected with family of origin, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and, in

the lesbian communities, with ex-lovers, the word "single" hardly does justice to this web of kinship ties. Similarly, not all women limit their passion to one sexual partner. Whether openly or secretly, whether temporarily or more permanently, many women have multiple partners. This range of relationships among lesbians has been discussed in the book *The Lesbian Polyamory Reader: Open Relationships, Non-Monogamy, and Casual Sex*, edited by Marcia Munson and Judith Stelboum (1999).

In sum, there has been little feminist debate about women's ways of relating in either sexual or nonsexual ways. Sexual relationships in particular are so influenced by patriarchal definitions that we cannot truly conceive of women relating in ways that feel authentic to us. Women's relationships are so complex and multidimensional that behavior, identity, and affection may not be homogeneous. We know little about how women's sexual and nonsexual relationships change over the lifetime. As we begin the new millennium, there is increasing uncertainty over who is a "woman," given the emerging transgender movement. For a feminist vision of women's sexuality, "sex" would need to be broadened to encompass more aspects of women's bodies, spirituality, love, and passion.

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## "You'll Never Walk Alone"

### *Lesbian and Gay Weddings and the Authenticity of the Same-Sex Couple*

Ellen Lewin

Several years ago, I taught a course on lesbian and gay issues at the University of California, Berkeley. One of the books I assigned, Paul Monette's *Borrowed Time*, is the chronicle of the illness and death of the author's longtime lover, Roger, from AIDS. It deals in wrenching and highly emotional detail with the progress of the disease itself, its changing impact on the two men's relationship, and the terrible loss Monette sustained with Roger's death (Monette 1988). During the week the class was reading the book, one of my students, a recently divorced woman in her midthirties, came to see me during my office hours. Her face was puffy, her eyes red, and she admitted that she had stayed up all night weeping as she read the book. I asked her what about the book most affected her, and she said with some amazement, "They loved each other so much. More than me and my ex-husband."

One of the constant problems for those of us who do our work on gay and lesbian family life is the conviction by many, both academics and ordinary people, that kinship and all that it is thought to entail—intense, unconditional bonds of love and lifelong commitment as well as the mundane details of domesticity—cannot be a part of gay life. Gay people's relationships with their lovers are assumed to be transitory and

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