CORRELATES OF RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION IN LESBIAN COUPLES

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This study broadens the construct of intimate relationships to include the experience of lesbian couples. Various psychological variables were assessed in both partners of 275 lesbian couples who considered themselves to be dual career. Because of the paucity of information on lesbian relationships in the literature, considerable attention is first given to describing this sizable sample. Individual and couple scores on each variable were correlated with relationship satisfaction scores. Among individuals, role conflict and personal autonomy were found to correlate negatively with relationship satisfaction, whereas dyadic attachment, power, intimacy, self-esteem, and life satisfaction were all positively correlated with relationship satisfaction. Although career commitment was not correlated with relationship satisfaction among individuals, differences between partners' levels of career commitment correlated negatively with each partner's relationship satisfaction. The findings counter extant stereotypes regarding lesbian relationships and provide a more accurate basis for developing an heuristic model of intimate relationships among women.

This study concerns the intimate relationships established between women in same-sex couples. More specifically it concerns the relationship satisfaction of lesbians involved in dual-career relationships. Although research on heterosexual couples provides some insights into homosexual relationships, the construct of male and female sex roles with its accompanying expectations, critical in research on heterosexual marriages, does not apply in a parallel way to relationships between members of the same sex (Morin, 1977). With heterosexual relationships, the focus has been on gender differences between the partners and how these influence the expectations and behaviors of each partner. Understanding the influence of gender on
same-sex relationships requires a new construct separate from the “gender difference” construct.

Relationship models need to be developed to describe the effects of gender on same-sex relationships. Both descriptive and empirical analyses of same-sex relationships are necessary to develop such models. This study contributes by focusing on lesbian relationships and the correlates of relationship satisfaction within these couples. In addition, research on lesbian dual-career couples provides a unique perspective on women in dual-career relationships by removing the effects of gender differences within the couples while maintaining the impact of relationship and partner variables. Important variables in studies of heterosexual dual-career couples are power and the politics of housework (Gilbert, 1988). What variables take on importance in dual-career couples when both partners are women?

The two-paycheck family, both in the forms of dual earner and dual career, is more common among lesbian couples than among heterosexual couples. As women, lesbians are socialized to value and maintain relationships (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982). But by identifying as lesbians, these women generally forego any expectations of economic security provided by marriage and accept a life-long responsibility to support themselves and their children. Despite this propensity for dual-career relationships among lesbians, few studies on lesbian couples have included variables such as career commitment and role conflict found to be important in studying career women in heterosexual couples.

This study explores variables that are surmised to have an impact on the functioning of lesbian relationships. Variables that have been found to be salient in research on heterosexual couples such as power, career commitment, role conflict, and relationship values were included. In addition, variables unique to same-sex relationships (such as level of disclosure about one's lesbianism) and variables particularly salient for women (such as perceived level of intimacy) were assessed. Previous studies (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986) have contrasted lesbian relationships with heterosexual married, heterosexual cohabitating, and gay male couples. In comparing lesbian couples with other groups, however, focus is often drawn away from the heterogeneity within the lesbian sample. This study, therefore, looked at the correlational patterns of each variable with a criterion variable provided by lesbians themselves: their rating of their own relationship satisfaction. Studies including lesbian couples and heterosexual couples have found no differences between these groups in the degree of reported relationship satisfaction as measured by the Locke–Wallace scale (Ramsey, Latham, & Lindquist, 1978) or adaptations of Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Cardell, Finn, & Marecek, 1981; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986).

Correlates of relationship satisfaction that have already been identified in lesbian relationships include high dyadic attachment and shared deci-
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sion making (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986), equality of power (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Peplau, Padesky, & Hamilton, 1982), equality of involvement in the relationship, and a similarity of attitudes and backgrounds (Peplau et al., 1982). These variables were included in this study through measurements of career commitment, role conflict, power, and the valuing of dyadic attachment and personal autonomy. Demographic or background variables of the individuals (age, educational level, income level, and how disclosive to others each is about her lesbian identity) and of the couples (differences between partners on age, income, and so forth, as well as length of relationship) were also assessed. One factor found not to be related to relationship satisfaction in the Peplau et al. (1982) study was the degree to which women were open versus closeted regarding their lesbianism, but data were gathered on only one partner. Therefore, degree of disclosure was included to determine whether differences in this variable between the partners could be significantly correlated to relationship satisfaction. Finally, intimacy and life satisfaction, variables associated with relationship satisfaction in studies of heterosexual relationships, and self-esteem, a variable stereotypically assumed to be lower among lesbians than women in general, were included.

It was anticipated that the results would replicate past studies in showing equality of power and intimacy as predictors of relationship satisfaction. In addition, it was hypothesized that differences between partners in power, perceived intimacy, relationship values, career commitment, role conflict, and degree of disclosure would be negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction.

METHOD

Recruitment

Participants in this study were partners in lesbian couples who responded to a request to participate in a study of dual-career lesbian relationships. Requests were distributed through local and national friendship networks, various professional networks by notices in newsletters and other mailings, paid advertisements in Ms. and Lesbian Connection, and numerous regional women's or lesbian/gay newsletters. The request asked for "couples that have been together in a primary relationship for at least 2 years, with each member of the couple engaged in full-time employment during most of the duration of the relationship. Enrollment as a student in an educational or training program in preparation for a career will be considered equivalent to employment for the purposes of the study."

A packet was mailed to the first 360 couples requesting to participate. Each packet contained two copies of a letter detailing the purpose of the
study, two questionnaires, and two self-addressed stamped envelopes. The sample used for analysis included only those couples for whom two completed questionnaires were returned, a total of 275 couples (550 individuals), 76% of the couples to whom questionnaires were sent.

Participants

The participants were from 39 states, the District of Columbia, and 2 foreign countries (Canada and Israel). Of the sample, 20% were from Texas, 14% from California, with lesser concentrations from Ohio (6%), New York (5%), and Illinois (4%). The sample was mostly Caucasian (93.3%), with 2.7% reporting as being Hispanic, 1.3% Black, 1.3% Native American, and .9% indicating another minority. The sample was similar in age and education to what would be expected in a sample of professional women. They ranged from 20–59 years of age, with a mean age of 35 and a standard deviation of 7.18 years. Everyone in the sample had a high school degree; 14% had not completed a further degree; 4% had an associate's degree; 30% had a bachelor's degree; 30% had a master's degree; and 22% had a doctoral degree. The occupational areas of the participants were also similar to professional women in general, with a large grouping in the business, human services, and education areas, and lesser concentrations in the technical or scientific fields: 81% indicated they were employed full-time, with the remainder working part-time or currently unemployed; 10% indicated full-time student status, with another 6% indicating they were part-time students. In terms of yearly income, 26% of the individuals reported making less than $15,000, 28% between $15,000 and $24,999, 25% between $25,000 and $35,000, and 20% reported making more than $35,000 each year.

Measures

The questionnaire contained items asking each respondent about her current relationship with her partner and her perceptions about lesbian relationships in general. Elements of the questionnaire were drawn from previously published research on lesbian relationships (Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978), dual-career heterosexual relationships (Holahan & Gilbert, 1979), and role conflict in married professional women (Elman & Gilbert, 1984). The language of some scales was modified where necessary to make them appropriate for a lesbian population. The 15 psychological variables assessed fell into two categories: (1) relationship variables that involve the respondent addressing a dynamic of her relationship with her partner or relationships in general, and (2) personal variables that involve the participant’s assessment of herself, independent of her relationship.
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Relationship Variables

Relationship satisfaction. The measure of relationship satisfaction was the 10-item Dyadic Satisfaction subscale of Spanier’s Dyadic Adjustment Scale (1976). The items are rated on a 6-point scale. The scale includes items that are behaviorally specific as well as more global measures of the quality of the relationship. A representative item is: “In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?” This scale has been noted as especially suited as a measure of dyadic satisfaction because most of the items assess the respondent’s perception of the adjustment of the dyad as a functioning group rather than individual adjustment to the relationship (Fitzpatrick & Best, 1979, p. 174). Cronbach’s coefficient alpha from this sample was .79 (n=539).

Dyadic attachment. This 8-item scale developed by Peplau et al. (1978) to measure the dyadic attachment factor in lesbians’ relationship values was modified for this study. One of the original items asking the importance to the respondent of “sexual fidelity in the relationship” was divided into 2 items: “Having my partner be sexually faithful to me” and “Being sexually faithful to my partner.” Two additional items were also added: “Having my partner provide me with financial security” and “Providing my partner with financial security.” Respondents rated each item of the modified 11-item scale using a 7-point scale that ranged from (7) extremely important to (1) not at all important. Cronbach’s alpha for the present sample was .74. Higher scores were associated with higher levels of dyadic attachment.

Personal autonomy. This 8-item scale developed by Peplau et al. (1978) to measure the personal autonomy factor in lesbians’ relationship values was modified for this study. One of the original items asking the importance to the respondent of “Enjoying our relationship now without insisting on a future commitment” was dropped. Three additional items were added: “Having each of us be able to follow our own occupational pursuits,” “Having our relationship not interfere with other important parts of my life,” and “Having my partner spend some time without me.” Respondents rated each item on the modified 10-item scale using a 7-point scale that ranged from (7) extremely important to (1) not at all important. Cronbach’s alpha for the present sample was .71. Higher scores were associated with higher levels of personal autonomy.

Power. An 8-item scale measuring the influence each partner feels she has in her relationship was developed by the author. Some questions were adapted from the scale used by Caldwell and Peplau (1984). Representative items include: “How much influence do you feel you have in your relationship?” and “How much say do you feel you have about important decisions affecting your relationship?” The scale was designed to avoid ratings of relative influence (do you have more or less say than your part-
ner); rather, participants were asked to respond according to the influence they feel they have in their relationship without regard to whether this is greater or less than their partner’s perceived influence. Cronbach’s alpha for this scale on this sample was .83.

**Intimacy.** Five of the six scales of the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) Inventory (Schaefer & Olson, 1981) were used to assess the degree of intimacy that a participant perceives she has with her partner. (The 6-item Conventionality Scale, a part of the original inventory, was not included in the present study because it is not a measure of intimacy.) This self-report measure consists of 30 items that are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from (1) not at all true to (7) very true. (Rather than the original 5-point scale, a 7-point Likert scale was used for consistency with items immediately preceding this scale.) Each of the five scales were scored separately. Cronbach’s alphas for the scales with the present sample were .78 (Emotional Intimacy), .71 (Social Intimacy), .80 (Sexual Intimacy), .72 (Intellectual Intimacy), and .62 (Recreational Intimacy). Except for a lower reliability coefficient for Recreational Intimacy, the coefficient alphas are similar to those reported by Schafer and Olsen.

**Personal Variables**

**Self-esteem.** Self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Robinson & Shaver, 1973). This self-report scale consisted of 10 items that measure the self-acceptance aspect of self-esteem. Responses were made on a 5-point scale ranging from (5) strongly agree to (1) strongly disagree. Representative items are “I feel that I have a number of good qualities” and “At times I think I am no good at all.” The scale has a theoretical range of 0–50, with higher scores indicative of a higher degree of self-esteem. Reliability for this scale using the present sample was .87 (Cronbach’s alpha).

**Career commitment.** This 6-item measure of career commitment reported by Elman and Gilbert (1984) was used to assess career commitment. Representative items from this scale include: “Overall, how committed are you to your career?” and “How high are your aspirations in regard to career achievement?” “The major satisfaction in my life comes from my job.” Each participant rated responses on a 5-point scale. Cronbach’s alpha for this sample of professional lesbians was .81.

**Life satisfaction.** This 5-item measure was adapted from the Life Satisfaction Scale reported by Holtzman and Gilbert (1987). Three of the items assessed the degree of satisfaction with three major life areas: worklife, primary relationship, and personal development. Another item asked: “How satisfied are you with how you have combined the various
aspects of your life?” The final item asked: “How satisfied are you at this point with the way your life has turned out?” Respondents rated each item on a 7-point scale from (1) not at all satisfied to (7) very satisfied. The reliability using the current sample was .77 (Cronbach’s alpha).

Role conflict. Measures developed by Holahan and Gilbert (1979) were used to assess three types of role conflict. These scales were developed to measure role conflict between pairs of three major life roles of Professional, Spouse, and Self as Self-Actualized Person. Each scale measures a potential conflict between a pair of the three roles (e.g., Professional vs. Spouse). In this study, these scales were used to measure conflict between three major life roles of lesbians in dual-career relationships: Professional, Partner, and Self. The scales are: Professional versus Partner (PR vs. PN), Professional versus Self (PR vs. SF), and Partner versus Self (PN vs. SF). Representative items include: “Wanting to be a ‘good’ partner vs. being unwilling to risk taking the time from your work” (PR vs. PN); “Wanting to be recognized as a high-level professional vs. wanting to maximize your personal development” (PR vs. SF); and “The lifestyle you prefer vs. the lifestyle preferred by your partner” (PN vs. SF).

Participants were asked to respond to the items using a 5-point scale ranging from (1) causes no internal conflict through (3) causes some internal conflict to (5) causes high internal conflict. Thus, high scores were associated with greater role conflict. The reliability coefficients for these scales on this sample were: the 7-item Professional versus Partner Scale (.80), the 4-item Professional versus Self Scale (.81), and the 5-item Partner versus Self Scale (.69).

Participant Characteristics

Disclosure about lesbian identity. A measure of disclosure concerning lesbianism developed by Shachar & Gilbert (1983) was used to measure this characteristic of participants. Respondents used a 5-point scale to rate 11 target persons (e.g., mother, father, lesbian friend, heterosexual male friend, coworker, and so forth) according to the level of disclosure they have made to each person regarding their lesbianism. Ratings were made from (0) I have not told them about my lesbianism and I think they do not suspect it to (4) I have told them about my lesbianism on a very deep, detailed level. For example, a woman may rate her mother as 3, indicating that she has told her mother about her lesbianism on a moderately deep, detailed level. The participant may also rate any target person “not applicable” (NA) if that relationship is not relevant to her. The total scores were divided by the number of targets rated by participants, giving each respondent a composite self-disclosure score, ranging from 0 to 4.00. Cronbach’s alpha for this 11-item scale on this sample was .77.

Other demographic data gathered included age, educational level, income level, length of time considering self a lesbian, length of time in
current relationship, and length of time couple has lived together. Information on employment status, occupation, marital status, and parenthood were also collected.

Intercorrelation of the Scales

Pearson correlation coefficients were derived for each pair of scales used in the study. The highest correlation was between scores on the Emotional Intimacy scale and scores on the Intellectual Intimacy scale (.74). Correlation between the other intimacy scales ranged from no correlation (between sexual intimacy and social intimacy) to .47 (between sexual intimacy and emotional intimacy). Correlations between the role conflict scales ranged from .37 to .49. Other moderate correlations existed between scores on the Life Satisfaction scale and the Self-Esteem scale (.59) and between scores on the Life Satisfaction scale and the Relationship Satisfaction scale (.48). Power was moderately correlated with several other variables: emotional intimacy (.44), intellectual intimacy (.44), relationship satisfaction (.39), recreational intimacy (.34), and life satisfaction (.34). The other correlations were low ($r < .30$) or not significant ($p < .05$).

RESULTS

Data analyses approached the data in three ways. First, a description of the demographic parameters of the sample was used to provide a picture of the subset of lesbian couples sampled. Second, the individual correlates of relationship satisfaction were examined both by correlational analyses and then by regression analyses used to determine which of the psychological variables accounted for the most variance in relationship satisfaction among the individual participants. Finally, the couple correlates of relationship satisfaction were examined.

Characteristics of the Relationships

Partners tended to be fairly close in age, with the mean difference being 4.82 years and a standard deviation of 4.18. There was a .95 mean difference in educational level between the partners, with a standard deviation of 1.02. This means that partners tended to have the same level of education (both have bachelor’s degrees or both have master’s degrees, etc.). When they differed in level, it tended to be by one level only (i.e., one had a master’s and one had a doctorate). As this variable was measured by level of highest degree attained, rather than years of education, differences may have been accentuated. For example, an individual in her senior year of college would be rated with a high school education, which would put her two levels below her partner who already had a bachelor’s degree.

Salary level was also measured in steps. Partners tended to be one level apart in salary level ($M = 1.07$) with the majority of the sample rating them-
selves less than 2 levels apart \( (SD = 1.07) \). Twenty percent of the couples agreed that they contributed equally to their household finances.

The couples reported being in their relationships up to 22 years, with the median length being 4.4 years, the average length 5.4 years, and a standard deviation of 4.4 years.\(^2\) The average length of time that couples had lived together was 4.8 years, with a standard deviation of 6.7 years. Ninety percent of the couples reported living together at the time of the survey. Of the 10% (26) that did not currently live together, 58% (15) never had lived together. Those that did not currently live together reported a variety of reasons: 35% (9) due to career moves or jobs in separate cities; 15% (4) due to one partner pursuing education at a distance; and 50% (13) reported a personal, lifestyle reason such as “for economic reasons and appearance sake,” “children make it difficult,” “each has own home—relatives wouldn’t understand,” “don’t like to live with lovers—need space,” “closet vs. noncloset,” or “nonmonogamy.”

Participants indicated that they considered themselves to be lesbians an average of 11.5 years with a standard deviation of 7 years. The median was 10 years. Partners differed considerably in how long they had considered themselves to be lesbians, with a mean difference of 6.5 years and a standard deviation of 6.8 years. The median difference score was 4.5 years.

Of the sample, 65% had not disclosed their lesbianism to their employers, and 37% had not disclosed the fact to anyone in their work environment. More than half had not told their fathers, whereas more than one-third had not disclosed to their mothers. More than three-quarters of the sample were not disclosive about their lesbianism, and therefore about their primary relationship, to the world at large (neighbors and strangers). Averaging across all targets rated, partners tended to differ little on this scale with a mean difference of .64 and a standard deviation of .50.

More than one-quarter of the sample had been heterosexually married at some point in their lives, and 19% had children. At least 15% of the sample were raising children with their partners.

**Individual Correlates of Relationship Satisfaction**

Correlational analyses were done in two ways. First, scores on each scale from the 550 individual participants in the study were correlated with individuals' relationship satisfaction. Second, couple scores derived from partner differences on each scale were correlated with individuals' relationship satisfaction.

None of the continuous demographic variables or the participant characteristics assessed in this study were significantly correlated with the relationship satisfaction individuals reported in this sample. Specifically, neither age, educational level, income level, length of time considering self a lesbian, degree of disclosure about lesbian identity, nor length of time in current relationship were associated with reported relationship satisfaction.
by the individuals in this study. Furthermore, no differences between partners' scores on these continuous demographic variables were significantly correlated with the relationship satisfaction reported by partners.

Table 1 reports the mean and standard deviation across individuals of each of the psychological variables. Of the 14 psychological variables, 13 were significantly related to relationship satisfaction. The Pearson correlation coefficients ranged from an \( r \) of \(-.17\) (PR vs. PN role conflict) to an \( r \) of \(.71\) (emotional intimacy). The one nonsignificant relationship was with the variable, career commitment. These correlations are summarized in Table 2.

Beginning with the individuals' scores on the relationship variables, both dyadic attachment and personal autonomy were correlated with relationship satisfaction, but in different directions: \( r = .19 \) and \( r = -.25 \), respectively. Higher levels of dyadic attachment, but lower levels of personal autonomy, were associated with greater relationship satisfaction.

Power, or one's sense of influence in the relationship, also was significantly related \( (r = .40) \) to relationship satisfaction. Individuals who reported a greater sense of influence in the relationship also reported greater relationship satisfaction. This measure of power, however, was not a relative measure; it did not indicate whether the respondent felt she had more power than her partner did. Rather, it merely asked about the sense of influence each felt she had in the relationship, without regard to her perception of her partner's power.

The intimacy scales were all positively correlated with relationship satisfaction. Emotional intimacy was the most highly correlated of all the scales \( (r = .71) \), indicating a close association between higher levels of emotional intimacy and relationship satisfaction. Similarly, higher intellectual intimacy \( (r = .59) \), recreational intimacy \( (r = .42) \), sexual intimacy \( (r = .39) \), and social intimacy \( (r = .24) \) were associated with higher relationship satisfaction.

Turning to the individuals' scores on the personal variables, higher levels of self-esteem were associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction \( (r = .25) \). Similarly, life satisfaction had a correlation of \(.48\) with relationship satisfaction. The relatively high correlation \(.48\) between life satisfaction and relationship satisfaction is not a surprising finding, as one's satisfaction with her primary relationship is one of the key elements assessed in life satisfaction. What this correlation says additionally, however, is that individuals' satisfaction with other areas of life, as measured by the life satisfaction scale, is associated with the level of relationship satisfaction reported.

All of the role conflict scales were significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction in a negative direction, although the magnitude of these correlations was quite small. Higher levels of role conflict were associated with lower relationship satisfaction. The correlation was strongest \( (r = \)}
Table 1
Mean item scores and standard deviations for psychological variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale (response format)</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship variables</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Satisfaction (1-6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dyadic Attachment (1-7)</td>
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<td>Personal Autonomy (1-7)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social (1-7)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual (1-7)</td>
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<td>1.22</td>
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<td>Intellectual (1-7)</td>
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<td><strong>Personal variables</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem (1-5)</td>
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<td>Career Commitment (1-5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partner vs. Self (1-5)</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Note: n = 523-550.

-.26) with PN versus SF role conflict, and somewhat lower for PR versus PN (r = -.17) and PR versus SF (r = -.18) role conflict.

Regression Analyses on Relationship Satisfaction

Stepwise regression analyses were performed on the data on individuals to determine which of the 14 psychological variables best predicted relationship satisfaction. The results yielded 7 variables that contributed significantly (p < .05) to the variance in relationship satisfaction. Table 3 provides a summary of the contribution of each of the variables: emotional intimacy, life satisfaction, personal autonomy, intellectual intimacy, recreational intimacy, power, and self-esteem. Emotional intimacy accounted for over 50% of the variance, with the additional 6 variables accounting for another 10%. This subset of predominantly relationship variables, then, accounted for 60% of the total variance in relationship satisfaction.
Table 2
Correlations between relationship satisfaction and the psychological variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>r</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship variables</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dyadic Attachment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Autonomy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>.39*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intimacy scales</td>
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<td>Emotional</td>
<td>.71*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>.24*</td>
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<td>Sexual</td>
<td>.39*</td>
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<td>Intellectual</td>
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<td>Recreational</td>
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<td><strong>Personal variables</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional vs. Partner</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional vs. Self</td>
<td>-.18*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partner vs. Self</td>
<td>-.26*</td>
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</table>

Note: n = 523–550.
* p < .0001.

Table 3
Summary of significant predictor variables for relationship satisfaction from stepwise regression procedure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Partial R²</th>
<th>Model R²</th>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional Intimacy</td>
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<td>.5055</td>
<td>515.17***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life Satisfaction</td>
<td>.0352</td>
<td>.5407</td>
<td>68.31***</td>
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<td>Personal Autonomy</td>
<td>.0267</td>
<td>.5674</td>
<td>30.97***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Intimacy</td>
<td>.0143</td>
<td>.5818</td>
<td>17.18***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreational Intimacy</td>
<td>.0079</td>
<td>.5896</td>
<td>9.60**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>.0042</td>
<td>.5938</td>
<td>5.12*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>.0032</td>
<td>.5970</td>
<td>3.93*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n = 506.
* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .0001.
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Couple Correlates of Relationship Satisfaction

Dyadic correlates of relationship satisfaction were assessed by developing a difference score for each couple on the various psychological variables. These difference scores were then correlated with the reported relationship satisfaction of each partner. Had this analysis been done on heterosexual couples, the comparison groups would undoubtedly have been determined by sex (e.g., Is there a relationship between partner differences on their valuing of personal autonomy and the men’s relationship satisfaction?). However, by removing sex as a variable in this study, alternative methods of categorizing partners needed to be determined. Rather than divide the partners randomly into two comparison groups, the sample was divided into those partners who reported greater relationship satisfaction than their partners (Partner A in Table 4), and those who reported less relationship satisfaction than their partners (Partner B in Table 4). The difference scores were correlated with the relationship satisfaction of each of these two groups. Using this categorization, data would indicate whether women who were more generally satisfied with their relationships than their partners would be affected differently than their partners by couple differences on the other variables.

Of the 14 couple difference scores on the psychological scales, 12 were significantly related to the relationship satisfaction of at least one partner (see Table 4). The Pearson correlation coefficients ranged from .23 to −.38. A perusal of the correlational patterns for the higher and lower scoring partners (on relationship satisfaction) indicates that generally they were not all that different. The possible exceptions to this were found in the subset of intimacy variables in which somewhat more negative correlations occurred for the lower scoring partners. Except for dyadic attachment, significant correlations between difference scores and partners’ relationship satisfaction scores were negative. Greater differences in dyadic attachment were associated with higher relationship satisfaction among both the partners who were less satisfied than their partners and those who reported greater satisfaction than their partners. Differences in personal autonomy, on the other hand, were not associated with the level of reported relationship satisfaction.

Differences in power, or one’s sense of influence in the relationship, also were significantly related to relationship satisfaction of both the more and less satisfied partners in this sample. Unequal power—or the discrepancy between partners on the sense of influence they feel they had in the relationships—is associated with lower relationship satisfaction for both the more and the less satisfied partners.

With the exception of professional versus self role conflict, differences in all the personal variables were significantly correlated with the relationship satisfaction of both groups of partners in a negative direction. Greater
Table 4
Correlation between partner differences on scale scores and relationship satisfaction of partner with higher and lower relationship satisfaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difference Variables between Partners</th>
<th>Relationship Satisfaction of Partner A*</th>
<th>Relationship Satisfaction of Partner B*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyadic Attachment-D$^{c}$</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>.23****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Autonomy-D</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power-D</td>
<td>-.24****</td>
<td>-.23****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intimacy scales</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional-D</td>
<td>-.25****</td>
<td>-.38****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-D</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual-D</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>-.24****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual-D</td>
<td>-.29****</td>
<td>-.38****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreational-D</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>-.31****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem-D</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>-.15**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Commitment-D</td>
<td>-.13*</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Satisfaction-D</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>-.20****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional vs. Partner-D</td>
<td>-.15**</td>
<td>-.15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional vs. Self-D</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner vs. Self-D</td>
<td>-.24****</td>
<td>-.26****</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n = 241-275.

*aPartner A is the individual in each couple who scored higher on relationship satisfaction. When partners had an equal score, A and B status were assigned randomly.

*bPartner B is the individual in each couple who scored lower on relationship satisfaction.

*cThe D is to remind the reader that this is a difference score between partners, not to be confused with individuals’ scores on the corresponding scale.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001; ****p < .0001.

Differences in partners’ self-esteem, career commitment, and life satisfaction were all associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction for both groups of partners.

Similarly, greater differences in the levels of professional versus partner role conflict and partner versus self role conflict were significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction in a negative direction. Greater differences in partners’ levels of role conflict were associated with lower relationship satisfaction. In the role conflict scale that does not include the partner role (professional vs. self), differences between partners had no correlation with either partner’s relationship satisfaction.
DISCUSSION

Because of the hidden nature of the lesbian couple population, a major contribution of this study is to provide descriptive data on this group. This population is not only hidden from the general population, but often hidden from group members themselves. This is evident in the eager participation in the study, the high response rate, and the fact that most participants requested information on the results of the study.

Perhaps the most surprising data regarding this sample is just how hidden these women are about their relationships. They have been in their current relationships an average of 5.4 years, and as long as 22 years. Most of them live with their partners, contributing to a joint household. At least 15% of the sample are raising children with their partners; yet 65% have not disclosed their lesbianism to their employers, and 37% have not disclosed the fact to anyone in their work environment. More than half have not told their fathers, whereas more than one-third have not disclosed to their mothers. More than three-quarters of the sample are not descriptive about their lesbianism, and therefore about their primary relationship, to the world at large (neighbors and strangers). At the same time, the sample is satisfied with their relationships and their life in general, experience considerable intimacy in their relationships, and are quite committed to their careers. The level of disclosure is not correlated with any of the psychological variables assessed in this study, suggesting that disclosure may depend less on intrapsychic factors and more on situational or sociological factors. Nondisclosure is apparently as adaptive for some participants as high levels of disclosure is for others.

A common way that stereotyping works for a hidden population is to assume that the members of the target group are "opposite" from those in the majority or reference group (Kite & Deaux, 1987). An example of this concerning lesbians might be the stereotype that lesbian relationships are transient and only sexual in nature. Yet the sample reflects that these lesbians are in stable, enduring, and committed relationships. The couples generally choose to live together, despite varying degrees of disclosure of their relationships in other aspects of their lives. Only 10% choose to live separately, with half of this group doing so because of educational or job demands, whereas the other half report various personal lifestyle reasons for living separately.

Another stereotype regarding lesbians, drawn from perceptions concerning women's relationships with men, is that lesbians become overly attached to their partners and lose their personal boundaries within relationships. It is clear that emotional intimacy, one measure of closeness, is highly correlated with relationship satisfaction in this sample. Yet, the sample values personal autonomy as much as they do dyadic attachment. Of course, dyadic attachment is positively correlated with relationship satisfaction. It is not surprising that personal autonomy is negatively corre-
lated with relationship satisfaction as it has to do with interests and activities outside the relationship. This finding is consistent in pattern across males and females in heterosexual dyads (Cochran & Peplau, 1985), although the measures and strengths of relationships vary. The results suggest that dynamic interplay of attachment and autonomy is an inherent element of any close relationship, and that it is not dependent on gender. Further support for this is the finding that greater differences in dyadic attachment between the partners is associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction.

The personal psychological variables assessed in the study indicate that the sample has fairly high levels of both self-esteem and overall life satisfaction, a finding that is consistent with other studies (Bell & Weinberg, 1978), but inconsistent with the common stereotype of lower self-esteem and unhappiness associated with the lesbian lifestyle. Career commitment is fairly high, with two-thirds of the sample rating themselves from moderately to very committed to their worklife. Through self-report these lesbians are probably neither more nor less committed to their careers than a comparable sample of women in heterosexual dual-career marriages. Yet, because many in the sample may not be “out” at work, they may be viewed as single, or unmarried, and may be expected to be more committed to their jobs than their heterosexually married colleagues are expected to be. This would be an interesting question to explore empirically. If expectations in the workplace are indeed different, how might that affect the coupled homosexual woman versus the coupled, but undisclosed, lesbian? Similar to studies of heterosexuals in dual-career relationships (Holahan & Gilbert, 1979), this study found the highest level of role conflict to be between the professional and self roles.

The relationship variables indicate that the couples in this sample tend to be satisfied with their relationships ($M=4.34$, on a scale of 1–6) and to value both dyadic attachment and personal autonomy ($M_s=5.26$ and 5.21, on scales of 1–7). Both partners of these couples reported a clear sense of influence (power) in their relationships, suggesting that an egalitarian relationship is the reality for most of these couples as well as the reported ideal for lesbians (Peplau et al., 1982). A high degree of intimacy also characterizes these couples, although the level and type of intimacy varies considerably throughout the sample. Generally, items reflecting recreational intimacy and intellectual intimacy are scored highest as true of participants’ relationships, followed by items reflecting emotional intimacy, sexual intimacy, and last, social intimacy. Although emotional and sexual intimacy are generally assumed to be important for lesbian couples, recreational intimacy and intellectual intimacy are logically as likely to be important in relationships between two women. Having similar interests in outside activities (recreational intimacy) and sharing common ideas and perspectives on the world (intellectual intimacy) would be expected more in relationships between two people with similar gender-role socialization.
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These findings are consistent with the findings of Peplau et al. (1978), whose study of 127 lesbians in relationships indicated these relationships were very close and personally satisfying, with an equal power balance being the norm. The present study clearly supports earlier findings that indicate that lesbians can establish personally rewarding and egalitarian love relationships.

Correlates of Relationship Satisfaction

Out of 14 of the psychological variables (but none of the continuous demographic variables), 13 were significantly correlated with the relationship satisfaction individuals reported. The fact that background characteristics had no relationship to the relationship satisfaction reported underscores the significant associations found with the lesbians’ attitudes and values toward their relationships, their work, and themselves. It is surprising that the degree of disclosure and the length of time considering self a lesbian were unrelated to relationship satisfaction. It was hypothesized that differences between partners on these variables would have a negative association with both partners’ relationship satisfaction. However, another variable, the comfort with or self-acceptance of one’s lesbianism, was assumed to lie behind these variables of time (length of time considering self a lesbian) and openness (degree of disclosure about one’s lesbianism to others). On retrospect, this assumption is probably erroneous. Self-esteem, which might be assumed to more accurately reflect self-acceptance, was significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction, and differences in self-esteem between partners was negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction of both partners.

Career commitment was the only psychological variable assessed that, among individual participants, had no relationship to the level of relationship satisfaction reported. However, differences in the career commitment between partners was significantly and negatively related to the relationship satisfaction of both partners. This finding underscores the importance of assessing partner similarities and differences, or within couple scores, in order to fully understand the interaction patterns in the functioning of close relationships. This technique is especially useful when assessing variables that do not reflect an association among individuals.

Intimacy is an important variable in predicting relationship satisfaction. However, some types of intimacy appear to be more related than others to relationship satisfaction among lesbians. Emotional intimacy, defined as experiencing a closeness of feelings (Schaefer & Olson, 1981), is the variable in this study most highly correlated with relationship satisfaction. Recreational and intellectual intimacy also emerged as important correlates of relationship satisfaction. Types of intimacy that appear less important are sexual and social intimacy.

The fact that most of the psychological variables assessed were correlat-
ed in some way with relationship satisfaction indicates that this study selected and included an important set of variables. In the stepwise regression on relationship satisfaction, 60% of the variance was accounted for by the variables of emotional intimacy, life satisfaction, personal autonomy, intellectual intimacy, recreational intimacy, power, and self-esteem. Further research might focus on the interaction of these factors in predicting relationship satisfaction by using controlled methods.

Limitations of the Study

Generalizations from this study are limited by three methodological issues. A random sample is not used because, as Morin (1977) has observed, it is not possible to gather a representative sample of a hidden population such as lesbians. Participation was based on self-selection, with those identifying themselves as dual-career couples volunteering themselves for the study. Those less satisfied with their relationships may not have elected to participate, or one partner may not have completed her questionnaire, thus eliminating the couple from the final analysis. Clearly, the results cannot be generalized to other groups of lesbian couples such as new relationships or those in which one partner is engaged in homemaking, part-time work, or is retired. Furthermore, generalizations cannot be made to other than caucasian and middle-class populations.

Second, it is important to note that in any ex post facto correlational study, causal connections among various psychological variables cannot be surmised. Rather, it is the purpose of this study to uncover the associations that exist among the variables as a basis for developing and testing further hypotheses about lesbian relationships. These findings need to be clarified by in depth research into the relationships among the variables identified by this study. Such research should, however, maintain a social perspective when viewing intrapsychic aspects of lesbians’ lives. Also, it will be important to emphasize that lesbians are not a homogeneous group, and that lesbianism does not represent a personality style (Morin, 1977). Not all lesbians experience the same kind of conflicts studied in this research, nor adhere to the values expressed by the participants in this sample. It is important, therefore, to allow for within group differences when studying lesbian samples, rather than to concentrate on the differences between homosexual and heterosexual groups. Breadth is needed by expanding the research literature to include the experience of lesbian ethnic minorities. In addition, the effect of class on the patterns of lesbian relationships should be investigated.

Finally, Fincham and Bradbury (1987) have argued that past research has confused correlates of relationship quality with assessments of relationship quality. This argument may be considered here, especially in the measure of emotional intimacy that accounted for so much of the variation in the relationship satisfaction measure.
Lesbian Couples

NOTES

1. Readers should note that participants selected themselves as “dual-career” couples. Those
that are students are pursuing graduate or professional training, a variation entirely consistent
with a dual-career lifestyle. Similarly, couples with a partner currently unemployed or
between positions is a normal variation among dual-career relationships.

2. Of the sample, 3% reported that they had been with their partners less than 2 years. From
the qualitative data in response to “What event or experience do you consider the beginning
of this relationship?” it was clear that partners often differed in their demarcation of the
relationship. Hence, there was occasionally a discrepancy in partners’ accounting of the
number of months they had been “in relationship.” Because this was a highly selective
sample, these few participants were included in the data analysis even though they did not
appear to fit the initial criteria for inclusion.

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