The Problem of Fusion in the Lesbian Relationship

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This paper is an attempt to outline a set of hypotheses about the kinds of issues that intensify the problem of fusion in committed lesbian partnerships. We consider also why the likelihood is so great of fusion occurring as a response to stresses both internal and external to the relationship. We have chosen to address the problem from a systems perspective because we feel that the most productive clinical interventions for lesbian couples depend upon an awareness of the problems inherent in the couple’s attempt to define the rules of their relationship within the context of a larger system in which no rules relating to them exist. We shall outline our basic conceptual approach to the problem, offer case examples of a “fused” lesbian couple, and discuss implications for treatment.

After a number of years of treating lesbian couples, we have been struck by the degree to which fusion is an issue when two women attempt to form a sexually exclusive, committed relationship. In referring to the concept of “fusion” we have borrowed Karpel’s definition of a term “used to describe the person’s state of embeddedness in, of undifferentiation within, the relational context” (13, p. 67). The term “committed lesbian couple” refers to two women who have chosen to form a sexually exclusive or monogamous relationship.

Although differentiation and the capacity for autonomy within a relationship specifically defined as monogamous are problems equally significant in heterosexual relationships, it seemed apparent to us that conflicts arising out of an inability to differentiate adequately occurred more frequently and with greater intensity in committed lesbian relationships. Our clients consulted us for problems of sexual dysfunction, alcoholism, the desire for separation, depression, anxiety, and in some cases sado-masochistic interactions. Always the “fusion” theme, the intense anxiety over any desire for separateness or autonomy within the relationship, was critical.

The Issue of Boundaries

To borrow a term again, this time from Salvador Minuchin, the concept of “boundaries” becomes crucial in understanding the nature of the dysfunctionally fused relationship. Minuchin defines the “boundaries” of a subsystem as “the rules defining who participates [in it], and how” (16, p. 53). If the lesbian couple is viewed as a subsystem functioning within the context of a larger system, which is society, it be-
comes clear that the relationship requires rules and structured interactions that will both differentiate it from the larger system and define its relationship to that system. The primary problem the committed lesbian couple faces as they attempt to define the "rules" relative to their relationship within the context of the larger system is that the boundaries go largely unrecognized by the larger system, which typically reacts to the relationship as either invisible or pathological.

A review of the existing literature concerning lesbianism and lesbian relationships often defines these relationships as masochistic, narcissistic, possessive, shadow-like couplings in which the two individuals involved are incapable of achieving any degree of autonomy. The relationship is seen as pathological by virtue of its very existence, and the "fusion issue" to which such terms as masochism, possessiveness, "shadow-like" refer, is seen as an inherent flaw in the characters of the individuals involved rather than a problem occurring within a relational context (4, 8, 19). Even in the more recent writings of "feminists" who purport to have liberated themselves from the judgments of psychoanalytic theory, relationship problems are a dominant focus of concern. For instance, Karla Jay, a prominent feminist writer and co-author of the recent Gay Report, states in an earlier essay that the "jealous lesbian" stereotype perpetuated by heterosexuals holds "a lot of truth" and that jealousy is indeed a problem in lesbian relationships (10, p. 42).

Our hypothesis is that if the lesbian pair, in attempting to define the boundaries around their relationship confront either the absence of response or a response that communicates that its boundaries are negative or illegitimate ones in the context of the larger system, their tendency is to rigidify those boundaries further and to turn in on themselves, adopting what has been described as a "two against a threatening world" posture. The rigid definition makes for an increasingly closed system, with the lesbians often cutting themselves off from others. As a result, the intensity of the fusion between the partners increases. Individual boundaries become blurred. Next, typical responses to fusion such as distancing, open conflict, or overt symptomatology occur to an intense degree in the relationship. Sidney Abbot and Barbara Love, in a pioneering book on lesbianism, refer to the closed system phenomenon.

It is not surprising that Lesbians try to minimize mistreatment by hiding. Outside their home or apartment, women who care for each other do not feel free to show affection; they do not like to cheapen their love by exposing it to ridicule. The privacy of the home offers freedom, but in time the home can become a prison.

In the beginning, when they are totally engrossed in each other, they believe, like all lovers, that they have locked out the world, but Lesbians are apt to discover that the world has locked them in. [1, p. 62]

It appears, then, that fusion issues within the relationship may result in part from attempts by the couple to maintain the subsystem within a larger system whose feedback about their relationship would constantly suggest that they dissolve it. Society's response to fusion in the heterosexual relationship is crucially different. The heterosexual couple gets feedback that its boundaries and rules are normative and that its attempts to maintain a subsystem are necessary and should even enhance individual functioning. Private space for the couples is a clearly acknowledged norm, as attested to by the vast popularity of "marriage encounter" in which thousands of couples have learned new forms of "togetherness." Because the lesbian or homosexual couple must spend excessive amounts of energy defining their boundaries in order to maintain their relatedness and private space in the face of countervailing forces, energy spent in more individuated behavior may tip the balance of the relationship.
toward dissolution. In the homosexual couple individuation is not countered by external forces supporting the survival of the "marriage." It is as though the heterosexual pair operates in an energy field of centripetal force and the homosexual pair operates in a field of centrifugal force.

In the face of this pressure toward dissolution, then, fusion in the committed lesbian couple is perhaps a typical but unfortunate response to living within a tightly closed system. The tendency to draw rigid boundaries appears to be a survival response, but the more tightly closed the relationship system becomes, the more likely it is that the partners will fuse.

In establishing boundaries, a couple must negotiate a complex series of relationships with the larger system. When these negotiations fail, absorption into the larger system or cut-off from it occurs. Entanglement with outside relationships subjects the couple to constant intrusions on their coupling. Cut-off results in the rigidly closed system that promotes fusion. A model of functional relatedness for the committed lesbian couple involves the formation by both the couple and the larger system of boundaries that are clear and respected, although not rigid, with a minimum of cut-off or entanglement.

Bell and Weinberg's findings would tend to confirm this hypothesis (3, pp. 219-220). In their landmark study of homosexuality they identify a form of relationship they define as "close-coupled." By close-coupled they refer to partners who are closely bound together—couples who "tend to look at each other rather than to outsiders for sexual and interpersonal satisfactions." The study found that close-coupled had a superior adjustment to all other homosexual groups and that "close-coupled lesbians were the least likely of all the groups ever to have been concerned enough about a personal problem to have sought professional help for it."

This finding would suggest that lesbians whose relationships are stable are those who manage to form clear boundaries around their relationship while maintaining flexibility and autonomy within them. They are able individually and as a couple to interact with the larger system without becoming entangled with it and without needing to cut themselves off.

Following is a description of specific areas in which lesbian couples must negotiate relationships with the larger system. They are situations that appear most often to constitute sources of pressure to rigidify boundaries and thereby increase the likelihood that the couple will fuse unless they learn alternative responses. It is crucial that couples be helped to establish their partnership in ways that lessen rather than invite these kinds of stress.

Pressures in the Larger System

The "Demand-Bid" Phenomenon

Because the formation of clear boundaries or rules is so crucial to the maintenance of the couple, the most obvious pressure that the lesbian confronts is the typically reactive response of the larger system to her statement that she is homosexual. To take a position about one's homosexuality is comparable to a "demand bid" in bridge. It is a statement that instantly re-frames the relationships of the teller and the told. Gay liberation notwithstanding, homosexuality continues to be stigmatized in our society, and other people usually feel called upon to take some position or make some statement in response to learning of a person's differing sexual preferences. To choose a homosexual life style is a position that by its very nature sets in motion a chain reaction of responses that may support or thwart the couple's attempts to maintain boundaries.

In social situations, most lesbians find that their heterosexuality is assumed. When invited to an office party or asked to relate socially to those with whom they have a professional or work relationship, it is assumed that even though they may be

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unmarried, there is a male “friend” or escort who will accompany them. The lesbian, unless she goes alone, is faced with the choice of either refusing to relate socially in her work settings or with the equally risky and uncomfortable choice of revealing her sexual preference. To do the latter is not to make a simple social statement, but rather to force a response from social acquaintances that goes beyond the level of intimacy that the gay person may really prefer. At the very least, the person who is told of someone’s homosexuality often feels privileged to be entrusted with such loaded information, whereas the homosexual may not have intended any message of special trust.

The real pressure for the couple inherent in the demand-bid situation is that both partners are inhibited individually and as a couple from participating fully in most social situations that exist outside of their relationship. It is not likely that a lesbian will choose to appear at the office party with her lover, and yet that system of work relationships is an important part of a lesbian’s life. One client, a teacher, in referring to the pressures of her work situation said, “I felt as if our house, when we were together, was the only place I was safe because I would work all day in a straight environment.” The secrecy that often surrounds lesbianism, appears to have functions and effects similar to the “family secret” that may exist in a family system.

The pressures are no less complex with respect to this lesbian’s friends and other non-work acquaintances. In many instances, when previously heterosexually identified women have chosen a woman as a partner, relationships with friends known for many years change drastically. Women friends often express jealousy or outright rejection of the relationship. Particularly when a woman has previously been married, her friends tend to relate to her as if she were a single woman again without the responsibilities of a committed relationship. In some cases, when the heterosexual friend or acquaintance becomes aware of the gay woman’s sexual preference, her reaction is to question her own attraction to the gay person and wonder herself if she has “secret” homosexual desires.

Even a woman whose homosexuality has been previously identified to her friends experiences major shifts when she becomes involved in a committed partnership. Often there are warnings to “avoid becoming jealous and possessive like heterosexuals,” from friends who fear the loss of a personal relationship with the lesbian. Friends invariably feel jealous of the new relationship and some outright refuse to relate to the pair as a couple.

It appears that because women friends often share an intimacy with one another that they had hoped and failed to find with a man, the establishment of an intimate relationship between two gay women is seen as a betrayal of the relationship between a gay woman and her friend. The friend tends to feel jealous, “unneeded,” left out. If the lesbian can successfully negotiate a change in the nature of the personal relationship with her friend, the couple stands to gain a much needed source of support. If, however, the friendship becomes untenable because of the shift of energies into the partnership, the couple is once again cut off from meaningful connections outside the relationship and the pressures to fuse increase.

Families of Origin

The “demand-bid” phenomenon has its most intense impact on the couple in the context of the family relationships of both partners. Individually, each partner is likely to confront a “where did I go wrong” response from either or both parents, who are often acting out a long-ingrained pattern of displacing responsibility for their own adequacy onto the child. The lesbian, of course, may also seek to project responsibility for her lesbianism by choosing to “come out” to her parents in a reactive, accusatory way in the context of a family argument.
Sometimes parents may simply deny the lesbianism, as did the mother of one client, Bernice, who "came out" at fourteen. She states that she returned home from a party drunk. Her mother asked her, "Are you a lesbian?" Bernice answered yes. "Are you having an affair with Arleen?" Bernice answered yes. Whereupon Bernice says her mother slapped her hard across the face and said, "You're from a good Methodist home, and Christians don't drink."

If the family's reaction to the individual's lesbianism is complex, their reaction to a lesbian partnership is even more so. The overtly stated or covertly implied boundaries around the lesbian couple are most often unrecognized or denied by the family of origin either because of the stigma of a same-sex relationship or because the relationship means there will be no perpetuation of that line of the family. Less frequently the family may be uniquely accepting, allow discussion of the lesbianism, and openly accept the partner as "one of the family." The latter reaction is deceptively "liberal" because it usually reflects a dynamic in the family system that suggests that the daughter has been "kept in the family." It does not necessarily reflect the family's tolerance of differentiation to any greater degree than the adverse reaction. In a highly enmeshed family in which the individual has had to struggle for any level of differentiation, there is frequently an attempt to deny the formation of even a heterosexual subsystem; the choice of a same-sex relationship usually allows the family simply to assume that the woman has never really left the family at all. In one case, the lesbian's father appeared noticeably relieved that his daughter chose a woman rather than a man. He had often suggested to her that, "she didn't really want to get married, did she?!" Clearly the two varieties of responses suggest that lesbianism carries a different meaning and function in different types of family systems.

The lesbian who attempts to remain part of a family network has to choose between enmeshment or cut-off, and if she attempts to draw the boundaries around herself and a lover as a subsystem, she may experience great pressure to do otherwise.

There is, of course, tremendous pressure, subtle and obvious, to break up the Lesbian relationship. Unknowing parents say: 'Why have you been living with that girl for five years? Don't you want a place of your own so you can entertain men?' At the same time they make the Lesbian constantly aware of the awards and approval incidentally accompanying a heterosexual contract: the showers, the big wedding for everyone in town, the newspaper announcement, the honeymoon. [1, p. 54]

Holidays are particularly good examples of the kind of pressure faced by the lesbian couple from the family of origin. Surely heterosexual couples must always negotiate whose "family of origin" "gets them" on holidays, and there are a multitude of loyalty issues implicit in the demands of the respective families. There is a recognition, however, that compromise will have to be made, often in the form of the couple spending part of the holiday with each family of origin. And, as Nagy (6) points out, once the couple produces a child the original obligation somewhat changes and lessens. For the lesbian couple, however, the necessity of compromise is often unrecognized because loyalty to the partner is invisible, either because the lesbians remain "in the closet" or because they are not recognized as a couple by the families of origin.

A specific example of "invisibility" of the latter kind manifested itself with one couple in treatment. Mary came from an enmeshed Italian-Catholic family that had ritualized Christmas to the point of its being the central family rite of the year. Mary's family explicitly knew that Mary was gay and was living with her lover, Janice. Despite this explicit knowledge, the relationship was not something that was discussed in the family, and the first year of Mary's relationship with Janice, Mary decided to

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go “home” alone for Christmas Eve and the major portion of Christmas day. She was, however, intending to drive the three hours back to her own house to spend Christmas night with Janice and to attend a party to which they had been invited. Mary announced her plans and her intended departure time, 3:00 p.m. Christmas day, to her family. There was no effort made to prepare Christmas dinner before her departure time. Consequently she left without having eaten Christmas dinner. The following day her sister called to say that Mary had ruined Christmas for the entire family by leaving and asked how dare Mary leave at 3:00 to go to a party with Janice when her family had counted on her being there.

For some time Janice’s family dealt with their daughter’s lesbian relationship by pretending it did not exist. In this case, the most blatant example was a continuing insistence on Janice’s mother’s part that Janice and Mary did not sleep in the same bed. In Janice and Mary’s home it is very clear that only one room is a bedroom, and it has a double bed. Invariably, Janice’s mother would come into the house, and within five minutes find occasion to remark, “Where does Mary sleep?” There were repeated references to sleeping arrangements. Mary’s family, on the other hand, gave Mary and Janice a double bed to sleep in when they visited, but father, mother, grandmother, and sister all walked into the room unannounced whenever they felt like it.

Many families, if not outrightly rejecting of their daughters and their relationships, give ambivalent messages around the “visibility” of a lesbian relationship. One couple reports that the family of one would never allow them to sleep in the same bed when visiting yet would send bed sheets for a double bed as a gift.

As with the situation of the “office party” and other social relationships in the lesbian’s life, at this point the lesbian is faced with the “demand-bid” situation within her family of origin. Either she must clearly state the boundaries around her relationship with her lover and force the recognition of the relationship, or the two partners must function separately within their respective families in a way that is a denial of their relationship. In some cases, the family can accept the statement of boundaries and respect the loyalties of the two partners, but in many cases the lesbian feels forced to choose between loyalty to her lover and loyalty to her family until she is able to deal with her personal relationships with family members in a way that is non-reactive and prevents cut-off. Although the family may define the situation as “either-or,” the lesbian can reframe the situation as “both-and,” and thus help the family to be less reactive.

In any case, the lesbian relationship is rarely accorded the same status within the family system as a heterosexual subsystem. The lover of the lesbian daughter is rarely acknowledged as having status more significant than that of a “close friend,” even though the two women may obviously share a household and material possessions and even jointly raise children from a former marriage of one or both.

One wonders whether the degree to which the family reacts to the same-sex relationship as a toxic issue or with denial may reflect the degree to which the woman’s sexual choice has in fact resulted from a family projection process (6), in which latent homosexual fantasies may in reality have disturbed one or both of the parents. It is curious to note that many gay women in treatment, when questioned as to whether they had ever fantasized that their mother was latently gay, overwhelmingly responded affirmatively and were able to cite instances in which their mothers had related closely to one particular woman friend or had actively sought the company of gay women. Many women have also reported overtly seductive behavior on the part of their mothers such as excessive nudity in their presence or inappropriately “affectionate” gestures. In the case previ-
ously mentioned, Janice's mother threatened to take Janice's first lover to court on charges of "alienation of affection." Mary's mother continues to plead with Mary to move home to be "closer to her mother." Neither woman perceived an emotionally warm or close relationship with the mother, but each felt that the mother "wanted" her on some level. One client's mother frantically insisted that her daughter "belonged" to her and had the daughter arrested for sexual deviance when she learned she was having a lesbian affair. Another mother screamed that her daughter didn't "love" her anymore after the daughter's "friendship" with another young woman began and the two became active with a local women's center. The suggestion of a tie between mother and daughter that is more important to the mother than the marital relationship is not at all unusual in our clinical experience. Again, Abbot and Love have addressed the issue:

Lesbians often become their mothers' psychic protectors and, in families where physical violence is expressed, their physical protectors as well. These ties, which run very deep, are far from understood, but in many ways some Lesbians seem to live so as to avenge their mother's deprivations, to make their lives worthwhile in a way the mothers themselves could not. [1, p. 52]

These phenomena raise interesting questions as to the meaning and origins of same-sex relationships within family systems and leave wide areas open to further work and investigation.

Lesbianism and Loss

Realistically, then, when the lesbian makes a choice to enter into a committed relationship, a series of losses occur differing qualitatively in significance from those heterosexual experiences in relinquishing options in a marital relationship. In choosing a homosexual life style, the individual first experiences a loss of a former sense of self. She is no longer "normal," or like other women. Her self-image may suffer. If she has not been previously married and borne children, she is most likely relinquishing her option for child-rearing. She loses social status, a factor that may be more significant for lesbians who have formerly enjoyed the status of being heterosexually married. There is often loss of important friendships as well as loss associated with the family of origin. In many cases there are previous relationships to be terminated and mourned. If these previous relationships were homosexual ones, the secret status of that relationship complicates the process of grieving.

As Betty and Norman Paul (17) have pointed out, incomplete mourning of loss often leads to the emergence of fixed patterns between spouses as well as resistance toward differentiation. Often fusion in the lesbian relationship is related to the fact that there are no sanctions or socially acceptable mechanisms for mourning losses that are looked upon by society simply as negative consequences of deviant behavior. If the lesbian turns, logically, to her partner for help in mourning loss, the relationship is again focused inward, and both partners are forced to confront the obvious limitations and consequences that exist as a realistic part of their choice to be together. The result may be that feelings are cut off and the losses not really mourned. Conflict occurs because the couple do not have the opportunity to move either individually or together through a phase of acceptance of loss on to a newer level of integration that allows them to embrace new experiences and relationships as a couple.

Sexism and the Gay World

The question is often posed from a clinical standpoint as to whether gay women have a predilection for fused relationships. In other words, are lesbians inherently less differentiated human beings?

It would appear that lesbians do, in fact, experience a comparatively greater degree
of fusion in their relationships than homosexual males do, but this phenomenon seems attributable to the fact that the socialization of women does not promote personal differentiation. Standards of differentiation in this society differ markedly for men and women. Traditionally women have been expected to deny self in relationships—that is, to put the needs and feelings of other people, their husbands and children, ahead of their own. Although it is typically acceptable for men to take strong, "independent," "I" positions, women are expected to be more dependent and follow the male's lead. Women have typically not been expected to take positions and, in general, it is more often the male in a relationship who gains self at the expense of the woman than otherwise. One meaning of differentiation is that a person is free to relate autonomously to those around him without excessive need to "debate the advantages or disadvantages of biological and social roles" (6, p. 370). However, if a woman is to accept her historic role, she would clearly be a disadvantaged self in our particular culture because that "role" has traditionally required passivity, selflessness, and submissiveness in most instances. From this perspective, if a woman attempts to be truly autonomous, her very autonomy may be labeled as reactive and, therefore, undifferentiated behavior in itself.

Given, then, that women have been socialized to deny self, it is not unusual for two women in an intimate relationship to become mired in a series of struggles because neither has had much practice at self-definition and autonomy in a relational context. The pressures the couple experiences to form a closed system in the interests of its own survival serve to intensify the problem, because individual boundaries may become increasingly blurred rather than strengthened. Also, because two people of the same sex feel a greater possibility of identification with one another, the tremendous appeal of that identification may mask the difficulty of maintaining autonomy in the relationship.

It is interesting to note that in dysfunctional relationships between gay males, a common response to systemic pressures is reactive distance rather than fusion. The gay male who is troubled by conflict in a relationship is more likely to triangle in a third party, separate himself by forming a separate household, or engage in "tricking" rather than attempt to maintain a monogamous relationship at all. In general terms, these two different responses to relationship pressures seem to reflect the differences in socialization between men and women: women cling, men distance.

Additionally, the role of sexism in the exertion of claims and pressures on the lesbian relationship cannot be ignored. Whereas culturally a heterosexual couple experiences a pressure for "coupledom," the gay couple faces on all fronts a pressure to be separate, to deny the reality of intimacy with one another. Because women have been raised to believe that the most legitimate form of intimacy is that shared with a man, the lesbian relationship is accorded only second-class status, an attribution that may be internalized to some degree by the women themselves.

When one lesbian couple set up a separate household with children from former marriages of both, one partner's ex-husband spent every weekend with them. Since he knew of and presumably accepted the lesbianism of his ex-wife, he saw no reason not to spend time with his children in this way. It is extremely difficult to imagine that this arrangement would have been acceptable to either the ex-husband or the wife she had been remarried to another man. All three involved in the situation colluded in reinforcing the second-class status of the lesbian relationship, and boundaries were not appropriately set until the couple entered treatment. Thus, much of what is labeled masochism or latent hostility of one woman for the other, could be seen as an
acting-out of imposed cultural values concerning the status of women in general. In any case, a relationship in which the needs of a female rather than a male are being met is not taken as seriously—such intimacy is seen as empty and insignificant. In fact, even much of the social reactivity surrounding homosexual relationships is reserved for male homosexuals, perhaps because they have most blatantly offended our patriarchal cultural rules by seeming to relinquish their male superiority in favor of more stereotypically “feminine” behaviors (7, p. 186).

The Gay World

Finally, pressures exerted by the gay community itself intensify the couple's problems in stabilizing a committed relationship. Within the gay community it has become politically suspect in some quarters for two women to choose a monogamous relationship. This “aping of heterosexual structure” violates the more radical principles of the women's movement.

Politics aside, gay couples are constantly vulnerable to the claims exerted by the community of gay women at large, who rarely respect the sexual boundaries a couple draws around itself. Any woman, attached or otherwise, is considered “fair game” sexually by another lesbian.

Former lovers seem particularly prone to try to triangulate themselves into the relationship of a new couple, a phenomenon in which the new couple often colludes. Because of the relatively limited circle of people in any particular gay network, relationships tend to become inbred, a characteristic of lesbian society widely commented on in the literature (1, 15, 22). The same principle that operates in the one-to-one relationship extends to the larger gay network. All person-to-person relationships within the network become prone to triangling and enmeshment because of the closed nature of the system. Everyone in the system knows everyone else. A person's best friend is probably a former lover. Relationships among members of a network tend to be intrusive and involve inappropriate claims. Finally, because women have been socialized to connect sex with love—that is, they assume that if they feel sexual they must be “in love” or if they feel loving they must express that love sexually—there is a strong tendency compulsively to become involved sexually with a woman who would be more satisfying as a friend. Because the network is thus inbred, it appears that any woman not engaged in a person-to-person relationship experiences herself in the uncomfortable position of being the outsider in a triangle, needing to get in. The triangling becomes appealing to the couple because it seems to lessen the fusion experienced within the dyad. What results is often a system of sustained triangles with former or new-found lovers that finally weaken the boundaries around the couple. It seems likely that members of a given lesbian network tend to demand allegiance to the espoused values of the group because of their strong feeling of being cut off from society and family. If there is greater enmeshment in such a group, greater reactivity to couplehood, and less tolerance for difference or disagreement, it is because “everyone needs to belong”; this phenomenon is not unlike what occurs in a nuclear family system that retains few ties with extended family members.

Male homosexuals also tend to create systems of sustained triangles, but they accomplish this in less emotionally charged activities such as “tricking,” gay baths, threesomes. In men, however, these maintained triangles may tend successfully to divert some of the anxiety from the dyad, unless one partner becomes “emotionally involved” with the outside sexual partner. Lesbians seem more apt to subscribe to the ideal of monogamy and are more likely to be unhappy if it cannot be achieved. Since, again, they have been socialized to equate sex with love, “love at first sight” as the
phenomenon is referred to by Jill Johnston in *Lesbian Nation* (12), triangling of a sexual partner appears to be inherently more destructive for women than for male homosexuals.

The dilemma for the lesbian couple, then, is that in relating to the gay community they are subject to intense triangling and inappropriate claims, but if they cut themselves off from the lesbian community they are again alienated from a deep sense of identification with their own reference group.

*The Therapeutic Task*

It has been hypothesized that the lesbian couple often tries to deal with the diffuse boundary around the relationship and with the pressures placed on that tentative boundary by fusing almost to the point of appearing as “two against a threatening world.” Attempts to deal with the discomfort of being fused may then involve all the relational patterns described by Karpel as typical of heterosexual relationships: (a) one partner distancing; (b) alternating distance; (c) cycles of fusion and unrelativeness; (d) continual conflict; (e) impairment of one partner (13, pp. 74–76).

Clinical experience, however, would seem to indicate that there is a greater attempt among lesbian couples to “triangle” either outside issues or other people into the relationship to a dysfunctional degree. Former lovers appear quite frequently in the network of lesbian couples, and they may represent attempts to evolve substitute family networks, but more often they seem to represent a system of “sustained triangles” that lessen the intensity and conflict of the fusion for the couple. In fact, we know of not one instance in which at least one partner in a lesbian partnership has not maintained contact with a former lover.

Another way of triangling is the introduction into the system of a symptom such as alcoholism. Our clinical impression is that there is, for reasons still not clearly identified, a higher incidence of alcoholism among lesbian women than among their heterosexual counterparts.

Finally, one way the lesbian frequently attempts to deal with the pain engendered by nonrecognition or outright rejection by family and friends is her attempt to politicize the issue of her sexual preference. Persistence that family and friends accept her lesbianism may in some cases block the gay woman’s working out of her relationships with these people and with her partner. The homosexuality is a “red herring” that serves the function of masking issues of individuation and autonomy. To go on a political bandwagon resolves family loyalty issues in much the same way as physical or emotional distancing, i.e., not at all.

The following case examples represent fairly typical problems encountered in clinical practice with lesbian partnerships.

*Case Number 1*

Ann is a 30-year old female who came into treatment in response to anxiety and depression when her female lover, with whom she had lived for two years, made a decision to attend graduate school in another part of the state. This was a first lesbian relationship for both women. Ann had become involved in this relationship through a mutual work setting. At the time she entered treatment, her major concerns were to deal with the effects of her lover’s move out of their home; to deal with the issue of her sexual identity, which she had begun to question since the lover had decided to go to graduate school; and to deal with her relationship with her family of origin.

The most interesting element of Ann’s anxiety about her lover’s leaving was that Ann herself had insisted that the lover should go. The lover’s graduate program was located within commuting distance of their home, but Ann had felt that her lover “needed to be away from her in order to become less dependent upon her.” About the time it became clear that the lover would go to school, Ann had begun to ques-
tion a previous decision that their relationship should be a monogamous one. She began to wonder if she might not prefer being with a man sometimes. She felt a great need for "space" and distance from her lover. She felt trapped by her and by their lifestyle.

Because it was the first gay relationship for both of them, they were struggling with forming satisfying social relationships with friends and other couples. For fully a year and a half they had avoided telling any of their friends or peers at work that they were lovers. When they did, reactions varied. Both lost some "straight" friends, and they found themselves increasingly concerned to find other gay women and gay couples to relate to. They allowed their relationship to be intruded upon at times by straight or gay friends who attempted to seduce or otherwise ally with one of them to the exclusion of the other. They had struggled with boundary issues or the rules of participation in their relationship almost constantly, and at the time Ann entered treatment, they had taken the lover's 17-year-old sister's female lover in to live with them for the summer as a gesture of "good will."

The most dominant message Ann had felt from friends was "stop acting so much like a couple—we would like to relate to you individually the way we used to." Ann was both confused and troubled by this message but only too willing to use it as a rationalization for distancing when pressure in the relationship became too great. Families also posed problems. Ann had been cut off from her family; her lover was enmeshed with her own family.

At the outset of treatment Ann felt closer to her lover than she had to anyone previously and vacillated between taking a "two against a threatening world" posture and reactive distancing. The real threat to the relationship came at the point that the lover took a very marked step toward responding to her individual desires and found herself literally "pushed out of the house" by Ann who could not deal with such an individuated move. It became clear that both women struggled with issues of individuation in different ways. It was clear also that the additional pressures from friends and family had contributed to their problems in working out their relationship rather than providing any kind of support.

Case Number 2

Barbara and Jane entered treatment after living together for approximately four years. They presented their problem as the intrusiveness of Jane's mother. Barbara was almost totally cut off from her own family of origin. She visited them infrequently and ceremonially. She had never really grieved the loss of her grandmother, a woman who served essentially as a surrogate mother. She was bitterly resentful of what she viewed as an enmeshed relationship between Jane and her mother, who contacted Jane daily; Jane had virtually no other close relationships. Yet Barbara made many moves to fuse with Jane; in fact she was at the point of resenting it if Jane walked on the beach by herself.

Both Jane and Barbara were recovered alcoholics, sober for two years in Alcoholics Anonymous. They lived together, went to A.A. together on the same night, and were otherwise inseparable. Sexuality between them had diminished to the point of being almost nonexistent. Both claimed to love and be committed to the other.

Therapeutic Issues

Although it is tempting to fault society's difficulty in dealing with differences, the focus of intervention, as in all therapeutic work, must be with the motivated part of the system, in this case the lesbian couple rather than the society in which it exists. Politicizing the issue of lesbianism, using it to blur other family problems, triangling other people and issues are just some of the ineffective responses lesbians tend to make to pressure. The therapeutic task is complicated; it involves both full recognition of
the unique kinds of pressure that lesbian couples face and a systems approach to coaching them to deal with these pressures without becoming fused.

In both the above cases, it was important initially to sanction the validity of the relationship. Both clients tended to feel that the evidence of problems in their relationship obviously confirmed the prevailing attitude that "gay relationships don’t work because gay people are sick." Ann’s first impulse when anxiety began to mount in the relationship was to decide that she probably wasn’t gay after all and to want to flee to the safe harbor of heterosexuality. This was framed as a bogus issue, because Ann felt equally that she loved her partner deeply and would choose to maintain the relationship “if it could work.”

Second, it was helpful to both couples to understand some basic systems principles and how they operated in their respective relationships. Concepts such as boundaries, triangling, distancing, de-selfing, and fusion were explained, with distinctions made for the specific pressures encountered in gay life. In our experience, most couples readily recognize the patterns occurring in their relationship and feel greatly relieved that their problems are no longer nameless, faceless expressions of their basic deviance and pathology. This process for the couple amounts to an entire reframing of the relationship as a system that is inherently capable of being maintained as opposed to one that is pathological in nature.

Finally, each individual was helped to become more differentiated within the relationship. The success of this phase depended on the motivation of each partner and our ability in the therapeutic situation to orchestrate and predict one partner’s response to the other’s steps toward autonomy. Confronting the fusion in this fashion involved two other important factors. The first was to coach the couple consciously to set firmer boundaries and to lessen the tendency to triangle other people into their relationship. The second was to work on families of origin in an attempt to repair ruptures that had brought emotional residue into the relationship. Barbara was helped to grieve for her grandmother, thus lessening the intensity of her need to fuse with Jane. At the same time Barbara was encouraged to detriangle herself from the relationship between Jane and her mother so that the two of them could deal with their relationship directly.

Ann was systematically coached to re-establish relations with her family of origin. She was also taught responses to the "straight" system that continued to pressure the relationship. For example, one straight friend in particular persisted in inviting Ann to functions without her lover. Ann was coached not to politicize the issue of her lesbianism but to deal directly with the change in her relationship with this friend and the friend’s probable sense of loss.

In many day-to-day situations, clients are coached to use humor to defuse the prejudiced and provocative comments relating to their homosexuality. When Janice’s mother next asks where Mary sleeps, Janice can be coached to respond humorously, “She has chronic insomnia,” or “Didn’t you notice the straw mat on the floor?,” thus deflecting the question with humor rather than joining the issue and escalating it.

When lesbians feel on the spot regarding social invitations, strategies need to be devised to circumvent the “demand-bid” nature of such invitations. We are still struggling to develop such strategies, but sometimes we are successful. Ambiguity seems to be a key. For example, “I have a friend I’d like to bring” is a less provocative statement than “I’d like to bring my lover.”

Finally, the prerequisite for coaching the lesbian and her partner is to convert the couple’s typical tendency to see villains everywhere to clear systems thinking. Blaming is a typical response that is heightened when dealing with any minority issue. Lesbian couples need to be helped to see their own role in maintaining and eliciting
the unfortunate kinds of pressure that society exerts on their relationship. To facilitate this cognitive conversion, however, it is necessary that the therapist acknowledge the frank differences that exist between lesbian and heterosexual couples.

**Summary**

It has been postulated that fusion and attempts to deal with it are crucial issues in treating the lesbian couple and that these issues exist in concert with a wide range of clinical problems generally encountered in practice. We have outlined broad areas of environmental pressures causing the boundaries around a lesbian couple to be ignored or violated, with the hypothesized consequences that the lesbian partnership rigidifies its boundaries and the partners tend to become more enmeshed or fused with each other. Families of origin, "demand bid" social situations, unclear boundaries with resulting inappropriate claims, loss, and sexism are all examples of those areas of pressure. We have gone on to look briefly at some of the responses lesbians tend to make to the pressures and to the phenomenon of fusion.

Finally, we have taken the position that the family therapist needs to be sensitively aware of the unique impact on the lesbian partnership of the difficulty in establishing respected boundaries. It is the therapeutic task to help the couple clarify those boundaries in ways that do not lead to fusion but that support the survival of the partnership.

**REFERENCES**


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Lesbian Motherhood: Identity and Social Support

Eileen F. Levy

This article explores the relationship between lesbian identity, social support, and lesbian mothers' ability to cope with the stress of a heterosexual and homophobic environment. Interviews with 31 lesbian mothers revealed that social support was obtained from a variety of sources, both lesbian and nonlesbian. The women had strong, positive lesbian identities and were open about their lesbianism, although selective about coming out. They had used stress-mediating resources and were successfully adapting to their social environments. The implications for social work practice are presented.

Lesbian motherhood, once largely hidden and unrecognized, has recently come into wider public awareness. Because of societal homophobia and a devaluation of alternative family forms, in general, and gay and lesbian families, in particular (Ettorre, 1980; Goodman, 1980), the lesbian family occupies a marginal position in society. It is evident that the lesbian mother suffers from the stigma of being lesbian in a heterosexist environment and that she and her family are stigmatized for being an alternative family form in a culture that idealizes the nuclear family (Goodman, 1980).

The existence of lesbian mothers and their children is a direct challenge to the patriarchal family assumption that is dependent on...