This research uncovers a pattern of support and the existence of a relationship network that runs strongly counter to the stereotyped view that lesbians in later life find themselves friendless and without support. The hypothesis that the older lesbian has developed friendship networks to replace missing or weak kin ties is substantiated. The findings are based on 20 in-depth, structured interviews with lesbians whose ages range from 50 to 73.

THE OLDER LESBIAN

LOVE RELATIONSHIPS AND FRIENDSHIP PATTERNS

SHARON M. RAPHAEL
MINA K. ROBINSON
California State University, Dominguez Hills

This article explores the subject of intimacy and aging by studying a heretofore neglected population of women, lesbians over the age of 50. The authors focus particularly on the patterns of support and nature of relationships that appear to exist for the women studied, whose ages range from 50 to 73. Much of the data presented question popular prevailing myths about older lesbians, especially those that picture the older lesbian as lonely, totally isolated, and without anyone to love or care about her in old age. Special attention is given to two areas that contribute to an understanding of support and intimacy in later life: (1) love relationships and (2) friendship patterns.

Authors' Note: We wish to acknowledge and thank Paula Dressel for her incisive comments and editorial suggestions.

ALTERNATIVE LIFESTYLES, Vol. 3 No. 2, May 1980 207-229
Other issues which this article will touch upon include the following.

(a) Are uncoupled lesbians single by choice or through just not having found the right person? What decisions have these lesbians who are now over the age of 50 made about their love relationships?
(b) What are long-term relationships between lesbians like? Does sexuality continue into old age? Does sexuality change as lesbians age, and in what ways?
(c) When the sampled older lesbians ended a long-term relationship (equivalent to divorce), did they get the support (emotional or financial) they needed? Were friends, or relatives, or co-workers told of the breakup? What role did each group play in providing comfort or understanding? Indeed, was there any support at all, from anyone? How does a closeted lesbian cope when she has lost a mate and the people around her are aware only of the more minimal loss of a "roommate"?
(d) Where do older lesbians meet other lesbians? In what kind of settings did the respondents meet their mates?
(e) In what ways do the lives of feminist lesbians differ from the lives of nonfeminist lesbians?

Wolf (1978), in reporting preliminary trends in her research on close friendship patterns of older lesbians, contends that because older lesbians have less chance than heterosexuals for close family ties due to social stigma and because they are also less likely to have children, they have developed close friendships which offer support. Lowenthal and Haven (1968) refer to the life-long need for intimacy:

Lowenthal and Haven show that a single intimate friendship is an effective "buffer" against demoralization produced by the three major kinds of social losses that beset older people: widowhood, retirement, and diminished social participation. Indeed, the morale of people who are more isolated in old age, but who have one intimate friendship, is as high as that of people with increased social participation.
Only for those without a confidant does more social participation help to forestall demoralization in old age. One intimate friendship, in short, was as effective as several less intimate ones for safeguarding morale after role exit [Blau, 1973: 71-72].

Blau also states:

Friendships with peers are more effective alternatives to marriage and work roles than are relationships with children, though only the latter are defined as institutionally significant. Indeed, because friendship rests on mutual choice and mutual need and involves a voluntary exchange of sociability between equals, it sustains a person’s sense of usefulness and self-esteem more effectively than filial relationships. . . . Bonds of friendship, as a rule, develop only between people who view each other as equals and who have interests and experiences in common that they can freely share with one another. For these reasons friendships are usually confined to people of the same generation and at a similar stage of life [Blau, 1973: 67-68].

And Raphael notes:

Being misunderstood and rejected by “straight” people who have previously been close increases the social barrier between Gay and non-Gay. The lesbian who has “come out” finds it more comfortable and more meaningful to look for friendships and support from within the Lesbian and Gay community [Raphael, 1974: 97].

With these considerations in mind, we will explore in some detail the love relationships and friendship patterns of 20 older lesbians.

SAMPLE AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The sample employed here consists of 20 women over the age of 50 who identify themselves as lesbians. Of the
women, 13 range in age from 50 to 59 and seven from 60 to 73. Exactly half of the respondents live in the San Francisco Bay area of California, and the other half live in the Los Angeles area.

The sample was selected by means of the "snowball technique." An attempt was made to minimize the bias in using this approach by making contact with the initial respondents form as broad a base as possible. This was done by advertising in lesbian, feminist, and older women's publications as well as by receiving referrals from friends and associates. There were two criteria for acceptance as a participant: The women were required to be 50 years of age or older and had to define themselves as lesbians.

All of the respondents are Caucasian, though of various ethnic backgrounds. Eleven of the women were single at the time of the interview and nine were coupled. Five of those who were coupled did not have mates in this sample. (Two couples were interviewed.) Seven of the women have children. Only one had a child still living at home. Five of the women had had heterosexual marriages of significant duration (19-33 years) and another six had short marriages (from three weeks to three years). The short marriages took place primarily when the women were in their twenties and, in several cases, were to gay men for the purpose of "passing" for heterosexual. Fifteen of the women state they have "always known they were lesbian." Two of the women "came out" in their sixties, three in their fifties, one at 48 and one at 38. The other 13 came out in their teens or early twenties.

Thirteen of the respondents had either attended or graduated from college. Six of these had Master's degrees. Two had some grade school and two had some high school. Three women were high school graduates.

Nine women were professionals, three were small business owners, two were office administrators, four were in retail sales or office work, one was a real estate sales-
woman, and one was an artist. Seven of the 20 are fully retired.

The religions the respondents were raised in were Catholic, three; Protestant, eight; Jewish, six; none, three. The religious convictions they currently hold are Protestant, two; Jewish, one; Science of Mind, two; belief in God, two; 11 had no affiliation or were atheistic.

The interviews took from one to four hours with each respondent. An interview schedule was used which explored four general topic areas: attitudes toward and preparations for aging, kinship/friendship networks, friends and lovers, and identity and community (Robinson, 1979). Discussion within this article will be limited to the material specifically pertaining to intimacy, friendship, and aging.

The data presented here are not intended necessarily to be generalizable to a larger population. Rather, the import of qualitative analysis is to show the richness, diversity, and complexity of the situations of individuals under study. We believe we accomplish this task. Further research can utilize the data offered here for the generation of specific hypotheses to be tested on larger samples of older women.

LOVE RELATIONSHIPS

What are the ways in which our interviewees structure their love relationships? To what extent is sexuality central to such relationships? Has the importance of sexuality changed over time for these women? These are the questions which will be explored in this section.

PATTERNS OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Although the dominant pattern that intimate relationships followed in our data was one of serial monogamy, there were some respondents with nontraditional prefer-
ences. All the lesbians have been in at least one major relationship. Three of the women sampled have been in only one relationship, and two of them are still in that relationship. All three are late-blooming lesbians.

Sixteen of the women in the sample, including the nine women currently in love relationships with women they live with, said they prefer being in a coupled relationship. The primary reasons they gave included companionship, sharing, and support. However, some women had more nontraditional ideas. One woman stated: "I want a lover, a monogamous relationship, but I don't want to live with her." Another single woman said: "What I would like best is a steady girlfriend but not living together." One single, feminist, late-blooming lesbian stated:

I prefer being single. I have idiosyncracies and I don't want to change how I live. Being coupled would be supportive and psychologically good but I'm too old [she is 63]. I would like a relationship but not someone to live with. It would be exciting to live in a retirement community with other lesbians.

Several women talked about wanting to live collectively and have nonmonogamous relationships. Two of them said:

I don't want to live with a lover. I want a primary relationship. I want to share experiences and goals but not a monogamous relationship. I want to live in a rural women's community.

I would like to live in a collective. I would like nonmonogamous, plural relationships.

A feminist woman in a coupled relationship stated:

I have mixed feelings. I love being single, but I also love sharing. . . . After we were together for three years we decided to try nonmonogamy. It didn't work out very well, although we tried for almost four years. Being nonmonogamous is demanding and time-consuming on your primary relationship. We give each other primary support, but I also
get support from other friends. We are monogamous again, but I think we’ll come to nonmonogamy again when we’re both ready.

SEXUALITY

Sexuality continues to play a part in the lives of all of the women in the sample. Some of these women have experienced changes in the emphasis they place on the importance of sexuality in their lives. This sometimes appears to be caused by the entrance of a new partner.

Sexuality wasn’t important to me before meeting — I was in a forty-year relationship, but the last thirty years we had no sex at all. I’m seventy-three years old and feel thirty-five. I have at last achieved what I looked for all my life in finding someone to love me. Our sex life is very active.

Sexuality is important to me now. It has changed. It’s now happy, fulfilling, marvelous. The frequency has increased since coming out [at sixty-two].

A single woman who was in a 23-year relationship stated:

Sexuality is very important to me. I’m not able to be sexual with women I don’t care about, and sometimes I have a hard time finding women who want sexuality to be a part of their lives. My sexual needs increase as I grow older. I think as women grow older we grow more sexual. We are getting in touch with our basic natures. I love to touch and be touched. I’m not so bothered now by what people think. Whoever I get involved with has to be very spontaneous about lovemaking. I’ve just started to realize this.

A single, late-blooming lesbian stated:

It’s more important now [the last few years] than before. I want more sex in my life. I’m willing to put more energy into sexuality, instead of in my head. I don’t find it easy to be sexual in a casual way. It is the most personal and private thing you can give to anyone. When I am in a relationship I am very sexual.
Another late-blooming lesbian who is in her first lesbian relationship after a 25-year marriage to a man reported: "Sexuality is very important in my life. But then I've got a damn good partner. Sex sure has gotten better!"

For one 72-year-old single woman, finding a partner is a problem.

Sexuality has been extremely important in my life. I still occasionally have a wet dream. My libido hasn't really changed, but my sex life has gone downhill the past three years, since my last relationship ended. If you don't have a partner, well . . .

A 60-year-old single woman stated:

Sexuality is fairly important to me but not something I have much of. There was a definite decline when I was going through menopause, from my early forties to my early fifties, but then it came back. There has been a slight decline in my libido in recent years.

Another single long-time lesbian reported:

I have to love someone before I can have sex. Within long-term relationships it has played a major part in the relationship. My sexuality has stayed the same. Aging hasn't changed anything.

Two women in the study, both feminists, talked about celibacy. The first, a long-time lesbian, responded:

I was celibate for over a year. Sexuality isn't nearly as important as I was prepared to think. I am relating to another woman now. I decided to be celibate at a time when I wanted to put a lot of energy into things I was doing and not into love relationships. It worked well for me.

The other woman, a late-blooming lesbian, stated:

My sexuality was transformed into spiritual energy. I have been celibate now for the longest time since I was seven-
teen [for the past one and one-half years]. I will remain celibate unless I meet someone very special. I do masturbate. My orgasmic drive has diminished. Three years ago I broke my ankle and the shock was so great to my system that I went through instant menopause. That's when my sexual need diminished. Now I'm content with four to six orgasms a week. That didn't used to be enough. Sexuality shaped my life in my thirties and forties, but in my fifties it hasn't [she came out at 51].

The problems that occur in long-term relationships seem to transcend sexual preference:

It's not the strongest thing in my life. It's less important than it used to be. We make love less often. I think it has to do with the long hours at work, my age [60], and the length of our relationship. I was fifty-three when I started feeling less sexual. We had been together twelve years at that time [twenty years now].

Another woman reported:

It was more important at one time. Not anymore. Sometimes I feel like going out and just picking somebody up. I feel I need that. Once in a while I feel restless. But I don't want to hurt ______. I don't want to risk our relationship [of 20 years]. My sexuality changed with menopause. I don't feel so sexy anymore. It might have something to do with my relationship. I love ______. But I don't stay with her for sex. I think sometimes couples put too much stress on sex. But sex isn't everything.

A long-time lesbian who has been in seven major relationships talked about her feelings after five years in her current relationship:

Sexuality is not the predominant factor in my life. My libido seems to change with my partners. Sexuality doesn't stand alone. It depends on circumstances. My libido has decreased, but the longer the relationship, the less important sexuality.
A 50-year-old lesbian who has been living with her 30-year-old lover for the past six years stated:

It has decreased. Partially because we've been together for a long time; it gets boring. Partly because we don't work at it. I'm not sure I was ever all that attracted to ______. We still make love periodically. We are intimate but we have something else. We are companions. Sex has been important in other relationships. The last affair I had [when she and her lover were being nonmonogamous] was very sexual. She was older and very erotic, very experienced. We got together for sex. That was the purpose. My libido is decreasing. The quality is more intense, more emotional, but not the driving force it was. I feel the decrease is due to my relationship. I need a woman as aggressive and self-confident and competent as I am. An older woman.

Thus, the myth of a sexual and emotional desert for lesbians in old age has been shown by our data to be false. The findings show that sexuality does continue into old age. Some of the respondents have found life partners at advanced ages. Women who find themselves single in middle or old age continue to seek new partners and in many instances find them. Unlike many older heterosexual men who prefer younger women to older women, the findings show that older lesbians prefer and seek out other older women as partners. Just as Laner's (1979) research comparing lesbians with nongay women tended to dispute notions of ageism within the lesbian community, our study has demonstrated that older lesbians prefer to relate both sexually and socially with members of their own age cohort.

The findings on sexuality in our study compare favorably with the results described in the Duke Longitudinal Study (Verwoerd et al., 1969) which uncovered patterns of variability in sexual activity in later life. One significant difference that stands out is that the unmarried heterosexual women in the Duke study were almost totally sexually inactive, whereas the older uncoupled lesbians showed a
high degree of sexual interest and had realistic expectations of finding sexual partners in the future.

Many of the single women in the sample follow the pattern that Gagnon and Simon (1967) found in their study of lesbians of all ages. These women feel the need for the development of a strong emotional bond before they feel comfortable in allowing sexuality to enter the relationship.

However, several of the respondents who are in long-term committed relationships with women they love state they are bored sexually and feel the need to look elsewhere to have their sexual needs met. Several other single women have stated that the type of relationship they would prefer to be in is a nonmonogamous one, preferably in collective women's communities. Older lesbians in our study who are working on the establishment of nonmonogamous relationships with women's collectives clearly represent examples of the concept of neogamy;

a seldom-used term meaning new forms of intimate bonding 
. . . meant here specifically to signify new and therefore alternative forms of intimacy and bonding among individuals which may or may not be sexual [Dressel and Avant, 1978: 13].

FRIENDSHIP PATTERNS

To examine the data to see whether friendships develop between equals (Roscow's [1967] term meaning similar status) and whether lesbians, after coming out, look for support within the lesbian community, we will determine the age range of friends and who friends are (gay, straight, men or women) for our respondents.

Two of the 20 women sampled either were in or had recently been in a love relationship with a woman considerably younger than themselves (about 20 years' difference). But all of the women who seek out friends do so
among women in the same age cohort. Only one woman listed gay men among her very closest friends, and she considered them to be more like kin than friends. They fulfilled kin roles in her life, such as taking care of her when she was ill and calling daily to check up on her.

Among the nine women in the sample who are currently in love relationships, only one said she had no need for additional friends outside of her love relationship, and she describes herself as a loner. The other eight all have, and wish to continue to have, friends, particularly older lesbian friends, in addition to the relationship they have with their lovers. All nine women view their lovers as their best friends as well as companions and mates.

The seven single feminist women who are actively involved in organizations and who make new friends with women they meet at those organizations are all involved in age-segregated organizations that were formed intentionally to meet the needs of older women.

In general, how do older women meet other lesbians? How important are straight friends? During stressful times, what natural support systems are available to older lesbians? And to what extent is one’s self-esteem related to friendship ties? The following sections address these questions.

MEETING OTHER LESBIANS

The respondents were asked how they meet other lesbians. Their answers ranged from “I don’t” to “In all the activities I participate in.” Several of the women compared the way things used to be with the way they are now in their responses.

It’s hard. I don’t like to drink. Bars depress me. I found when I broke with ______ [23-year relationship] I didn’t know what to do. I went to bars. It was demoralizing. . . . [Now] I’m in women’s and lesbians’ groups. I meet them through that, but that’s new. It is a problem.
I meet them at Alcoholics Together (gay AA) meetings. In the past, going to gay bars was the only place I could meet my own kind.

It's difficult to meet other lesbians. I'm glad for the women's movement. I don't like bars.

I came to the city to meet other older women. The first year I was here I worked with a neighborhood food co-op, but all I met were younger straight men and women, so then I got involved with older women's groups.

Only three of the women responded in the negative, saying they didn't meet other lesbians. All three, since the time of the interview, have met other older lesbians by going to lesbian and women's movement activities and meetings.

The women in the sample were asked if they had any lesbian friends. The women who are coupled appear to have fewer close friendships with lesbians (other than their lovers) than do single lesbians. Many more coupled lesbians answered the question of friendship with lesbians with the responses, "Quite a few, but I don't see them very much," "A lot, but not close," and "Several, but they are really social acquaintances." The single women, on the other hand, tended to answer with, "Yes, five or six very close friends" or "Lots, all since I came out six years ago."

That the single women in the sample appeared to have more close lesbian friends than the coupled women is quite understandable. One's lover in the lesbian world is almost always a lesbian's best friend, confidant, and constant companion. Therefore, all other lesbian friends take on a less important status almost automatically. Exceptions are found among feminist women, particularly those who believe in nonmonogamy or plural relationships.

About one-third of the women in the sample have met and continue to meet lesbian friends (and potential lovers) in the organizations in which they participate. Another third of the respondents meet other lesbians through friends. The few women who stated they were not able to meet any
other lesbians have, since the interviews, met other lesbians at organizations they were directed to by the researchers. This is additional evidence to help destroy the myth that says lesbians are isolated in later life. A few of the respondents were relatively isolated from the lesbian community and did not have many lesbian friends. However, given the information on where they could contact other older lesbians and what organizations existed they were quick to follow up with participation in the lesbian community.

Mates were met in similar settings, generally through friends or within organizations in which they participated. Some of the respondents were friends with their mates for a long period of time before becoming interested in forming a love relationship, while others were immediately attracted to their mates as potential lovers.

STRAIGHT FRIENDS

When asked if they had any straight friends, one woman answered, "Only casual acquaintances, but they don't come over." Three women said, "Neighbors" or "People I work with." One woman responded with "Many," but when asked who they were, she said, "The grocer and church people." She does not attend a church at this time.

Half of the women in the sample reported they have had close, long-time friendships with at least one heterosexual woman, but when questioned, they state they have never come out with these close friends. Most of the women in the sample reported they have only one or two straight friends, while they have many lesbian friends. Only one of the six late-blooming lesbians had made any new straight women friends since she had come out. None had made straight male friends. However, all but one had made new lesbian friends since coming out.

Blau's (1973) statement that friendships develop between equals would tend to be supported by the evidence
that all of the respondents, when seeking out friends, do so within their own age cohort. That most of the women sought lesbians as friends also supports Raphael's (1974) statement that a lesbian who has come out will find it more comfortable and more meaningful to look for friendships and support within the lesbian community. During the course of the interviews, many of the women spoke specifically to the point of having to look very hard at times to find lesbians their own age, because most of the lesbians in organizations were younger women, but they definitely expressed the need for friends of their own age.

When the respondents were asked about straight friends, many gave a different type of answer than they gave when asked about lesbian friends. With a few exceptions, they tended to qualify their respondents with comments that served to nullify their answers, such as "I'm friendly with all my neighbors, but they don't come over." One possible explanation for the difference in the type of answer given is that at least some of the women were not comfortable with stating directly that they had no straight women friends. Another possibility is that people define the word "friend" differently. To some, a friend is anyone toward whom one is friendly. To others, a deep bond of commitment that can only be established with time is a necessary ingredient for friendship. Other women appeared to include anyone with whom they spent social time as their friends. Some described friends as the people with whom they worked on common goals in organizations. Thus, a number of reasons may account for the variations in responses.

SUPPORT SYSTEM AVAILABILITY
WHEN LOVE RELATIONSHIPS END

One way of determining one's support system is to examine a stressful event and the relevant people one relies upon in such a situation. A major trauma in most individuals' lives is the ending of a love relationship. This
research attempts to find if the sampled lesbians had the support of friends or family at these times in their lives. Another area of interest is the support systems for lesbian "widows"; however, only one of the respondents had ever suffered the loss of a mate through death, and that death was a suicide. Instead of being given support, the surviving woman was blamed for the death of her mate by her friends. The only support she received was from one old woman who lived next door. There was no will, and the house they lived in, which was in her lover's name, went to the deceased's mother. They had been in the relationship for five years.

Two women in the sample had never experienced the end of a major love relationship with another woman. Both are still in their first relationship. The other 18 respondents had gone through the experience of having a lesbian relationship end at least once in their lives.

There have been major changes in the support women used to receive and what they now receive. It appears that these changes are a consequence of the lesbian's being more out of the closet, at least with people she considers friends, than she used to be. An example of this is the response from one woman when asked what support, if any, she received when her relationships ended:

None. None of our friends knew we were Gay. It was a shock to them, but they thought we were just friends who decided after twenty-three years of living together that we didn't want to be roommates any more. We did remain friends and gave each other support, but mostly I gave her support. When that relationship ended, I was broken up. I do feel I had friends around, but I don't ask for help. My friends are straight. I couldn't go to them and say I just broke up with a lover. My best friends are straight. And that's where I should look for support. My intimate friends are not gay, so I could not tell them. Lesbians did invite me to parties, and one I went places with. I got more from them because they knew what happened. The next relationship I had was still in the closet and so was she, so we had no supports. By the time
my last relationship ended, I was involved in groups [older women’s liberation groups] and I had told a few good friends [straight] about being gay. I got support.

Other women had similar stories to tell:

When my first relationship ended, I had no one to talk to. I was afraid her parents would make trouble on my job. There was one gay woman where I worked that helped. She gave me support. My last relationship before the one I’m in now I wanted to end. She had a serious drinking problem, and I am an alcoholic, but don’t drink anymore. I couldn’t handle it. By this time I was out and I did get a lot of support from friends. I had no support at all. When a relationship ended, I drank. Things are different now. I don’t drink. I have friends. If I were to break up now, well, it would be different.

Three of the respondents had different experiences. Two talk about the phenomenon of looking for friends and finding unwanted potential lovers.

Right after the war [World War II] a woman broke up with me. I went to pieces. My friends all sympathized but they all wanted to go with me themselves. But I played the field for a while.

Most of the time I’ve gone directly into another relationship, but I do have friends I can talk to but one time I didn’t, so I went to some meetings hoping to make some new friends, but all the women wanted me for a lover, not a friend. I resented it and felt they should have known better. If I were interested in someone sexually, they would have known it because it would have been obvious.

Six other women reported that they have never had support when a relationship ended. Two of them reported:

I had no support at all when we broke up. I was afraid my sister would say “I told you so” and she was the only one who knew. I wrote my feelings in a journal. It was kind of childish stuff but I had nothing else. We had no friends.
There was never enough support. I was not out. Most of my friends were straight, and they didn’t know anything. There was a lot of hurt. Nothing you could do about it in those days.

Several of the women received other forms of support. Two of them reported:

When I broke up, my gay male friends kept me busy. They took me out. I also threw a party to meet new people and it worked.

We had each other. We continued to live together.

In examining the data, then, we find that 11 of the women state they had very little or no support whatsoever. Eight of these women, however, state that things are different for them now. Some of the women have more friends to turn to, and others are no longer in the closet (at least to the degree they once were), so they can now confide in friends, where once they could not. The ideology of the gay liberation movement, which has stressed coming out, has clearly made an impact in this area.

An ever-increasing number of women have been able to come out, at least with people they consider their friends. Future generations of older lesbians should be reporting fewer and fewer instances of lack of support when relationships end, if the coming-out trend continues. Attempts to put lesbians and gay men back in the closet, such as the defeated California Proposition 6, have potential ramifications far beyond loss of job, even extending to the seemingly unrelated area of support system availability.

SELF-ESTEEM AND FRIENDSHIP TIES

In the interviews conducted with the respondents, the women were asked for their self-image—how they saw themselves. Their verbal responses were rated positive, mixed, or negative, depending upon their answers. In analyzing their answers, three categories were used; strong
self-esteem, moderate self-esteem, and weak self-esteem. The responses were assigned to a category in the following manner.

To be assigned to the strong self-esteem category, the respondent must have primarily used words and phrases commonly understood to express positive values. An example is “strong, bright.”

To be assigned to the moderate self-esteem category, the respondent must have primarily used words and phrases commonly understood to express negative values. An example of this is “If I was to see me walking down the street, wouldn’t bother turning my head.”

These self-assessments were then compared with the respondents' frequency of interaction with kin (siblings and children) and friends. On the basis of these responses, relationships were categorized as strong, moderate, or weak.

The modal findings are as follows:

1. Most respondents reported weak sibling ties and strong friendship ties.
2. Most respondents with children reported strong ties with children and with friends.
3. The strongest assessments of self-esteem came from those individuals with weak sibling ties and strong friendship ties. And the stronger the friendship ties, the more likely the older lesbian is to have high self-esteem.

Another way of viewing this is that if one has high self-esteem, one is likely to have strong friendship ties. This is another finding which helps to dispel the myth that lesbians, because of weak or absent family ties, spend their later years friendless, lonely, and with low opinions of themselves. It does appear that lesbians in the age cohort sampled for this study show a much lower incidence of strong ties to vertical kin than do Stehouwer’s (1968) respondents, who represent the general population. How-
ever, Wolf (1978) is correct when she states that missing
kin ties are most often replaced with close friendship ties.

Five of the 10 women in the category of weak sibling and
strong friendship ties have very purposefully sought to build
friendship networks. They have done so by being involved
with feminist organizations and in attempting to form living
collectives. All five of these women are single.

The other five respondents who fit into the category of
weak sibling ties and strong friendship ties have not joined
feminist organizations or planned collectives. They have not
purposely set out to form friendship networks, and four of
the five are not single but are in love relationships. Four of
the five women would not describe themselves as femi-
nists.

There are several possible explanations as to why the
feminists and nonfeminists were found to be in the same
category—weak sibling ties and strong friendship ties. The
one explanation that makes the most sense to the writers is
that lesbianism, not feminism, is the common denominator
which unites the women in this sample in relation to their
friendship patterns. For the older lesbian, the development
of close friendship ties can be looked at as a type of
adaptation to aging. Friendship ties often serve as an
important support system which can enable the women to
survive in an otherwise hostile environment. It seems that
older lesbians have adapted well to aging as minority group
members regardless of their relationship status or political
ideology.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

By way of summarizing, it was found that serial monoga-
my was the dominant life pattern. All the women in the
sample had had at least one major relationship during a
lifetime and most preferred coupled relationships. Some
held nontraditional feminist views about relationships, and
expressed interest in nonmonogamous, supportive, and collective-type friendship networks.

Our findings on sexuality showed that it continues to play an important part in the lives of all the women in the sample. Level of sexual activity was greatly influenced by availability of partners. The older lesbians in the study expressed a strong preference toward other older lesbians as partners. The uncoupled lesbians, unlike their heterosexual counterparts, had realistic expectations of finding new partners and expressed little difficulty in finding sexual partners in their own age group.

Regarding friendships, it was found that lesbians who “came out” in later life had fewer straight friends than before “coming out” and chose to seek friends from among their lesbian peers. Single lesbians have more close lesbian friends than do coupled lesbians. The lesbian in a coupled relationship views her partner as her best friend.

Our study found significant differences prior to gay liberation regarding support system availability. Often when a long-time lesbian relationship ended pre-gay liberation, there was often no recognition by friends or relatives that a relationship had existed. Those lesbians who had experienced gay liberation and feminism tended to be more “open” about such relationships and more prepared to share feelings with both gay and nongay intimates who they knew to be supportive.

Finally, this study found that lesbians with high self-esteem tended to have weak sibling ties and strong friendship ties. This finding tends to dispel the myth that because of the loss of family ties the older lesbian would find herself in later years friendless, alone, and with low self-esteem.

A final note should be made regarding feminist ideology and the women in our sample. The data have shown that the nonfeminist women are living out their lives in ways which are satisfying to them and which are not so different from those of the feminist women. There would appear to be three major differences between feminists and nonfemi-
nists. Feminists tend to be active in organizations, while nonfeminists are not active. Nonfeminists tend to be in long-time monogamous relationships, while feminists tend to be single. Finally, feminists are interested in the concept of collective living, while nonfeminists are not.

One way to describe the differences between feminists and nonfeminists is to view the nonfeminists as traditional-thinking women and the feminists as non-traditional-thinking women who believe that new ways can be found to deal with old problems. Another way to view feminists and nonfeminists in this sample is to recognize that the primary difference between the two groups, except for organizational involvement and differing views on monogamy and collective living, is one of conscious ideology. It would seem to the researchers that nonfeminists in many cases live out the same ideology as do feminists—that is, their supportive relationships with friends. However, the nonfeminists do not see a connection between their lifestyle and the philosophy of feminism.

Regardless of political orientations, however, all of our respondents in their own ways represent positive role models for future age cohorts of older women who are seeking nontraditional supports and living arrangements in later life.

REFERENCES

Ph.D. dissertation. Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University.

Sharon M. Raphael is Associate Professor of Sociology and Coordinator of the Graduate Gerontology Program at California State University, Dominguez Hills. Raphael is Co-coordinator of the National Association of Lesbian and Gay Gerontologists (NALGG) and is particularly interested in developing curriculum and promoting research on gay and lesbian aging.

Mina K. Robinson is an instructor in the Summer Institute of Gerontology at California State University, Dominguez Hills. This article is based on research conducted for her Master's thesis, "The Older Lesbian." Robinson has an ongoing interest in research and teaching in the areas of lesbian and gay aging and women and aging. Robinson is a past editor of the New Professional and Student Pages of The Gerontologist.

Both Raphael and Robinson have been active in the gay and lesbian communities in the Los Angeles area, serving on the boards of directors of numerous institutions in Los Angeles and nationally for the past 10 years. In the summer of 1979 they taught the first course on "Aging in the Gay and Lesbian Community" at C.S.U.D.H.
THE SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF QUEERS AND PEERS

ALBERT J. REISS, JR.
University of Michigan

Sex delinquency is a major form of behavior deviating from the normative prescriptions of American society. A large number of behaviors are classified as sex delinquency—premarital heterosexual intercourse, pederasty, and fellation, for example.

Investigation of sex behavior among males largely focuses on the psychological structure and dynamic qualities of adult persons who are described as "sexual types" or on estimating the incidence, prevalence, or experience rates of sex acts for various social groups in a population. There is little systematic research on the social organization of sexual activity in a complex social system unless one includes descriptive studies of the social organization of female prostitution.

An attempt is made in this paper to describe the sexual relation between "delinquent peers" and "adult queers" and to account for its social organization. This transaction is one form of homosexual prostitution between a young male and an adult male fellator. The adult male client pays a delinquent boy prostitute a sum of money in order to be allowed to act as a fellator. The transaction is limited to fellation and is one in which the boy develops no self-conception as a homosexual person or sexual deviator, although he perceives adult male clients as sexual deviators, "queers" or "gay boys."

There has been little research on social aspects of male homosexual

---


3 H. Laurence Ross, op. cit., p. 15.

---

296