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## The Nature and Function of Fusion in the Dynamics of Lesbian Relationships

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*Although much has been written about the problem of fusion in relationships, especially among lesbians, there is little evidence of its prevalence in the nonclinical lesbian community or information about the function it may serve in lesbian relationships. This study examined the frequency of fusion in lesbian and heterosexual women's relationships and the relationship of fusion to other relational variables. The study found that there were no differences between lesbian and heterosexual women's levels of fusion and that fusion was strongly related to both satisfaction and dependence.*

two women together is a work  
nothing in civilization has made simple (Rich, 1978, p. 35)

In the growing body of literature on the nature of conflict in lesbian relationships, researchers have often focused on the balance of power between female partners. For example, Renzetti's (1989) contention that dependence is a correlate of abuse resembles the characterization of the interpersonal dynamics of lesbian relationships in much of the literature on *merging* or *fusion* (terms that are used interchangeably in the psychological literature and in this article). Fusion is frequently identified as a source of conflict in lesbian couples, yet articles on fusion often

fail to define the word *conflict* or to investigate the possibility that it encompasses behaviors other than normal healthy arguing.

This article explores the role of fusion in women's relationships. First, it reviews the affect of socialization on lesbian relationships. Then it presents not only the authors' study of the frequency of reported fusion among lesbians and heterosexual women, but also it illustrates other relational characteristics that are related to fusion.

### BACKGROUND

#### Socialization of Lesbians

To understand the expectations and attitudes that lesbians may bring to intimate relationships, it is necessary to account for the effects of women's gender-role socialization in the dominant culture. Most lesbians and gay men grow up in heterosexual family structures and are socialized (like all children) by familial, educational, religious, and other institutions that prepare them (to various extents) to internalize dominant beliefs and participate in the mainstream culture. The relationships represented by this homophobic culture, seen both through direct experience and in the mass media, are frequently rooted in hierarchy and imbued with unequal power. Historically, heterosexual relationships have been legally and ideologically based on men's ownership of women; even today, the idealized construction of true love perpetuates this theme of possessing another person completely. This social organization often still is taken to be a natural order; therefore, any threat to it is construed as an attack on the institution of the family and an unraveling of the social fabric. To preserve this order, both boys and girls are brought up to be deeply suspicious of powerful women—including lesbians—and they are supposed to react with fear or hatred to evidence of women's strength.

These attitudes toward lesbianism and powerful women are but one part of the misogyny and homophobia that often keep

lesbians and gay men hidden, or *in the closet*. Certain institutions explicitly endorse discrimination against gays and lesbians (the military is a notable example); in many other situations in which inequalities are not explicitly sanctioned, no legal or other recourse is available through which to challenge discriminatory conditions. Thus, for many lesbians and gay men, secrecy is not a choice but a necessity. However, staying hidden does not ensure safety or freedom from discrimination because hiddenness requires constant vigilance to maintain the secret life and a perpetual fear of discovery. On the other hand, coming out by acknowledging one's sexual orientation has its own attendant risks. It may result in ostracism by one's friends; alienation from one's family; the loss of one's job, housing, or child custody; and subjection to gay bashing or other forms of harassment and abuse. No matter which route a lesbian chooses, her self-determination is constantly limited by the pervasive effects of oppression; her control over her life is circumscribed by the knowledge others have about her and by how they choose to use it.

### Lesbian Couples

The lack of control accorded to lesbians individually is reproduced and reinforced at the level of lesbian couples because heterosexual society regularly negates the boundaries of lesbians' intimate relationships. "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" (Krestan & Bepko, 1980, p. 284). Lesbian or gay-male marriages are not legally recognized in any state, and few areas of the country have domestic-partnership laws that officially acknowledge committed gay men and lesbian relationships. As a consequence, "the necessity for establishing the relationship as both special and binding lies almost completely with the couple" (Moses & Hawkins, 1982, p. 144).

Faced with the constant threat of censure and violence, lesbians and gay men are prevented from acknowledging their

relationships publicly even through the small expressions of affection by which heterosexual couples announce and reinforce their feelings for one another. As Rotenberg (1989, p. 6) noted,

Simple gestures, such as holding hands and kissing, which form an assumed part of the public interaction of heterosexual lovers, can only be practiced furtively by lesbians. Unless one has experienced this denial of self and relationship firsthand, one cannot really imagine the myriad ways in which it colours the emotional and sexual intimacy between lovers.

The result, a "constant pain of invisibility that permeates most lesbian [and gay male] relationships," places a continual strain on the couple to remain "real" for themselves what they must constantly hide from and deny to others (Rotenberg, 1989, p. 6). The affect of being in the closet cannot be overestimated; as one lesbian explained to a researcher, "having to conceal her sexual orientation influences everything she does" (quoted in Rotenberg, 1989, p. 9).

The unremitting nature of homophobic oppression, its curtailment of individual rights, and its concealment of lesbian relationships work together to construct the loss of control—and the need to reclaim it—as central concerns for lesbians. "Alienation, isolation, and oppression are facts of life for lesbians in this country. The result can be immeasurable psychological stress" (Schilit, Lie, Bush, Montagne, & Reyes, 1991, p. 85). When the lack of self-determination creates stress, a natural and healthy response is to reestablish equilibrium by reclaiming as much control over one's life as possible. If individual lesbians are engaged in such a process, then just as the incidence of stress may affect their relationships with each other, so will their efforts to reclaim control affect their intimate relationships.

### Fusion in Lesbian Relationships

Given their lack of control in many other areas of their lives, it is hardly surprising if lesbians attempt to exercise authority in those areas in which it remains in their power to do so. "Lesbians lose social and political power through [the] lack of

affiliation with men and male power. . . . Their self-determination is often frustrated in painful ways . . . they lose the narrow access that heterosexual women retain to power in the world" (Burch, 1987, p. 127). As a result, "many lesbians express a determination not to be in a less powerful position in a relationship" (Burch, 1987, p. 127). If a woman cannot be self-determining in the larger world because she has chosen a same-sex relationship, then she needs to feel self-determining in the relationship itself. Here the particularity of lesbian experience intersects with earlier learning about relationships from heterosexual models; thus, it reestablishes and reenforces a preoccupation with losing and gaining control in intimate relationships.

In the psychological literature on lesbian relationships, a recurrent theme suggests how such relationships manage to survive in the face of the constant threat of denial, erasure, or outright hostility. Merging or fusion has been used to explain the genesis of both intimacy and conflict in lesbian relationships. Initially characterized as pathological, the phenomenon has more recently been discussed as an adaptive response to a hostile environment (see Rotenberg, 1989). It can be seen as a mode of resistance to the dominant culture's attempts to negate or sever the bonds of love between two women.

Fusion was defined in its original context as "the person's state of embeddedness in, of undifferentiation within, the relational context" (Karpel, 1976, quoted in Krestan & Bepko, 1980, p. 277). Krestan and Bepko (1980) considered fusion a pathology, characterizing relational partners who fit this definition as "dysfunctionally fused" and in need of treatment. They noted that in such relationships, "typical responses to fusion such as distancing, open conflict, or overt symptomatology occur to an intense degree" (p. 278) and eventually lead to conflict. The problem—as they saw it—was not the specific fusion behavior but its inevitable backlash or consequences. Nevertheless, through their discussion, the term *fusion* acquired a negative connotation and was redefined by these authors as "the intense anxiety over any desire for separateness or autonomy within the relationship" (p. 277).

Although the term and its negative association were quickly adopted by the therapeutic community, subsequent writers identified an alternative to Krestan and Bepko's (1980) view. Rather than consider the closed system produced by fusion as inherently dysfunctional, some therapists have followed through with Krestan and Bepko's incidental observation that "the tendency to draw rigid boundaries appears to be a survival response" (p. 279). This interpretation regards fusion as a strategy for maintaining a couple's boundaries amid constant threats to the integrity of the relationship. "Viewed as a structure which serves to protect the lesbian couple from a hostile environment, merger assumes a different complexion from that described in the psychological literature. It can be seen as an adaptive survival mechanism" (Rotenberg, 1989, p. 3).

Rotenberg (1989, p. 3) argued that the predominantly negative evaluation of fusion or merger behavior "[stems] from a male concept of self-development [that] equates psychological maturity with the ability to separate effectively, to remove oneself from the relationship." Before one condemns lesbian behavior that does not seem to fulfill this model of maturity, Rotenberg advised,

any evidence of so-called merger between lesbian partners must be carefully examined against this powerful backdrop [of a homophobic society]. Without a clear and sophisticated understanding of the oppression lesbians encounter . . . therapists will be unable to focus on its consequences. (p. 5)

As an adaptive response to a hostile environment, lesbians' internal merging reinforces and safeguards the boundaries that are continually exposed to external threat. This alternative model suggests that rather than succumb to pressure to end their relationship or to an attitude of disregard that demeans their love or minimizes its significance, lesbian couples affirm the seriousness of their connection by forging an even stronger bond, pulling together with greater resolve against the forces that would tear them apart. Engaged in relationships that are disapproved of and condemned by much of society (often

including friends and family members) these women fight determinedly to preserve the partnerships for which they have sacrificed so much. Faced with their lack of control over other aspects of their lives, they may vigorously exert control over the one area that still seems within their power. They move closer to prevent outsiders from forcing a wedge between them and from establishing leverage to loosen or sever their bond.

However, to recognize the possible adaptive function of fusion is not to deny its more problematic consequences. Lesbian fusion fosters an expectation of sympathy and sameness that is bound to be frustrated in the course of a relationship. If maintenance of the relationship depends, or seems to depend, on a fierce drawing together of two into one, then any experience of difference or distance between the partners may be immediately perceived as a threat. Lindenbaum (1985) explained that when a couple engages in what she termed *undifferentiated merging*, the qualities of each partner are experienced as the shared qualities of both. If one partner then exerts her autonomy, the other may suddenly feel deprived of something. "She feels as if part of her is missing, that [her partner] has something she wants and cannot have, that she must take back the quality she believes she has lost" (Lindenbaum, 1985, p. 91).

Lesbian relationships that are described as fused, enmeshed, or merged are often presumed to be dysfunctional. Moreover, the degree of fusion is often assumed to be high in most or all lesbian relationships. However, the findings of Causby, Lockhart, White, and Greene (1995) and Kurdek (1988) contradicted this expectation. Moreover, Causby et al. (1995) reported that some couples who are high in fusion are nevertheless satisfied with their relationships. In part, this finding can be explained by specifying the type of fusion involved. Causby et al. reported a two-factor structure for their fusion scale that was broken down into time and sharing components. However, when the sharing part of fusion is more troubling, higher conflict and more violent conflict-resolution tactics may be used (Lockhart, White, Causby, & Isaac, 1994). Such findings not

only reveal the need for more particularized studies of fusion, but also they warn of the dangers of substituting stereotypes for scientific research.

## THE STUDY

### Research Questions

Different conceptualizations of fusion and its effects raise questions about exactly how fusion functions in lesbian relationships. The study presented here measured fusion to identify the relational variables associated with it in lesbian relationships. In their research, the authors explored the following questions on the basis of the preceding rationale:

Question 1: What is the level of fusion in lesbian relationships compared with that in heterosexual women's relationships?

Question 2: What relational variables are associated with fusion in relationships?

Question 3: In lesbian and heterosexual women's relationships, are other variables associated with fusion in the same ways?

### Participants and Procedure

Data were collected from lesbians at the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation. Trained researchers distributed surveys the morning of the march and waited for the participants to complete them. The surveys were generally filled out in groups of 5 to 10 people (range 2 to 15 people) and took about 20 minutes to complete. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The 66 lesbian participants were predominantly Caucasian (90%), ranged in age from 18 to 61 years ( $M = 33.4$ ,  $SD = 7.85$ ), and had an average annual income of \$27,000. Of the sample, 20% reported having children.

A comparison group of heterosexual women was recruited from introductory communication classes at a southeastern university, and they completed the surveys outside class as a substitute for a short written assignment. The 77 heterosexual participants were predominantly Caucasian (85%), ranged in age from 18 to 42 years ( $M = 24.1$ ,  $SD = 7.65$ ), and had an average annual income of \$13,800. Of this sample, 3% reported having children. Thus, the heterosexual women were slightly younger and had fewer children than the lesbians.

### Instruments

All the participants completed measures assessing fusion, dependence, closeness, autonomy, and relational satisfaction on Likert-type 5-point scales, ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* (see Table 1 for the means, standard deviations, and ranges for all the variables). The participants also provided demographic data.

**Fusion.** The measure of fusion was developed by Causby et al. (1995) and Lockhart et al. (1994). The nine items about relationships with their partners were as follows: "I feel that we should have separate recreational activities;" "I feel that we should do everything together" (R); "I feel that I need to have independent time with personal friends;" "I want to be able to read my partner's mind" (R); "We share professional services, such as doctors or therapists" (R); "We rarely call each other at work;" "We share money, clothes, cars, etc." (R); "We insist on friends being shared by both" (R); and "I feel we should share all social activities" (R). R indicates that the item was recoded for consistent scoring. The reliability of this scale was moderate in the study ( $\alpha = .71$ ).

**Dependence.** Dependence, or emotional reliance on others, was measured by 18 items from Hirschfield et al.'s (1977) Interpersonal Dependency Inventory, forming one subscale. One

TABLE 1: Means and Standard Deviations (SD) for the Variables

Variable	Lesbians (N = 66)	Heterosexual Women (N = 77)
Fusion		
Mean	2.62	2.67
SD	0.52	0.59
Rubin's Love-for-Partner Scale		
Mean	3.81	3.84
SD	0.60	0.58
Global satisfaction		
Mean	4.35	4.07
SD	0.72	0.68
Autonomy		
Mean	4.21*	3.84
SD	0.50	0.56
Closeness		
Mean	4.42*	4.09
SD	0.51	0.62
Dependence		
Mean	3.19*	3.53
SD	0.52	0.51

\* $p < .05$ .

item stated, "I would feel helpless if deserted by someone I love." The reliability of this scale was good in the study ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

**Closeness.** Relational closeness was measured by 14 items developed by Maxwell (1985). One item stated, "My partner and I are very close." The reliability of this scale was good in the study ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

**Autonomy.** Autonomy was measured by 10 items developed by Peplau, Cochran, Rook, and Padesky (1978) and Peplau and Cochran (1981). One item stated, "We share equal power in this relationship." The reliability of this scale was moderate in the study ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

**Relational satisfaction.** Two measures of relational satisfaction were used. Global relational satisfaction was measured by 5 items from Duffy and Rusbult (1986), such as "My relationship is very satisfying." The reliability of this scale was good in the study ( $\alpha = .82$ ). Satisfaction was also measured by Rubin's (1970) Love-for-Partner Scale with 13 items, including "I would do almost anything for my partner." The reliability of this scale was good in the study ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

## RESULTS

The data were analyzed by *t* tests and Pearson product-moment correlations; the level of significance was set at  $p < .05$  for the *t* tests and  $p < .01$  for the correlations. Reliabilities were estimated by Cronbach's alpha.

### Lesbian Participants

The results of the correlations are presented in Table 2. For the lesbians, there were strong correlations between Rubin's (1970) measure of satisfaction and fusion ( $r = .40$ ), indicating that the lesbians who perceived high fusion in their relationship were quite satisfied with these relationships (and those who perceived low fusion were less satisfied). As expected, the measure of dependence was also correlated with fusion ( $r = .39$ ), such that those who scored high on fusion also scored high on dependence. The correlation with closeness was not significant ( $r = .13$ ). Autonomy was less strongly linked with fusion ( $r = -.31$ ), and the relationship was inverse; that is, the lesbians who scored high on fusion scored low on autonomy. Also, the relationship between age and fusion was inverse ( $r = -.28$ ) although not strong, indicating that the reports of fusion decreased with age. Fusion also decreased with length of time in the relationship ( $r = -.34$ ). Thus, the older the lesbian participants were and the more time they had spent in their relationships, the less

**TABLE 2: Correlations for Variables With Fusion**

Variables	Lesbian (N = 66)	Heterosexual Women (N = 77)
Global satisfaction	.14	.35***
Rubin's Love-for-Partner Scale	.40**	.47***
Autonomy	-.31**	.23
Closeness	.13	.43***
Dependence	.39**	.34**

\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

fusion they reported. However, it is possible that there is an association between age and length of time in a relationship that is separate from fusion.

### Heterosexual Participants

The correlations for the same variables for the heterosexual women are also presented in Table 2. The patterns of these correlations are remarkably similar to those for the lesbian participants. For the heterosexual women, there were strong correlations between both measures of satisfaction and fusion ( $r = .46$  and  $.35$ ) in intimate relationships with men. This indicates that people who perceived high fusion in their relationships were quite satisfied with these relationships (and those who perceived low fusion were less satisfied). The measure of dependence was also correlated with fusion ( $r = .34$ ), and the correlation between fusion and closeness was significant ( $r = .43$ ). Autonomy was not significantly linked with fusion ( $r = .23$ ), but the relationship was direct. The relation between age and fusion was not significant ( $r = .01$ ), indicating that the reports of fusion were unrelated to age. Fusion also decreased with length of time in the relationship ( $r = -.22$ ). Thus, the more time the heterosexual women were in their relationships, the less fusion they reported. However, there were no age differences.

### Differences by Sexual Orientation

To provide additional information, the participants' scores on fusion were compared by sexual orientation. The *t* test ( $t(130) = -.47, p = .64$ ) indicated no differences in the fusion scores of the lesbians ( $M = 2.67, SD = .59$ ) and the heterosexual women ( $M = 2.62, SD = .53$ ); that is, both groups reported equal amounts of fusion in their relationships. There were also no differences between the two groups on measures of global satisfaction ( $t(134) = 1.81, p = .074$ ) or Rubin's (1970) Love-for-Partner Scale ( $t(131) = -.36, p = .72$ ). The heterosexual women ( $M = 3.53$ ) scored higher on dependence ( $t(133) = -3.84, p < .001$ ) than did the lesbians ( $M = 3.19$ ). The lesbians scored higher on closeness ( $t(131) = 3.26, p = .001$ ) and autonomy ( $t(132) = 3.92, p = .001; M = 4.42$  and  $4.21$ , respectively) than did the heterosexual women ( $M = 4.09$  and  $3.84$ , respectively).

## DISCUSSION

### Levels of Fusion

The first research question addressed the level of fusion in lesbian relationships compared with women in heterosexual relationships. The study found no difference in the levels of fusion reported by the lesbians and heterosexual women. Thus, some of the claims regarding the problem of lesbian fusion may need to be reexamined. The findings did support the results of Causby et al. (1995), who found moderate levels of fusion in their lesbian sample. If fusion is such a problem for lesbians, it is clearly a problem for heterosexual women as well. Perhaps lesbians were unfairly singled out by previous researchers. This is not to say that fusion is not or cannot become a problem in lesbian relationships; however, it is not a phenomenon that is unique to lesbians.

When one looks at the levels of women's intimacy in friendships—regardless of sexual orientation—this intimacy may be labeled as fusion or enmeshment, depending on the

viewer's perspective. In all types of relationships, women are expected and socialized to be responsible for nurturing and intimacy. According to theories of women's epistemologies (see, for example, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberg, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982), women tend to see the world in terms of connections and webs of interpersonal relationships, and men tend to see the world in terms of impersonal categories. Lerner (1989) noted that men seldom become scholars of intimacy. Women's orientation toward relationships need not be seen as excessive or a liability. However, women's relationships must not be viewed as women's sole source of self-esteem, regardless of their sexual orientation. In addition, for this study, it is important to recognize that the reports of fusion and satisfaction varied by target. That is, the lesbians' reports were based on target intimate women, but the heterosexual women's reports were based on target intimate men.

From childhood, women are socialized toward connectedness, attachment, affiliation, and selflessness. From adolescence onward, women try to understand the world around them by sharing confidences (even about difficult emotional issues), acknowledging disappointments, and seeking solutions together. Eichenbaum and Orbach (1987) noted that sharing is not a concession or a difficult struggle and that being selfish feels like a type of betrayal. Thus, the question is, What is an appropriate level of fusion? Women's connectedness and interrelationships clearly are larger issues than sexual orientation.

Van Den Bergh and Cooper (1986) asserted that having the right to name one's own experience is a feminist priority. Therefore, perhaps the first step in dealing with what appears to be a negative, judgmental, value-laden label of fusion is to rename the term because feminist theory states that it is empowering to name and rename terms. Without a shift in how women's interrelatedness is viewed, this society will continue to accept the male model of relationships in which a higher level of emotional detachment is used as the yardstick of emotional health. Thus, one way to address these problems may be to rename the concept of fusion, referring instead to linking, connectedness, or commitment.

It is also possible that the image of fusion as negative and harmful is inaccurate. On the basis of the findings of this study, fusion indeed looks like closeness, yet it has different connotations. As with other terms (for example, *manipulation*), fusion has acquired a negative connotation that masks its value as an interpersonal strategy and even a survival skill. Hence, in addition to renaming the term to free it of its (often undeserved) negative connotations, studies of fusion need to reexamine negative judgments of a term that condemns women for what has been a traditionally feminine emphasis on emotional connectedness. Researchers must question the value system that labels independence and emotional autonomy as strengths but condemns connectedness as a sign of weakness. For many women, heterosexual and lesbian alike, connections to lovers, children, family members, and friends are essential parts of their daily lives, and research on these various emotional ties may lead to insights about the multiple meanings of fusion. Paying more attention to the role of intimacy in all aspects of women's lives may reveal that gender—not sexual orientation—is the crucial variable related to fusion.

### Relational Variables

The second research question asked what other relational variables might be associated with fusion; the third question asked whether these relations were the same for lesbians and heterosexual women. For the lesbians, fusion was strongly associated with one type of relational satisfaction and independence. For the heterosexual women, it was associated with all measures of relational satisfaction and closeness.

The demographic finding that fusion decreases with age may support the socialization argument presented earlier. If younger lesbians have difficulty dealing with negative messages and hostility toward their sexual orientation and relationships, they may respond with more rigid boundaries in their partnerships. This may serve as protection. Older lesbians who have dealt with these problems longer may have developed support systems that make this kind of fusion unnecessary.

There may be other explanations for this finding as well. For example, the correlation between fusion and length of time in the relationship for both groups of women may indicate simply that fusion occurs at the beginning of all or most relationships. It may be brought on by the excitement of new love and the desire to spend as much time as possible together. From this perspective, fusion would naturally decrease over time with the development of the relationship and increased independence. If this supposition is true, then the conflict associated with fusion may be a result of the struggle to adjust early expectations of togetherness to subsequent stages of a relationship. According to this view, fusion is a developmental variable that changes with the stage of a relationship. Life-cycle models (that extend knowledge about family life cycles to couples) may expand the understanding of this process, but thus far they have not been applied to discussions of fusion.

Anderson and Sussex (1996) suggested that as a result of oppression, lesbians may develop strong resiliencies over time. Laird (1994) observed that in the face of invisibility, silencing, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination and prejudice, many gay and lesbian individuals, couples, families, and children seem to be doing as well as everyone else. Therefore, it seems important to reframe the discussion of the problem of lesbian fusion in light of these findings.

### Limitations

There are several limitations to the study. First, the relationships were not tracked over time, so it is impossible to make causal inferences (that is, does satisfaction lead to fusion or does fusion lead to satisfaction?). Second, the data were individual reports of relational variables, not reports by couples. Third, the sample size was small, although many studies in this area have used even smaller samples. Fourth, the comparison groups are also not equal because one was drawn from a college population and the other from a large political demonstration. Fifth, the lesbians who responded to the survey during the 1993 march on Washington may have been systematically different



from those who would not attend such a public demonstration (in that they were out of the closet), and this possibility cannot be accounted for in the data. In light of these limitations, the results should be interpreted with caution.

### Implications

Although the study found that women with high levels of fusion were satisfied with their relationships, fusion cannot occur without some problems. The difficulties of weak boundaries may include feeling guilty when saying no, fearing others will not like or approve of you, readily agreeing to the wants of others, and suppressing one's needs. Another common pitfall of fusion is taking responsibility for the actions, feelings, and emotions of others. Few studies have explored what happens to lesbian couples (or couples in general) with high levels of fusion over time. Do highly fused couples (homosexual or heterosexual) tend to stay together or come apart? Krestan and Bepko (1980, p. 278) noted that "the lesbian . . . 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." If all of one's emotional energy is devoted to defying societal expectations and maintaining a relationship in the face of overwhelming odds, then any perceived internal or external threat to that relationship may be resisted with equal determination.

In their contributions to the literature on fusion, few authors have chosen to examine issues related to clinical assessment and bias, yet this is clearly an area that is ripe for study. Rather than begin from the premise that fusion is a pathology, researchers need to examine this phenomenon from other perspectives. They must examine how merging contributes to the strength and resilience evidenced by many lesbian relationships, despite the destructive influence of homophobia. If fusion can be understood as a means of resistance to oppression, then it may also be understood as a developmental factor that is more related to resilience than pathology. Examining the ways in which lesbian relationships prevail despite all the

forces that would destroy them may offer some valuable lessons about how individuals and couples maintain a range of emotional connections in a society that often seems less nurturing and/or hospitable to such bonds.

### Future Research

The results presented here indicate that fusion is not specific to lesbian relationships. Thus, it may be helpful to compare men's and women's reports of fusion to determine if gender or sexual orientation (or some combination) is the best explanation for the presence of fusion. It is also important to track relationships and fusion to see if fusion is related to more disruption or less disruption in the relationships over time. In future research, the literature on conflict in relationships and on violence in lesbian relationships may be linked through a more careful examination of how and why interpersonal conflict escalates into battering for some individuals but remains simple, healthy arguments for others.

In investigating women's relationships of all kinds—friendships as well as intimate partnerships—researchers may discover new strengths. Such insights could be helpful in building stronger heterosexual relationships and gay male and lesbian partnerships. Rather than continuing to look at issues of pathology, exploring strengths will add to the depth and breadth of understanding of human resilience in the face of oppression.

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