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Fusion and Conflict Resolution in Lesbian Relationships

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SUMMARY. In this study the authors explore the issues of social distancing and conflict resolution in lesbian relationships. The authors surveyed 275 lesbians about the extent of fusion in their relationships, sources of conflict, and styles of conflict resolution. Results with a nonclinical sample indicated that lesbians reported moderate levels of fusion in their relationships. Furthermore, two subscales of fusion—fusion time issues and sharing—were produced from these data. Sharing large amounts of time with lesbian partners apparently was not problematic for many couples. However, sharing concrete items (e.g., money, clothing, or car) and professional services (e.g., physician or therapist) made maintaining appropriate boundaries more difficult. Participants who reported high sharing fusion tended to report more sources of conflict and poorer conflict resolution strategies with their partners, including physical aggression and violence.

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For well over a decade, lesbian couples have been described as fused, enmeshed, or merged (Douglas, 1990; Krestan & Bepko, 1980; Pearlman, 1989; Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978; Zacks, Green, & Marrow, 1988). The assumption is that fusion, merger, or enmeshment creates dysfunctional relationships through poor conflict resolution, conflicts over time spent with anyone outside the relationship, low self-esteem, and isolation. The first set of obstacles for young lesbians, according to Berg-Cross (1988), involves the dual developmental tasks of "coming out" and escaping the suffocating fusion typical of many lesbian relationships. Lesbians are seen as cutting themselves off from others in a two-against-the-world posture (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984; Krestan & Bepko, 1980; Pearlman, 1989).

The level of fusion in all lesbian relationships is assumed to be extremely high and therefore dysfunctional. Both assumptions—that fusion in lesbian relationships is high and that high levels of fusion are dysfunctional—may be unfounded. Numerous authors have cited extreme levels of fusion in lesbian couples and have defined the level of dependence as a problem, even though the couples also reported high levels of satisfaction with their relationships (El-drige & Gilbert, 1990; Kurdek, 1992; Peplau, Padesky, & Hamilton, 1983). In a nonclinical population, can fusion be seen as an adaptable strength rather than a pathological symptom for lesbian couples?

This article presents a literature review that defines fusion and provides an overview of the extent of fusion reported in lesbian relationships. Previously cited theoretical reasons for greater fusion or enmeshment with lesbians are discussed. This article also addresses conflict styles, sources of conflict, and means of conflict resolution. Finally, the authors present the findings of a study on fusion in lesbian relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fusion, Enmeshment, and Merger

Peplau and her colleagues (1978) have pointed out that in all close relationships, a balancing of the desire for intimacy and the

desire for independence is required. The effort to achieve a satisfactory pattern of separateness and connectedness is a fundamental, lifelong task for couples, regardless of sexual orientation. Fusion, enmeshment, and merger are terms that have been used to describe the emotional relationship between lesbian couples. These terms have been used interchangeably to identify a psychological state in which there is a loss of oneself as an individual and also a state of imbeddedness in, or undifferentiation within, the relational context (Berg-Cross, 1988; Krestan & Bepko, 1980; Pearlman, 1989). Merged partners find it difficult or even undesirable to think, act, or feel separately from each other (Burch, 1982).

The concept of boundaries is essential in understanding the nature of fusion. Minuchin (1974) defined *boundaries* of a subsystem as the rules used to define who participates in the subsystem and how they participate. This task of defining the inner and outer boundaries of a couple involves deciding how emotionally close one partner can come before there is a loss of individuality. The function of boundaries is to protect the differentiation of the system. The boundaries of a couple must be clear enough to allow individuals to carry out their functions without undue interference, but those boundaries must also allow contrast between both members of the couple (Minuchin, 1974).

Reasons for High Levels of Fusion in Lesbian Relationships

Many theories have explained why high levels of fusion continue to be cited in lesbian relationships. From a systems perspective, it has been hypothesized that couples fuse as a response to a hostile environment (Krestan & Bepko, 1980). Lesbian couples turn to each other for validation and support of the relationship that they do not often get from the larger society. Consequently, they may have relatively closed boundaries. Unlike lesbian or gay couples, heterosexual couples receive feedback regarding boundaries and rules that are normative and necessary to individual functioning (Zacks, Green, & Marrow, 1988).

Moreover, families, friends, and co-workers may fail to treat two women as a couple. This lack of affirmation is further exacerbated by the absence of rituals and legal sanctions. Without outside boundaries, the lesbian couple tends to create its own boundaries;

through intense involvement and exclusion of others (Krestan & Bepko, 1980; Pearlman, 1989).

In contrast to a systems perspective, Pearlman (1989) hypothesized that lesbian couples get stuck in the first stage of couple development, or "limerance" which is characterized by intense bonding, and the loss of ego boundaries and individuality. In the second stage of couple development, the power or control stage, couples struggle with issues of differentiation and dependency. At this point, they begin to reestablish individual boundaries. Lesbian couples who deny differences and avoid conflict tend to return to a more merger-like state (Pearlman, 1989).

Other explanations of why fusion problems are frequently associated with lesbian relationships have related to the psychosocial development of women and to the socialization of lesbians as women. Chodorow's (1978) work has been cited frequently as a comprehensive explanation of gender differences. She stated that the psychological separation of the child from the mother is never as complete for girls as it is for boys. Consequently, ego boundaries are less tightly formed, so women have more difficulty seeing themselves as separate individuals. This psychological differentiation places women at a greater tendency toward fusion or merger in intimate relationships, regardless of their sexual orientation. Furthermore, when the maternal expectation of the daughter is one of sameness with the mother and daughters do not conform (i.e., because of lesbian behavior), mothers react by emotionally distancing the daughter (Pearlman, 1989). Distancing then begins to mean disapproval and is connected with relationship loss. These relationship patterns may shape the dynamics for future relationships with women, especially in lesbian relationships.

Although dependency needs are one of the universal aspects of relationships, there is a widespread inclination to believe that women have greater dependency needs than men. Women are socialized to focus on relationships and to depend on others (Berg-Cross, 1988). Some authors may believe it is women who have low feelings of personal efficacy. For example, Lerner (1989) indicated that women may fear that men or their main relationships will not tolerate increases in autonomous functioning, especially as long as there is the possibility of obtaining dependent, compliant relationships.

Fusion for lesbians, then, may be a response to homophobia from the larger community as well as lack of affirmation for their boundaries as a couple. The psychosocial development and socialization of lesbians as women also may contribute to higher levels of fusion. Based on this information, one research question for the current study was, *What is the extent of fusion in lesbian relationships when using a nonclinical population?*

Sources of Conflict

The behavioral expression of fusion may be manifested in extreme dependency or in extreme distancing. The more unhappy partner may act out her feelings by having an affair or fantasies of an affair, may provoke quarrels, and may fume with unexpressed anger (Burch, 1982). That partner also may act out a desire for increased separateness through over-involvement with work, increased disappointment with the relationship, or lack of sexual interest (Lindenbaum, 1985; Pearlman, 1989).

Almost an infinite number of issues can serve as possible sources of conflict for persons in intimate relationships. Sources of conflict identified in the conflict and family violence literature indicate that couples argue over issues that are both internal and external to the individuals in the relationship. Sources of internal conflict may include issues of emotional and financial dependency. Gelles and Straus (1978) reported that jealousy and the use of alcohol or drugs are also major sources of conflict in families. Sources of external conflict may consist of issues that cause stress in the family (e.g., unemployment, jobs, and finances). Other stressors for couples may relate to relationships outside the boundaries of the primary couple such as relationships with family, friends, and the partner's children.

Hypothesis 1 in this study was that *lesbians who report higher levels of fusion will report more conflict over internal and relational issues and less conflict over external issues.*

Conflict Styles and Conflict Resolution

Conflict is inevitable in individual lives as well as in close relationships (Lloyd, 1990; Roloff, 1987). Interpersonal conflict in-

volves communication about incompatible goals and strategies used to manage differences (Canary, Cunningham, & Cody, 1988). Given that communication is one avenue of conflict resolution, interpersonal communication can function as a means of resource exchange and also as a means for couples to produce relationship rewards (Rolloff, 1987).

Conflict styles comprise two partially competing goals: (a) concern for oneself and (b) concern for another person (Hocker & Wilmot, 1985). Sillars' (1980) work used a three-dimensional model to assess individual conflict styles. Those three styles were: (a) passive-indirect (avoidance, accommodation, and nonconfrontation); (b) integrative (managing conflict with a win-win strategy); and (c) distributive (forceful, controlling tactics from a competitive win-lose orientation). Similarly, Covey (1989) perceived that conflict is addressed by six paradigms of human interaction: "win-win," "win-lose," "lose-win," "lose-lose," "win," and "win-win" or "no deal." He stated that the paradigms of human interaction operate on a maturity continuum from dependence to interdependence.

In terms of conflict style and gender, Canary, Cunningham and Cody (1988) indicated that, although research on the use of conflict styles based on gender is inconclusive, women are more likely to select strategies that maintain positive feelings and relationships. Women use styles that are more consistent with problem-solving strategies and are integrative in nature (Greene, Parker, & Serovich, 1992).

Violence as a Means of Conflict Resolution

Like Sillars (1980) and Covey (1989), Straus (1979) examined conflict resolution tactics, specifically what Sillars (1980) labeled as distributive or violence tactics used in families. One tactic, verbal aggression, is the "use of verbal and nonverbal acts which symbolically hurt the other or the use of threats to hurt the other" (Straus, 1979, p. 79). Compare this tactic with that of reasoning which involves discussing issues calmly, obtaining additional information about the conflict, or seeking outside help for a problem. In addition, physical aggression and violence as conflict resolution tactics include severe abuse involving pushing, slapping, hitting, or threat-

ening a partner with a knife or gun, which all potentially may result in a great deal of physical harm.

Lesbians who use physical aggression and violence as a means of conflict resolution tend to overly depend on their partners and, hence, resort to violence to inhibit their partners' effort to be independent (Renzetti, 1988). Dependency also has been linked to self-destructive behaviors such as alcohol abuse in lesbian communities (Nicoloff & Stigletz, 1987).

Battering among lesbians has been defined as a "pattern of violent or coercive behavior whereby a lesbian seeks to control the thoughts, beliefs or conduct of her intimate partner or to punish the intimate for resisting the perpetrator's control" (Hart, 1986, p. 173). Battering threats may be direct, but often these threats are indirect or veiled efforts at intimidation used to establish control and power over the battered partner. Consequently, when the battered lesbian responds with increased fear, efforts to change the batterer's behavior, or attempts to distance herself from the relationship, the batterer's control, power, and battering escalate (Hammond, 1989). This pattern of control, intimidation and escalation of violence also characterizes violent and abusive heterosexual relationships (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980).

Hypothesis 2 in this study was that *lesbians who report higher levels of fusion will use more verbal and physical aggression and violence strategies but fewer reasoning strategies for conflict resolution*. Hart (1986) indicated that lesbians who use physical aggression and violence as a means of conflict resolution do so to dominate and to achieve compliance from their partner. They express feelings of powerlessness and helplessness in their relationships, viewing independent and self-caring actions by their partner as sources of conflict and a means of being controlled by their partner. Lesbian batterers see themselves as victims. Consequently, they use violence to gain control over themselves and their partners (Hart, 1986; Renzetti, 1988).

Fusion and Self-Esteem

In merged couples, couple harmony may become the primary issue so that partners deny differences and avoid, rather than resolve, conflict. Individual differences, interests, activities, and friend-

ships are relinquished (Krestan & Bepko, 1980; Pearlman, 1989). Prolonged fusion demands individual compromise and loss of self. This loss frequently is accompanied by anger, feelings of powerlessness and low self-esteem (Pearlman, 1989). Hence, in the current study, Hypothesis 3 was that *lesbians with higher levels of fusion in their relationships will report lower levels of self-esteem and independence as personality traits*.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The lesbian participants in the current study were women who attended a large regional women's music festival held in the Southeast. Of 400 questionnaires distributed, 275 were returned, for a response rate of 69%. Respondents were guaranteed confidentiality. Each respondent was, or had been during the previous 6 months, involved in a lesbian relationship.

Instruments

The following variables were measured: fusion, conflict resolution tactics, sources of conflict, personality traits, and self-esteem.

Fusion. Fusion was measured by six items. On a 5-point Likert-type scale of 1 (never) to 5 (always), with higher scores indicating more fusion, each respondent was asked how often she felt the need to share recreational and social activities, felt the need to do everything together, felt the need for independent time with friends, insisted on sharing professional services, made regular phone calls at work, and insisted on sharing monies and clothing.

A factor analysis of the fusion items produced two subscales. Items relating to sharing recreational and social time, feeling the need to share everything, and needing independent time with friends form a subscale labeled *fusion time issues*. The reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of this subscale was .89. The second subscale, labeled *sharing*, contains items that focused on sharing concrete items and services (e.g., monies, clothes, professional services, and phone calls). The reliability of this subscale was .79.

Conflict resolution tactics. Straus's (1979) Conflict Resolution Tactics Scale was used to measure the nature and extent of reasoning, verbal aggression, physical aggression, and physical violence used to resolve conflicts. The Conflict Resolution Tactics Scale has 19 items, and respondents used a Likert scale of 0 (never) to 6 (more than 20 times a year) to respond to how often each item was used as a means of conflict resolution. The subscale labeled *reasoning* includes resolution strategies such as discussing, getting information, and asking for help outside the relationship. Reliability for this subscale was .54.

Verbal aggression includes verbal and nonverbal acts in which one person symbolically hurts the other. Acts include making threats, sulking and refusing to talk, stomping out, and saying something to spite the partner. The reliability for the verbal aggression subscale was high: .84. The items composing the physical aggression subscale have been described as mild forms of physical abuse (e.g., throwing an object at a partner, pushing, shoving, or slapping). Reliability was .90. The violence subscale carries high risk for the victim and includes kicking, hitting, beating, as well as threatening to use knife or gun. The reliability for the violence subscale was .96.

Sources of conflict. Almost an infinite number of issues can serve as possible sources of conflict for persons in intimate relationships. Based on typical sources of conflict identified in the conflict and family violence literature (Hart, 1986; Straus, 1979), the authors of the current study developed a list of 26 potential sources of conflict. Respondents used a Likert scale of 0 (never) to 3 (nearly all the time) to respond to how often they had conflicts over the listed items.

Three subscales were formed from these 26 sources. A subscale of *external conflicts* includes issues related to employment status, jobs, and how money is spent. Reliability for this subscale was .66. The *internal conflicts* subscale includes emotional and financial dependency of both the respondent and her partner, jealousy, and drug and alcohol use. Reliability for this subscale was .73. The third subscale comprises tasks performed in relationships as well as other *relational issues* such as housekeeping, cooking, children, relatives, friends, and sexual activities. Reliability for this subscale was .80.

Personality traits. Lesbians in the sample were asked to describe themselves and their partner by using a list of six personality traits reflecting autonomy. Traits were placed at opposite ends of a continuum (i.e., "not at all dependent" to "very dependent"). A Likert type scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was used to form the extremes of the continuum. The scale consists of traits such as like feeling not at all independent, feeling submissive, being passive, needing other people's approval, having one's feelings hurt easily, not feeling confident, and giving up easily. The reliability of this subscale was .67.

Self-Esteem. Hudson's (1982) Index of Self-Esteem was designed to measure the degree or severity of the problem the respondent has with self-esteem. A high score on the Index of Self-Esteem indicates the respondent has a problem with self-esteem. The 25-item scale includes items such as "I feel that people would not like me if they really knew me well," "I feel that I bore people," and "I feel I get pushed around more than others." This index has an alpha coefficient of .93.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using 95% confidence intervals (CI) and Pearson product-moment correlations. The level of significance was set at $p < .05$. Composite variables were subjected to exploratory factor analyses (varimax rotation). Reliabilities (Cronbach's alphas) were computed for all composite scales.

RESULTS

Research Question

The research question addressed the extent of fusion within the sample. The fusion scale used in the study contained the subscales *fusion time issues* and *sharing*. Participants reported overall moderate levels of fusion. Confidence intervals were used to determine an expected range for means. If confidence levels do not overlap, they may be considered significantly different. Respondents ($N = 275$)

reported more time fusion ($X = 2.80, p < .05, SD = .89, t(271) = 8.69, p > .001$), than sharing fusion ($X = 2.28, p < .05, SD = .79$). (These two variables could range from 1.00 to 5.00). Time fusion and sharing fusion also were directly correlated, $r = .33, p < .01$, such that participants who reported high time fusion tended to report high sharing fusion.

Tests of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1. The first hypothesis proposed that higher levels of fusion will relate to more internal and relational conflicts and less external conflicts; this hypothesis was partially supported. Correlations among the three groupings of conflict sources (internal, external, and relational) were run with the fusion scales. Time fusion was not significantly related to reports of internal ($r = .03$) or relational ($r = .08$) sources of conflict. Time fusion, however, was directly correlated with external sources of conflict ($r = .12, p < .01$). That is, participants who reported time fusion were likely to report more external sources of conflict.

The relations for sharing fusion were slightly different. Sharing fusion was directly related to reported internal ($r = .17, p < .01$), relational ($r = .13, p < .01$), and external ($r = .20, p < .01$) sources of conflict. That is, participants who reported high sharing fusion tended to report more of all sources of conflict.

Hypothesis 2. The second hypothesis proposed that with increased levels of fusion, there would be more verbal and physical aggression, as well as violence used as conflict strategies, with less use of reasoning strategies. This hypothesis, which was partially supported, was tested using a series of correlations among the two fusion scales (fusion time issues and sharing) and the four conflict resolution strategies (reasoning, verbal aggression, physical aggression, and violence).

For the time dimension of the fusion scale, time fusion was related only to verbal and physical aggression as conflict resolutions. Participants who reported high time fusion reported using more verbal aggression strategies ($r = .14, p < .01$) and more physical aggression strategies ($r = .11, p < .05$). Time fusion was not significantly related to reasoning strategies of conflict resolution ($r = -.05$) or to violence ($r = .03$).

The sharing dimension of fusion was significantly correlated with all four conflict resolution strategies. That is, participants who reported high sharing fusion tended to report more frequent use of reasoning ($r = .10, p < .05$), verbal aggression ($r = .18, p < .01$), physical aggression ($r = .19, p < .01$), and violence ($r = .17, p < .01$) as styles of conflict resolution. This finding may reflect more overall conflict or simply more aggressive forms of conflict resolution because the reasoning correlation was the weakest.

Related to self-esteem and violence, a finding that was not predicted indicated that lesbians with low self-esteem reported using higher levels of verbal and physical aggression as well as violence to resolve conflicts. This is consistent with literature that reports profiles of batterers and victims in heterosexual relationships (Gelles & Cornell, 1985).

Hypothesis 3. The third hypothesis predicted that reports of higher fusion will relate to lower self-esteem and lower levels of independence as a personality trait. This hypothesis was partially supported. Self-esteem was inversely related to scores on sharing fusion ($r = -.10, p < .01$). That is, participants who reported high sharing fusion tended to have lower self-esteem. Self-esteem and time fusion, however, were not significantly related ($r = .03$). That is, scores on time fusion were unrelated to self-esteem.

Independence was not significantly related to either time fusion ($r = -.04$) or sharing fusion ($r = -.05$). That is, participants' ratings of independence were unrelated to scores on fusion. Independence was also related to other variables in ways not predicted. Independence was directly correlated with self-esteem ($r = .40, p < .001$) such that high scores on independence were related to high self-esteem. Independence was also directly correlated with both physical ($r = .14, p < .01$) and violent ($r = .23, p < .01$) conflict strategies but inversely correlated with crisis strategies ($r = .08, p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

Several of the proposed hypotheses in the investigation were confirmed. Many of the correlations were statistically significant due to the large sample size; however, most were small in magni-

tude. The extent of fusion in lesbian relationships from a nonclinical population was not reported as being excessive. Rather, moderate levels of fusion were reported. This finding differs from a number of previous works that documented high levels of fusion (Berg-Cross, 1988; Krestan & Bepko, 1980; Pearlman, 1989). Although all close relationships require a balancing of the desire for intimacy and the desire for autonomy (Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978), emotional attachment has been found to be highly valued in lesbian relationships (Schneider, 1986).

Only one article was found that questioned whether enmeshment was a value-laden term. Zacks, Green, and Marrow (1988) expressed concern that the concept of enmeshment evolved from traditional male-oriented biases that value independence and clear boundaries in relationships. These characteristics may be norms for heterosexual couples, but perhaps the qualities desired in lesbian relationships vary from those desired in heterosexual relationships. One such difference may be the level of fusion that is functional in women-oriented relationships. Consequently, social workers may need to look closely at their own comfort level with a couple's closeness. McCandlish (1985) suggested that traditional heterosexual therapists may feel uncomfortable with the level of closeness in a lesbian relationship, and thus may view that relationship as immature and pathological, contributing to the couple's separation.

Furthermore, high time fusion appeared to be less problematic than high sharing fusion. One possible explanation may be that lesbians simply enjoy spending large amounts of time with their partners and participating in social activities together. Lesbian couples may reconcile issues of sharing time and space more easily than heterosexual couples. Apparently, this allocation of time does not cause conflict in the lesbian relationship nor contribute to the loss of oneself. This finding is consistent with the Peplau, Cochran, Rook, and Padesky (1978) finding that lesbians reported being in close, loving relationships and also reported high levels of satisfaction. Perhaps one of the strengths of a lesbian relationship lies in the value both partners place on relating. Women who have previously related to men have often reported a sense of relief that the burden of keeping the relationship intimate, close, and vital was no longer

solely their responsibility. Their lesbian partner often accepts equal responsibility for the closeness of the relationship.

High levels of sharing fusion, however, do appear to affect one's sense of personal autonomy. Respondents who reported high sharing fusion also reported lower self-esteem, more conflict in the relationship, and poorer conflict resolution strategies. Lesbians who reported low self-esteem also reported higher levels of fusion relating to the sharing of concrete items (money and clothes) and the sharing of professional services. One possible explanation for this finding is that people's choice of possessions (e.g., clothing and automobiles) is in many ways a statement about personal identity. Those possessions indicate to the larger world how people view themselves and project their individuality. Sharing of these items and maintaining appropriate boundaries is more difficult than sharing large amounts of time together.

Participants who reported high—not moderate—time fusion also reported high sharing fusion. Although both types of fusion were related to verbal and physical aggression as a means of conflict resolution, respondents who reported high sharing fusion also reported more frequent use of violence to resolve conflicts. But both time fusion and sharing fusion were positively correlated with verbal and physical aggression. Also, sharing fusion was positively correlated with violence. M. Wilder (personal communication, October 13, 1993), in her work with lesbian domestic violence perpetrators, indicated problematic issues involving negotiating boundaries for both sharing of time and possessions (e.g., clothes, money, or car). Clients who have difficulty expressing their needs eventually become so frustrated they use physical aggression to resolve conflict. She further stated that when a client has high levels of both time and sharing fusion, the prognosis for change is more difficult.

Future research should more fully identify the strengths as well as the problematic aspects of high levels of closeness in intimate lesbian relationships, both sexual and platonic. For example, what are the boundary issues with two women who are not sexually involved? Future studies of lesbian relationships should further explore issues of fusion and conflict resolution.

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