Lesbian couples: Relational dynamics centered around satisfaction power and conflict

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LESBIAN COUPLES:

RELATIONAL DYNAMICS

CENTERED AROUND

SATISFACTION,

POWER

and

CONFLICT

by

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B.A., the University of Montana, 1995

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for the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Montana

1999

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Dedication

I wish to dedicate my completion of this research and my graduate studies in memory of my mom. The persistence and grace I’ve put into this work is a reflection of that which I have received from mom. I never would have thought I would accomplish something as this...Mom, you always knew didn’t you!

Acknowledgments

It is with much gratitude that I thank the sixteen lesbians who so willingly provided me a window into their relationships and shared so much with me. I have learned a great deal from all of you. It is my hope that you too find something of value from my interpretations. Thanks also to a very kind soul for your contribution transcribing. You saved me a great deal of time. And, Bill, thank you for your excitement for this topic, your guidance and your candid feedback. You were with me all the way from conception to completion, through my personal setbacks to my coming alive again...thank you for staying with me even during your sabbatical.
ABSTRACT

Lesbian couples are an important aspect of contemporary life. Research on lesbian couples tends to compare them to heterosexual and gay couples rather than focusing intensively on lesbian couples per se, especially in regards to conflict patterns. This study explores relational dynamics in lesbian couples centered around satisfaction, power and conflict. Participants identify factors of lesbian experience, separate from gender, that contribute to relational dynamics. Power balance for these lesbian couples ranges from a more holistic relational approach to an individualistic approach. The couples’ conflict processes reflect their approach for balancing power in that couples using constructive conflict processes balance power more relationally and couples using destructive conflict processes use a more individualistic approach to balance power, reinforcing the notion that power is a fundamental concept in conflict. Additionally, this study reveals some identifying features of what being lesbian or a lesbian couple means.
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INTRODUCTION

Jamie and Andrea have been together for five years and have experienced the joys and difficulties, the ups and downs, the in's and out's that are common to many couple relationships. Jamie, however, has begun to question the future of their relationship. She is 31 and wants to have a child. Andrea is not sure she wants to commit to raising a child and can't quite articulate why, it's just this gut feeling. Jamie just doesn't understand Andrea's unwillingness, especially since they both think they are quite happy in their relationship overall. Unsure of what to do in this dilemma, Jamie heads to the bookstore to try to find some information to help guide her. She becomes frustrated because most of what she finds relates to heterosexual couples.

Research no doubt has many benefits for the average person, though not all research is within reach of the general public. One area that has received scant attention in communication, social and psychological sciences is interpersonal conflict in lesbian couples. While research on lesbian couples in general is increasing, much of the research on interpersonal conflict in lesbian couples is limited to comparative research. That is, much of this research compares conflict styles and perspectives to heterosexual couples and gay couples. Upon review of past research, it will be apparent that research in lesbian relationships, and in conflict in particular, needs to identify aspects of relational dynamics specific to lesbian couples as well as compare to other types of couples. Since lesbians experience "otherness," exploratory research is needed that might illuminate and add to our understandings of lesbian couples.

Purpose

It is the purpose of this particular study to explore relational dynamics in lesbian couples which center around satisfaction, power and interpersonal conflict. Knowledge
gained from this study can add to present knowledge, stimulate discussion and speculation, and create a stronger foundation for future study in communication and lesbian relationships as well as provide practical information to lesbian couples.

Descriptive Framework

The particular descriptive framework that drives this exploratory research is based on a systems view of conflict and is guided by the Wilmot-Hocker Conflict Assessment Guide (Wilmot & Hocker, 1998). Areas of investigation center around conflict components, elements, perceptions and processes, and power, all of which provide a foundation for conflict analysis. The conflict assessment guide is adapted to determine questions for interviews as is suggested by the authors.
CHAPTER 1
LITERATURE REVIEW

This research is augmented with an overview of interpersonal conflict, factors to consider in the study of lesbian populations and a review of lesbian relationship research. Providing this review of literature sets up the rationale and research questions for this particular study.

General Overview of Interpersonal Conflict

Conflict processes can tell us much about the individual and how they relate to others by way of various "psychological, communicative and sociological properties" (Canary, Cupach & Messman, 1995, p.2). By studying communication in and around conflict, we can better understand people as social and relational beings. More often than not, studies in conflict can contribute information that explains a great deal about the relationship. For example, studying conflict can reveal what accounts for dissatisfaction in relationships and offer approaches toward more effective communication that may contribute to relationship satisfaction.

Theoretical approaches

A variety of theoretical approaches are used in studying conflict. The two that I will describe here include cognitive and interactional approaches. One cognitive approach is the Social Exchange theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) which takes an economic
perspective and attempts to quantify relational outcomes. Basically, this theory suggests that an individual weighs the costs they invest in a relationship against the rewards they receive from being in the relationship. When there is an imbalance there is perceived scarce resources which in turn creates conflict. Accordingly then, there should be less conflict in rewarding and egalitarian relationships, and more conflict when rewards or investments are perceived as inequitable.

A second cognitive approach would be attribution theory. In general this theory looks at dimensions of how one attributes what is happening in conflict. Typically, when dissatisfaction arises in a relationship, an individual will attribute that to some internal, global or external factor to place it in a perspective from which they may operate. These cognitive approaches are individually focused mental constructs of the conflict. What goes on in the mind about the conflict influences how that individual perceives the conflict.

The interactional approach is more of a relational approach and involves systems theory. In the case of couples, a systems view is based on defining the dyad by the interaction in the dyad. Each person's actions affect and are affected by the other's actions. In conflict, focus is typically on behavioral interaction, such as what meaning particular behavioral patterns suggest and how those patterns contribute to the dynamics of the relationship. Focus on the interaction de-emphasizes the role of the individual which leads us away from assigning blame and recognizes the interdependence of the conflict parties.

**Definition of Conflict**
Canary et al. (1995) have reviewed a number of researcher's definitions of interpersonal conflict and find that they are best categorized within four dimensions as depicted below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior Nonspecific</th>
<th>Behavior Specific</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conflict as pervasive</td>
<td>Conflict as a type of behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict as a type of episode</td>
<td>Conflict as episodic and behavior specific</td>
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Categories of interpersonal conflict definitions (p.6)
Table 1.1

Conflict definitions center around episode and behavior, and this variance is indicated above. Some researchers suggest that conflict centers around particular episodes with communicative behavior having no effect; some suggest conflict centers around specific behaviors regardless of episode; some suggest a combination of episode and behavior with perhaps more emphasis on one than the other. Canary et al. (1995) do report that one common element of most definitions is "incompatibility."

Given the variety of definitions of conflict, for the purpose of this study I will focus on one particular definition which is relevant to interpersonal conflict that occurs in couples. "Conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources and interference from others in achieving their goals" (Wilmot & Hocker, 1998). In breaking this definition down, the
authors identify the components of conflict.

**Components of Conflict**

**Expressed struggle**

Interpersonal conflict exists when the parties involved each communicate in some way that there is a struggle. How this struggle is communicated can occur in many ways, i.e. verbally, nonverbally or a mixture of both, but it must be expressed by each party in order for it to be considered conflict. Conflict therefore is a mutual activity.

**Interdependence**

That conflict is a mutual activity extends to the interdependence of the parties involved. How the parties view their relationship with one another and the degree of influence they have upon one another contributes to determining interdependence. The parties or one party may view themselves as fairly independent yet, if they are in conflict, they share some level of interdependence.

**Perceived incompatible goals**

Perceived goal incompatibility can occur when partners are striving for the same thing or for something different. For example, both members of the couple may want the attention of a mutual friend. This may be perceived as incompatible when one notices the other is receiving more attention than she from the mutual friend. They both want the same thing but one is getting more than the other. As for different goals, the
incompatibility is usually more recognizable. One member may want to go to the game, whereas the other wants to stay home together for the evening. The differing goals of which thing to do are incompatible.

More specifically Wilmot & Hocker (1998) identify four specific types of goals - content, relational, identity and process. One or a combination of these types of goals may be present in any interpersonal conflict. Content goals are usually very identifiable and external to the relationship. These goals relate to "what to do, what decisions to make, where to go and how to allocate resources" (p. 56).

Relational goals relate to "who we are to each other" (p. 57). Power, interdependence and the kind of treatment we want is represented through relational goals. Such goals are often difficult to recognize and often are embedded in content goals. In other words, someone wanting more respect from another may say, "I didn't call you because you never return my phone calls," thinking that "You don't respect me because you don't return my calls, so I won't respect you by not calling you." The relational aspect of respect is hidden in the emphasis on content in the first statement. Wilmot and Hocker (1998) state that "relational goals are at the heart of all conflict interactions" (p. 58).

Identity and face-saving goals relate to "who am I in this interaction" (p. 60). Viewing oneself and having others view you in a positive manner and protecting this image is important in all conflict situations, but it can become the major goal driving the conflict.

Finally, process goals relate to "what communication process will be used" (p. 64). Conflict will arise when parties differ on how to talk about the issue at hand. These goals
have more to do with how communication happens and the differences in communication that arise to create interference.

Important to note is that some or all of these goals may be present in a conflict. Depending on the conflict and how it evolves different goals may move in and out of relative importance. Yet, relational and identity goals are typically at the "core" of the conflict (Wilmot & Hocker, 1998, p.66).

**Perceived scarce resources and interference**

Perceived scarce resources relate to what one member perceives that there is not enough of and she sees the other member as having more of that particular resource. Such resources may be tangible or intangible. Using the previous example of the couple wanting attention from a mutual friend, one member perceives a scarcity of attention and that the other member is receiving more attention than she. Intangible resources such as attention, affection, respect, power, and love are common resources perceived to be scarce. A scarce tangible resource may be perceived when one member of the couple spends a large amount of money on an item the other may believe is unnecessary. Money may be perceived as scarce to the other individual.

Finally, the last piece of the puzzle to make a conflict a conflict, interference to the goals and resources must be perceived. Someone must perceive that another is obstructing attainment of goals.

**Elements of Conflict**
According to Wilmot & Hocker (1998), the basic elements that comprise conflict include:

- the communicative and/or behavioral acts of each party
- the meanings ascribed by each party to the communicative and behavioral acts
- the meanings ascribed by each party to the relationship.

Specific communicative acts are given meaning by each member of the couple. How each person perceives and interprets these acts may be and often are different. Attribution theory investigates the inferences people make about why someone does what she does. This work indicates that we tend to make attributions in regards to ourselves differently from those we make toward others. In trying to make meaning of causes for particular behaviors, we tend to use external attributions for ourselves, suggesting "I" am not to blame, and internal attributions for others, suggesting something about their disposition as being the cause for the behavior. Grounds are ripe for conflict when these meanings do not coincide.

Similarly, differing attributions and meanings ascribed to the relationship can affect the conflict in the relationship. Distortion of what is actually going on in the relationship can be hard to identify when one is viewing it from only their own perspective. Recognizing all three elements and the varying perceptions of each party can help clarify how it is that such distortions can occur. The combination of these elements actually suggest a systems perspective of interpersonal conflict.
Perceptions of Conflict - Metaphor

How one views conflict is often related to how one communicates in conflict. Wilmot and Hocker (1998) offer a number of metaphors commonly used to describe conflict such as, warlike, explosive, a trial, a game, a balancing act, a dance and a garden to name a few. A particular metaphor of conflict is directly related to the process of conflict. Such metaphors can "limit" one's perception of conflict, or enhance their view of conflict. For example, in talk about a particular conflict, a common metaphor of conflict as warlike is revealed in language that centers around war terminology - battleground, killing the opponent, attacking, winners, losers. When analyzing conflict, identifying one's metaphor of conflict can be very revealing.

Power in Conflict

Power is a central concept in any examination of conflict. Wilmot & Hocker (1998) classify two types of power: "distributive...focuses on power over or power against others," and "integrative highlight[s] power with others" (p.83). Generally, power is viewed negatively as forceful, where one person has more power than another, or positively as sharing power.

Significant study has occurred around power in social relations. Thibaut & Kelley (1959), Blau (1964) and Emerson (1962) all view power as a property of the relationship and not just of the individual. They go on to describe how "actors" try to balance power considering the alternatives available to them. Generally, these alternatives are in direct relation to the level of dependence one has on another.
This is depicted in the following explanation presented by Emerson (1962). To describe power as a social relation, an examination of the interrelation of power and dependence in the relationship occurs. Given two people, A and B, the power that A has over B is equal to the extent of B’s dependency on A for goal attainment. Likewise, B’s power over A equals the extent to which A is dependent upon B. In formula fashion, this is represented as:

\[ P_{AB} = D_{BA} \]

\[ P_{BA} = D_{AB} \]  

(p. 33)

The "currencies" (Wilmot & Hocker, 1998, p. 91) A has will affect how dependent B is on A. If B's goal is to attain more of these currencies, B will be very dependent on A. If B has little need for A's currencies or has alternative ways to obtain those currencies, B will not be very dependent on A. A's power over B lies in how important A's currencies are to B. The more important they are, the more influence A will have over B. Currencies can include "resource control, interpersonal linkages, communication skills and expertise" (p. 92).

The implication is that the person trying to balance power is the one with less currencies. This person will generally look at costs, rewards and alternatives. The person then determines if the rewards are worth the costs; whether other avenues offer better rewards or whether their own values can change in order to remain in relationship. After weighing these out, the person will act accordingly to which avenue provides the best route for them. The relational nature stems from the “exchange,” interaction or behavior
that occurs among the individuals involved (the powerful and the powerless).

This interrelation of power and dependence affects the balance of power. One's dependency on another relates to how important the goals are that the other can influence and the promise of other alternatives to obtain those goals (Wilmot & Hocker, 1998). Given the interdependence of conflict parties, power then, is central to the dynamics of how conflict occurs in relationships.

**Conflict Processes**

Given the components of conflict, parties perceptions of conflict and the dynamics of power, the conflict will be either destructive or constructive. Processes of destructive and constructive conflict have a direct affect on the relationship. Continual destructive conflict likely results in dissolution, whereas constructive conflict may promote a more healthy and satisfying relationship.

Patterns or signs of destructive conflict and constructive conflict are listed in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of destructive and constructive conflict</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Destructive conflict</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escalatory spirals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retaliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominance/subordination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demeaning communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.2 (Wilmot & Hocker, 1998)

A thorough investigation of conflict will consider the following: theoretical
approach, the components and elements comprising conflict, perceptions of conflict, power and how the conflict affects the relationship.

Lesbian Relationships

Research perspectives on the gay and lesbian populations in the United States have changed dramatically since the mid-seventies. In 1973 homosexuality was removed as a category of diagnosis from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (Rothblum, 1994). Previous to this, much of the research involving gays and lesbians investigated their "mental disorder" and focused on how to overcome this disorder. Since its removal from DSM, the research has taken a turn toward affirming gays and lesbians in a way that validates their relationship and societal roles.

Donovan (1992, p. 27) poses an important question to researchers, "To study gays and lesbians is to study whom?" The terminology used to describe this population varies depending on the author. More common terms in recent research includes homosexual, gay, homosexuality, lesbian, gay men, and more currently, queer. While Donovan's (1992) research is fairly current it is incomplete in that it only focuses on the differing uses of the words homosexual, homosexuality and gay. Such an omission of an investigation of the term lesbian is reflective of the limitations embedded in gay and lesbian research.

However, Donovan (1992) does address a critical concern for researchers. If we are to use past research to guide future research there must be some consistency in how these terms are defined and used. This is especially critical if studies are to be used in any comparative way, and it is especially difficult given the variety of meanings that subjects,
researchers and the general public use. Donovan's work is significant in initiating the dialogue around this critical issue, and it is imperative that it be expanded.

Recognizing that women couples may use different terms to identify themselves, the terminology in this study will reflect that used by participants. Reference to other studies will consist of terminology used in that particular study.

**Considerations for Studying Lesbian Populations**

Because heterosexuality is normalized, many heterosexuals question their sexual identity in ways distinct from the challenges lesbians face. Lesbians typically experience a questioning process, and it may or may not lead to "coming out." Coming out is a process in which the lesbian openly identifies herself as a lesbian to others. Such a process can be a life long process due to homophobia and the normalization of heterosexuality. A lesbian may come out gradually to different people over time. Even the lesbian who is only "out" to other lesbians around her deals with the coming out process continually because she is constantly having to decide how out she can be in any given situation.

Social attitudes towards lesbians varies greatly from hate and unacceptance to loving acceptance. Certainly, since the uprising at Stonewall in 1969, the so called birth of the "gay movement," visibility of gays and lesbians has increased. This is evidenced by the number of books, newspapers, magazines and professional organizations that address issues surrounding lesbians and gays. While this visibility has led to increased tolerance and "acceptance" of lesbians, Savin-Williams & Cohen (1996) remind us that others do not want to see our lesbianism. The general public wants us to keep it to ourselves. The
increase in reactions toward visibility of lesbians and gays evidenced through the national Defense of Marriage Act and local and state government laws advocating discrimination towards gays and lesbians are indicators that society as a whole is generally unaccepting of lesbians and gays. As a result, many lesbians remain "closeted" or keep their identity as a lesbian concealed.

While every lesbian's experience is unique, generally, deciding whether or not to be out, how much to be out, and to whom to be out can be a continual balancing act for lesbians to perform. Given the prevailing attitudes towards lesbians, this process can be stressful because of the fear of reprisal from family, friends, co-workers and the public at large. For example, in her study of perceived parental attitudes towards lesbian couples, Murphy (1989) reports that one in three of her respondents perceive that their parents "accept" their lesbianism. Additionally, even though parents may know of their daughter's lesbian relationship, the parents often ignore the women's coupleness by only inviting the daughter and not the partner to family functions. The stigmatization towards lesbians contributes to stress and coping that heterosexuals typically do not have to deal with.

As a result of the varying levels of being out or closeted, lesbians are difficult to identify as a population. In trying to identify a lesbian population, Rothblum (1994) divides lesbian participants into three groups, recognizing that members will overlap among groups - membership lesbian organizations, self identity as lesbian, and involvement in same sexual activity. While Rothblum acknowledges there is no way to determine how many people comprise a lesbian population, this division still limits the sample to only a portion of the lesbian population.
There are various "lesbian organizations" but if the lesbian is very closeted, she will likely not be associated with these organizations and it would be difficult to identify her as a lesbian from the population at large. Additionally, as I will describe in detail later, limitations arise from defining the couple according to their sexual activity and likewise, using only individuals who self-identify as lesbians. Many researchers acknowledge that their sample is not representative of the lesbian population as a whole while indicating that it would be impossible to obtain a representative sample of lesbians (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984; Lynch & Reilly, 1985; Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton, 1982; Reilly & Lynch, 1990).

Given all that I have mentioned, research in lesbian couples must acknowledge a number of issues. The interaction of the normalization of heterosexuality, the stigmatization of lesbians, personal and social definitions of sexual identity and lesbian relationships and the hidden population of lesbians presents a challenge to researchers. These factors have changed dramatically in the past thirty years and continue to change. As such, the study of lesbian relationships must address these interactions and the continual change to determine how it all contributes to the dynamics of lesbian relationships.

Defining Lesbian Relationships

Rephrasing Donovan's (1992) critical question, "To study lesbian couples is to study whom?" As will be evident, defining a lesbian couple can be limited by a number of factors. Peplau & Cochran (1990) suggest we need to be more open minded than we have been in the past when studying homosexual relationships and when attempting to define
such relationships. For example, homosexual identity is often identified with sexual actions among same sex individuals. However, whether or not the same sex couple engages in genital sex should not be the exclusive defining characteristic of a homosexual relationship. Though sexual interaction may be how some lesbians distinguish their relationship from a heterosexual relationship, other facets such as emotional quality, commitment and communication may be considered equally or more important for other lesbians. Rothblum & Brehony (1993) compile a number of perspectives toward the "Boston Marriage" ((p.5), asexual, but romantic relationships among women)) that emphasize the need to redefine lesbian relationships to be inclusive of romantic but asexual relationships, and to move away from sex as the legitimizing factor of relationships. Sarah Hoagland (1991) describes this need to redefine our notion of what it means to be in lesbian relationships while writing of a way to make meaning of lesbian desire:

We need new language and new meaning to develop our lesbian desire, especially as we explore and develop what draws us, where our attraction comes from, what we want to keep, what we want to change and why, how our attractions vary, how our desires change over time and so on...we need a lot more discussion and exploration among ourselves...to develop the meaning of lesbian desire (p.168)...Our desire informs our interactions as we choose where and how we focus and direct our attention (p.178).

Clearly, the need to encompass other facets of the relationship besides sex is necessary in defining a lesbian relationship.

Additionally, leaving it up to the couple to identify themselves as lesbian also has implications for research. Given the pressures of American society to categorize and label sexual identity when it is other than heterosexual as gay, lesbian or bisexual, individuals
may be unclear among themselves as to what the definitions of such labels are (The lack of
clarity is not limited to researchers). While having the participants identify themselves as
lesbian has merit, this can exclude some same sex couples of long duration where one
partner may identify herself as bisexual. Does this necessarily mean that the relationship
cannot be identified as lesbian? The combination of social and personal definitions of
sexual identity presents the researcher of lesbian couples with challenges to clarify who it
is that is the subject of study.

Peplau & Cochran (1990) suggest using a combination of objective and subjective
measures to work toward developing definitions of homosexual relationships. For
example, objective measures such as longevity of relationship or living together, would be
considered along with subjective measures of how the members of the couple view
themselves. To compare studies of lesbian couples, whether it be to heterosexual, gay or
lesbian couples, consideration must be given to what identifies the couples as lesbian.
When defining lesbian relationships consideration of a number of facets must be taken into
account given the fluctuation of views toward lesbians and lesbian's views of themselves
over time. It must be recognized however, that while it is important to define a lesbian
relationship, it is also important to not categorize lesbians and lesbian relationships as all
the same.

Lesbian Relationship Research

By investigating what factors contribute to satisfying relationships, we can have a
better understanding of close relationships and lead to building theory about lesbian
relationships which previously were stigmatized and received scant research. In reviewing research on lesbian couples, the bulk of the research that I am aware of focuses on satisfaction, power and sexual behavior, all considered to be significant facets of married heterosexual relationships. Much of lesbian couple research is limited by comparisons to heterosexual and/or gay couples research, and while satisfaction is generally high for lesbian couples, typically results indicate little or no difference between the various couples in regards to satisfaction (Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Kurdek, 1991; Kurdek and Schmitt, 1986; Peplau & Cochran, 1980 in Peplau & Cochran, 1990).

Satisfaction

A number of studies have investigated the notion of satisfaction in lesbian relationships from various angles using many measures. Some scales used to measure satisfaction and correlates include Spanier's (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale, Rubin's (1970) Love Scale and Liking Scale, and other questions derived from previous studies on heterosexual dating (Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976). While some survey questions consist of data derived from extensive interviews with lesbians (Peplau, 1979), most surveys use scales and models derived from data from heterosexual samples. Keeping in mind, that adopted heterosexual models may limit findings in lesbian couples and that we need to begin somewhere, let us consider the following studies of satisfaction in lesbian relationships.

Rusbult (1980, 1983) developed the investment model to predict relationship satisfaction in heterosexual relationships using measures of costs and rewards. Such a
model suggests that satisfaction is determined with the following formula:

\[ \text{Rewards} - \text{Costs} = \text{Satisfaction} \]

Rewards of being in the relationship minus the costs of being in the relationship equals the level of satisfaction. If rewards are high and costs low, satisfaction will be high. Likewise, if rewards are low and costs are high, satisfaction will be low. Rewards could include assessment of partner's personality, intelligence, sense of humor, physical attractiveness, and costs might assess partner's faithfulness, neediness, integrity, and bad habits.

In a comparison of heterosexual, lesbian and gay couples, satisfaction is greater for all couples when levels of rewards are high and costs are low (Duffy & Rusbult, 1986). Additionally, women (lesbian and heterosexual) report greater levels of giving in the relationship than do men. The authors suggest that basically relationships across the four groups appear to be more similar than different in regards to rewards and costs correlating to satisfaction.

Using a sample of lesbians and gay couples, Kurdek (1991) has found that variables from the contextual, investment, and problem solving models are reliable in determining satisfaction in lesbian and gay couples. Such variables comprising these models include, satisfaction with social support, expressiveness, dysfunctional relationship beliefs, self-consciousness, rewards, costs, discrepancy between actual versus ideal investment, and conflict resolution strategies. Kurdek suggests that because of the reliability of the correlation of these variables among lesbians and gays, and that this has already been determined for heterosexual couples, these models can be used to measure
satisfaction across a variety of couples.

According to Eldridge & Gilbert (1990), variables that contribute significantly to satisfaction in lesbian relationships are "emotional intimacy, life satisfaction, intellectual intimacy, recreational intimacy, power and self-esteem" (p.53). High attachment with low levels of autonomy account for greater satisfaction. Emotional intimacy correlates more highly than the other variables with recreational and intellectual intimacy also being important. Sexual intimacy and social intimacy seem less important than the others in regards to satisfaction.

Additionally, power was found to correlate to satisfaction in that women claiming to be in egalitarian relationships reported greater satisfaction and expected less problems than those claiming to be in unequal power relationships (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984; Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton, 1982). More discussion of power will follow.

There has been some exploration on the significance of how "out" the partners are and how this might contribute to satisfaction. Degree of "outness" is found to not be associated with relationship satisfaction. Interesting to note, the authors suggest that "level of disclosure" did not correlate with any of the other variables and that it may indicate that level of disclosure is more dependent on "situation and sociological factors than intrapsychic factors" (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990, p.57). Self-esteem was related to satisfaction and the authors note they may have erroneously associated degree of outness with one's "self-acceptance and comfort" with being lesbian identified. (p.59).

Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton (1982) attempt to look at affects on satisfaction of how long a woman has identified herself as lesbian. More "experience" as a lesbian was
not found to affect satisfaction. The authors suggested that closeted lesbians might have more difficulty maintaining a satisfying relationship than a couple who is out, but found no evidence to support this. They seem to equate more experience, or the longer one identifies as being lesbian with lesbians who would not "conceal" their relationship. This is problematic in that lesbians with greater experience are not necessarily more open about their identities or relationship, and likewise, lesbians who are out have not necessarily experienced a greater number of lesbian relationships.

The following table summarizes the satisfaction findings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlates of Satisfaction in Lesbian Couples Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peplau, Padesky &amp; Hamilton (1982)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duffy &amp; Rusbult (1986)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eldridge &amp; Gilbert (1990)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Researcher Variables Correlating to Satisfaction Variables Not Correlating to Satisfaction

Kurdek (1991a) Satisfaction w/social support
Low self consciousness
High rewards/low costs
Positive conflict resolution strategies
Low endorsement of dysfunctional relationship beliefs

Table 1.3

Certainly, investigating satisfaction in lesbian couples can help identify factors that contribute to healthiness and well being in lesbian relationships. However, consideration must be taken to identify factors that may not have been identified in studies of heterosexual couples. While some standard of measurement for satisfaction is necessary, caution must be taken in relying only on scales that are reliable in studies of heterosexual couples. Further exploratory research on lesbian couples satisfaction can help identify factors relating specifically to lesbians.

Power

In studies of heterosexual couples, power is a salient feature that is investigated to better understand relationship dynamics. Perhaps this is so because an unequal balance of power has been common in heterosexual relationships given the ideological support of male dominance. The inclusion of lesbian couple studies in relationship research has also focused significantly on power and how it is perceived in lesbian relationships. Because there is significant emphasis on power dynamics in lesbian relationships, and power is a
salient feature in conflict, I divide out a discussion of power from satisfaction to describe it in detail. (Remember, balance of power is a correlate of satisfaction).

Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) viewed power as "the ability to get one's way, to influence important decisions" (p. 62), and they worked from the assumption that power reflects the influence of income. The authors found that in married heterosexual, cohabiting heterosexual and gay couples, income was used to determine who had more power in the relationship, while lesbians generally did not use money to control. According to the researchers, lesbians seemed to view income as a way of avoiding having to be financially dependent on one another, whereas, in other couples, income was viewed as a way to have power or control over the other. However, the authors go on to suggest that in couples other than married heterosexual couples, the higher wage earner had more weight in decisions around expensive leisure spending.

A general concern was found among lesbian couples to desire equal terms surrounding financial responsibilities, and they tend to resolve this by "pooling" their money (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983). However, this typically does not happen early on in the relationship. Once the partners get a sense of trust for a lasting relationship, lesbians are more likely to pool their money.

Reinforcing findings by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983), Lynch & Reilly (1986) find strong evidence of sharing and equality surrounding financial matters and decision making in lesbian couples, and found that there were no role relationships which determined who did what in the household. In another study, equal decision making did occur in more than half of the sample in regards to situations including food buying,
leisure spending, who to visit, what restaurant to go to and what house/apartment to get (Reilly & Lynch, 1990).

Looking at perceived power, by asking participants who has more say in the relationship, Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton (1982) investigated the correlation of balance of power to satisfaction in lesbian relationships. They found that women who believe they have equal power are more satisfied in their relationship than those who perceive an unequal power balance. An interesting note, the authors point out that it is possible that the correlation could be reversed - higher satisfaction could facilitate an equal power balance.

Many studies revealed more than half of the sample indicating equal power and higher satisfaction (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Caldwell & Peplau, 1984; Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton, 1982; Reilly & Lynch, 1990). When partners had a differing sense of their influence in the relationship there was less satisfaction. Most couples indicated satisfaction and of these, both partners reported having a sense of influence in the relationship indicating egalitarian relationships as a "reality" for most couples.

Power in these studies was measured by asking who has "more say" in decisions in the relationship. While almost all couples in the aforementioned samples thought an ideal relationship would entail equal influence by both partners, not all relationships attained that ideal. Such results indicate the importance of distinguishing between actual and ideal influence when investigating egalitarian characteristics among couples.

Reilly and Lynch (1990) found similar equality discrepancies among lesbian couples in regards to sexual initiation and sexual frequency. While perhaps wanting the
ideal of partners equally initiating sex or making mutual decisions regarding frequency, this did not always happen.

Lynch and Reilly (1986) suggest that power imbalance in lesbian relationships cannot be explained by those same correlates which account for power imbalance in heterosexual relationships. While Caldwell and Peplau (1984) did find that partners who had more income and/or more education did result in their having more influence in the relationship creating an imbalance of power, other researchers found evidence otherwise. Typical variables viewed in heterosexual relationships as contributing to power imbalance, such as age, education, income and assets, did not explain inequalities in lesbian relationships (Lynch & Reilly, 1986; Reilly & Lynch, 1990; Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990).

Power in lesbian relationships appears to be related to satisfaction, and is significant in that a high amount of couples surveyed indicate egalitarian relationships. Given that power and satisfaction are interrelated, it is important to continue investigation into these areas to provide information that may be useful to those who are desiring more satisfying and equal relationships.

Conflict

Very few studies have focused specifically on conflict in lesbian couples, though certainly the emphasis of studies in lesbian relationships - satisfaction and power - can contribute to learning more about conflict. Kurdek (1991a) evaluated problem solving strategies in regards to relationship satisfaction, finding that gay and lesbian couples reported similar conflict resolution styles, and suggests that conflict strategies can mediate
relationship satisfaction. Similarly, Falbo and Peplau (1980) reported no significant differences between gays and lesbians in conflict styles. Metz, Rosser and Strapko (1994) compared conflict resolution styles among heterosexual, gay male and lesbian couples. Results indicated that lesbian couples reported greater relationship satisfaction and more effort to resolve conflict than gay and heterosexual couples. Additionally, lesbians held a more positive outlook towards resolution, perceived their partner as being "upset" about conflict and their partner as putting forth effort towards resolution. In comparison to heterosexual women, lesbians tended to rate effort towards resolution both for themselves and their partner higher than heterosexual women, and lesbians reported more assertive behaviors, whereas heterosexual women reported more physical aggression.

The authors conclude that conflict resolution styles are generally similar between heterosexual, gay and lesbian couples, and that the differences that emerged tend to be accounted for by gender rather than sexual orientation.

While Kurdek (1991b) investigated dissolution of gay and lesbian couples, this information can suggest where conflict arises. This particular study revealed that non-responsiveness on the partner's part was the most frequent reason for dissolution which parallels with the most highly rated reason - absence/emotional distance. Additional reasons obtained for open-ended questions include partner problems and sexual issues. Most highly rated reasons consist of "frequent absence, sexual incompatibility, mental cruelty, lack of love, infidelity, job/school commitments, excessive demands and financial problems" (p.273) in order of descending importance. Because dissolution of a couple typically ends in conflict, these results can be used to compare data concerning
conflict in further studies of lesbian couples.

More often than not, studies on physical violence and/or abuse in relationships focus on heterosexual couples. In the past ten years, research has shed some light on domestic violence in lesbian couples. Battering among lesbians is similarly defined and similarly exerted as in heterosexual relationships. Sexual, psychological, emotional and/or physical control of the partner may be employed. According to Lockhart, White, Causby & Isaac (1994), verbal abuse in lesbian couples centers around conflict about "partner's job, partner's emotional dependency, spending money, housekeeping/cooking duties, sexual activities and use of alcohol/drugs" (p.488). Escalation of perceived power imbalance can occur among a wide variety of relational aspects. Certainly, lesbian abuse occurs, and more research is needed in this area. While abuse is central to conflict, it is not the focus of this particular study.

Gender Socialization

Notably, throughout much of the research on lesbian couples in the last fifteen years, differences in relationship dynamics from gay and heterosexual couples typically are attributed to gender socialization rather than sexual orientation. Macoby (1990) reviews a number of studies to provide some explanation for gender socialization. Girls develop distinct interaction patterns in same sex peer groups that continue into adulthood, and she indicates, "among girls, conversation is a more socially binding process" (p. 516). Gilligan (1982) suggests too, that females emphasize equity, caring and connection in relationships. In reviewing substantial scholarship on differences between male and female communication, Wood (1996) describes female communication as "inclusive, cooperative
and expressive" (p. 110).

Many studies of heterosexual couples attribute gender when differences arise. Similarly, in comparison studies between gay and lesbian couples, because few differences between gay couples and lesbian couples are identified, gender becomes the "reason" for any differences. When comparison is made then, among heterosexual, gay and lesbian couples, gender is attributed for explaining any differences (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Kurdek, 1991; Metz, Rosser, & Strapko, 1994). For example, Nichols (1990) explains that lesbians' dissimilarities with gay men, in particular less frequent sex and less sex outside the primary relationship, indicate gender as being more significant than sexual orientation. Her reasoning being that if gays and lesbians were similar to each other in regards to sexual activity, yet different from heterosexuals, then sexual orientation would be more significant. Basically, when gender is attributed to explaining results of lesbian couple studies, focus is centered on the dynamics of female socialization being multiplied.

Rationale for this Study

A review of lesbian couple studies reveals a number of factors relating to relationship satisfaction. Additionally, in studying power in lesbian relationships, equal power balance appears to be common and significant in many lesbian relationships. As I mentioned, scant research on conflict in lesbian couples has been accomplished. Investigating the interrelation between conflict, satisfaction and power in lesbian relationships can provide researchers a broader, and hopefully more accurate, picture of
dynamics in lesbian relationships.

While using scales and measuring devices that were found to be reliable and valid for heterosexual couples seems to be the best thing we have to work with, I question whether or not we are getting an accurate picture of lesbian couple's relationships and are doing justice by "incorporating" these scales into current research on lesbian couples. What identifies and is significant in lesbian couples may be quite different or it may be quite similar to what identifies and is significant in heterosexual couples. Lynch & Reilly's (1986) data suggest that using similar variables across various types of couple relationships is not always reliable and valid, and suggest we cannot use the traditional methods we've come to rely on for measuring heterosexual couples. Additionally, it seems that by using those traditional measuring devices which have been used for measuring heterosexual couples, that results are more likely to sway toward explaining differences by gender, as that is how many differences are explained in heterosexual couples. This tends to negate or dismiss possibilities of differences that may be explained by sexual orientation.

Kitzinger (1987) suggests that current research on homosexual couples purports an all inclusive and more positive approach towards gays and lesbians than previous studies emphasizing pathological aspects of homosexuality. She challenges the current "gay affirmative" approach as tending to normalize homosexuality so that it fits, and is subsequently subsumed, into heterosexuality by indicating that homosexuals and heterosexuals are very similar. Much of the results, especially in comparing lesbian couples to gay and heterosexual couples, attributes any differences to gender socialization,
and this is not limited to comparison studies. Certainly, while similarities likely exist between heterosexuals and lesbians, to get a broader understanding of lesbian relationships, it is necessary to explore what differences may exist and to what those differences may be attributed. Rather than relying completely on prescribed devices that have been very useful in identifying aspects of heterosexual relationships, researchers need to take a step back to explore what contributes to lesbian relational dynamics and address the following research questions.

Research Questions

- What factors contribute to a particular level of satisfaction for lesbian couples?
- What does the lesbian herself view as the most significant factors contributing to relationship satisfaction?
- How is power “played out” in lesbian couples? What does power balance look like in the relationship?
- How is it related to satisfaction?
- What are lesbian’s perceptions of conflict?
- What factors contribute to how lesbian couples do conflict?
- What, if any, third party has been considered to help resolve conflict in the relationship? Would mediation be considered for conflict resolution?
- What does being lesbian mean?
- What does being a lesbian couple mean?
- What about being in a same sex relationship contributes to relational dynamics of
lesbian couples?

- What about being lesbian, separate from gender, contributes to relational dynamics of lesbian couples?

- How does being a same sex couple in a society that normalizes heterosexuality affect relational dynamics?

- How do lesbians compare their conflict processes to heterosexual couples? To other women couples?

Asking the above questions can help researchers move toward finding additional contributing factors that explain satisfaction, power and conflict in lesbian couples. It is important to explore factors relating to these particular areas to inform research and practical concerns for lesbian couples. Using these questions to guide my research, I will explore satisfaction, power and conflict in lesbian couples.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

An ethnographic approach was chosen for this study of lesbian couples in order to provide a descriptive analysis of particular aspects significant in lesbian couples in regards to relational dynamics. Common to ethnographic research is a personal involvement or exposure with the subject of study which is especially important to me, so that I may get a more descriptive portrayal of lesbian couples’ experience. For this particular study subjects were interviewed about relational dynamics centering around satisfaction, power and conflict.

Population and Sample

Due to the impossibility of obtaining a representative sample of lesbian couples (Klinger, 1996), participants were selected through snowball sampling. Such a technique involves the use of informal networks of friends who refer friends, and it allows for access to members of undefined populations (Lynch & Reilly, 1986). Recruitment for participants occurred initially through contact with my friends and acquaintances with the hopes that they would consider participating and also inform their friends of the study. In addition, I handed out announcements about my study at a local gathering of lesbian and bisexual women.

Women couples who consider themselves to be in a serious or significant relationship and have been together for one year or more were considered for
participation. Consent was obtained from all participants and participation was voluntary. Particular demographic information was obtained by completing a background information form. Participants were interviewed as a couple and individually with half of the couples being interviewed first as a couple and then individually, and the other half being interviewed individually, first and as a couple, second.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews occurred at a place of convenience and privacy for the respondents, with many occurring at their homes. Consent for participation was discussed and all respondents signed consent forms.

Using the research questions to guide the interview, interview questions explored particular aspects of the relationship in general, such as - how the couple identifies themselves, how out they are, satisfaction in the relationship and power. More specifically, the questions lead to what topics of conflict arise, which conflicts are repetitive, if there is an imperative for getting issues out on the table, how they manage conflict, how conflict is resolved and if a third party is involved. Follow up probes were used to gather more detailed explanations and descriptions to assure more accurate data interpretation. Interview questions for couples and individuals are presented in Appendix A.

The couple interviews probed for how the couples see themselves in the relationship. Individual interviews consisted of each member of the couple being interviewed separately to allow the individuals to present their own perspective of
relational dynamics. Each interview was taped and transcribed.

Upon completion of transcription of the interviews, coding began by writing short notes and brief summaries within the margins. Central categories generally followed the research questions with some overlap among interrelated concepts. Transcripts were coded and each category was analyzed through constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to discover what patterns emerged.

It is the intention that responses to the interview questions will illuminate and add to the current research on lesbian relationships by providing some initial exploratory data in an area of lesbian couple research that is quite scant.

Reliability and Validity

Of those respondents interviewed, I had a previously established friendship with seven participants. For some of those participants, I sensed a more comfortable and open atmosphere, and for others, more guarded responses. It is difficult to determine if this was a direct result of having an already established relationship with the respondent because I noticed similar dynamics among respondents with whom I did not have previous relations. That is, among those respondents I did not know previously some appeared open and comfortable with providing responses and some appeared more guarded in their responses.

Those couples choosing to participate in the study represent a broad spectrum of the lesbian population in Western Montana especially in regards to age, occupation, income and years identified as a lesbian. An area in which respondents were quite similar,
race, is quite representative of Montana in general. However, it is important to mention that this information may not be reliable for lesbians of races other than Caucasian.

I was conscious in my analysis to represent the respondents descriptions as close to their described experiences as possible and in a manner which did not sensationalize their experience. The range of findings appear to represent a diversity of experiences and relational processes.

Finally, I have discussed the findings with some of the respondents (8), and they verify the interpretations as representative of the dynamics in their relationship. One respondent suggested that reading this research was like “having a conversation” with her lesbian friends, and that she could relate to what the other participants had to say. This signifies the likeness of these couples’ experiences and dynamics with other lesbians.
CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Demographic Data

Demographic information was obtained from respondents by asking them to complete a background information form which included the following information: age, race, level of education, annual income, money pooling, years in current relationship, years identified as a lesbian. All respondents are residents of Montana residing in central to western areas of the state living in or near communities ranging from 265 to 43,000 in population. Sixteen women, who identify as lesbian, range in age from twenty four to forty nine. All respondents have attended at least some college, of whom six are currently students in college. At the time they were interviewed, nine respondents have completed less than a B.A./B.S., six have completed a B.A./B.S. and one has completed an M.A. Income range for fifteen respondents is from zero to $42,000 with 63% earning less than $20,000/year. Length of time in their current relationship ranges from two to eight years. Respondents have identified as lesbian in a range from four to forty years, and all respondents except one reported being Caucasian. The one reported being “human.”

A compilation of responses and summaries follow:
### Demographic Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Annual Income</th>
<th>Years in Current Relationship</th>
<th>Years Identified as Lesbian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Cauc.</td>
<td>M.S.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 ½ - 3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Cauc.</td>
<td>In Master's program</td>
<td>18,000</td>
<td>2 3/4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Cauc.</td>
<td>Sophomore in college</td>
<td>11,000</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Cauc.</td>
<td>2 years college</td>
<td>no response</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Cauc.</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Human</td>
<td>Sophomore in college</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Cauc.</td>
<td>2 years college</td>
<td>29,000</td>
<td>2 ½</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Cauc.</td>
<td>B.S.</td>
<td>7,200</td>
<td>2 ½</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Cauc.</td>
<td>Freshman in college</td>
<td>under 10,000</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Cauc.</td>
<td>Senior in college</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Cauc.</td>
<td>B.S.</td>
<td>13,000</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Cauc.</td>
<td>1 year college</td>
<td>9,000</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Cauc.</td>
<td>B.S.</td>
<td>42,000</td>
<td>2 ½</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Cauc.</td>
<td>A.S.</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>2 ½</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Cauc.</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Cauc.</td>
<td>Senior in college</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1
Demographic Category Summaries:

**Range of years in Current Relationship** 2 - 8 years

**Range of years Identified as a Lesbian** 4 - 40 years

**Race** - All respondents, except one reported being Caucasian. The one reported being “Human.”

**Age Range** 24 - 49

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Distribution</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 - 30 years</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 - 40</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 - 50</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 16 unless otherwise noted

**Level of Education**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than B.A./B.S.</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.A./B.S. completed</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.S. completed</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6 respondents are currently students.

**Income Range $0 - 42,000**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Distribution</th>
<th>n = 15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 - 9,999</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000 - 19,999</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20,000 - 29,999</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30,000 - 39,999</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40,000 - 49,999</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 couples pool all their money CD, OP
2 couples pool none of their money MN, IJ
4 couples pool their money partially

Table 3.2
Defining Lesbian Relationships

As mentioned in the review of literature, there is a need to define terminology, or labels, in lesbian research. Rather than assume that everyone similarly interprets what being a lesbian means, respondents were asked what it meant to them. This can provide some perspective for the reader of this research by creating a better understanding of the respondents meanings of being lesbian. The question was asked of each individual (Describe what being lesbian means to you.) and of each couple (Describe what being a lesbian couple means to you.). The following description portrays the defining features offered by respondents.

Identifying Features of Being Lesbian

Four identifying features in defining what being a lesbian means stand out in the interviews - homophobia, self, partnership, and a global connection to women. Respondents indicating homophobia as a feature may or may not have used that term specifically. If not, the description of their behavior indicates a reaction to either their own or external homophobia. Terms categorized in the feature of self include honesty, strength, power, happiness, truthfulness to oneself which all seemed to indicate some sense of self awareness that comes with being lesbian for some of these women. A global connection to women includes responses which suggest some type of connection to women as a whole. When describing what it means to be a lesbian, descriptions typically included one or a combination of these features.
### Distribution of responses defining what being a lesbian means

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Description</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homophobia</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self &amp; Homophobia</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self, homophobia &amp; partnership</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self, partnership &amp; global</td>
<td>M, C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self &amp; global</td>
<td>E, G, H, O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership</td>
<td>D, F, I, N, K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership &amp; global</td>
<td>J, L</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.3

Two women, A & P, defining their lesbianism in terms of homophobia both indicate that being lesbian is not a significant part of their identity, it is just a part of the whole. What seems to be most significant in their identity as a lesbian is homophobia and how it affects them, or sets them apart from the norm of traditional heterosexual couples.

A - It's not like it’s a huge overwhelming part of my identity, where at one time in my life it has been...felt like it was a big part of my life...In kind of subtle ways it affects me. Like if I read editorials that condemn homosexuality, it definitely ends up upsetting me or feeling the world’s not fair. But, it’s not a huge part of who I am that I’m conscious about.

P - It’s [being lesbian] not a big part of me anymore. It’s like asking what having dogs means to me, or what’s soccer mean to me. It’s just another part of my life. It’s just the makeup of who I am...I guess what it means is maybe a little bit more of a challenging lifestyle. It’s not necessarily the easy path of the straight white lifestyle...homophobia [makes it more challenging]...

Additionally, P defines her being lesbian as being “more truthful” to herself, introducing the element of self,

...because I’m lesbian and because I’m with women, it’s a lot easier for me not to
fall into that straight [traditional female] role...I know I would take the easy way out [if I were straight]. I would fall into that role...it’s a lot more challenging not falling into [that role], which I think is a lot more my truth and honest, which I could seek out if I were straight as well, but probably wouldn’t.

Interestingly, the only other woman (B) who spoke in terms of homophobia as an identifying feature of being lesbian does view her lesbianism as a significant part of her identity. It seems that what contributes to its significance is the aspect that she undergoes an unconscious vigilance of how others might react to her lesbianism. It’s a combination of internal and external homophobia that seems to drive this unconscious vigilance.

It makes me aware of how other people are gonna respond to that [my being lesbian] in different situations, so that affects my behavior, more on an unconscious level, I think, than a conscious level at times. On a situation by situation basis, I determine how out I’m gonna be based on how comfortable I am in that situation and how willing I think the person receiving that information would be to that as well...

B also speaks of the meaning of being lesbian in terms of a partner and of herself,

By choosing a woman as a partner, that puts me a little bit out of the mainstream of life, so...I’ve defined, to a certain extent a little bit of a different reality for myself...It means choosing women as partners, both sexual partners and partners in life. But, I guess it [also] has to do with not ascribing to roles that have been presented to us in society, and there really is a lot more freedom for me as a lesbian in that sense...It just gives me a little more freedom to be who I am.

Two women (M, C) describe their lesbianism in terms of self, partnership and a connection to women as a whole,

M - It means that my attraction for a life long partner is women. I think it pretty much is where I identify the most, where I feel most comfortable is with women...[There’s] much more to it than emotions. It really gets down to feelings. It really gets down to truth and honesty...once I make that [kind of] connection...it doesn’t happen with men very often. So not only am I a lesbian, but I identify much more with lesbians, not just women...I think that it is totally who I am. It is just my whole core.
M does make the distinction that she has more of a connection to lesbians than women as a whole. Also, her lesbianism is core to her identity. It is truth and honesty that motivates the connection she senses with women.

C - I am in a relationship with a woman and I really enjoy the company of women, and I think generally, men are pretty irritating. So, I just love to surround myself with women, all kinds of women, even if I’m not romantically or sexually attracted to them. I just prefer the company of women in general, and I think that carries over into so many things...before I came out, I did not...have this power that I feel like I have now...I stopped worrying about what [others] thought of me...and I just became somebody else altogether. So, for me, it was coming out that gave me all this power, made me a lot stronger.

In being lesbian, C has a greater sense of awareness of her personal power and strength, is in a relationship with a woman and generally likes the company of women.

The last category including self is that of self and global connection to women.

These women didn’t necessarily mention anything about partnership.

E - I have a deeper appreciation of being a woman, more of a consciousness about how we are in society. I’m definitely happier than most women I know out in the world, that’s my interpretation of what I hear from women...[I’m] more understanding of other people who are also minorities, understanding people’s feelings...[It’s] very gratifying.

O - For me it means that all my, my connection is with women. I’m friends with men, but as far as the wholeness that you have with somebody who’s a friend and a lover, that I find with women. That’s where my connection is. That’s where I feel most safe, where I feel the most open and where I feel the most attraction.

G - It means really appreciating women. Not only women I meet day to day, but women in our culture in general. Also being a lesbian means gravitating towards women, wanting to hang around with women, being more interested in women than men, and just generally appreciating and loving women...I would say part of being lesbian for me is being strong...in my sense of motivation and purpose and strength of character. Certainly being able to do things on my own, a certain independence.

H - Having a loving, caring, sharing my thoughts, feelings, spiritualness with a
woman and being attracted to women in that way. Predominantly wanting and needing to be around women and sharing all that I just described and not having much identity with men...My comfort level just isn’t as high with men as women.

There’s a general self awareness of happiness, strength, and comfort these women sense as being lesbian. Additionally, a deep appreciation and sharing with women contributes to a connection they feel with women in general.

In general, those individuals describing what being lesbian means in terms of self tended to provide more descriptive and somewhat prideful, even passionate expressions of loving women. Note from the following descriptions that those not including self in their description provided more brief, concise responses.

For those individuals defining what it means to be lesbian in terms of partnership, one individual did suggest that the labeling creates some confusion for her,

D - To me, lesbian, it just means that I am in a relationship with a woman...I think it confuses me more than it makes out who I am because there are a lot of interpretations. Especially in the queer [community], being a lesbian, there are a lot of expectations to be politically correct. I think that once I started identifying myself as a lesbian, I changed a lot. I started doing things that I thought I was supposed to do with a lesbian, and now I’m kind of getting away from that. From simple things, like eating meat to...I don’t know, I think it is confusing...though it is easier to say, “I am a lesbian,” and then people get the idea that ‘she is in a couple.’ But, lately it has been kind of confusing.

Other responses that featured just partnership follow,

F - I see myself as a human being. I don’t like to draw lines and differentiations. I love women and I choose to partner sexually and romantically with women.

I - I consider myself a lesbian, but I don’t consider myself that different from anybody else. I have a female partner and I don’t know...I haven’t really thought about it. When I look at who I am, I don’t think about that [my being a lesbian]. It doesn’t pop into my head.

K - It means being physically, sexually attracted to women.
N - ...falling in love with another woman. So, mostly it is being committed and being in what typically would be a heterosexual relationship with a man. The same idea as being in a relationship with a woman, kind of a marriage of two people, two women.

Notice the difference from those descriptions featuring self and even a connection to women as a whole. Except for D, these women define their lesbianism as just being in relationship with a woman, similar to being in a committed heterosexual relationship, or that their being lesbian doesn’t make them different from heterosexuals. The responses have a more matter of fact tone to them than those featuring self and global connection to women.

The last category features descriptions pertaining to a combination of partnership and a global connection to women.


L - ...I am mostly woman identified...I identify with women, and want to be with women socially, sexually, in every way. In a man/woman relationship, I would not want to be with a man that way, as defined by marriage or whatever. I definitely do not want to be with men. I would much rather be with women.

To these women, being lesbian means being with women in relationship and generally identifying with women in many aspects of their lives.

Basically, presenting the respondents descriptions provides a sense of their perspective on what it means to be lesbian and what particular features stand out in their definitions. It is apparent from the differences in these descriptions that there are many interpretations of what it means to be lesbian. For these sixteen individuals, four features are present that help them define what being lesbian means - homophobia, self, partnership
and an overall connection to women. The following chart depicts how many times each feature was mentioned by a respondent.

**Identifying Features of Being a Lesbian**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identifying Feature</th>
<th>No. Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homophobia</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Connection to Women</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.4

63% of respondents refer to partnering when defining what being a lesbian means while half of those refer only to partnering. Two other identifying features, self and global connection to women, are referred to by 50% of the respondents. Respondents referring to both of these features combined one or more other features in their definition. Those respondents referring to homophobia as a defining feature of being lesbian comprise 19% of the sample. Clearly, among these respondents, partnership, a strong sense of self and a global connection to women are important defining features when describing what it means to be lesbian.
Identifying Features of Being a Lesbian Couple

Responses to the question of "Describe what being a lesbian couple means to you" resulted in many different identifying features as compared to the question regarding what being a lesbian means. Being a lesbian couple generally was described in regards to difference from heterosexual couples, similarity to other couples, commitment to partner, self, and partnership and global connection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distribution of responses defining what being a lesbian couple means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Different from heterosexuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similar to other couples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership &amp; global</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.5

There is not near as much reference to self as there was in the individual interviews. When seeing themselves as a couple, it seems the self doesn’t stand out as significantly as it does when looking at their own lesbianism. Interestingly, even when describing individual lesbianism they included partner and global much more than when describing being a lesbian couple.

What does stand out more across interviews is describing their coupleness in regards to other couples. Most respondents that did this compared themselves more specifically to heterosexual couples, while C inferred couples in general.

I think that being a lesbian couple means that we are two women who spend our time together and love each other and have fun together and play. And, we are friends and we are lovers, and we fight. Primarily though, two women, I think, in this relationship, doing all the stuff that people do in relationships, and that is a
lesbian couple.

Other respondents, when comparing themselves to couples, either referred specifically to heterosexual couples or made an inference to heterosexual couples,

B - For me, some of the things it means is that we’re different from our heterosexual friends in some ways and certainly not others. But, there is a sense of feeling different...It also means for me, I’m more aware who I introduce my partner to, or as I introduce my partner, I’m aware there might be a different reaction to that...there’s never an automatic acceptance for your partner, but I think that’s a little different for a heterosexual couple than it is for me as part of a lesbian couple...Also, as a lesbian couple, we have our heterosexual friends and our lesbian friends, and are conscious of that many times when we are planning events like birthday parties or holiday parties...It doesn’t seem it should play a role, but it does come up in planning how to gather with our friends.

A - The other thing is, the other day we were trying to find a place to have a celebration. We can’t just call up and say we’re having a wedding. We have to come out to do different things as a couple in the world...People look at us as a couple if we choose to come out that way, [otherwise] we get looked at as two friends.

Here, A infers that heterosexual couples do not have to provide explanations when they tell someone they are having a wedding, but in her experience, in locating a place to have a lesbian wedding and to just announce their wedding, they have to provide explanations and come out as a lesbian couple which makes it more complicated.

Other comparisons to heterosexual couples include,

M - Well, to me it is a monogamous commitment to another person at that time...I don’t think the couple thing, compared to a heterosexual couple, is any different, other than I think women are more evolved. So, I think a lesbian couple can be a more evolved relationship. (By evolved, she’s referring to women being generally, more emotionally expressive.)

N - It is a partnership of two, just identifying lesbian vs. heterosexual, a marriage of two women...but, I think in a lesbian couple there is a lot more sameness, parallels, than having that element of a male in a relationship...so, I can look at [my
partner] and say, "Oh yeah, I can understand how that can be," versus sometimes with men, I just don't know where they are coming from.

It would appear from these responses, that there are some perceived differences from heterosexual couples. The differences mentioned are in regards to greater understanding and more emotional expression in lesbian relationships, most social interaction is with other lesbians, planning gatherings of mixed heterosexual and lesbian friends, and not being recognized as a couple by society in general. At the same time, one aspect that is similar to other couples, that of being committed to their partner, was also identified as a common feature of what being a lesbian couple means. The following chart depicts the number of respondents referring to each identifying feature:

Identifying Features of Being a Lesbian Couple

Table 3.6
Again, reference to partnering is the most common feature mentioned. 56% of the respondents referred to partnership when they describe what being a lesbian couple means. 38% made some reference to comparison to other couples, usually heterosexual couples, and identifying features of self and global were referred to much less in describing what being a lesbian couple means.

The tendency to compare to other couples, especially heterosexual couples, is not as high as I would have thought it to be. One area that repeatedly arose in the interviews was discussion around roles. More specifically, lesbian couples having limited role models, liking the freedom of not having predetermined roles, like traditional male/female roles, but wanting some sense of model to compare to. During the interviews several women mentioned how they liked not having predetermined roles. So even though they may have compared themselves to heterosexual couples elsewhere in the interview, it was not as prevalent in their definition of being a lesbian couple.

Additionally, elsewhere in the interview, respondents also spoke about how homophobia affected how they could relate to each other. Given the responses in other areas of the interviews, I would have thought homophobia would contribute more to identifying what being a lesbian couple means to these couples.

Interesting to note is that more couples match identifying features during the couple interview. Six couples indicate the same identifying features in the couple interview while only one couple did so from the individual interview. This could be a result of the dialogue couples had during the couple interview as a way of running with what the other has mentioned. The question regarding what it means to be a lesbian
couple could be asked during both interviews to get a better sense if individuals are saying all they want without the influence of their partner’s presence.

Again, the significance of all this has to do with trying to identify what features are viewed as important when women self identify as lesbians. Because there are so many labels and definitions for women couples, this information helps to provide a perspective from which the lesbian herself is viewing her identity. Gathering this information is critical if comparison studies are to be made.

Clearly, when focusing on identity as a lesbian, defining that in terms of partnership is prevalent. Defining features of self and global connection to other women are much more significant when describing being lesbian versus being a lesbian couple. Likewise, comparison to others is much more significant when defining being a lesbian couple, whereas, little comparison was inferred in descriptions of being lesbian. The most defining features across both individual and couple interviews are partnership, self, global connection to women and comparison to other couples.

Key Findings:

• Key identifying features of defining what being lesbian means are partnership, self, global connection to other women and homophobia.

• Key identifying features of defining what being a lesbian couple means are partnership, comparison to other couples, global connection to other women and self.
Considerations for Studying Lesbian Populations

Outness and homophobia

Most couples' levels of outness appear to be similar and for the most part they are comfortable with each other's level of outness and to whom they are out. For some couples, tension arises and creates some conflict if their levels of outness centers on displaying public affection.

AB, CD, OP

For these couples, one person is more comfortable with public affection than the other and generally respects the other's needs or fears around this. There seems to be varying levels of understanding of the other's fear. Where there is a lack of understanding (CD) tension is present, but is tempered through respect. At a higher level of understanding (OP) some tension still remains even though there is understanding. At a still higher level of understanding, where one seems to have a clear sense of the real fear her partner has and accepts where she is with that (AB), there seems to be very little tension here. The level of understanding this couple has achieved has taken time to develop in their relationship because they mention how there was less understanding earlier in the relationship.

GH, KL, MN

These couples seem to indicate similar levels of discomfort displaying affection in public and do so rarely. However, when they have the sense they are surrounded by other
gays and lesbians, they have a tendency to display affection more openly. Because they have similar levels of discomfort no conflicting issues arise for them here.

IJ

For this couple, there is some discrepancy about whom they are each out to. However, they did not appear to have tension or conflict around this issue.

EF

Both indicate their comfort with each other’s outness in that they don’t try to hide their relationship with each other. No description specifically regarding public affection is provided.

It appears that while some couples or individuals may generally not desire to display affection in public, for some respondents, homophobia plays a key factor in whether or not affection is displayed in public. Generally, homophobia is the fear of homosexuality. More specifically, this exists as external homophobia and internal homophobia. While the boundaries of the two tend to overlap, external homophobia typically refers to someone else’s fear of homosexuality and internal refers to one’s own fear of homosexuality. Even though they identify as lesbian, lesbians experience internal homophobia as a result of being socialized in a society that normalizes heterosexuality. As some couples attempt to negotiate their comfort with being affectionate in public, they suggest both internal and external homophobia plays a part. O speaks of her fears displaying affection in public,
I think it has a lot to do with where that public place may be. I tend to feel more safe in larger cities, like San Francisco. I think it’s because there’s so many people and so much diversity. I don’t feel like I stick out much...In [Montana] it really depends. I don’t feel very safe in [Montana] a lot of the time.

She suggests that having some anonymity helps her to feel more comfortable. When asked to clarify if her fears were based on external or internal homophobia, O sugests it’s a combination of both.

Well, again, I think that the external homophobia is that I have a greater fear of physical affection outside of safe places, and internally I think. I know I have a lot of internal homophobia...I think it’s going to be interesting in our having a child. I think that’s going to be interesting for our relationship and how we deal with it. We’re not as physical as [my partner] would want. It might be scarier to come out to teachers once we have a child because there’s that fear of, “How’s that going to affect this additional unit?”

It ends up being a combination of feeling fear of others responses (external) and of not feeling comfortable enough with one’s own lesbianism to just be openly affectionate or out. Careful consideration is given to each situation that arises.

Others speak of their internal homophobia in regards to how out they are in public.

C - Kissing in public, holding hands, that sort of thing, yeah. Just in the last year since I was so inspired by that conference I have been really trying to introduce her as my partner in public situations, but it is a struggle for me to do that. And, I think she is more understanding of that struggle than I am. I don’t want it to be a struggle. I just want to be able to be out and it makes me angry that it is a struggle, and that I am homophobic. That pisses me off. It shouldn’t have to be that way, but it is. [But], when she does stuff like that, when she is afraid, then it makes me angry, and I think, “We have made this commitment. You are my partner. You need to not be ashamed of that,” and it is not that she is ashamed of it, but that there is stuff around it that she has a hard time with sometimes, and so we have little tiffs around that.

C is referring to both her and her partner’s internal homophobia and how it’s difficult to deal with individually and relationally. That it is so ingrained due to socialization is
bothersome to her because she wants to just be openly out.

K - I have been homophobic since I was aware of homos, so I don’t know what I would be like if I wasn’t homophobic, because I know I am. It is just internalized to some extent. I think it has something to do with, like I am not a real physically demonstrative person...I think ever since I was a kid I have been homophobic. Society has made me homophobic, so it is hard for me to touch women in any way and feel totally comfortable and unselfconscious about it. [Even within my relationship], outside of the home for sure. Anybody at all clueless would probably just think we were friends because we hardly, compared to a heterosexual couple, we are not very physical or demonstrative in public.

K sees how ingrained her own homophobia is as a result of socialization and describes how it contributes to her being very conscious of not only her affection with her partner but with women in general.

It appears that the respondents descriptions of their own homophobia is related more to a sense of fear than a disliking of their own lesbianism. As suggested, this seems to come up most in regards to whether or not and how much affection they will display in public or how out they will appear in public.

Gender Socialization

In an effort to distinguish between factors related to gender socialization and sexual identity, and how they contribute to relational dynamics, respondents were asked how being in a same sex couple affects their relational dynamics, as compared to what about being lesbian contributes to their relational dynamics. As will be seen by some responses, in particular, those regarding roles, it is difficult to distinguish clearly what may be a result of gender socialization and what may be a result of sexual identity. It is clear, however, that some distinctions can be made.
The following is a breakdown of the responses to the questions of how being in a same sex couple (gender) or how being lesbian contributes to relational dynamics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Being lesbian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>women more open, nurturing, willing to resolve issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>women more open, nurturing less defined roles than heterosexuals +</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AB</td>
<td>A - awareness &amp; understanding of how hormonal cycles contribute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B - &quot;more presence &amp; openness w/emotion &amp; acceptance of other's emotions because both women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>better understanding of feelings and experiences as women; more open; less intimidation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>less defined roles +</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD</td>
<td>C - less defined roles +; better understanding, on different level than men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D - not having power struggle that comes w/male/female roles +</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>(unclear recording)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>less defined roles -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EF</td>
<td>E - more understanding; no roles +</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F - different level of communication &amp; understanding than w/men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>more caring, understanding, nurturing, empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>women tend to be relationship building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Being lesbian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GH</td>
<td>G - deep level of understanding H - more comfortable w/ women, trusts women at higher level than men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>thought women communicated better (questions this from her experience)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>women are more emotional so communication is more open/honest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IJ</td>
<td>I - no response J - more understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>(didn’t want to generalize)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>greater understanding through commonalities of biology and oppression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KL</td>
<td>K - less defined roles + L - exciting to be with someone like her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>(didn’t ask)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>commonality of women’s experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MN</td>
<td>M - more understanding; less defined roles + N - freedom from less defined roles +</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>women brought up to be more caretaking, emotional &amp; communicative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>more understanding due to socialization &amp; being women; less defined roles +</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OP</td>
<td>O - feels safer w/women to express self; more validation P - less defined roles (+) so power play is different</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|Table 3.7| (+ = positive response to having less defined roles, - = negative response|
to having less defined roles)

It is evident that a number of these responses corroborate much of the research exploring differences between various types of couples in that differences are attributed to gender socialization. 75% of the respondents indicated some form of female socialization as contributing to their relational dynamics. Basically, the respondents infer that because there are two women in the relationship there is greater depth of understanding, communication, emotional expression and nurturance.

Generally, when participants responded that roles were less defined than in heterosexual couples, they indicated that they perceived a more equal balance of power in their relationships. 56% perceived that they had less defined roles in their relationships and for the most part indicated this was a positive aspect in their relational dynamics. Note that participants offered this response for both questions, or one and not the other.

Lesbian Experience

Not all women indicated that their identity as a lesbian contributed to their relational dynamics. However, looking at the responses of those that did could illuminate attributions, other than gender socialization, when researching differences between types of couples.

To investigate this further, a listing and description of responses other than less or no defined roles and gender socialization is presented.
Factors of lesbian experience contributing to relational dynamics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Homophobia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Combination of Internal and External</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>creates conflict in decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>affects couple’s perception of relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>isolation contributes to working on relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brings couple closer together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>affects self esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disapproval from family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>discomfort displaying affection publicly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legal Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legal complications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited resources for advice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coming out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process of identifying as lesbian motivates:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>honesty/honest communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tolerance/awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good self image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective strength</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.8

Respondents spoke of a variety of implications that either their own or other’s homophobia has on their relationships and how they relate to each other. Respondent A attributes differing comfort levels with their own homophobia as contributing to conflict in their relationship.

[Our sexual identity] is pretty core to some of the things we deal with. It comes up a lot, mostly to do with homophobia, trying to make decisions in our lives...like whether or not to have a ceremony...being at different comfort levels with that has been the source of big conflict.

Additionally, A suggests how homophobia may play in the decision to have a baby,

Even having a child, doing that as a female couple, in some ways, maybe those
same conflicts would come up. [Having a baby] is just more of an accepted thing [for heterosexual couples]. [For them], it’s easier to talk about with other people. You don’t have to worry about, ‘Is this kid gonna be accepted in our society?’

The combination of her own homophobia, her partner’s, and how that differs, and other people’s homophobia plays a part in their decision making and contributes to some of the conflict in particular decisions.

A also speaks of how external homophobia contributes to her perception of her relationship with her partner,

In some ways it affects how we envision being together. We grow up in this heterosexual fairy tale of marrying this man you’ll be with your whole life. I think there’s all this questioning with, “Okay, I’m with a woman. Can I have a lifetime commitment [or] are we just together?”...I’m feeling like I’m breaking new ground all the time...what does a committed lesbian relationship mean? It affects the way I look at long term commitment, family...

The promotion of heterosexual families and relationships as the norm, out of a sense of homophobia, tends to blur A’s perception of her relationship. The continual process of having to “break new ground” can be trying on their relations as is portrayed in some of their decision making processes.

Next, looking at how some respondents indicate that external homophobia affects their relations, J suggests that

...you work harder on the relationship because it’s not so easy to just run out and find another, especially in this part of the world [small isolated town].

The isolation she feels from being in a small town stems from “…the people, they don’t understand, we’re not accepted.” So, because of the isolation and the limited availability of meeting other lesbians in a small rural town, she sees the importance of working things out in the relationship and tries to put more effort into making it work.
Also, because of the isolation and being “the lesbian couple of the town,” J sees how that brings them closer together.

That makes us more dependent on each other, which makes us stronger. There are so many people in the town that when we’re together look at us like we’re aliens. So, when we’re together, that makes us stronger.

Being more dependent upon one another, in the face of others homophobia, may bring the couple closer together, however it also may heighten their isolation, thereby creating tension as a result of the confinement of their own small world.

Additionally, Respondent A suggests that homophobia of society in general can lower one’s self esteem, “…it affects our own self esteem because there’s a good portion of the world out there saying we’re not okay.” Related to this is the disapproval some lesbians sense from their immediate families. D speaks of how her family doesn’t like her being in a lesbian relationship,

…my family really affects me and their not wanting me to be in a queer relationship. They have said some things, so sometimes that can make me feel doubtful about my relationship…we really want to have a baby, and knowing that my family doesn’t approve sometimes makes me think, ‘What am I doing?, Why am I doing this?, Why am I in this relationship?, Why am I causing so much trouble?’ So, it can really affect us, [the decisions we make]…my mom said some really awful things [when I told her] we were trying to get pregnant. She said, “Well, there is nothing I can do about that!”…some of my family doesn’t really like one of my brother’s partner…but they don’t disapprove of him having a kid. No one really said what my mom said to me…that it is awful to have a kid together…It makes us doubt us, doubt what we are doing, doubt why we are together. It does, and we have talked about it...

Acceptance from others, whether it be from our families or society in general, does have an affect on how some lesbian couples relate in that it affects how they view themselves and their relationship.
As far as internal homophobia, or one’s own fear of being lesbian, the issue that seemed to affect some couples and how they relate is that of displaying affection in public. P speaks of how she and her partner having differing levels of homophobia plays a part in their relationship,

as far as our internal homophobia...she’s a lot more afraid, when we go out in public, of holding hands or touching or kissing...For me, I’m not as afraid of that. So, that is sort of hard sometimes, for me, because I want to hold her hand or I want to walk down the street and link arms or something like that...Mostly, I respect her space and at the same time I’m like, “Why is that?” I want to talk about it. I want to work that out with her and hope that if I can talk to her about it, maybe it will get better...I’ll bring it up and I’ll say, “It’s hard. I really want to do this [hold hands]. I’m gonna respect you and your space and what you want to do, and it’s really hard sometimes.”

P ends up being the one to compromise what she wants by honoring where her partner is with her own level of homophobia, however, sometimes, she will still address the issue.

Whether it’s internal homophobia, external homophobia or a combination of both, each can have an affect on how lesbian couples relate. Having differing levels of homophobia can create strain on relations which may lead to conflict. Communicating about how homophobia is contributing toward tension seems to help some couples deal with that strain. Even in the case of bringing the couple closer together, to be more dependent on one another, this can eventually result in tension due to the isolation the couple feels. Whether or not the couple chooses to deal with the issue of homophobia, it is apparent it has some affect on how they relate to one another.

The second issue about being lesbian that affects how some of these couples relate within their relationship is that of legal issues. Within this category, legal complications and limited resources for advice were addressed. C discusses how legalities make their
decisions more complicated,

So, we have to make up our own rules regarding our commitment to each other, whether we want to make that public or not, have a ceremony, can we get married...the rules and politics of it all are very different. Health insurance, having a baby, if I am the biological mom, [my partner] doesn’t count. If she adopts the baby, I don’t count. It is just this weird system. The whole system is set up for heterosexual couples, so we have to do things differently, and figure out where we fit in the whole thing...Bringing a baby in would make it harder...

Likewise, in discussing about making legal arrangements before her partner’s surgery, F says,

Traditional heterosexual couples can get married [and] are instantly afforded all these rights...[my partner] had a tumor...we had less than a week’s notice to get all the papers in order because we’re not related. We had to get power of attorney...legal documentation saying I had the right to make these decisions for her. I could marry any bum off the street and the next day be in that situation and he would have complete control of my life [he’d be afforded the rights to make decisions for me].

The legalities involved tend to make relations more complicated in some instances. Again, this can create strain on the couple’s relations.

Along the same line, D speaks of how resources for advice or help for lesbian couples is limited,

There is not a lot of information out there...There are some books out there for us to read about women who want to have kids, but it’s not [in] our knowledge from childhood...

While this is certainly related to the claim many respondents provide that there are limited or no role models for lesbians, just as significant is that resources for re-shaping the norms of the “system that is set up for heterosexual couples,” are limited. Respondents suggest these factors stemming from their being lesbian do contribute to how they relate to each other. Talking about the issues or seeking support from their partner
are some ways they deal with these factors.

A third factor related to being lesbian affecting how the couples relate is that of various processes they have experienced as a result of their lesbian identity. This includes coming out and other processes of identifying as lesbian and a collective identity. O talks about how her experience of coming out contributes to how she relates to her partner in her relationship,

I think because of that experience [coming out], I have more of an understanding as far as going through a painful experience as far as feeling ashamed, secretive, and feeling like I didn’t have a connection with anybody because I didn’t really know who I was. I think what that does in my relationship is I don’t ever want to go back to any of those feelings and so I work really hard to be honest and to be true to what I want...definitely knowing who I am and not being willing to hide it...when I have inklings of feeling ashamed or feeling like I’m pretending to be something I’m not, how it affects my relationship is that I work really hard to work through any of those twinges to keep my relationship healthy because I’m keeping myself healthy.

Similarly, G & H discuss how “lesbians are working on their self esteem through their issues,” indicating that this may contribute toward affecting how they relate,

G - I want to say [lesbians] are more self aware.

H - Maybe because we have to go through that process of defining ourselves and realizing, “Oh, I’m a lesbian.” At some point along the line you are doing some work, and maybe that’s the catalyst [identifying as a lesbian], that you start doing more and more work on one self, and working through the issues.

G - Right, they’ve already had to crank themselves out of the norm at one point in their life, so they’re used to taking a little risk.

This couple is suggesting that as a result of coming out and identifying as lesbian, they are more likely to work on self growth and more likely to take risks in the relationship to work things out. Likewise, as other comments portray, identifying as lesbian has
motivated aspects which contribute to how some of these couples relate,

N - I think that having to deal with the idea of having an alternative lifestyle, just being a little different than how we were typically raised, and we were raised in a heterosexual family, being different from that has really helped me. Recognizing that and accepting that has really done a lot for my self esteem, just accepting myself there. So, then all the other things...places where I don’t feel comfortable, places where I don’t fit in, I see them almost as a lot easier to deal with...they are pretty minor compared to what I had felt and gone through in the growth to accept myself as a lesbian in a relationship...It helps in recognizing that that other person [in the relationship] had to come from the same place, otherwise we would not be together. So, there is kind of a mutual respect, kind of an added knowledge, and it’s pretty cool whatever it is...[It] enhances the relationship, communication, just in our life experiences.

G - I believe straight women may have a different view of the world or society in general than lesbians. And, as a lesbian, I might be a little more tolerant of differences...Although there are many heterosexual women out there that are very tolerant of differences. I can’t really say how it directly affects the relationship, but it does. I might be a little more tolerant of something my partner does...I feel like we’re proud to be lesbians and that affects our relationship, it strengthens it...I feel like I’m drawing on the strength of all the lesbians that are out there. I feel a collectivism...it’s like all the lesbians I’ve ever met and everything I’ve ever read about lesbians is all stored in here [heart] and that it contributes to the relationship, and it enriches the relationship.

H - I know there’s a difference there, but it’s hard for me to put my finger on it...being lesbian, you’re kind of outside the norm of society...maybe I, we, tend to be more tolerant of each other or differences a little more.

F - I would look at being a member of an oppressed population, that that affects how I relate. Not like seeing myself as special, but I have alternatives...Specifically, if you look at traditional heterosexual couples, roles are very defined, very rigid...I don’t think there’s as much of an awareness that they can redefine and approach things differently...I have a larger diversity of people from which to draw experiences so I can also see alternatives I never even thought of. There’s something there [in being lesbian] that motivates me to be able to see that.

E - ...there’s a sexual relationship, not that all lesbians are sexual, but I think when you say you are lesbian, you’re telling the world that you love women. There’s more comforting, more honesty to be able to say you are sexual, which is taboo. To go beyond what society finds acceptable, and to be able to live like that, that
brings on yourself to draw from the strength of being committed, from being in love from this other dimension...

D - ...being able to identify [as lesbian]...has helped me so much in my life in being honest...everything was a secret, so I think...because I have come out as a lesbian, I have come out in a lot of different [ways] in myself, and that has helped me in my relationship to communicate...It helps to communicate because we have to hash all this stuff [homophobia and legal complications] out. We have to start thinking about having a baby, how are we going to do that? [Communicating about this] is helping us, helping us to understand the negative out there and to be able to talk about it.

There’s definitely a sense among some of the respondents that their experience as a lesbian contributes to how they relate or communicate in their relationships. Generally they feel they communicate more honestly, are more true to themselves, have more tolerance for differences and have a stronger self esteem as a result of their experience of identifying as lesbian.

According to 69% of the lesbians interviewed there is something about being lesbian, beyond gender socialization and having less defined roles, that affects how they relate in their relationship. The overall experience of being lesbian of which identification processes, homophobia and legal issues are a part, provides a different lens from which to view the world and contributes to relational dynamics in lesbian relationships. While it’s not a simple matter to narrow this down specifically, even the respondents indicate that there’s a sense that being lesbian contributes but it’s difficult to specify how, it seems, for some of these respondents, that more communication can occur and within that communication more awareness and honesty is present as a result of one’s experience as a lesbian.
Normalization of Heterosexuality

As mentioned in the review of literature, normalization of heterosexuality and homophobia were identified as factors to consider when studying lesbian relationships. To determine how these factors may impact relational dynamics, respondents were asked. When asked specifically how normalization of heterosexuality affects how they relate, respondents, not surprisingly, address roles, homophobia and independence, themes which resonate in their responses throughout the interviews.

When respondents speak about roles, they address how other heterosexuals assume they have traditional male/female roles, how they may take on those particular roles at times or how there are no role models from which to help define particular roles within a lesbian relationship. While having less defined roles is generally viewed by most respondents as positive, it has varying affects on each couple. K talks about coming out to a nephew,

> When we came out to [my partner’s] nephew, he asked us, “Who gets to drive?”...well, we take turns. I guess from what some questions that I get from people, when I come out to them, is they have a certain expectation of gender roles, and they want to know which ones we have assigned to ourselves. Part of what I like about being lesbian - I guess I could do that if I were heterosexual too - I really feel a lot freer to decide what my role is going to be. Not based on my gender, just whatever I feel as an individual I want to do.

This respondent feels a sense of freedom from not being defined by gender roles typical in traditional heterosexual couples. However, another respondent (E) talks about the inner conflict she experiences because of the normalization of traditional gender roles,

> Sometimes, I think it tends to make me see woman/man, who’s the woman, who’s the man. Sometimes, I pull that into my relationship, or even play that out in our relationship. I don’t think that’s necessary, but I think there’s a kind of
brainwashing thing that’s going on...It’s not necessary, it’s ridiculous!...Sometimes, I might see myself as the less, huh, that already tells you a lot, the less qualified, less knowledgeable. I’m definitely more of a homemaker. I tend to get caught up into that sometimes, and that’s ridiculous, that’s not who I am. That doesn’t promote my growth to do that...I’m the one that doesn’t know as much as my woman. She’s so knowledgeable. So, I’m kind of this less than being and that’s ridiculous, but that filters into my perception and who I am in this relationship sometimes.

This respondent sees herself in that homemaker role and tends to take on society’s view of homemakers, devaluing that role, her role, and has this inner turmoil because that’s not necessarily what she believes. By bringing this into her relationship, she tends to devalue herself, and for this particular respondent, tends to be more “easy going” and ends up in a relationship that does not have a more equal balance of power. Not surprisingly, this respondent also addressed how having less defined roles is a positive aspect to their relational dynamics. A similar paradox of feeling a sense of freedom and feeling limited seems to be a common view among those respondents mentioning not having role models.

C and D discuss the notion of roles,

D - When I was talking [in the individual interview], I was talking about not having the roles with a man. Roles play a lot in a relationship. We have our power struggles, but not that power struggle. That is a big one for me.

C - I talked about the same thing, about roles and not necessarily having to fit into one. In a heterosexual couple the roles are pretty clear and any additional struggles one may have are just on top of what it is you are supposed to be doing as the woman. I don’t feel like we have that additional struggle...We are different than society’s idea of a couple...one of us isn’t a man and we cannot fit into the stereotypes of commercials, the Christmas commercials, the women who say, “My boyfriend can go to Zales and buy me a diamond.”

D - And mine needs to get me electronics or tools. (C - Oh that is true.) I could use tools for work, but I can also use negligees.

C - Right, and that is nice. There is all this flexibility in our relationship. We can
take on *all* of the roles. We can be all the things we want to be, and we don’t need someone else to tell us how to do it. But, it is kind of scary too, because there aren’t a whole lot of role models, and we are treading new territory. This is not a mainstream thing. We don’t get to see how Rita and Mary, who have been together for fifty-five years and are celebrating their fifty-fifth anniversary, how they have done it, because there are so few Rita and Mary’s.

It is clear that this couple experiences a sense of freedom from not having such defined roles as they perceive a heterosexual couple to have. Yet, there is a longing for some kind of role model because fears arise in breaking new ground.

In their attempts to redefine roles, many of the respondents in this study still come up against barriers. Whether it be general assumptions placed on them by others, inner turmoil in trying to shake free from the confines of traditional views, or not having role models from which to draw upon their experience, these barriers become part of these couples’ experience in some way or another, and therefore affect their relational dynamics.

A second area identifying how normalization of heterosexuality affects relational dynamics is that of homophobia. Although some of this has been addressed earlier, it is an area of which some respondents addressed again in regards to how normalization of heterosexuality affects their relational dynamics. In general, responses regarding homophobia center around how public the couple is in displaying affection. Although, generally, this does not seem to be an area of contention for most couples interviewed, differences do arise. Again, the distinction between internal and external homophobia is addressed. Earlier, B spoke of this unconscious vigilance she has when being out in public with her partner. H speaks of a similar experience,

I think it makes us be conscious, when we’re out in public, of where we are and
maybe unconsciously recognize what kind of situation we’re in, and what may or may not be appropriate, [what we feel is appropriate], at the time for our comfort level. There’s always probably some sort of unconscious stuff going on, unconscious and conscious, in our minds, trying to balance that, how affectionate or not [to be]. Whereas, a heterosexual couple probably wouldn’t have to be having those [thoughts] going on...[I feel] not so much anger, maybe some frustration...yeh, there’s probably some anger there though, but I don’t let it overpower me, or let it come to play in the relationship. It would be wonderful if we didn’t have to be that way.

As a result of their own homophobia, these respondents are quite aware of what the situation presents and how to act accordingly, and do so even at an unconscious level.

Although a distinction of internal and external homophobia is noted by some respondents, it is difficult to distinguish a clear boundary between the two. Two more respondents speak about feeling “restricted” in regards to displaying affection publicly, which addresses external homophobia, yet, one of them also acknowledges her own internal homophobia,

N - Out there in the world can be pretty confining and restrictive...The freedom to just be able to express myself as a lesbian [is limited]. Walking hand and hand with [my partner] down a street, or something more affectionate, that expresses my caring and love, is not that easy. It is an awareness that other people really might not be accepting of me to be me, and that hurts. And, it forces me to really look at myself and think, does it really matter what they think, and whatever they think, they are wrong anyway...out in society, I am more conforming. I will go out and my desire to be accepted for what they think I am overrides my desire to really show folks what I am, who I am.

L - For sure, homophobia is, I think, a real destructive, unhealthy thing as far as I’m concerned. Being comfortable with each other in public, because you feel restricted, confined, that you cannot express what you can express at home, not that I normally would anyway. Just not having the choice really, or feeling restricted makes me feel cranky, that that is taken away. That heterosexual couples take that for granted, and it is in your face twenty four hours a day - media, books, you name it. It makes me very cranky. It makes me feel bummed out.
Even though this respondent admits she may not be affectionate in public anyhow, she still wants to have that choice that comes with normalization, that seems to have been provided for heterosexuals.

This same respondent goes on to describe how this has the potential for creating conflict within a relationship,

I think it could have negative repercussions with your relationship. Like, if your partner was not bothered that day by homophobes, or things like that, and she wants to hold your hand in public, and you’re feeling very conscious about that. So there derives a conflict which should not be there. So, it is like, “Oh, you don’t love me enough to show this affection, fuck whoever else is there,” and you are like, “Well, there is my boss over there.” So there is this whole load of implications that come with that. So, I think there are definitely chances for conflict that way, you know, stress, pressure, that kind of thing.

And, as will be mentioned later (see balance of power), A and P speak of how this is an area of tension that arises in their relationships.

Homophobia, internal or external, contributes at varying levels, to the relational dynamics of the respondents. Through the normalization of heterosexuality, some respondents feel restricted in displaying affection to their partner in public. While some situations may evolve to conflict within the relationship, most respondents seem to come to a general understanding of each other’s levels of homophobia.

Finally, the third area that respondents speak of in regards to how normalization of heterosexuality affects their relationship is that of giving them a strong sense of independence. Because they do not feel a sense of support or acceptance from society in general, many respondents speak of having to create their own path, whether it be redefining roles, accepting her lesbianism or building community among other lesbians.
M - I think when I was younger, of course it was totally different. Now I feel almost cocky about [being] out in society because it is like I am finally comfortable with who I am. I don't have to be anybody else. I am a lesbian. I am in love with this woman, you know, and just get used to it. I am proud as punch about it...It makes [our relationship] more real...And, I think being lesbian, too, we are kind of held accountable...to dig deep and to work things out between us because we are not just the given [heterosexual] married couple...And, we have to fight for it all the way, almost, so we are proving it to ourselves and to society as a whole, that we are real.

N - I think that our relationship is still strong even though we head out into the world and recognize that we have to restrain ourselves some...We are probably more independent...I suppose there is an extra bond because we know we are unique in some ways.

G I think it makes us more self sufficient and more independent because we know society isn’t going to help us out with laws governing inheritances...and as far as health insurance, and it makes us closer to each other, more tightly knit...and we might even be closer to our [lesbian] community because society doesn’t write in those provisions for us. And, as I say that, I’m really angry about it. I don’t think [the anger] comes into our relationship. I can’t let that anger hold me back, and I can’t funnel it into the relationship. I think it makes us more resilient as a couple - the non-support by society.

There’s a sense of feeling empowered in their independence that may manifest itself in enhancing one’s self esteem, bringing the couple closer together or building community with others with similar experience. The “resilience” that is born out of this independence, in response to the lack of support they sense from society, seems to strengthen some respondent’s relationships.

While it is evident that roles, homophobia and independence are areas which respondents identify as contributing to their relational dynamics as a result of the normalization of heterosexuality, it is not always specifically clear as to how they contribute, and certainly, different couples experience each of these factors in differing ways or on different levels. From a systems point of view, that each respondent
experiences any of these factors, it in some way will affect how the couple relates.

Depending on the situation, it may bring the couple closer together, it may elevate the potential for conflict, or it may not be clear as to what affect it does have. When speaking of how homophobia affects how they relate, one respondent says,

I’m not sure how it does. I am sure it does, that weight, because I can feel it, but I am not sure how it comes out with us. But, I am sure it does.

It may not always be easy to ascertain, but given these respondents reflections, the normalization of heterosexuality does affect their relational dynamics.

Key Findings:

- Level of outness does not appear to significantly affect relational dynamics except in instances of displaying public affection.
- Gender socialization contributes to relational dynamics in regards to greater depth of understanding, emotional expression, communication and nurturance.
- Lesbian experience appears to contribute to relational dynamics for some couples in regards to homophobia, legal issues and identity.
- Normalization of heterosexuality contributes to relational dynamics in regards to homophobia, having differently defined roles than traditionally associated with heterosexual couples and independence.

Satisfaction

Respondents were asked to rank their current level of satisfaction and then, what
factors contribute to their current level of satisfaction in their relationship. After this, respondents were asked what factors they considered to be most important for ideal satisfaction though not necessarily in their current relationship.

As is evident from the Satisfaction Table (see table 3.9), most respondents indicate they are fairly to very satisfied in their current relationship. It should be noted that some respondents commented on how their satisfaction level fluctuates depending upon what is going on in the relationship, and that their response represents their satisfaction at the time of the interviews. Note that some individuals’ level of satisfaction changed across interviews (E, F, I, L, M). This could be a result of a fluctuating level of satisfaction, mentioned above, or that the individuals wanted to present a more desirable response in the presence of their partner.
Current level of Satisfaction
All couple and individual responses, except two individuals, were within the fairly satisfied to very satisfied range across interviews. Following is a break down of responses:

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Table 3.9
The following table represents respondents responses when asked what contributes to their current level of satisfaction in their relationship. Given that most respondents were fairly to very satisfied, the table represents factors contributing to satisfaction at those levels. Factors contributing toward less satisfaction include separation from each other, lack of trust, partner’s child, and fear of being affectionate in public.
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<td>Support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Love, caring, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good self image</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respect, honesty, trust</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Acceptance of each other’s differences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support for each other’s growth</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spark, spiritual connection w/partner</td>
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<td>Quality time together</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good sexual relations</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to relationship</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small amount of conflict</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common friends</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Companionship</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being out as a couple</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing tasks</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common interests</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical attraction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement w/partner to have baby</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement w/partner to have wedding</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.10
The following are what individuals and couples indicated as being the most important contributors to a high level of satisfaction in a relationship, not necessarily the relationship they are in currently.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors contributing to ideal satisfaction</th>
<th>No. of times indicated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect, honesty, trust</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to personal growth, good self image, self care</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spark/special connection</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love, caring, kindness</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time apart</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to relationship</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common interests, values</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting differences in each other</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality time together</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being friends</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good sexual relations</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing common friends</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.11

Communication ranks the highest for both contributing to current levels of satisfaction and as being the most important factor contributing to high satisfaction in a relationship though not necessarily in the current relationship. Respondents were asked to indicate what they meant by “communication.”
D - Being able to tell someone when things aren’t right, being able to say, ‘hey, this isn’t feeling good to me right now...what can we do about it?’ Being able to say whatever is in your head...for the most part you can be completely honest about everything, when things are and...are not going right. That is communication.

C - ...and we can communicate with each other and say, ‘I don’t like the way you are treating me. We need to talk about it,’ rather than walking around just being crabby and not talking...I am able to talk to [my partner] about my feelings, and if something bothers me, I can say it without feeling like she is going to get defensive or, you know, not hear me, and she can say things to me, and I feel like I can listen to her and ask questions if I don’t understand things, and really be interested in what it is that she is trying to say to me. And, I feel like I get that from her...there is something to the talking that [my partner] and I do that is more than I would with, you know, a good friend of mine, and I think that it needs to be that way. Like we need to be the best of friends and lovers and everything all in one.

F - Every night we always spend time to sit down and talk, ‘How was your day?’ That’s not something we committed to do, it’s just what happens. [We] stop and listen to each other.

H - ...being able to talk with each other and sharing thoughts or feelings and understanding each other...Being able to express our respective feelings or opinions even though it might be hard sometimes...being able to share those...in a safe way, to know I won’t be laughed at or whatever, be taken seriously, respected and valued.

N - ...a big key to what is really cool about what I find in our relationship is a challenge...just the conversation...all these things came into my mind that challenge me to keep thinking. It is like living. It is a very alive relationship...because [our conversation] is challenging.

O - For me, we communicate a lot, and we talk a lot about how we feel, and what we want...she’s somebody I’m willing to tell everything to and I want to hear everything. She has to tell me all the hard things as well as all the good things...

Aspects of communication that appear to be important include taking the time and effort to converse, listen, express feelings, share desires, and address uncomfortable situations.

Mentioned almost in conjunction with communication were the aspects of respect,
honesty and/or trust. These seem to go hand in hand and both ranked highly as being factors contributing to current levels of satisfaction and being most important contributors to ideal relational satisfaction.

K - ...to be able to be with somebody who is going to be honest with you. So, I think you are trusting them to tell you what is going on with them, and you can also trust them with your feelings.

P - Trust in myself and trust in [my partner]. Once I started to trust her, even in our worst points, she wouldn’t throw me any low blows. She knows what all my soft points are, what could really hurt, and [I] just trust that even at the worst moment she won’t throw those at me...Essentially, I’m trusting everything of who I am with somebody else, which is a really hard thing to do.

J - Trust is huge, going back to the last question (What contributes to your current level of satisfaction?), I don’t really trust her. I think trust is really important, it’s just huge...I’m paranoid she’s gonna find someone else when I’m not here. When she’s not here at a certain time when she says she’s going to be, she says, ‘You can trust me. I’m not going to go away.’...She’s gone home with someone before when I was gone. It’s just happened recently.

B - You have to have a mutual respect. It doesn’t mean you have to be alike or have the same value system. It does mean you have to have respect for the other person’s decisions or the choices they make.

G - I just really respect my partner. There’s such a total level of commitment and respect that whenever one of us does a chore around the house, we thank each other. Sometimes it goes to the ridiculous, we’ll thank each other for coming into the room! There’s such a level of appreciation and respect that I’ve never felt before in any other relationship and it’s really beautiful.

It is apparent that communication, honesty, respect, and trust are important factors which contribute to relational satisfaction for these individuals. It is easy to see how they go hand in hand as it is through communication that honesty, trust, respect and the second most highest contributor to current relational satisfaction, support, are expressed.

Support rated as the second most reported factor contributing to the current level
of satisfaction in these couples relationships. Those respondents indicating support as a factor typically suggested their partner offered emotional support. Following are some excerpts from respondents claiming support from their partner as being significant in contributing toward their current level of satisfaction in their relationship.

F - ...emotionally I rely on her...she contributes a lot to me and to our relationship...I talk to her about school, my relationships there, our relationships with our friends, I have some disability stuff I talk to her about...and she’s been really supportive...she takes care of me in that sense.

E - ...understanding on [my partner’s] part on things I do in my life...I just went through surgery and she’s definitely helped me.

B - I get a lot of support from [my partner], like emotional support.

P - ...there’s a lot of places where in that whole interaction where I was grumpy she could have just gone, ‘You are being a bitch today,’ or freaked out on me. Instead it’s just a little softer, knowing that I’m grumpy, knowing that maybe I just need a little more space this morning...

Being there emotionally, being sensitive to each other’s emotional needs in showing support is an important factor contributing toward relationship satisfaction for these individuals. What’s interesting here is that while support ranks second highest as contributing to current levels of satisfaction, only one person indicated it as one of the most important factors contributing to relational satisfaction not necessarily in their current relationship. Additionally, when asked later in what ways they depend on their partners, many respondents (10) indicated they depend on their partners for emotional support. While support seems to be an important factor contributing toward relational satisfaction, and many individuals seem to depend on each other for support, it does not seem to be considered as significant when looking at what is considered most important
for ideal satisfaction. This could be attributed to a combination of different factors, an expectation that one’s partner and women specifically are generally supportive and that support is sometimes sought out from within one’s community of friends.

A - ...I needed her support badly, and she wasn’t there for me, and I was just blown away. I just kept thinking, there were other times where I’d been very supportive of her and here I am having a hard time and she’s not being supportive. I now realize there are periods of time where she’s not going to be there for me and that’s okay. I have support from family and friends. Then she kind of settled down and came to a place where she could be there for me.

This individual clearly had an expectation that her partner would provide her with needed support, and when it became clear that her partner could not provide her with support whenever she needed it, she came to reshape her expectation and found support through other avenues. Seeking support from other than one’s partner seemed to be fairly common among respondents especially given that many respondents tended to not want to be heavily dependent on their partners.

Commitment to one’s personal growth, having a good self image and caring for self needs were next most commonly reported as contributing toward current levels of satisfaction and as being most important contributors ideally.

L - I think [my satisfaction] mostly stems from where I am at, whether I am peaceful with myself, and that affects my relationship with everybody, especially my relationship with [my partner]...working on my emotional self through therapy and all that. Recently I have just come to an understanding or a peacefulness with myself to just allow things to be and to be okay with it, to change what I can and do whatever I can, but not get all stressed out with the minutest things...

M - Well, I guess the more I learn about myself, the more I realize that it is myself that contributes to that [level of satisfaction]. If I am struggling with where I am at then my relationships with anybody become more toward the dissatisfied...it becomes pretty muddled when I start dealing with my own issues, and that is what brings the dissatisfaction because then I get the expectations of somebody else to
make me happy, somebody else to take care of me or somebody else to take responsibility for me...it really does have everything to do with me.

C - ...people dealing with their own stuff is really important, because if I bring a bunch of baggage into this relationship, I don’t think there is any way that [my partner] and I could have a healthy relationship...if I have issues around [something] I have a hard time being open or honest, or my idea of what the truth is is sometimes really muddy...So, I think I have to continue to work on who I am and what I like and don’t like, and bring that into a relationship, and that makes it really satisfying, because if I don’t like me, I don’t like her, I don’t like my job, or my house or anything. So, I have to like me first.

G - For me, the big contributing factor is self awareness and your ability to have worked through some of the major issues in your life. Definitely self esteem. I believe people who have worked through a lot of their issues and who actually like themselves have a better chance of making a relationship work because not only do they respect themselves, but they respect their partner. And, if they like themselves, they’re able to say what their needs are and put them out on the table and actually believe they have a right to those needs.

Having a strong sense of self is significant to these individuals. Knowing oneself, asserting that self and being continually aware of one’s personal growth opportunities seems to give these women a strong base from which to contribute more wholly to their relationship and feel more satisfied.

Additionally important to current levels of satisfaction and as being important towards ideal satisfaction are the presence of love, caring and kindness and feeling a special connection or “spark” towards their partner.

E - Affection, there’s a lot in our relationship... Sometimes the same kinds of things happen to us, same kinds of feelings, and we’re in the same kind of space and we realize that. And, It’s like wow, that was strange!

J - What makes me satisfied is the feeling of love and knowing somebody cares.

B - ...a real caring and coming from a real kindness... and a lot of love, and that’s a wonderful thing in my life...and in our relationship...I know what the spark feels like but I don’t always know what that is. My guess it’s some direct connection
with that person on one or many different planes. It just sort of fits.

A - ...having independent lives, getting support, for me those are great but if there’s not some spark there, then it’s not that satisfying...In some ways, [it’s] just the laughter. There’s something, that we just have a really good time together. In the context of stripping everything from our lives away and it’s just you and me and a tent, we laugh and we have fun...it’s the core...

P - I think I just sort of knew...I’d never felt that way before...we were right for each other...

O - ...feeling like she’s my main connection in this world...there’s always that dynamic that you have to be kind of in love...

F - [I’m] very satisfied in the sense that just the loving and the caring and the spiritual connection between us.

C - I communicate really openly with everybody in my life, but I don’t feel towards them the way I do about [my partner], so there is something else. Look at her, she is so funny and beautiful. I don’t know what it is, there is something else besides communication. There is something about you [to partner]. I don’t know what it is. Maybe it’s just a [partner’s name] thing. Maybe everybody should have the opportunity to be in a relationship with [my partner] once in their life!

Feeling a special connection with one’s partner and feeling love, caring and kindness all contribute towards a high level of satisfaction for these individuals and towards ideal satisfaction. There’s seems to be a sense of this connection that is difficult to describe with words, a common occurrence when trying to describe deep feelings.

Another factor commonly reported as contributing to current levels of satisfaction in their current relationship is acceptance of each other’s differences. Letting each other be and express who they are is important to these individuals.

N - There is the feeling of being able to be myself and having assurance that...to be honest and up front in my good and my bad moments, that I am okay, and that feels good.

O - Our personalities are very different. [My partner] is more outgoing and I’m
more introverted, and that carries over into how we communicate with one another. [My partner] is much more articulate with how she feels when we’re having conversations, and I tend to be more internalized, where it takes me longer to process things. So, what we’ve done with that, how we’ve learned to communicate with one another is...understanding, accepting that we’re just different people.

M - I like who [my partner] is and I like the idea that she works on her own stuff...I have watched her when she was with her family...she did those things that she did as a little girl...she was gone...I would talk to her and she was not even there, she was not present. And, it was like, ‘ok,’ and it was cool because I watched what was happening...but she knew too and when she came back, we talked about it.

C - I feel like [my partner] gives me a lot of room to be who I am which is just full of energy and really expressing myself in all these ways, and being loud and fast...Accepting those nuances and having one’s nuances accepted helps provide more satisfaction for these individuals. They seem to suggest that even if it’s a more unpleasant side that’s presented, it is part of who they are and being accepted as a whole person, the good and not so good is important.

As will be explained in the section on power, this notion of accepting each other’s differences weighs significantly in contributing towards a balance of power for some couples. Interesting to note, even though this ranked fairly high as contributing to these individuals current level of satisfaction, it was reported by only one individual as being one of the most important contributors to ideal relational satisfaction.

Worth mentioning also is the fact that 25% of the respondents reported support for each other’s growth as being a factor contributing to their current level of satisfaction. This was mentioned specifically and separately from emotional support which is why it is in its separate category.
B - I feel like [my partner] is willing to support me in many areas in my life. Probably the most important being personal growth and...she’s really been consistent there for me. So what it’s done for me is really give me a sense of grounding and stabilization and trust in the relationship.

This seems to go hand in hand with support and with commitment to personal growth which are covered above.

Clearly, some of these factors overlap, but we are provided with some sense of what factors contribute towards these individual’s levels of satisfaction in their current relationship, and what they consider to be most important in contributing to a high level of satisfaction. Determining such factors can help identify more accurate levels of satisfaction in current relationships.

Key findings:

- Communication ranks highest as contributing to current levels of satisfaction and as being the most important factor contributing to ideal satisfaction.

- Although support ranks second highest for contributing to current levels of satisfaction, it ranks lowest as being one of the most important contributors to ideal satisfaction.

- Acceptance of each other’s differences ranks among the third most reported responses for factors contributing to current levels of satisfaction, while it is among the lowest reported for contributing to ideal satisfaction.

- Having a good self image and commitment to personal growth, respect, honesty and trust, love and having a special connection all rank highly for current level and
ideal satisfaction.

Power

Views of Power

Respondents’ reactions to the mention of power in their relationships varied. Some respondents had never really thought about how power was played out in their relationship, some had neither a positive nor a negative reaction to questions pertaining to power and still, some did not even want to use the word power because they perceived power negatively. While more than half the couples had no particular reaction to questions around power, providing the views of those not having thought about it before and those who view power as negative may lend some insight toward power dynamics in lesbian relationships.

First, looking at some thoughts from those not recognizing the part power plays in their relationship, A comments at the completion of the interviews,

I didn’t even know there was power and influence in conflict in relationships until you came. I wasn’t aware of that whole idea. Maybe it’s been easy for us to balance. At times it seems we really balance it out and other times, I didn’t even know that I had so much power. But, we did talk about the power of my having a baby, but I didn’t ever really think about it in those terms. Being dependent on each other...I’ve been burning for this [last interview] to get over, so I can talk to [my partner] about this.

It appears that the notion of power dynamics in their relationship were not that apparent to A. It was not until she was asked particular interview questions regarding power dynamics that she began to explore how those dynamics played out and what affect they may have on their relationship.

Similarly, while G and H were discussing their power dynamics, and how they are
comfortable with one being the leader and the other being the follower, G was suddenly struck with the notion of a possible imbalance,

In a way, I’m seeing an imbalance of power here. In an ideal situation, we should both be bringing up the conflict to level out power balances. If one partner is feeling hesitant to bring up conflict it might become a power struggle. I see it that it takes power away from the person that’s afraid...to bring it up. When a person can bring up conflict, it makes them more powerful...It becomes really weird because [my partner] doesn’t talk and seems to withdraw, from my perspective, and then I’m going through all this stuff in my head. In some ways, by not talking, I feel like she’s holding power, and then all of the sudden I can’t take it anymore and I’ll bring it up...but there’s definitely an imbalance of power going on there. I can see some real leveling out there if we work at it.

Again, it was not until we were discussing this during the interview that G began to recognize this as a dynamic of power. She had not realized the power her partner held by not initiating discussion around conflict that was occurring between them. For both of these couples, they were, in a sense, unaware of some of the dynamics of power in their relationship, and by responding to the interview questions about power, they began to look at some of the dynamics in their relationship from a new angle. In fact, one respondent approached me nine months after the interviews to tell me how they were now confronting the notion of power balance in therapy, whereas before the interview, they had never thought about how power played out in their relationship.

Those individuals viewing power as negative, basically did not want to associate their relationship with the notion of power. Some of their comments can provide a more clear sense of their reactions. First, looking at dialogue between O and P,

O - I think instead of looking at it as a balance of power, it’s more like [my partner] has strengths and I have strengths. It’s not necessarily that it makes her more powerful or me more powerful. It’s actually good, something we value.
P - ...I keep looking at power as such a negative word, but if it’s chosen to be looked at in a positive manner, then the place where I am more powerful, [my partner] doesn’t [necessarily] get to feel weak...Strength does feel like a better word [than power]. It wouldn’t mean that just because I have a strength in that area that [my partner] would be more weak in that area. That’s something that we as a unit draw on, rather than just me or [my partner].

As will be explained in the section on power balance, this couple prefers to see power as strengths from which they draw upon from each other while no one is weak because of another’s strength. P goes on to describe her perception of power,

I keep seeing power as such a bad word, and I keep using it in a negative context...if we were to use the word, power, in a good way, the way that I would think that a balance of power is good is that when I have power, she doesn’t have weakness...It’s more like utilizing each other for the most that we can offer. If [my partner] has all this knowledge on what we could cook for dinner tonight, and I don’t, that’s not my weakness. All it is is she has more for the gain for both of us. We can make this great meal...a really good balance is that what she has isn’t necessarily what I don’t have, it’s also what I have, I just have to get it through her...yeh, there’s imbalances all over but they’re not looked at negatively.

P recognizes power as negative. So, when she and her partner have imbalances, such as one being more knowledgeable than the other, and they work with those imbalances for the gain of each other and the relationship then it is not viewed as power, or negative. However, when one of them uses her knowledge in a negative way, or when one is not comfortable with the particular imbalance, then the imbalance becomes one of using one’s power over the other. It would seem this is where having good self esteem and open communication are important in order to recognize and discuss these imbalances as they arise. Just because there is no power over does not mean there are no dynamics of power present. It appears that what is happening in this relationship is power with. But, because power traditionally is viewed as negative and as power over, this couple, who have a very
holistic power balance do not recognize it as such.

**Influence**

Respondents were asked who has more influence in decision making in the relationship. 63% of respondents indicate that neither one has more influence than the other, while 38% indicate that one individual has more influence. Of those couples indicating that one individual has more influence both agree as to whom that individual is.

The following table depicts respondents responses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who has more influence in decision making?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A, B, C, D, G, H, K, L, O, P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E, F, I, J, M, N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.12

**Dependency**

To investigate Emerson’s (1962) power dependent relations formula, respondents were asked in what ways they were dependent on their partner and their partner on them.

One other individual clearly did not like using the word power or dependency. L responds in the following manner when talking about power balance and dependence,

Because, in relationships, [power] is what marriage is all about, that is what my opinion is. Men and women get married, and women give up their power to the man. She gives up her name, she gives up her power, she gives up her body. And, I guess that is so repulsive to me...I think [power] could be positive if it is a personal growth thing, like you feel your own power. I think for me that is centered around self-esteem type of issues...a good sense of who you are and that you are having that foundation of strength and stuff, and your spirituality and all that is a sense of what personal power is. I am not talking about wielding power over someone in an abusive way. That is what I am referring to when I am down
on power...Dependency means to me, like with power, it means you are giving up, giving away your power to this [other] person. To me that is wrong...I think dependency is a very dysfunctional thing...first I need to depend or be with myself. And, I guess I have a feeling that I cannot really depend or shouldn’t depend on anybody else. That is not the way we should have a relationship...Dependency sounds like you are clinging on, but an expectation is a hope. It is like a wish, hope or [I] strongly desire this thing. [Having an expectation] is not like you are giving up something for this thing [you desire] in an unhealthy, dysfunctional way.

So, L clearly did not want to acknowledge that she was dependent on her partner in any way. Her perception of being dependent on her partner would mean that she were relinquishing her own personal power and giving that over to her partner which would result in her partner having power over her. Wanting to be less dependent on her partner or wanting her partner to be less dependent on her were common responses in regards to the questions revolving around what ways respondents were dependent on each other.

The following chart details respondents attitudes towards their dependencies on each other:

**Attitudes towards dependency on partner**

| Desires partner to be more dependent | I | G | O, E, B |
| Comfortable with partner's dependencies (Mixed feelings) | M | C, D, P |
| Desires partner to be less dependent | A, F, L | H, J, N |

Table 3.13 (One respondent declined to respond)
As can be ascertained from the table, 56% of the respondents desire less dependency either on their own part or on their partner’s. Clearly, most respondents are not comfortable depending on their partner or having their partner depend on them.

Overwhelmingly, most respondents indicated they depended on their partner for social companionship and emotional support. Eighty one percent (81%) say they depend on their partner for social companionship, and seventy five (75%) say they depend on their partner for emotional support. Other areas in which respondents depend on their partner include security of being in relationship (19%), particular household tasks (19%), financial support (13%), objectivity and spiritual connection (6% each).

Clearly, responses regarding power and dependence indicate some negative views of power. This is not uncommon given the traditional view of power over relations. Additionally, negative responses towards dependency are not surprising given the responses of many respondents about lesbian experience building self-esteem and independence to find their place in a world that provides limited support.

**Power Balance**

Different couples seemed to use different approaches to balance power. Couples accepting each other’s opposite differences as strengths and those incorporating a “give and take plus” appear to have a more holistic balance, where individual and relational aspects seem to be of equal significance to the couples. Interestingly, these couples, 50% of the sample also reported the same level of satisfaction across both the individual and couple interviews.
The remaining couples each had their own nuances that seemed to be most apparent in their particular dynamics to balance power. Among these couples, at least one person in each couple reported a different level of satisfaction across the individual and couple interviews. Factors that could contribute to this are providing more acceptable responses in the presence of a partner or that satisfaction did indeed change between the time of the individual and couple interviews.

Also, as is indicated by the continuum (at the end of this section), there seems to be more relational aspects imparted among those couples accepting opposite differences and those incorporating give and take plus. At the same time, the remaining couples seemed to have a stronger individualistic aspect. This will be more apparent upon reviewing the descriptions provided.

**Accepting opposite differences as strengths**

Three couples, (CD, GH, OP) seem to draw upon each other’s strength from an “opposites” dynamic that is at the core of their relations in balancing power. There’s an acceptance and respect for each other’s “strength,” and they do not view one’s own lacking in the other’s strength as a detriment but more as an asset from which they can draw on as a unit which lends this approach a relational aspect. While the “opposites” dynamic is different for each couple, they each seem to recognize this as central to the balance of power in their relationship. To illustrate this, a description of this balancing process for each couple follows.

The opposites dynamic that is present for CD is that of emotionality and
rationality. C describes how her partner’s rationality contributes to her own contribution in decision making.

I think that I’m really impulsive about things and I get ideas in my head and I want to do them. [My partner] is really good about letting me decide whether or not I want to do all these little things, but when it comes to really big stuff...she has the ultimate authority in the house because she’s the voice of reason...I get these ideas and I really think we have a lot more money than we really do. I say, ‘Let’s go do this. Oh, come on, it sounds like such a good idea,’ and I just tell her how much I love her and how it would be fun to get away and do this. She says, ‘Ok, we can do it,’ but if we really had no money, she would be the voice of reason and just be very practical about it. I would pout for a little while, and she would come in and see if I was ok...and just be very sweet to me, but [would say], ‘you know we can’t go.’

C recognizes her spontaneous judgments as not having a lot of thought put in them and accepts that as part of who she is. She recognizes the value in her partner’s ability to be more rational and how that helps balance her own approach. So, when her partner does present a more rational viewpoint, C eventually responds to this as a more reasonable viewpoint than her initial judgment. Once provoked by her partner's practicality, C reevaluates her judgment and gives the whole idea more thought and sees the reasoning behind what her partner promotes and goes along with it because she comes to see it as more reasonable than her initial judgment. Through this process, C comes "full circle" to her own decision in the end. She values her partner's say in the process and makes a final decision with which she is comfortable.

Her partner, D, expresses her respect for her partner’s emotionality,

I really look up to the fact that you can be so emotional, more emotional about things, but sometimes when you want to buy a $1000 bed, that is not so practical. But I think that is a neat balance in our relationship...and it is a really good balance because we love that part of each other. It is not a conflict with us...I depend on that emotional stuff because I have not been able to be emotional before and have
not been able to share all that inside stuff.

D values her partner’s ability to be emotional and share emotions because she’s found that to be difficult for herself. Rather than devaluing that in herself, she draws on her partner’s ability to strengthen what they have as a couple. By accepting these differences in each other, they find a comfortable balance.

For GH, the opposites dynamic that contributes to their balance of power is a combination of two dynamics, that of being present and being in the future or past, and that of being the leader and being the follower. H describes their decision making process as such,

I think we have similar influence in it all, but [my partner] tends to be the initiator...I don’t want to sell myself short that I’m not making my contribution too. She’ll tend to be the initiator and she’ll say, ‘hey, what do you think about this?’ I’ll either agree or maybe come up with some alternative to it. So, I think it’s pretty well balanced as far as the decision that gets made...

H appears to be content with her partner as leader and she as follower. Her contentment may be a result of having a good sense of self as her partner suggests,

I believe [my partner’s] ability to stay in the present is extremely powerful...I see her as a powerful woman in that respect because I’m always flitting back into the past or the future and my power gets robbed from me. I just have this picture of her standing there like a solid tree being in the present with whatever we’re doing and I’m all over the place...we don’t fight over that, and I definitely get the feeling she will not do anything she doesn’t want to do.

The opposites dynamic that is prevalent in balancing power for OP is that of one being more vocal and verbal and the other being more silent and nonverbal. Early in their relationship, this dynamic seemed to work against them because of their perceptions that being able to articulate one’s thoughts quickly was more powerful, and internalizing one’s
thoughts was a lack of power. Through counseling, this couple came to more understanding of each other’s approach and through that understanding came an acceptance of their different approaches. P describes,

For a long time I associated that communication was the only way - that I was good and she was bad because she didn’t talk. Internalizing things were bad, that was just how I was raised. You don’t internalize things, you talk. It was hard to have to unlearn that and realize it’s not bad, it’s different from how I do it and that there’s movement that needs to be done on both our parts...

Her partner O describes this process in a manner fitting with this dynamic. Succinctly she states, “I think it’s understanding, accepting that we’re just different people.” It appears there is a fair amount of discussion that occurs to maintain a balance, but both separately indicate that there’s an awareness that underlies this discussion that keeps that balance in check.

It is apparent that these individuals find a sense of strength in each other’s differences from which to draw upon as a unit. By not viewing their own “lacking” in a particular aspect of this opposites dynamic as a weakness and seeing the strength derived from acceptance of both their own and their partner’s contribution to this dynamic they find a balance of power with which they are comfortable. It is this acceptance that lends both an individual and relational aspect to this power balance, and provides what appears to be a more holistic balance.

**Give and take plus**

Another form of balancing power was described by respondents as “give and take.” Two couples (AB, CD) describe this as part of their process of balancing power.
However, along with the give and take, for both couples, two other factors seem to be key for maintaining a balance they are comfortable with, 1) having a good sense of one’s own needs and 2) the importance of the relationship.

For B, she describes it as such, “I would like to say it’s [balance of power] a give and take out of acknowledgment of the other person in trying to come up with a balance.” It appears this balance comes as a result of clearly identifying her own needs and weighing that with her partner’s and the relationship as a whole. In their decision to have a baby, B admits “it has to feel right for me in order to be able to do it.” It seems she comes to an understanding of her partner’s wants and her own, which as she mentioned, in this situation, has extended beyond a year. Even though the final decision is not her first choice, she tends to understand the significance to her partner and that there is not really a middle ground in this situation, her partner wants to bear the child.

What would fit more for me is to adopt a child, but [my partner] is really interested in having a child and that’s really important to her, so it’s her deal and I’ve agreed to support that...I realized if something happened to [my partner] I would have all the grief not only for the loss of my relationship to her, but also the loss of the potential opportunity to have a family.

Given the lengthy process to come to a final decision around having the baby, B isn’t relinquishing her power to A. She makes it clear that she couldn't participate in [the decision to have the baby] unless I was feeling ok with myself; and it's taken a long time to get there...we went to counseling...[had] some give and take in terms of the concept of the relationship...there's not a middle ground here...although that wouldn't be my first choice, I'm willing to support [my partner].

So, having a clear sense of her own desires and remaining in relationship with [her partner] is very important for B.
Similarly for A, being in relationship with B is important enough for A to have given up some things in order to balance power,

I end up making a lot of compromises about just doing things because I'm just so happy to be with her... We're both willing to be in this relationship that we're willing to change things and do things because we want [the relationship] to be in our lives.

Again in the decision to have a baby this is illustrated by A,

[My partner] makes some big decisions based on what I want... or just wanting to make me happy, not in spite of not making her happy, because she just can't do that. That's pretty clear... even with this baby, if she couldn't do it, she really wouldn't do it.

There seems to be a conscious effort to balance individual needs and desires with being in relationship with the other. As a result, they both have a sense of giving some here and taking some there which seems to be a comfortable balance of power for the two of them.

C & D speak similarly of how give and take, along with having a good sense of one's own needs and the importance of the relationship, occurs in the process of balancing power in their relationship. C describes the give and take she senses,

There is a feeling I have, where I feel like [my partner] gives me a lot of room to be who I am, which is just full of energy and really expressing myself in all these ways, and being loud and fast. So, I get to be that person that I am without ever thinking twice about it... and she just gives me permission to do that, and then I have to give her permission when she is certain about something that differs with my opinions or how I feel... I think I am so grateful for the way I feel around [my partner] and for the person I get to be, that on those few occasions, when she says, 'no you don't get to be that way, now it's my turn,' I gladly give that to her.

D offers her perspective of the balance of power they have,

I think that is how we can get that balance, by talking about it... give and take... Sometimes I give in when I might not necessarily think it is OK right now to go see her sister because we don't have the money, and she really wants to go and I will say, 'Well, OK' and just let things go. It is kind of give and take...
Similarly, as mentioned with AB, there's the factor of wanting to be in relationship with the other. C imparts this aspect as such,

I love [my partner] and I love being with her, and I think that having her in my life is such a huge benefit that there is stuff that I am willing to not fight about. It is not that important.

For D,

I find out how much she really wants to do something, what it really means to her to do it, and realizing that I won't stop her from doing something, we definitely talk things out.

Even when there may be no particular benefits to one when there are for the other, being in relationship with the other, in itself, may be the benefit of letting the other have what she wants. C points this out,

with respect to me going to school, there is no obvious benefit for [my partner], but [to partner] you know I want to do it so you really help me find a way that I can do that. And, you want to move and I really would have been perfectly content staying here for the rest of my life, but I know you want to do that so I really try to find a way I can go with you...

It’s apparent that both individuals acknowledge the importance of the relationship in each of their efforts and willingness to give.

Similarly as with AB, having a good sense of self and knowing what one wants for herself becomes part of the equation in looking at power in this relationship. C illustrates this while discussing power balance,

I think that it is really important too, knowing what I want and then bringing that into the relationship, rather than trying to figure out what [my partner] wants me to be...our relationship is so much richer now because we are both so much who we are and if we alter that at all I think we would be missing out.

Likewise, D suggests,
knowing what you need is way important in a relationship, for both people to know what is going on with [their needs], so they can bring that in and talk about it.

It doesn't appear there is any manipulation in this process, and it seems that for the most part, both couples like how this balance works in their relationship. Wanting to be in relationship to the other, having a good sense of self and bringing that into the relationship in a form of give and take is a key aspect in both couple’s, AB and CD, balance of power.

Utilitarian egalitarian

For the most part KL sees their balance of power as the two of them contributing equally. This comes about through their “willingness to be assertive and also to negotiate.” More than other couples, this couple seemed to express a more “utilitarian” form of balancing power and they were the only couple to describe differing views of their balance of power - one seeing it as more egalitarian than the other, even though both work to attain an egalitarian balance.

In describing their decision making, K says,

We try to be really conscious about decision making because we don’t want one of us to be kind of in charge, because when that does happen, the other person feels somewhat resentful, or the person who is making the decision feels resentful like they are doing too much.

Similarly, L also sees them both having equal influence in making decisions,

I think we both do [have influence] pretty much equally...It is something that we both have to agree on...I think we are both committed to that whole process, to try and each have a say about whatever it is that we’re negotiating about...what to do or not to do.

I describe this as a more “utilitarian” approach because, while this has similarities
with how other couples described their decision making processes, K & L do not make any mention that there may be some give for the sake of the relationship. Likewise, it is not just “give and take” or “exchange” as L describes, “It is not something like, ‘Oh you get to make the decision now, [and I later.]’” K reinforces the equal contribution, “I think sometimes we just find a different solution that is more like a consensus than a compromise.” It appears that what’s most important is that each contributes equally, and what that is ends up being negotiated in each situation. K points out that “really we just talk minute shit to death sometimes... getting down to what really is the thing here.” Even though there is a hint of exasperation in her tone, their negotiation seems to be key in working toward an equal balance of power.

However, as I mentioned, this couple seems to have differing views of their balance of power. K sees their influence in decision making as “pretty much 50:50...it is something that we really work on to be that way.” K suggests this is what makes their relationship egalitarian. However, even though L sees both as contributing “pretty much equally,” she seems to suggest there is more compromise than what K suggests. In her discussion of power she often mentioned that if they couldn’t come to agreement they would compromise, “it seems like mostly, we come to a meeting, a middle place...but sometimes there are things we cannot compromise.” While the differing views are somewhat subtle they do exist. This is more pronounced when L describes that they “try really hard to have an egalitarian kind of relationship” yet her ideal of a balance of power “is a more egalitarian relationship...sharing most everything about our lives.” L is speaking of more equal sharing from both individuals so that “petty feelings” don’t
“hinder” that delicate balance of power and it appears she’s wanting a more relational aspect highlighted.

Each individual offers her own way of contributing toward maintaining a balance of power. K admits that

as far as relational things, [my partner] is more aware, more sensitive to what is going on, if things are changing or they are not satisfying...I try to be more aware of relationship things because I know that is a weakness for me...I don’t want L to have to do all the work.

By trying to be more aware of relational matters, K works to increase her contribution in an area she sees herself as not contributing equally. This differs from other couples, in particular those having the opposites dynamic, who spoke of differences as strengths and not as a weakness.

L speaks of learning from earlier relational dynamics, where she felt an imbalance of power because

I did not know I had any power, and it was easy for anybody to have power over me...and K’s personality was very strong and way more assertive than mine was at the time...[Now] I make sure that I am representing myself in this relationship. I make sure that there isn’t going to be that element there, like in the past, that it is not taking over what I want, what I need and what I feel.

Additionally, L emphasizes her personal growth overall as contributing significantly toward an egalitarian power balance and that when both are at this “peaceful place...with [their] own personal power, we accentuate each other...in how we relate to each other.”

There is much going on for this couple as they work to balance power in their relationship. More so than for the other couples I’ve mentioned, this couple’s descriptions of power balance are not as consistent with one another although both seem to be satisfied
for the most part with what they do to balance power. I’ve described their egalitarian approach as somewhat “utilitarian” because their egalitarian approach lacks a relational depth. In other words, the individual’s need for equal contribution is first and foremost and I’d suggest more important than relational needs.

Lessening dependence on each other

MN is the only couple that explicitly suggest that in an attempt to balance power in their relationship, they try to lessen their dependence upon one another. One way they do this is to live separately. When asked how they balance power, N responds,

I go home to get back to where the only one in charge is [my cat]...If we didn’t have our separate homes, we would really struggle...For me there is an element of avoiding that power struggle by going home.

There is discussion by both about how one power struggle in particular is manifested through N’s attempt to be the controller. She says, “I’m learning more about my control issues...and [my partner] helps me to see those [control issues].” M describes how this process has evolved,

...before we were able to communicate about a lot of that stuff, I could not bring anything up...and [now] I can bring some of those things up to you and you are able to not take it so personally...you are a whole lot more open.

So, in recognizing power struggles that do exist, M agrees with her partner in that “our power struggles aren’t near as great because we live in separate homes so we have our own power, our own space.”

Additionally, M speaks of how she counters her partner’s attempts to control. She explains how her partner will plan an activity and include M by saying “we” as she’s
talking about it. Then M will sometimes not say “no” even though she doesn’t want to be included,

I don’t have to make a commitment if somebody else just sets it up and just drags me along...and I am not in any way responsible...I set her up to do that and then I don’t have to take any responsibility for anything...and then I rebel...I won’t be predictable and you [partner] won’t put me in a mold.

So, in an effort to balance her partner’s attempts to control, M plays along with her partner’s plans and then surprises her by doing something different than what her partner had planned. Even though living in separate homes doesn’t eliminate these control battles, they see it as lessening the power struggles they could have.

N also speaks of lessening her dependence on her partner when she recognizes she’s more dependent on her partner than she’d like.

Where I really think that I need to have her fill a void, sometimes I will find somebody else. Sometimes I will go to the effort of writing in my journal, doing my own work and trying to do something healthy that will get me back in touch with myself...

In their attempts to balance power, this couple tries to lessen their dependence on each other by living in separate homes and finding other ways to fulfill particular needs. Within this attempt to balance power is another tactic that plays itself out as a way of balancing each other’s attempts to control or be controlled.

Acceptable imbalance

It appears for the most part that power in this relationship (EF) is more imbalanced than balanced. F admittedly has more influence in decision making and E is more “easy going” and in general, tends to go along with her partner’s ideas. F’s struggle with roles
and equal balance seem to get in the way of balancing power in this relationship.

F admits to having more influence in most all decisions in the relationship, in particular in regards to where to live, how to live and recreation. She says,

I tend to be overbearing, probably don’t validate her input as much as I should. I probably devalue her input from time to time, like in buying a house...I tend to have more weight in the decision making.

Her partner tends to corroborate this with,

I think [my partner] has some strong likes and dislikes too. I’m pretty easy going...I like variety and change so I’m pretty open to what we decide to do. It’s not like she makes the decisions [all the time]. It’s not something worth getting all upset over.

To balance power, rather than just deferring to her partner’s expertise, E will do some research on her own and then make her contribution to the decision based on what she’s learned. She explains,

She [partner] knows a lot about building, construction, cars...I usually defer that to her. Sometimes I want to find out for myself...I don’t always defer to her experience and I call around and compare...I used to see it as undermining, but I think it’s a good thing...I do it before I just agree with her.

For her part, F tries to be inclusive but admits it doesn’t always work,

I’m trying to be more aware of when I’m pushing my stuff on her...and ask more questions, what she thinks, what she knows...and try to be more validating. I’m not always good at it...she’s patient.

F relies on her partner’s easy going demeanor to get them through her more overbearing nature.

For this couple it seems the “opposites” dynamic does not balance as evenly as it appears to in other couples. F’s “overbearing” nature and her struggle with what comprises an equal contribution seem key to this seemingly imbalance of power. She has
difficulty envisioning what a balance would even look like because as a whole, her relationship is not validated legally and she is not aware of any role models for more egalitarian relationships.

My income is considerably less than hers. I don’t like that. We should all be pulling our own share. Role modeling and how we learn to be who we are in our relationship, it’s very difficult. Traditional heterosexual couples can get married and are instantly afforded all these rights...So, when we determine our roles in our relationship, like who should be providing how much, and should we pool our resources...It’s difficult to make those decisions...We try to be as egalitarian as possible about it, but still in the back of my mind there’s this thing, ‘No, there’s no validation here for you to act as a couple, as a mutual pair.’...there’s no clear definition. What’s hers is hers, and what’s mine is mine and we’re not a couple (ours). That kinda gets to me...it’s frustrating...I have to contribute equally...It’s okay if she doesn’t, but I have to.

It is apparent that F does not have a clear picture of what an egalitarian relationship or equal power balance would look like and that is a problem for her. In trying to validate F’s financial contributions E says

[My partner] does a lot of work around here and saves us a lot of money...but doesn’t give herself due credit...It’s another issue, that [my partner] devalues her contribution to the household.

It is as if F has this sense that equal contributions are matching contributions, especially as far as finances are concerned. This line of thinking seems to be more linear and perhaps more limiting than the “give and take plus” and “accepting differences as strengths” that couples with a more even balance of power have. Even though she wants and strives for an equal balance of power, not having a clear vision of egalitarian roles and contributions seems to limit F’s efforts towards balancing power equally.

Retaliation
There seems to be an apparent imbalance of power in this relationship (IJ) in some aspects because both agree that J has more influence in decision making. However, it seems that in response to respondent I not feeling she has any power in the relationship, she uses retaliation as a way of trying to obtain power. Even though J’s satisfaction level remained the same between interviews, her level of trust in her partner seemed to deteriorate as a result of her partner’s retaliatory actions.

When asked what they do to balance power in their relationship, they both agreed they don’t. Respondent I sees herself as having no power in this relationship in that she always gives in to her partner. She doesn’t like how this feels but doesn’t want to “fight it” even though she thinks her partner would want her to communicate how she feels. J admits she has more influence in decision making and would rather her partner contribute more in decision making.

There is also the element of distance in this relationship, where J is not at home during the week and comes home only on some weekends, which seems to irritate I. While respondent I did not voice her opinion as much as J during the couple interview, the issue of distance was one item she made clear. For different questions she would make some response about their distance,

Being apart, we both basically have different lives in different towns...We’re not together that often to make joint decisions...I think she [partner] should depend on me more...she probably would if we were together more.

J speaks of I’s acts of retaliation to balance power,

I think [my partner] tries to balance [power] in the bedroom, by when I want to make love, she’ll say no.
J senses this is in response to her getting her way when it comes to making love,

If I want to have sex then we do, if she says she wants to and I don’t, then we don’t.

Additionally, respondent I seems to have retaliated over the issue of J not coming home one weekend by going out with another woman. Apparently, between the couple interview and the individual interviews, respondent I went out with another woman when J was not home for the weekend. Though J doesn’t mention it as retaliation, and her partner never mentioned it at all in her individual interview, it does appear that I is attempting to gain back some power because J usually has the say as to whether or not she is coming home for the weekend no matter what I’s input is. J says,

I think [my partner] gets frustrated by my power, not just the sex thing, but over other things, like if I’m not gonna come home [for the weekend], I have the say.

Clearly that there is retaliation present indicates an unequal distribution of power. Factors seeming to contribute to this imbalance are 1) physical separation for the week and some weekends, 2) J having more influence in decision making, and 3) a lack of communicating self needs. Indeed, as interviewer, I did get the sense this couple did not have the skills and/or confidence to communicate their needs to the other. This is demonstrated by respondent I as follows,

I’d like us to be able to communicate more. I think if we’d communicate more, it would be a lot easier on us...I can communicate to anybody else, I’m just scared of what she’ll think, I guess...or don’t want to rock the boat, don’t want to make her mad. If I say something, she gets her feelings hurt easily and it’s easier to just not say something than say something and hurt her feelings...I don’t think either one of us are honest with each other...about how we truly feel...My communication levels aren’t real high though, I don’t like it [talking about things when things come up].

Speaking of communicating about different issues that arise between the two, J says,
I usually just tell her... well, not always. If I don’t tell her she can tell I’m holding back... my silence. If we do something I don’t want, I’ll just be quiet all the time and she’ll get mad at me... We try to talk about it, but a lot of times we don’t... we don’t really talk about it, but it’s something that is there under the surface.

Retaliation is the result of a perceived imbalance of power and tends to keep this couple from obtaining a balance with which they are both comfortable. That they don’t communicate about what each is experiencing also contributes to remaining in this destructive spiral. It appears that using an approach of retaliation to balance power negates both positive relational and individual aspects.

The following table indicates the approaches to balance power used by each couple, and are ranked as such from a more holistic balance to a more individualistic balance.
### Power Balance Continuum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accepting opposite differences as strengths &amp; give and take plus</th>
<th>Accepting opposite differences as strengths</th>
<th>Give &amp; take plus</th>
<th>Utilitarian egalitarian</th>
<th>Lessening dependence on each other</th>
<th>Acceptable Imbalance</th>
<th>Retaliation</th>
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Table 3.14
Satisfaction and Power Balance

Additionally, note that among those couples using a more individualistic approach to balance power, at least one individual changed her response regarding current level of satisfaction.

Power Balance and Influence

Note that those respondents indicating that neither individual has more influence are situated from the center of the continuum to the more holistic approach of balancing power. Likewise, those respondents who each saw one particular individual having more influence are situated on the more individualistic end of the continuum. While influence is only one way to attempt to measure power, this relation between influence and approach to balancing power seems to corroborate how the couples view power dynamics in their relationship. It appears that with a more equal influence comes a more holistic power balance with varying levels of a holistic approach.

Key Findings:

- Power balance approaches range from a more holistic, relational approach to a more individualistic approach.
- Some respondents have a very negative view of power.
- Many respondents indicate they are dependent upon their partner for emotional support which corresponds with the finding of support being a factor contributing to current level of satisfaction.
Many respondents prefer to have less dependency on their partner and/or their partner to be less dependent upon them.

Conflict

Feelings Towards Conflict

To get an overall sense of respondents’ reactions to conflict the following table indicates their responses to the question, “How do you feel about conflict?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How respondents feel about conflict</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A I hate it. It makes me terribly uncomfortable.</td>
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<td>B I don’t like it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C With each other? I don’t like it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>D I don’t like it. Who likes to fight?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E (unclear recording)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F I don’t like it. I don’t want any part of it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G It’s certainly not fun, but it’s part of life. It’s hard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H Overall, I’d rather not have it, but intellectually, I know that certain conflict is good and healthy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I I don’t like it but, it’s always there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J I don’t like conflict.</td>
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<tr>
<td>K I feel okay about conflict</td>
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<tr>
<td>L I feel fine engaging in conflicts with [my partner].</td>
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<tr>
<td>M I don’t like conflict.</td>
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<tr>
<td>N It doesn’t feel good.</td>
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<tr>
<td>O I don’t like conflict. Conflict makes me really anxious.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P I don’t like it. It just stresses me out.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.15

Not surprisingly, twelve respondents (75%) clearly do not like conflict. As will be revealed in the following descriptions, some respondents admittedly avoid conflict, but
others recognize it can be healthy in relationships even though it is hard for them.

Identifying predominant conflict styles in family of origin, and how the respondents responded to that, can further reveal the respondents' perspectives of conflict.

Family Conflict Styles

Generally, three categories comprise the main conflict styles present in the respondents' families of origin. These include avoidance, competition or a combination of both.

<table>
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<th>Family of Origin Main Conflict Style</th>
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<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
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Table 3.16

Respondents indicating avoidance for the main conflict style apparent in their family of origin suggest that conflict was just not dealt with openly. Additionally, some respondents infer that gender roles also contribute to this avoidance. C and D discuss their experience with family conflict,

D - For us, I think the way we grew up, at least the way I grew up, conflict, you don’t really want to go there.

C - It is so American. Girls are supposed to be nice and sweet and compliant. Speak when spoken to.

D - And not have that conflict...

Others speak of their experience with family conflict,

A - My family never had conflict. Basically, you don’t talk about conflict, you just kind of squash it...I don’t ever remember my parents having an argument in front of us ever. If my mother was angry about something, it was like this seething,
underriding, maybe this is how I can pick up on this in my partner, because it just kind of comes out of her ears. It’s not very above board in my family. It’s taboo to have it [conflict] open.

L - ...like in the family, you avoid the situation at all costs. It doesn’t matter, just avoid it. Shut up and deal with it, whatever, pretend it is not there.

N - ...we could not show any anger...so, the way that I coped was to soften everything, try to soften it all. Mom yelling isn’t really yelling. [My sister’s] reaction to that isn’t really [my sister] doing that. Everything is fine and dandy...It is very clear to me how I look at it [conflict]. It is the same as my family did, which is kind of defensive and avoiding anger.

Not expressing anger, having to pretend there is no conflict, being compliant and just outright avoiding confrontation were the typical conflict styles modeled for these respondents.

The second category of main conflict style in families of origin as described by respondents was that of competition. Typically this confrontation consisted of yelling, though for some it included direct communication or physical abuse.

H - I think because dad was an alcoholic, and growing up in an alcoholic family, I didn’t want to see conflict. There was conflict between my parents. They weren’t really in love as we were growing up...

J - [There was] a lot of yelling between my brothers and sisters...and my sisters and mom had yelling matches...usually I was in my room, out of the picture. I’m sure that has an influence on why I don’t like it.

One respondent indicates how ethnicity contributes to a competitive style that was common in her family,

K - My family was always kind of confrontational. You had to really speak up to be heard...I think it is [my] ethnic background [Portuguese and Ukrainian]. People in my family, their emotions are pretty much right on the surface. They express a lot of emotion. They are either really happy and you know it because they are
laughing smiling and cracking jokes with you, or they can be angry. And, you will
know it too because they are frowning and yelling, waving their hands around...

Interestingly, this respondent (K) is one of the respondents that indicated she felt “okay”
about conflict. She says, “It feels natural for me to engage in conflicts.” Her family’s
competitive style seems acceptable to her, just as for one other respondent (P) whose
family competitive style was typified with verbal acuity. She spoke of how she learned
this from her mother and provides a description of how this occurs between she and her father,

...he has chosen not to talk to me about [my wanting to have a child] for various
reasons because it’s been hard for him. So, to me, I was saying that hurts when
you don’t talk to me about it. He took it on a whole different level and said,
“Maybe if you did some of the things that I said, I’d know that you respect me,”
which is a whole different fight thing. There’s history to that...that was a whole
separate argument that comes up frequently but has nothing to do with this. It’s
more like, “Let’s just stay on track...” sometimes it comes out harsher like, “That’s
not even WHAT I’m talking about and maybe you’re not listening to me.”

The verbal acuity is expressed when she recognizes her father bringing in other issues and
it is used not only to try to keep them on track but more so as an attack on the other. For
the most part, this respondent and the one who describes how her ethnicity contributes to
a competitive style seem comfortable with competitive style, whereas the others didn’t
seem to be as comfortable with competition in their families.

The third general category of family conflict styles is that of a combination of
avoidance and competition. Two respondents describe their experience,

M - I was raised a good little Catholic girl in a Catholic school, that explains my
attitude toward conflict. I just get guilty...Avoiding [happened in my family],
constant emotional abuse from my father and my mother with us kids. My parents
fought constantly...My dad emotionally abused my mother something fierce, and
my mother physically beat all of us day after day.

B - In my family, my father ruled the house [shouting], so there was a lot of stifling of comments or attitudes on my mom’s part because she wouldn’t want to be in conflict with my father. My father drank a fair amount, so his was certainly not an open communication style...I didn’t learn good relational skills from watching my family, and didn’t develop those as a young person.

Feeling guilty around conflict, or believing that feelings must be stifled, abuse and shouting contribute to a combination of avoidance and competition in family conflict for these families. The competitive style is expressed through abusive behavior and shouting, and one response to the competitive style in their families appears to have been avoidance, where one respondent feels guilty and the other’s mother models avoidance by keeping quiet in the face of shouting. Whether the main style of conflict for families of origin was avoidance, confrontation or a combination of the two, respondents have varying opinions as to whether this has a direct connection to how they view and deal with conflict in their current relationship.

Evolving styles

It appears for the most part that family of origin conflict styles do carry over into views and styles of conflict in current relationships, although some respondents speak to how they have changed or tried to change their conflict management styles within their current relationships. Those that have expanded their views of conflict or altered their approach admittedly suggest that those styles they learned in their family of origin still play a part in conflict in their relationship.

H - I’m getting to the point where I don’t welcome it, but it’s not that scary to
me...I recognize [conflict] can be a good thing and part of a good learning process. But, it’s my entire upbringing, I wanted things to be smooth and quiet, and just go along, and that’s what I’m bringing into this relationship. I’m learning [conflict] is okay. Things don’t have to be hunky dory, and if it is then things probably aren’t going very well.

G - I feel like I’ve reached a certain amount of growth in my life that I can handle a fair amount of conflict. I feel that I have the communication skills and the maturity to handle conflict. I don’t greet conflict with open arms, but I realize that’s an important way to grow. I grew up where we avoided conflict in my family, and there was a lot of repressed anger and resentment. It makes me want to avoid conflict, but I’ve grown to a point that I can manage it now, so there’s a part of me that’s fearless. There’s a part of me that if I confront the conflict, there’s the potential for inward growth, so I go after it. It’s kind of an exciting combination.

D - Conflict is not necessarily a bad thing, but that is how I have been brought up to look at it, and it is not necessarily bad. Conflict is good...but it is hard for me to realize that conflict is good. That is not a sentence that is in my vocabulary, but it is [good], it really is.

It is apparent that although they learned to avoid conflict in their families, these respondents admittedly still do avoid some, but they also see that conflict can provide opportunities for growth in their relationships.

Previously mentioned was the respondent who indicated her ethnicity contributed to her having a more confrontational conflict style. She and her partner describe how their conflict style has evolved as a result,

K - I was raised in a real kind of argumentative household and that is how people resolve their differences, by engaging in verbal conflicts. So, generally, I am pretty comfortable in conflicts, but there is a difference as far as conflicts go in our relationship. [My partner] was raised in a household that was completely opposite from mine that way.

L - this has come up a lot because we do conflict so differently, and especially in the beginning of our relationship, I would just shut down and not engage in any conflict with K because it was too scary...a raised voice was like worse than a lashing. It meant, ‘Oh my god! This is serious. This is horrible. This is so unbearable,’ that I couldn’t stand it, so I would just go underground, not confront
or be assertive... But, through the years, I have felt more comfortable engaging in conflicts... because I have changed. I have become more assertive... We did a lot of processing and talking about our differences... it was very hard. But we have worked on that one and it is still sometimes a problem because I ask her to come down and meet me at my level, and she has asked me to come up and meet her at her level, as far as being really loud and me being really quiet. Maybe we can meet each other somewhere in this middle place and trying to understand where we are coming from.

K - Yeah, I don’t think it is all gone. I have a tendency, like L said, to raise my voice, to start getting emotional about something, but I think I have really toned it down a lot... it is better off to kind of watch myself a little bit to see what is going on, but it is also good because I think L is more tolerant in some ways, so I don’t feel like I have had to completely ditch a part of my personality.

Both K and L have found that they needed to change the conflict styles they learned from their families in order to manage conflict in their relationship. For all of these respondents, they began to expand their view of conflict from what they learned in their families, and in doing so, saw how conflict can be healthy in their relationships.

Mirroring family styles

While some respondents spoke of how they consciously work to view and manage conflict differently than the predominant style used in their family of origin, other respondents indicated how they use the same styles predominantly in their current relationship, with some being more aware of this than others.

M described earlier how her family avoided and her parents were emotionally and physically abusive. She goes on to say,

[My siblings] would say, ‘Just cry and she will quit.’ I wouldn’t cry. I held my breath and passed out. She was not going to get the best of me, so she just kept going. So for me, that is how I do that now, I basically just hold my breath and pass out. It is like I am not going to deal with this... I don’t deal with conflict. It
scares me to death, and I am afraid to death of anger or any of that.

She speaks of wanting nothing to do with conflict and also of not letting the other, in her family it was her mother, get the best of her. Interestingly, it seems that not wanting to let the other get the best of her may contribute to bringing conflict into her relationship with her partner. In the discussion of power balance, it was mentioned how M counters her partner’s attempts to control. In a sense, she is not letting her partner get the best of her, just as she wouldn’t let her mother. M says to her partner, “I won’t be predictable and you won’t put me in a mold.” M follows the tactics she learned in her family, she avoids addressing the issue directly with her partner, and she doesn’t let her partner “put her in a mold” by surprising her with last minute changes of plans.

Interestingly, M’s partner also admits to using her family’s conflict style of avoidance. Reflecting on her actions when conflict arose in her family, she says,

I think for myself, I probably squelched a lot of anger trying to look for an easy side. So how I do that now, I probably retreat more than [not]. I probably try to soften stuff up still...Whether I get angry now, or what I do with the anger, [I’m not sure]. I am sure it is there...

And, in talking about conflict between she and her partner, in particular, an area where conflict arises repetitively, N says,

...I don’t know if I get angry with her, but I think I kind of withdraw, and then our communication kind of goes out the window. We are not connected anymore and the relationship is not in a healthy state.

She describes her withdrawal as going into “some other space” in which she may or may not be able to come back from, depending on the situation, to talk with her partner.

For the most part, conflict styles learned in family of origin are still present in many
respondents current conflict styles, for some, more so than others. What is clear among
these respondents descriptions is that conflict in their family of origin does have some
affect on how they do conflict in their current relationship. For some, there is a conscious
effort to change their view and response to conflict and for others, similar styles and
tactics employed in their families are used.

Metaphor

Following McCorkle and Mills (1992) notion of viewing conflict through
metaphors to represent how one might manage conflict, respondents were asked to
describe conflict metaphorically. Using Wilmot and Hocker’s (1998) categories of
metaphors, the respondents metaphors are categorized into

1) metaphors that limit the way conflict is viewed

2) metaphors that are neutral, that is, conflict can be negative or positive
depending on the skills used in each conflict situation, and

3) metaphors that expand conflict potential.

The respondents metaphors are:
**Metaphors that Limit Conflict**

- Volcano
- Storm
- Scared Rabbit
- Crouched down, waiting for it to pass
- Underground seismic activity
- Drowning
- Having a craving & not having all the ingredients to the recipe to satisfy the craving.

**Neutral Metaphors**

- Paddling upstream
- A wave
- Getting gum on you
- Class V river trip

**Metaphors that Expand Conflict Potential**

- Running up against a wall/cliff & going over, retreat or smell the roses
- Tug of war - put down the rope
- Flamenco dance
- Clawing up a steep ridge - stretches limits
- Wall of ice that melts

Table 3.17 (Note: some respondents provided more than one metaphor across interviews.)

Note in the following descriptions how the metaphors used depict the individual as powerless, or wanting to avoid the situation in the face of conflict, thus limiting their view of conflict.

A - The way I react to it, it makes me feel like some sort of natural disaster, like a volcano.

F - ...clashing, stormy, turbulent, in it’s extreme form...it’s uneasy...not easy air, it’s kind of building.

I - I’m just scared of conflict, crouched down and waiting for it to pass.
J - Scared rabbits...we’re always having to tiptoe around each other...and a lot of times, I’m just the rabbit in the headlights where I freeze and go the other way...

M - For me, conflict is like underground seismic activity...eventually there is an earthquake...

O - For a long time I felt like, in my life, I was drowning. So, I was at the bottom of a lake, so it was a lot easier to stay on the bottom than to go to the top where there was conflict...I don’t know if I still view it like that. I see conflict as not being so terrible anymore, but I think it still has that weight to it...I think now I have a little oxygen tank so I’m not drowning, [but still down underneath].

P - It’s like a [pregnant] woman, who would be having this intense craving for some food, and there’s a little bit of a process to go through and make it, and then not having all of the [ingredients] of the recipe to make it.

While the metaphors are very creative, note how the respondents limit their view of conflict by using metaphors which render them powerless.

The second category of metaphors, those that are neutral indicate that conflict is viewed as neither positive nor negative, and the outcome is dependent on the skills used, or the particular situation, at the time. Again, this can be noted in the respondents descriptions,

G - What comes to my mind is paddling upstream in a heavy current with a head wind in your face. It’s like you can knock yourself out or you can just go to the shore or turn your boat around.

K - ...a wave coming toward a beach, and the wave breaks and spreads out on the beach and washes away.

B - Conflict is like a class V river trip...the ratings are from I - VI, with I being flat water and VI being unrunable. Basically, V is too. You’re putting yourself in certain danger if you mess up...V is quite hard.

E - A storm, lightning every once in awhile, but basically it’s a nice storm...

A - I was thinking it’s sort of like gum or something you spill and make a mess of, and it’s kind of sticky, but you get it off eventually...It’s like gum, because
sometimes you just get it on you and it’s not that big a deal, but other times you
could get into it and it’d be like ‘I’ll never get out of this.’

These descriptions are more neutral in that the respondent doesn’t view conflict as
necessarily negative or positive, but the process or outcome can be positive or negative
depending on the situation.

Finally, some metaphors can depict how the process is viewed as more expansive,
offering opportunities. These are metaphors that can expand conflict potential.

G - Your a person that loves to hike, and you start at point A, and you’ve got a
goal to get to point B. You’re hiking along, having a good time, and you’re in a
canyon, and all of the sudden you hit a drop off. There’s no way around. What do
you do? Do you fall to pieces and retreat back up, or do you think this is a
wonderful opportunity to stop and smell the roses, or do you drag these ropes out
of the pack and go over? That’s what conflict feels like to me, running up against
a wall or a cliff...I’m a mixture of all those things.

C - The image that comes to my mind right away is a tug of war, and [my partner]
is on one side and I am on the other side, and we are pulled back and forth, but
where that stops is that I don’t feel like somebody loses...I see putting down the
rope, just setting it down, and actually I have a very vivid image of setting it down
and hugging and kissing...nobody lands in the mud. It is a nice game of tug of war
where everybody struggles and pulls, but we are talking while we are
pulling...keeping my dignity and being respectful of [my partner’s] is important.

H - Something kind of scary, yet can be beneficial. Risky. Clawing up a steep
ridge. There’s part of me that wants to get to the top and be free, but there’s a
part of me that’s really scared and maybe don’t want to be there, shouldn’t be
there [because] I’m out of my comfort zone. It might be a little bit beyond my
ability, so I’m pushing my limits of my abilities.

D - I was thinking of flamenco dancing...stomping of the feet. It can look like you
are one dancing together, and it can be separate and thrash about and come back
[together]...There is distance, but then they come together and dance incredibly
together...

N - Conflict is like a wall of ice. You can’t get to it at first, but as you start
working with it, it melts down and turns to water...a wall of ice, you can see
through it and not see it. You can pretend to look beyond it, whereas sometimes
you run right into it. So, sometimes I think that if we can just work on the conflicts a little bit at a time then they never...freeze to a wall that is so thick that you can never melt it down.

These metaphors depict potential for a variety of options which provides a more expansive view of conflict. Seeing opportunity in conflict can help provide stimulus for movement, lessening the chance of remaining stuck or feeling powerless. Taking a look at metaphors used to describe conflict may provide some insight towards how the respondents view conflict. To test this, it is important to have a clearer sense of the respondents conflict processes.

Current Relational Conflict Processes

Taking a look at current conflict processes occurring within each relationship reveals characteristics contributing to constructive and destructive conflict processes. Each couple will then be placed on a continuum representing the level of constructive or destructive conflict they use in their current relationship (see table 3.18).

AB

In talking about conflict over having a baby and having a marriage ceremony A describes the process as such,

Last fall, [the conflict] came up a lot. Then I’d lay off of it for months and then it’d come up again, or we’d be working on it in counseling, and then I just kind of laid off of it and all the sudden it happened, [partner agreed to both]...a lot was going to counseling and talking about where each other was coming from. Getting a clearer idea where those needs and desires came from. What we were willing to give up for those or not give up. And on my part, consciously being able to let it go for awhile, and basically setting a deadline that said, ‘Nine months from now, I’m gonna decide to do this [have a baby] on my own.
A recognized a need here to do something different, to change her strategy and in doing so found this to help move them forward from being stuck to where they were both satisfied with the outcome.

B - I was aware of the deadline, so it was easy to deal with. It took about 3 - 4 months [for me to decide then].

A speaks more about how the conflict process evolves,

A - If she says [something] in an accusatory way, then I wouldn’t respond to it very well. I’d withdraw and we’d probably both withdraw. It’ll either just arise again and get more intense, or one of us will say something...When we come back around to it again, we’re both much more open and can do much more complex stuff that we had practiced before, like really listening to what the person is saying. We’re much more open to not getting defensive.

Even though there may be withdrawal on both their parts, notice the element of cooperation present when one of them brings it to their awareness again. They’re both more open and willing to listen to each other and curbing any defensive reactions.

Overall, although there is some avoidance, constructive characteristics are much more prevalent - recognition for change, forward moving, and cooperation.

Taking a look at B’s description, it is apparent that there are more constructive characteristics of conflict than destructive.

B - In order to deal with conflict, you have to be really present and be willing to listen and share, and I’ve had to work on those skills...Somehow in my upbringing, I came forth with the attitude that other people’s needs are greater than my own. I would put other people first, and I don’t think that serves me well in conflict. It’s too easy to step back and allow someone else to step forward.

It’s clear from the discussion on power balance for A and B that B does not just “step back” in the conflicts that arose around having a baby and having a marriage ceremony.
B - It’s been hard for me because I don’t really know what I want. If I know what
I want it’s pretty much easy for me to communicate it, but I haven’t known [for
these two issues]. It’s been kind of a game for me, hoping something would come
up, something that would fit with me or open to or feel right about...I’ve tried to
look at why those things are frightening for me. What is it that causes me to
hesitate about those commitments in my life...sometimes I’d be willing to
communicate about it. Other times, if I’d had too much, I’d be building a wall.
It’d be too much...so I couldn’t make any movement on it, so as a couple, we
couldn’t...

When asked how her goals with these issues changed over time she says,

Significantly, I’m willing and interested to participate and excited from my own
perspective rather than to just accommodate [my partner’s] interests.

She describes how her partner’s goals have changed also,

The marriage commitment, her expectations of me are really different. We’re
working on trying to define a kind of commitment that really works for both of us.
She’s actually moved quite a distance in that respect. Having children, she’s been
willing to consider that I would play a minor role, though that wouldn’t be her
choice, but she’s been willing to negotiate the two parent family to consider
options. If you meet resistance, you have to shift somewhere.

Even though B thinks she did not learn “good relationship skills” from her family, she has
done a great amount of self reflection through her approach to conflict. In doing so, she
does not “just accommodate” her partner, she finds what’s true to herself and then brings
that into the relationship. As a result of moving through this process, she has found that
not only have her own goals changed, but her partner’s did too. As mentioned, much of
this is apparent in the description provided in the discussion of power balance. The
characteristics apparent in this more constructive approach to conflict include - self-
estee enhancement, learning experience, relational focus and recognition that people
change.
Taking a look at how they describe their conflict process can illuminate characteristics of constructive conflict.

D - We have a lot of conflicts when we are really hungry... We will be hungry and all of the sudden all these stupid things, we will start arguing about... but sometimes, I know what is happening, and I can turn off very easily. I just say, “Let’s wait until we eat and see how we are feeling after that.” Then we can talk it through and everything is fine...

C - Our conflicts are pretty minimal when they occur, but being able to talk about stuff, saying, “This is how I feel,” and “This is what is going on,” finding out her perspective and my perspective, and then talking it through. That seems to resolve a lot of conflict...

D - ... [conflict] is not necessarily bad. Conflict is good. That is how we learn. That is how I know who you are, when we have conflict... we come out of it loving each other more and knowing who we are... we keep on the issue, talk about it, process through it. We can still disagree. We tell each other how we feel. She does not have to think the way I do... It sounds so easy, that we just talk about stuff like that. Sometimes I have my thing, I have my stuff. We start to have an argument and... my walls go up and I don’t want to talk about it. [My partner] will do that too. We will have to press each other, “Let’s talk about it. Let’s get through this,” and it is nice to do that. I still don’t want to have the conflict... [but] we talk about it...

C - And sometimes it’s different. Sometimes the same argument [will] come out at a different time, and it will turn out differently and that is nice too.

D - Yeh... sometimes I don’t always get out exactly what I need to say because I just don’t. I forget, or I don’t know how I feel or I have trouble communicating. [The conflict] does come up a few times. I will say, “I didn’t say this and I needed to,” and we start taking again.

C and D find their conflict process to be a learning experience. Through the process of dealing with conflict, they learn who each other are and who they are together. This relational focus becomes apparent in their efforts to “press each other” to be sure they address conflict to get through it together. This attitude also keeps them moving forward
so they do not get stuck in conflict. Additionally, there is a cooperative element here when issues around a conflict may arise again. When D realizes she hasn’t expressed herself completely, C is open to talking about the conflict again and both are open to new changes as a result. There’s a recognition here that people change their goals and there is an openness and acceptance for this in their relationship. These characteristics are also recognizable in the discussion on power balance for C and D. The characteristics of constructive conflict that are most apparent in C and D’s relational dynamics are - recognition that people change, learning experience, forward moving, relational focus, and cooperation.

EF
E speaks about conflict around intimacy,

We’re both incest survivors and we both have to deal with [that]...I bring this issue up more than she and I think we kind of bounce off each other...[Sometimes] I have problems with [our intimacy] because we haven’t talked about it, or I want to be [intimate], but I’m really mad because we’re not talking about it [the intimacy]...for her, she’s tired of talking and she just wants to be comfortable...but I want to talk...[my partner] sometimes doesn’t want to talk or go into more depth...sometimes it’s hard to express what it is I want to talk about...I think I have my own problems and that’s another piece to it not getting resolved.

There’s an element of avoidance here even though E tries to bring up discussion around their intimacy. By not sensing an element of cooperation, it seems as if E senses some loss when she and her partner don’t communicate when she feels the need to. It also appears that E takes it on as her own problem, which is more apparent in her following description of the metaphor,
The storm is within me because I don’t want to be unfair with my partner, so I’ll be fuming over whatever it is before I talk with her. I try to resolve the conflict in myself first, to some extent, instead of being angry and irritable. If I see there is a conflict, I think about it a long time...Sometimes I decide I have a big part to play in the conflict. I think I see that I’m blaming it on my partner. Then I tend to just keep thinking about it and trying to work things out for myself, and I don’t always tell my partner if I have a problem.

By trying to resolve it on her own and within herself, E is not capturing the relational element that comes with constructive conflict. While elements of extreme destructive conflict are not apparent, it is apparent that there are little to none constructive conflict characteristics present in E’s description.

In talking about a conflict around F’s health, F offers this description,

She’ll buy stuff for me to eat that I don’t eat...She’s concerned about my health. I write what I want on the dry erase board. I restate it again and again and it just keeps happening. She wants me to be healthy and doesn’t want me to have a stroke...she talks about the health part, or she’ll make fun of what I eat...I get frustrated with it. It doesn’t seem to escalate, it’s just continuous. Sometimes I back down [and eat what she buys].

E - I tend to buy a lot of things I think she should eat, like a salad once a month would be nice, or a piece of fruit once a week would be nice. What happens is I wind up with fifty apples and I have to eat them all. She holds her ground there and she’ll say, “I told you, just buy what you want for you and I’ll get what I want for me.”

F - So, how do we deal with it? Sometimes she doesn’t buy what she wants me to eat, and sometimes I’ll eat what she wants me to eat.

While it may appear on the surface that there is some sense of cooperation here, there really is not. Neither of them seem to be accepting that as a solution with which they are satisfied. They seem to avoid getting to what may be an underlying relational issue here, and stay stuck on the content of “don’t buy me this” or “I want you to eat this.” There’s no room for change here when there is inflexibility on both their parts. Their temporary
resolutions keep them stuck in this pattern and they both remain frustrated with the other.

While it may not have yet escalated, the avoidance of this and other conflict issues can eventually lead to building escalation of conflict overall in their relationship. Again, these characteristics contribute to destructive conflict in their relationship.

GH

G speaks of a recent conflict between she and her partner,

G - It started during our vacation and when we got back. I would be talking and she’d look over with this expression of, ‘You’re full of shit!’ And, I was shocked because I’m used to her agreeing with me. It happened a few more times, and a few more times and I finally just shut down. I wouldn’t talk...finally it just got so bad that I sat down with her and said, ‘Something is going on here, and I feel like there’s a real distance between us and that we’re not connecting.’ So, we talked about it...What I was thinking was going on in the situation was completely different from her take on it...it was wonderful that it finally got up on the table, and I was able to see what I was doing...We were a lot closer after that discussion...but I can’t let it go on. I can’t let stuff that doesn’t feel right to me go on...There’s a part of me that if I confront the conflict, there’s the potential for inward growth, so I go after it...I realize [conflict] is an important way to grow...The conflict that keeps coming up may never be totally resolvable, but I can learn a lot about myself and me and her in the relationship.

It is apparent that though it may be a difficult process, G sees conflict in her relationship as a learning experience. She seems to be more than willing to learn about her self, her partner and their relationship in ways that may enhance her own self esteem and enhance their relationship. Even though she may withdraw at first, the potential she sees in conflict is the catalyst which moves her from avoidance and brings her to address the situation with her partner, moving their relationship forward, creating a “closer” relationship. Four characteristics of constructive conflict are present in the conflict process G initiates with
her partner - learning process, forward moving, self-esteem enhancement and relational focus.

G’s partner, H also has a more constructive approach to conflict. Although she would prefer to avoid conflict she sees its benefits.

Overall, I’d rather not have [conflict], but intellectually, I know that certain conflict is good and healthy...it helps air feelings and depending on the circumstances, let them go. It can be beneficial...

Speaking of conflict that arises over her desire to be in a “quiet mood” and her partner “not getting the usual types of responses she’s come to know and expect and want,” she describes what occurs,

We’ve got this dynamic going on where I’m wanting to be quiet and she’s wanting to get me to open up and not feel like I’ve gone away. Certainly we both feel some tension in the air. I can tend to be short with my answers, because I’m tired or wanting to be quiet, and [my partner] takes that on herself, like she’s messed up or something...Generally what happens, [my partner] will say, “You’ve gone away. What’s going on here?” Ninety percent of the time that’s how we at least start talking about it...Once we talk about it...we both say what’s going on for each of us. Then we’ll each state some goals so it doesn’t happen next time. I’ll try to be more communicative and say, “I’m feeling like I need some space.” [My partner] will say, “I’ll try to give you your space,” or whatever it will be.

H speaks of how this is a learning process for her,

[My partner’s] helping me learn some of these [communication] skills, or at least open them up to me so I can start working on them and getting them into my life. In that way I am learning from her...For me personally, [our conflict] is a good growing thing for me...I’m getting to the point where, I don’t welcome [conflict], but it’s not that scary for me.

Through the conflict processes in their relationship, H finds it to be a learning experience and has increased her sense of self esteem in that she has a more expansive view of how she can be in conflict which makes it less scary for her. As mentioned in the section of
power balance, H seems to let her partner be the initiator and this holds true in their conflict processes. H generally is not the one to bring the conflict out in the open. To have an even more constructive conflict process, H might want to consider taking the risk of confronting the issue rather than waiting for her partner to do so the majority of the time. While both G and H are generally comfortable with G being initiator and H being the follower, G did make mention of “seeing an imbalance of power here.” She suggests that they could “level out” this imbalance by having both initiate discussion around conflict.

I

Respondent I speaks of their conflict in general,

[Conflict] is always there. I don’t think it ever goes away because we don’t talk. You can just feel it because we’re distant from each other. I think you can just basically feel it and it will just finally blow up...finally it will get to a point where one of us just can’t take it anymore, and we’ll just start spewing about everything under the sun that happened in the last month...[After the explosion], I usually leave, just walk out and go somewhere, and she’ll come and follow me. I always know she’ll come and get me. Then she talks and she’ll calm me down and we never solve it though...We can just talk in circles and never solve anything. It usually ends up being late at night and we go to bed and go to sleep and we don’t even talk about it the next day, neither one of us.

It’s apparent from her description that there is avoidance at many stages of the conflict.

As she speaks about a specific conflict over her partner’s friend, avoidance again comes into play,

We don’t really bring it up because it just really upsets me...we just don’t talk, or [we] avoid the situation when you can tell the other person is upset with you.

She sees their separation during the week as being a major contributor to the conflict she
and her partner have, however they don’t address that directly. Yet when they are
together on weekends they still don’t seem to get over the distance that’s been created by
other relational dynamics,

I think we want weekends to be too perfect [because we’re not together during the
week], so we don’t want to talk about anything [that might be upsetting] and how
we’re feeling...I usually just say that it’s crazy to keep trying when we aren’t
getting anywhere, and if we don’t fix it [our relationship], we’re not going to make
it. But, I’ll never come out and say, ‘I want out now.’

Clearly, avoidance plays a major role in keeping their conflict process in a destructive
mode. Although respondent I does not address the issue of retaliation, her partner does,

[The] conflict is, I don’t trust the people she goes out with. I’m always afraid
something is going to happen, which it did, so it’s just heightened since then...She
was drunk. She ended up spending all night, so I was wondering what might be
going on...she didn’t tell me about it for a couple weeks, but I knew. I was [at my
other house] and I knew she was out. We started going to a counselor...and she
told me this a couple days before our appointment. So, we went for three or four
sessions and it never really got discussed...

While it’s not apparent that J recognizes her partner’s actions as retaliation, it appears they
are. As explained in the discussion of power balance, respondent I feels she has no power
in the relationship and did not like that her partner and she were separated so much. It
appears that as a way of gaining power she went out with someone when her partner
didn’t come home for the weekend. Also mentioned in the section on power balance,
respondent I tries to balance power with her partner by retaliating when her partner wants
to make love. That retaliation and avoidance are prevalent in this relationship is a clear
sign that there are some definite destructive conflict processes contributing to the
dynamics in this relationship.
As already discussed in the section of family history, the strategies K and L have used to overcome their different styles of conflict are characteristic of constructive conflict in that they were able to move forward with it and they had a relational focus.

In addition to that, L talks about some repetitive conflicts and areas where they tend to stay stuck and not resolve the conflict.

...space wars. Like for instance...K might put her shoes in the middle of the floor, but it will be like right near the path where you are walking. I trip over them, stub my toe, and it is like, ‘ouch, god dammit, rrrr.’ We have talked about that one to death...That one comes up a lot...at least a couple times a week...I am expressing irritation here about this thing and I would really like you to not do that. It seems we have to do this, the processing part and talking about it. And, the other person is usually not very receptive at that point in time because they are reacting to the other person’s irritation, so we are both irritated.

K - And then also, I think part of it is deciding boundaries of that. The space issue is one that comes up. L has a right to walk through the house without tripping over my stuff. And, I guess I kind of feel sometimes that I have the right to put my stuff where I want. It is my house, within limits anyway.

L - It seems like always there has been some kind of dialogue and one way or another we will figure out something.

It appears there is considerable inflexibility here even though they may discuss it each time. By holding onto their own positions the conflict process doesn’t move forward and they remain stuck when the conflict arises over and over again. Both speak in terms of rights so there may be underlying relational issues of wanting respect or trying to determine who they are in relation to each other that do not get addressed here which also contributes to the conflict staying stuck.

Apparently there is also another area where this couple remains stuck from L’s
perspective. They seem to get sidetracked within a conflict about the process of dealing with it.

What usually happens is a misunderstanding...apparently I am misunderstanding her...I'll say, “Well wait a minute, I’m feeling like you are really pissed. What is going on?” [And K will reply], “Well here we go again, I am not. What can I tell you to let you know that I am not?”...I hear something in K’s voice that isn’t there [according to her]...We still try to talk about it, and we still know it is there, but unsure what to do about it...She says she cannot even be angry because I am going to always think that she is taking it out on me because I am reacting to her...[I say] have your feelings, be angry all you want...and I don’t want to deal with you [when you’re like that]. And, she is like, “Hey I get to be angry. Why are you running away?”... That is one of those stuck places.

Again, the notion of remaining stuck in this conflict, and others, and not finding any forward movement keeps K and L in a more destructive pattern. They seem to have differing perceptions of what is occurring which is one of the key elements contributing to conflict.

K describes an area of conflict that seems to revolve around having differing expectations from each other. This is an area where they seem to get irritated with each other, but K does not understand what is going on here.

We meet after work or something and like, L asks me how my day was, and I will be like, “It was OK.” Then I am waiting for her to ask me something [more], so I don’t say anything, and she is sitting there [not saying anything more]...and now we are going to have this argument, and I don’t want to talk about my day now. K is wanting her partner to probe and ask more about her day, whereas it appears that L asks this blanket question that she thinks is enough to initiate a conversation about the events of the day. Again, there seems to be an element of inflexibility here. K says it happens “fairly frequently” so it is another conflict in which they don’t seem to move forward.
It is apparent that K and L have characteristics of both constructive and destructive conflict. It is constructive in that they have been able to move forward in their relationship in regards to having differing conflict styles, though L suggests they still have problems with that. Having a focus on their relationship helped move them forward to where they are. However, in other areas, they seem to have a considerable amount of inflexibility and a lack of forward movement which keeps them in a destructive mode too.

MN

As mentioned previously, a common conflict dynamic for this couple is both individual’s attempts to gain control. N will talk about doing something and automatically include M whether M says she wants to do it or not. Then just before the event, M will surprise N by not showing up, in an attempt to gain control and not let her partner place her in a mold. In their attempts of trying to gain control, M believes they do not get to the underlying issues.

It is around those power things, those power struggles. I think that conflict around alcohol is something totally different...But the conflict as far as the power struggles, like that day N just wanted to be in her space and wanted to be quiet, and it was fine that I was there. But, she was very short with me. So I think a lot of times it is the underlying things that maybe we don’t recognize...she does not realize when she is pulling for power ...and I don’t realize that I am pulling for power or manipulating, but I am...Initially if I bring up something or if N brings up something, of course I am on the defense or she will be on the defense...But, it is hard because I have my little manipulative ways, and when [my partner] calls me on it, if I come back with my tail between my legs, I have a way of doing that so she feels like she has no right to beat up on me because I beat up on myself enough. So, then what I do is I make her feel really bad. That is manipulation, total manipulation...The conflict is so hard because it doesn’t come up. It is not like “Bingo,” this is the issue, let’s get through it. It is just muddled, and I start doing the rebellious stuff or [my partner] starts doing these little kind person
things.

It appears that in their attempts at trying to gain control, conflict arises and if they try to address it, there are some “unconscious” acts of manipulation and they do not get to the issue that is driving the conflict. M says she is not always aware when she is doing the manipulation but if she looks back at the situation, she sees that is what she has done.

“...a lot of time I choose not to look back at it, so I just continue on [manipulating].” This manipulation contributes toward a destructive conflict process.

A constructive characteristic is that they try to address the conflict. However, in their attempt to address the conflict they may get sidetracked and this is where the manipulation comes in. An all too common theme among lesbians is that there is so much “processing.” If this processing keeps the couple in a cycle that keeps them from addressing the underlying issues it also could be destructive. M comments on a particular conflict in which this may occur.

Last Sunday, that was definite conflict, and we stood out by my truck for 2 1/2 hours talking to resolve it. Then I came home and called her on the phone, and we talked for another two hours [about it]. So, we do talk a lot about [it]...it usually is one of those things that we both just kind of admitted to wherever we were at for whatever reason, and hopefully understood it better...

Even though they may be done talking, it doesn’t appear that they are totally clear on what was going on but they decided to let it go. The destructive element here, again is not getting to the underlying issue of what is truly driving the conflict.

N speaks of her issue with control,

[My wanting control] is sometimes subliminal, like I don’t realize it and [my partner] will bring it to my attention. Then I will get mad about it and get real defensive. I dearly want to try to look at it, but I also get the feeling that I’m
being attacked for who I am...if I'm in a place to being receptive to her bringing it to my attention, then we can go places with it and I can really work on it. But, if I am in a lousy spot, it is hard for her and I am just not willing to move. I get real stubborn and my stubbornness then gets worse.

It is apparent that when N or M get in their defensive modes there is no room for movement. Such inflexibility keeps them in a destructive process when this occurs over a number of conflicts which seems to be the case for M and N.

Additionally, the discussion of conflict around M's alcoholism appears to get muddled. N didn't recognize a particular conflict as being over that, and M sees this conflict as being totally different from their "power struggles." It seems to be becoming a source of conflict in their relationship more than it was because N seems to be confronting it more than she did early on in the relationship. M would prefer to avoid addressing her drinking and instead through her last minute changes try to get her partner to be mad at her. M suggests this would distract her from her own issues of drinking. For this to become a more constructive conflict process, M and N would need to move outside some of their current patterns of inflexibility, manipulation and avoidance.

OP

P speaks of how they have come to recognize a core issue to many of their conflicts.

But it wasn’t even about money, that wasn’t the issue...What it really came down to when we figured it out, I finally said, “Well, I feel like I’m not being very well taken care of,” and [my partner] said, “Well, I feel like I’m not being taken care of.” So, what it came down to is usually that’s what our arguments, or the core of our argument is, that we just have to stop when we’ve forgotten each other, when we’re going on in our day to day lives and have sort of left each other in the dust.
O speaks of how this came about,

We’re planning [a trip], and [my partner] just quit her job, so she’s able to go earlier and has more time to stay than I do...the other morning when we were talking she says, “Well, I want to leave tomorrow, so why don’t we just buy you a plane ticket [to meet me there] and we can come back together.” We don’t really have the money to pay for a plane ticket and what I was really feeling was pretty hurt because we haven’t really seen each other in the past three or four weeks because [my partner’s] worked steadily and she’s been so stressed out with work. So when we were together, we’d be talking about [her work]...and what I was hearing was that she didn’t want to spend time with me now that she had free time. It was easier to focus on “we don’t have enough money” than focusing on “what about me?”

Later that day is when they were able to come together to talk about the conflict and this was when they realized they had not been giving each other enough attention.

Addressing the conflict, once O recognized the relational aspect (what about me?) underlying the content (not enough money) issue, helped move them into a more relational focus. Recognizing that this is core to many of their conflicts also keeps them moving forward, knowing they have gotten through it before and also getting to the underlying issue more quickly.

In speaking of conflict that arises between them around family P explains how that is more difficult to get to the underlying issue.

I think the core of [conflict around family], that’s old [from childhood], so that goes back to insecurities rather than “I miss you” and not connecting. It’s about ultimately not connecting, but it’s not as deep as our fight when it came to money... This one [family] was like we can’t even get as far as connecting because [we’re] insecure.

When they are around family, conflict arises because they “revert back” to how they were when they lived with their families, and they “still haven’t...learned how to be around each other” in those situations. It does appear however, that even though they may not be
totally clear on what's happening they have some insight that insecurities may be an underlying issue. So, even though conflict arises in these situations, they work through it and seem to make it a learning experience from which to draw for future time spent with family, lending this a constructive conflict process.

As mentioned in the power balance section, O and P have worked towards accepting each other's differences as strengths from which to draw on as a unit. The relational focus of this definitely contributes to having a more constructive conflict process. Overall, their approach to conflict appears to be very constructive.

The following continuum represents the couples' conflict processes.

---

**Conflict Process Continuum**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CD, OP, AB, GH</th>
<th>KL</th>
<th>MN, EF</th>
<th>IJ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constructive Conflict Process</td>
<td>Destructive Conflict Process</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.18
To get a more complete vision of respondents family conflict styles, metaphor and conflict processes the following table summarizes each.

**Conflict Table** - Respondents views of conflict, family of origin predominant conflict style, metaphor tone, and their predominant conflict process in their current relationship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>View of Conflict</th>
<th>Family of Origin Conflict Style</th>
<th>Metaphor</th>
<th>Current Conflict Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Dislike</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Limiting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Dislike</td>
<td>Avoid &amp; Compete</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Dislike</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Expand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Dislike</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Expand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>unclear</td>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Dislike</td>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Limiting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Expand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Dislike</td>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Expand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Dislike</td>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Limiting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>Dislike</td>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Limiting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>No response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Dislike</td>
<td>Avoid &amp; Compete</td>
<td>Limiting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>Dislike</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Expand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>Dislike</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Limiting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>Dislike</td>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Limiting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.19

Notice that even though it is suggested that family history may contribute to how respondents do conflict, there are no apparent patterns among the respondents family history and current conflict processes. However, it is apparent that those using more
constructive conflict processes have altered their approach to conflict from their family conflict patterns. This is not to say that those using more destructive conflict processes have not altered their conflict styles. From the descriptions provided by respondents, it is just more apparent for those couples to the left and center on the continuum.

Now, looking at metaphors and conflict process, the following table represents respondents' metaphor type and conflict process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Metaphor</th>
<th>Current Conflict Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Expand</td>
<td>Constructive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Expand</td>
<td>Constructive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Expand</td>
<td>Constructive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Expand</td>
<td>Constructive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>Expand</td>
<td>Destructive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Constructive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Constructive/Destructive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Destructive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Limiting</td>
<td>Constructive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>Limiting</td>
<td>Constructive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>Limiting</td>
<td>Constructive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Limiting</td>
<td>Destructive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Limiting</td>
<td>Destructive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>Limiting</td>
<td>Destructive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Limiting</td>
<td>Destructive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>Constructive/Destructive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.20

It was expected that those respondents using metaphors that expand conflict
potential would also use more constructive conflict processes. 80% of those respondents using a metaphor that expands the potential of conflict use more constructive conflict processes. Of those respondents using a limiting metaphor 50% use more constructive conflict processes and 50% use more destructive processes. Those using a more expansive metaphor have more isomorphism with their current conflict processes. Surprisingly, 42% of those using metaphors that limit conflict use more constructive conflict processes.

Likewise, it was expected that those using metaphors that limit the potential of conflict would employ more destructive conflict processes. 57% of those respondents using limiting metaphors do indeed use more destructive conflict processes. One respondent using a more equal combination of destructive and constructive conflict processes used a neutral metaphor. With one respondent not providing a metaphor then, 60% of the respondents' metaphors match their conflict processes. The following table exhibits the distribution of metaphor and conflict process:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metaphor/Conflict Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limiting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.21
Conflict Process and Power Balance

In reviewing the conflict process continuum, and comparing it to the previous power balance continuum, it is clearly apparent how power balance and conflict are fundamentally interrelated. Those couples using more constructive conflict processes overall are the same couples who have a more holistic power balance. Likewise, those couples using more destructive conflict processes are the same as those who have a more singular or individualistic power balance. This relationship is portrayed in the following table.

### Power Balance/Conflict Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Power Balance</th>
<th>Conflict Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individualistic</td>
<td>IJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic, Relational</td>
<td>EF, MN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CD, GH, OP, AB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructive</td>
<td>KL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destructive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.22

As you recall, some respondents used different identifying features when describing what it means to be lesbian. Eighty eight percent of those respondents using a holistic power balance and constructive conflict processes described their lesbianism in some terms of self. Those respondents identifying their lesbianism in terms of self i.e. honesty, strength, personal power, happiness, truthfulness to oneself, appear to be more
likely to use a more holistic approach to balance power and constructive conflict processes. Likewise, those respondents identifying their lesbianism in terms of just partnership appear to be more likely to use a more individualistic approach to balance power and use destructive conflict processes. The paradox here is that those identifying their lesbian identity in terms of self tend to be concerned about relational and individual needs, whereas, those describing their lesbian identity in terms of partnering with a woman tend to be most concerned with individual needs in regards to balancing power and types of conflict processes typically relied upon.

Conflict Topics

Respondents spoke about particular areas of conflict that arise repetitiously, speaking of some, more in depth than others. Some common topics of conflict arise across couples as portrayed in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict Topic</th>
<th>No. of Couples</th>
<th>Couples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>GH, EF, IJ, KL, MN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>AB, CD, EF, OP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Together</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>AB, CD, IJ, OP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>AB, CD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Chores</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>AB, CD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.23

Those couples referring to conflict in regards to not communicating, misinterpreting each other’s actions, and not listening were categorized together in the conflict topic of communication. Note that four of the five couples indicating conflict in this area are the couples who have a more individualistic approach balancing power in
their relationship (see power balance continuum). This is not surprising given that in order to have a more relationally oriented relationship or power balance, it would make sense that quality interpersonal communication must occur.

Additionally, as was noted in the section on satisfaction, communication was the most reported factor contributing to a high level of satisfaction. With communication being so important, in regards to satisfaction, to forty four percent of the respondents, it is not surprising that conflict arises over a lack of quality interpersonal communication. Interesting to note here is that 30% of those having conflict over communication in their relationship indicated communication as contributing to their current level of satisfaction as very satisfied or between very satisfied and fairly satisfied. It appears that these individuals may find some level of satisfaction with their communication processes and still have some problems around that. This reinforces the need for more quality interpersonal communication skills. Additionally, 60% of those having conflict arise over communication named communication as an important factor contributing to high satisfaction ideally. These respondents seem to be aware of the significance and importance of communication, yet 66% of these respondents (who are more individualistically inclined in their relationship) just may not have the necessary interpersonal communication skills to have a more relationally oriented relationship.

The next highest reported topics of conflict are finances and time together. Couples having conflict over finances reported conflict arising over how to manage finances, who contributes what and who pays the bills. Conflict over finances is common to many couples in general, and is typically related to power. Of those couples reporting
conflict over finances, it seemed to be most significant to EF and this does contribute to their imbalance of power. The other couples seemed to regard other topics as being more significant, or more in the forefront, when looking at conflict in their relationships.

Couples having conflict over time together spoke in terms of not being together enough because of physical separation or of getting tied up in daily living and not making time for each other. Again, this seemed most significant for IJ, being physically separate during the week and some weekends. As described earlier, OP have discovered that this is what underlies some of their conflicts that come out as more content related.

The remaining two topics that were common topics for two couples, sex and household chores seemed to be issues for which both couples were finding resolution or recognizing the issue and addressing it before the conflict escalated.

Other topics of conflict that respondents discussed, that may or may not have been mentioned previously, include irritation with each other’s behavior, moving to another region, friends, going out with another woman, the future, children, infringement on each other’s space, getting married, having control, and alcoholism. While the topics of conflict seem to be common for couples in general, the five to be common across the couples of this study include communication, time together, finances, sex and household chores.

Comparison of Conflict Styles to Other Couples

While it is not the intent of this study to compare these lesbian couples and their relational dynamics to other couples, I was interested in how lesbian couples compare
themselves to others. Respondents were asked how their conflict styles compare with heterosexual couples and other women couples respectively. This was asked to get a sense if they see themselves similarly or different from other couples and what they think may contribute to that.

**Comparison to heterosexual couples**

Basically, most respondents believe they do conflict differently than heterosexual couples. Based on their previous experience as a partner in a heterosexual couple, or on their observance of heterosexual couples they made a number of comparisons.

Eighty eight percent (88%) of the respondents replied that they believe they do conflict differently than heterosexual couples, inferring that the difference is better. Of those respondents viewing their conflict processes as different, they attribute this difference, in general, to:

1) themselves communicating to a depth that heterosexual couples they know do not,  
2) not having defined roles, so less automatic power differential is present, and  
3) gender.

Although there is overlap among the differences in the respondents descriptions, the following descriptions present all three differences.

**Communication depth**

First looking at differing levels of communication, following are some of the comments offered by respondents:
A - I think we’ve really worked on it, talked about stuff and tried to work on it. I think that’s different than most heterosexual couples I know... They don’t talk through or try to work through them at the depth we have. Just seeking the advice of a therapist, most of my heterosexual coupled friends haven’t... There are heterosexual couples that are willing to work on things, but I think they are fewer and far between. I see more of my women friends in heterosexual relationships rely on their women friends to help them deal with conflict they have, and to confide in them, and then go back to that relationship and somehow deal with it, than to deal with it directly with their partner.

She goes on to describe how she’s noticed one way that this happens from what she’s observed at parties with her friends.

It’s interesting because at a party, we’ll all start talking to each other at a party, all of us [men and women]. The men are some of the grooviest sort of new age men that I know... but over time, the men will talk to each other and the women will talk to each other. It’s really strange because the women are talking about their partners, or their spouse, and here my partner and I are together in this group of women sharing things. But, we’re sharing it together... We’re there sharing that together [rather] than [having] this split [like the heterosexual couples].

Another respondent says,

G - I would say my partner and I are miles ahead... Many people are very scared to confront issues and... they keep fighting over the same things, but it has nothing to do with the underlying issues, and it’s over little trivial things like should we paint the house now or later, and they’ll fight over it... I believe [my partner] and I know the same issues keep coming up, but we have the courage to delve deeper each time and the courage to say, ‘What can I change about myself?’ There are a lot of couples... that say, ‘She did this to me,’ or, ‘He did this to me.’ You’ve got to take responsibility for your end... I believe lesbian couples are at a different level of self awareness. Some of them aren’t and some of them are partially there. Self esteem and self awareness are what keep couples together, and respect. I don’t see a lot of respect in heterosexual relationships.

This respondent believes she and her partner confront conflict more consciously and get to the underlying issues. In addition, she sees that self awareness and esteem, along with respect are critical to keep relationships forward moving and just doesn’t see that in the heterosexual relationships with which she is familiar.
One other respondent speaks about accepting her lesbianism and how that helped her to communicate better and therefore be more open to dealing with conflict.

N - I have been in denial about conflict for a long time, so just having the desire to work with somebody on it and being accepting of somebody having a different opinion than me probably would not have come about if I had not gone through the path of trying to get to know myself, through my lesbianism...I think I am better having gone through what I have gone through to know myself, and I am probably more equipped and better at communicating toward a resolution during a conflicting situation.

This respondent attributed differences to "the old power play stuff" that comes from traditional female/male roles. However, as she describes above, through her path of identifying as a lesbian, she believes she is a better communicator having had this experience, and better able to address conflict than heterosexual couples in traditional female/male roles.

Less defined roles

One couple speaks to this difference in communication stemming from redefining roles.

L - I think we have an understanding and a certain amount of respect, and I think we have learned how to communicate with each other, with other people, and how to do conflict in a healthy way.

K - Maybe because they are raised in a heterosexual family, and [they] are heterosexual, they just do what their family did. Maybe there is no need to find another way...it worked for them. Being a lesbian, being a same sex couple, [we] had the opportunity to try something else because those role models wouldn’t work.

L - I feel like we are outside of the loop there...We have had to start from scratch almost in our emotional lives and that kind of thing, generally speaking, and I think that lesbians are more likely to look at their own stuff, their own emotional health,
their own personal growth, totally generally speaking, than a lot of heterosexual folks. They don’t have to. Everything around them is applauding their heterosexualness. They don’t have to work on anything.

Because they are lesbian, they’ve been challenged to redefine who they are because the traditional heterosexual role models do not work for them. As a result, they are more self aware, have more understanding of each other and therefore have learned how to communicate in a healthy way with each other.

Next, respondents who spoke more in terms of differences attributed to less of a power differential in their relationship than heterosexual couples, offer their views.

K - ...my generalization is that, of the few heterosexual couples I know, they have assigned areas of responsibility of decision making, or power, or whatever, which I would imagine for most couples there is a sort of balance. But, they don’t, like, so much share their decision making. They have different decision making responsibilities...[It is like] that [decision] is hers, and that is his...With [my partner] and I, we share decision making in different areas.

This respondent sees a power differential arising from having separate areas of responsibility in decision making for heterosexual couples and conflict that stems from that power differential. Because she and her partner share in the decision making all around, there is less potential for conflict then. So, by having assigned roles, for heterosexual couples, there are different or separate decision making responsibilities that are likely to lead to conflict.

One respondent who compares it to heterosexual relationships of which she has been a part says,

D - I have been able to do the conflict well with [my partner]. I haven’t just said,
“Okay honey,” and I do that sometimes, but there are times when I don’t. I can talk more now. I can tell her what is going on with me in that conflict instead of just trying to do what I thought was expected of me to do. Now I don’t feel like I have to be [in] that role all the time, that I can switch.

Speaking from her own experience, this respondent notices a difference because she does not feel confined to a particular role as she did when she was in heterosexual relationships. She infers that the role she played when conflict arose was that of the compliant female, whereas in her current relationship, she does not see that happening near as much.

One other respondent, speaking of an imbalance of power in heterosexual relationships, sees conflict arise over this imbalance. In particular, speaking of her sister, she says,

P - ...it is about power with her and her partner...[my] sister does fall into, like, “Let me get this for you. Let me make you dinner. Let me be the homemaker,” and at the same time, “I’m a strong, independent woman and I work full time”...I do see that being a lot more of an issue in their relationship...

She sees more conflict arise from having defined roles in heterosexual relationships, and that conflict revolves around those particular roles.

Gender

Finally, the third common difference mentioned has to do with gender.

H - The differences in gender, being two women who are willing to, again, generally want to build relationships and keep those relationships going, whereas men typically, they don’t want to deal with it. They just want to do their work. Because we’re two women, we’re willing to work on it, make it work, whereas a man and a woman might not want to be working on it together. Yeah, just using my mom and her husband as an example, mom’s willing to work on stuff and he isn’t.

L - ...I think we are light years ahead. I think again that goes back to that
biological familiarity and just connection. That is my theory anyway...I think, because we are women, we are already in the club. We know about each other. How close can a person get than be of someone like you sexually and physically, and that, for one, is really an intimate closeness that no man [and] woman could ever share.

Again, the notion of gender comes into play, setting lesbian couples apart from heterosexual couples. Here it is described in part as gender socialization, and also "biological familiarity," as contributing to a connection which brings these women closer to their partners, contributing to a better understanding of one another and perhaps less conflict than may arise in heterosexual couples because of these differences.

Whether it be better communication, fewer defined roles or gender related, the majority of the respondents recognize a difference in how they do conflict as compared to heterosexual couples. For some, their identifying as lesbian contributes to what they view as being better, more open communication than what they’ve had the opportunity to observe in heterosexual couples they know. For others, the fact that roles in their relationships are less defined than what is traditionally defined in heterosexual relationships, and that they perceive less of a power differential in their own relationship is perceived as being more equal, or better. And, having a connection with another woman is perceived to lead to more healthy conflict processes. What is interesting to note is that these responses corroborate responses given for how being lesbian or in a same sex couple affects relational dynamics overall.

While 88% of respondents believe they do conflict differently than heterosexual couples, one respondent sees no difference as she describes here,

F - [Comparing to heterosexual couples] is too generalizing. I’d like to be able to
make the statement that, “Yes, we’re better than that, more egalitarian, more willing to deal with these things.” That just isn’t true, not from what I see...Just because we’re lesbian doesn’t mean we’re any better. We’re gonna have the same conflicts as [heterosexuals], the same household deals as [heterosexuals]...We have emotional, financial problems just like anybody else.

and one other respondent indicates that she just does not know what goes on at that level in the heterosexual couples she does know, so she chooses to not compare.

Comparison to other women couples

There is more variety in responses when it comes to comparing their own conflict processes with those of other women couples they know.

Comparison of conflict processes with other women couples

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Table 3.24

Of those respondents believing their conflict processes are better than other women couples, they generally attribute this to doing their own personal work, going to counseling or knowing couples who are abusive.

F - I think we deal with it a little better. I think we become more willing to discuss what needs to be discussed quicker instead of waiting until it gets big.

I - The only other [couple] I’ve been around is really messed up. They were terrible alcoholics, abusive physically, emotionally.
J - I’ve seen a lot worse - abuse, screaming, drinking... I think we do pretty well. I know a lot of couples who don’t even talk.

G - I know there are a lot of women struggling... The only thing I can think of is they’re maybe bringing a lot more issues in [to the relationship], that somehow, I do not know to this day why [my partner] and I don’t have a trillion issues. We’ve got a few, and we’re working on them and we’re aware of them... I believe we’re going strong. That’s the only difference I can see, we don’t have a giant suitcase full of issues that we’re bringing in.

B - I think we do pretty darn good with how we do stuff, and I think that comes from having done our own work personally and individually. God knows we weren’t raised how to do conflict, or how to be with someone in a healthy way... We have had to learn how to do this stuff all over. I think we do pretty good compared to a lot of folks... I would say better than from the few people I know.

P - The [couples] I can think of, it seems like everybody breaks up, which is so sad... I feel like lesbian couples... are dealt a heavier blow. There’s a little bit more to work out because you’re going, first of all, against society, so... regardless of your own internalized stuff you have [from] growing up, on top of that, you’re going against society. Then you’re getting into a relationship with someone who has the exact same stuff in their own separate ways. So, there’s one more added ummph to help this relationship not work, which is going against society and what society wants. In response to that, as far as other women couples, there’s a lot more dysfunction. I think [my partner] and I could definitely have gone on that path had we not gone to counseling.

Although these respondents admit they don’t know that many other women couples, those they compare themselves to are viewed as not addressing conflict as well. Whether it be through counseling, personal growth or simply not being abusive, these respondents think they process conflict pretty well, comparatively. Interesting to note, half of these respondents or 19% of the sample, indicating they have better conflict processes than other women couples, were found to use more destructive conflict processes in their own relationship.

Those respondents believing their conflict processes are similar to other women
couples offer the following remarks,

A - I know a lot of lesbian couples who have gone to couples counseling either before, or while they are breaking up because they want to leave on good terms...I think that my partner and I are pretty darn nice to each other, which I’ve seen other couples who aren’t that nice to each other. Sometimes they have a tendency to hurt each other more.

H - I’d say we’re probably pretty similar. We try to bring up stuff and talk about it, and it might not be resolved at the moment, but at least we bring it up and talk about it. Looking at other couples, it’s [about] the same.

E - At times, I think, “Wow, we do really good,” and other times, I’ll say, “Damn, we’ve got a lot to work on don’t we?” It kind of goes back and forth, and that’s how we learn.

K - From what I’ve seen of other conflict management, which isn’t a whole lot actually, it seems like most of our friends are pretty private about their conflict resolution. But, it appears to me that they also kind of strive for a sort of egalitarian resolution of their conflicts, so I guess ours is pretty similar.

These respondents tend to see their conflict processes as similar to other women couples.

As one respondent indicates, most couples are more private with their conflict and this makes it difficult to have a good sense of what other women couples do.

One respondent, who was unsure about a comparison with others, spoke of her experience in wanting to keep their conflict more private.

D - There is a responsibility, sometimes, especially in the [lesbian] community. Sometimes, women are like, “You guys are the best couple. You make the cutest couple.” So, when we do have conflict in front of people, I feel like maybe we should not do this because they think we are such a great couple. I feel pressure about that sometimes, because I do want to be a positive role model because we do have a great relationship. But conflict isn’t bad, and there is that thing again.

Other respondents indicating they were unsure how other women couples process conflict attribute this to not knowing many other women couples, or not being privy to those particular dynamics in women couples they did know.
Asking respondents to compare their conflict processes to heterosexual couples and other women couples provides a sense of how they view their own processes. Given the responses in regards to comparing their own conflict process to heterosexual couple's, the responses are not surprising. The respondents offered responses that corroborate what they said about how their gender or lesbianism affects their relational dynamics. Similarly, responses when comparing their conflict processes to other women couples are also not surprising. Most respondents saw their own processes as similar or better than other women couples' processes. It is common to attribute better qualities to one's own processes when comparing to others.

Although many respondents did admit they were making a major generalization, for both questions, and their perceptions may have been based on the few couples they have the opportunity to see conflict processes, they still provided a comparison. Asking respondents to compare provides a sense of what assumptions are made about heterosexual couples and other women couples, and it provides a sense of how they perceive their own conflict processes.

Third Party

To get a sense of whether or not respondents would consider mediation to help resolve conflict, they were asked if they have used or would consider a third party, who that was and if they would go to a mediator for the conflict that arises in their relationship. A counselor, or therapist, is the only third party mentioned by the respondents. Following is a breakdown of the responses:
Those couples who went to counseling were asked how it affected their relational dynamics. The responses vary as to the level of impact therapy had as can be seen in the following responses,

J - We had a lot better communication. She gave us some tools to work with. Ways to communicate, easier ways to say something, rather than saying, “You’re a bitch.” We haven’t used [these tools] for awhile.

B - It gave us some specific tools for communication. Where you’re consciously present and you’re acknowledging what the other person is saying...not being defensive...We use parts of those skills...We don’t always take the whole time to sit down and process though any particular issue as we might have when we were first dealing with this. But, we still use that basic concept of listening and acknowledging.

And, her partner adds,

A - Fully listening to the other with respect and verbally acknowledging that. There were specific steps that we’d actually practice...and sometimes when we don’t, I remind [my partner] to. It works so much better for me to tell her I need her to do that.

Learning “communication tools” seemed to be the significant result of therapy together.

One respondent thought that just the act of going to counseling together was more significant than the content of the counseling.

K - Maybe because it was something we were doing together that at a time when it seemed like everything was kind of falling apart. That we were kind of still in this together...[though] we never did this in our sessions, but afterwards we would gang up on the counselor...critique the counselor. That was kind of a little bonding experience. I think that...just to actually go see a counselor, even if we did not do any work there, was like a statement of our commitment.
This respondent was hesitant to say that the counseling itself had any noticeable affects, but the act of going signaled their commitment for each other and motivated her to deal with the issue at hand.

One couple spoke of counseling being a significant contributor to their high level of satisfaction. As one respondent describes and the other nods in agreement, they did not necessarily apply specific skills, but rather changed their beliefs as a result of counseling.

P - For me it was really key to let go that there doesn’t necessarily have to be a step by step process of how things work and that things can just work out, which is a lot like how [my partner] does things. But, to me I need to know exactly how you’re feeling right now, so that I can know where I stand...It was honestly just letting go of the fact that I needed to know really clearly. So, the more I let go of it, the easier it became for me. And, [my partner] started opening up more. The less I [pressured her] to talk to me, [she] started opening up.

Respondents who have received therapy as a couple experienced varying results. Trying new communication skills and altering one’s beliefs seemed to be most helpful to two couples, whereas the other two couples appear to have received less direct benefits, with one of these couples terminating counseling due to scheduling conflicts.

Respondents were then asked if they would consider going to a mediator for those conflicts they sought or considered a therapist. Responses follow:
Would you consider a mediator for relationship conflict \((n = 16)\)

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Table 3.26

Although many respondents indicated they would consider mediation, even some of them said they weren’t very sure what mediation is, or what the difference between mediation and counseling is,

H - I’m not exactly sure what the difference of a counselor and mediator would be, what the difference of their role would be...It seems as if their role would be very similar, maybe I just don’t know what a mediator would do.

D - To help us talk about it [conflict]. Yeah, I don’t know very much about that [mediation], but I would be interested.

I - I’m pretty open. I think I’d do just about anything to fix us, or at least try.

So, even though they would consider going to a mediator to help resolve relational conflict, some of the respondents did not have a clear sense of what a mediator could do. These respondents, along with those being unsure of what mediation is, suggest a lack of awareness of alternatives, other than therapy, for involving a third party to help resolve conflict.

There seems to be a general sense by some respondents that mediation does not get into emotional realms as indicated by the following two comments,

K - I don’t think a mediator would work in terms of our relationship. There were a lot of emotions involved. To me, mediation seems more on an objective level of conflict and resolution, and not so much on the emotion level.
L - From what I understand about mediation, and I don’t know a lot… I would want more the deep emotional part looked at as well as everything else because that is important in these kinds of conflict. It is about pretty deep emotional stuff.

Their general impression is that a mediator would not be skilled to work with “someone [who] is really hurting bad,” where emotions are running heavy, whereas a therapist would have the skills. Overall, there is a general lack of knowledge and awareness as to how mediation could be used to resolve relational conflict among the respondents.

Key Findings:

- Family conflict styles appear to contribute to current conflict processes in that most respondents tend to alter their approach to conflict from what was prevalent in their families.
- One’s metaphor for conflict does not always represent one’s conflict process.
- Power balance and conflict process appear to be directly related.
- Half of the respondents indicating they have better conflict processes than other women couples currently use more destructive conflict processes in their own relationships.
- There is a general lack of awareness of how mediation could be an option for resolving conflict within the relationship.
- Respondent comparison to heterosexual couples reveals that they believe they do conflict differently than heterosexual couples in regards to communication depth, less power differential with less defined roles and gender.
Methodology

To determine which might be most effective, to interview the couple first or the individual first, the sample was divided in half. Four couples were interviewed as a couple first and individually second, and the other four couples were interviewed individually first and as a couple second. There are no concrete findings here due to the following reasons:

1) Amount of time between interviews for couples varied due to a break in research work as a result of personal factors. This variance between interviews ranged from one week to four months.

2) Transcriptions from the first interview were not completed by the time the second interview occurred. To have done so would have facilitated probing where responses may have varied from the first interview.

Further research comparing order of interviews could provide concrete findings as to whether it is better to interview the couple first or the individuals.

What this study does support is the importance of having both interviews, that of interviewing the couple and the individuals of the couple in separate interviews. This interviewing procedure, while time consuming, provides a very thorough description of the dynamics occurring within the relationship. Having both interviews creates a stimulus for the couple to interact together and also for the individual to reflect on significant issues in their relations.
Considerations for Studying Lesbian Populations

Identifying Features of Being Lesbian and Being a Lesbian Couple

One discussion in current research on lesbian couples is, "What exactly comprises a lesbian couple?" (Donovan, 1992; Peplau & Cochran, 1990). Due to evolving and varying definitions and terms used to identify "lesbian couples," identifying common features provided by lesbians gives us a more clear definition of lesbian couple samples. This is especially significant when comparing lesbian couples with other couples and may provide a more clear understanding into differences between types of couples.

The most common identifying features of being lesbian and being a lesbian couple in this sample include partnering with women, having a solid sense of self awareness, feeling a global connection to women and being different from heterosexual couples except in regards to commitment. Partnering with women is the most common identifier among respondents reinforcing the typical category traditionally used to identify lesbian couples. However, this sample indicates there is more to being lesbian and a lesbian couple than partnering with women. Acknowledging the other features of a strong self awareness, global connection to women and differences from heterosexual couples - greater understanding, more emotional expression, more social interaction with other lesbians, and not being recognized by society - provides a more all encompassing definition of the particular sample and may help to distinguish differences among lesbian
couples. In addition, these identifying features may provide insight into factors that may enhance relations or make relations more complex which may prove beneficial when comparing to other types of couples.

This study reveals there is more to being lesbian or a lesbian couple than partnering with a women. Further research is necessary to provide common identifying features across lesbian samples. Studies involving lesbian populations using the traditional definition of partnering with women should seek to determine how the individuals of the sample define themselves and what that means to them. Doing so will provide a more clear and accurate description of the sample and can begin to build a stronger foundation for defining lesbian populations. Identifying these features may help to more clearly define lesbian samples, and therefore more accurately project research implications toward more specific lesbian populations.

Perhaps, what even further research in this area could explore is differences in relational dynamics attributed to particular identifying features of one’s identity. In other words, sexual identity in regards to who one is partnered with could still be considered, and perhaps there are common identifying features that cross sexual identity boundaries as they have traditionally been defined. Exploration of common identifying features across different sexual orientations may move our research beyond the traditional categories of heterosexual, gay and lesbian couples.

Gender Socialization

For many comparison studies of heterosexual, gay and lesbian couples, differences that arise across couples are typically attributed to gender (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983,
Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Kurdek, 1991; Metz, Rosser, & Strapko, 1994). In other words, the dynamics of female socialization being multiplied in lesbian couples explains differences from heterosexual couples and gay couples. That 75% of the respondents indicate some form of gender socialization contributing to their relational dynamics corroborates the notion that gender socialization does contribute toward how lesbian couples may be different from heterosexual and gay couples. What is difficult to distinguish is just what qualifies as gender socialization. While there may certainly be overlap, it appears other factors, mainly relationship roles and lesbian experience, also contribute toward relational dynamics in lesbian couples.

**Relationship Roles**

Having less or no defined roles as compared to traditional male/female roles of heterosexual couples was identified by some respondents as an attribution of gender and by others as an attribute of lesbian identity. Although it is difficult to distinguish whether the affect of less defined roles is a result of gender socialization, or having to do with their identity as a lesbian, it is likely to be a combination of both. Given that women are socialized to be more concerned with equity (Gilligan, 1982), and that lesbians have limited role models with which to identify, and in a sense more liberty because they are outside social norms, it seems very likely some would attempt to redefine traditional roles in an attempt to distribute power more equitably. Along with this attempt to redefine roles with few role models to learn from, it makes sense that more communication must occur in effort to establish roles within the relationship. This communication in turn is
directly related to how power is balanced, or not as the case may be, and to how the couple processes conflict that may arise as a result.

Given that lesbians have to define roles for themselves, and the process that must occur, that of determining who they are to each other while also attempting to define, or redefine, relationship roles, relational goals become much more complex. Since the relational and identity aspects are the "drivers" to most conflict (Wilmot & Hocker, 1998, p. 66), the significance of communication is even more apparent. However, in addition to redefining roles, some respondents indicate varying aspects of their lesbian experience contributing to relational dynamics also.

Lesbian Experience

What most research does not seem to address is if and how one's lesbian identity might contribute to relational dynamics. Defined in terms of lesbian experience and normalization of heterosexuality, some respondents identified specific features that contribute to relational dynamics in their relationships. These features include - homophobia, legal issues, identity processes and independence. Again, recognizing that each of these features may have an affect on relational dynamics implies that more communication may need to occur as a result of the affect it has.

Homophobia

First, in regards to the affects of homophobia, respondents mentioned how both internal and external homophobia contribute to their dynamics. Given that most couples
were generally comfortable with whom and to what extent each was out, internal homophobia was spoken of most commonly in regards to displaying affection to each other in public. While particular levels of public affection are deemed appropriate for heterosexual couples i.e. holding hands, holding each other, and kissing, typically lesbian couples of this sample are very conscious of whether or not they feel comfortable and where they are when displaying affection to each other in public. 75% of the couples indicate some discomfort or tension related to displaying affection publicly. Much of this is due to external and internal homophobia. Half of those couples indicate that there has been some misunderstanding or conflict as a result of varying levels of homophobia, and among the other half of those couples both individuals have similar levels of homophobia so it does not arise in conflict within the relationship.

That internal homophobia exists, tension is created in some form. It may be expressed through conflict, attempting to understand and respect each other’s needs around it, or disappointment and fear from not expressing oneself openly. It appears then that internal homophobia does impact relational dynamics though in varying ways for different couples. The same can be said for external homophobia.

External homophobia refers to other people’s discomfort with someone identifying as lesbian or gay. While there are many forms of external homophobia respondents mention specifically disapproval from family and society in general and how that may contribute to isolation, bringing the couple closer together and questioning their relationship and themselves. Again, in attempts to resolve fears around other’s homophobia, tension may build and conflict arise bringing the need for more
communication to resolve any issues around the results of the external homophobia.

The boundaries between internal and external homophobia are not always clear, so it may be difficult to distinguish between the two in some cases. Also, some individuals may not be aware of their own homophobia, or recognize it as such. All of these factors become relevant in identifying how and how much homophobia affects relational dynamics. Some respondents of this sample recognize the tension and communicate to resolve that tension created by homophobia.

Whether it's dealt with consciously or unconsciously, external homophobia in combination with one's own level of internal homophobia is an ever present fear at some level in lesbian couples. While its presence appears to be universal, its affects are not. The response to this fear appears to affect dynamics among lesbian couples in a variety of ways. For some, conflict arises. For others, feelings are repressed. And, still for others, there may be a lack of awareness of its presence. Respondents suggest homophobia contributes to isolation and/or bringing the couple closer together. Again, in doing so, communication becomes a key factor as they attempt to negotiate relational and identity goals. The results of such negotiation may lead to conflict and/or also to creating a stronger sense of self and independence as it did for some couples in this sample.

**Legal issues, identity processes and independence**

Likewise, other areas mentioned by respondents as a result of their lesbian experience - legal issues, identity processes and independence - appear to contribute to relational dynamics. Because lesbian couples are not afforded amenities related to being a
couple, where heterosexual couples are, complications and stresses result, again, creating
tension which may affect relations.

As for identity processes, some respondents attribute their open and honest
communication, tolerance, and good self image to their processes of identifying and
coming out as a lesbian and suggest this contributes to the level in which this is present in
their current relationship. Indeed, all of these factors were indicated as contributing to
respondents current level of satisfaction in their relationship. Again, this could be a result
of gender socialization, but it seems more likely that it’s a combination of that and a
response to homophobia and the normalization of heterosexuality. In the process of
identifying as lesbian, she steps out against the norm of being heterosexual, typically with
little support from others.

Likewise, independence was identified as being a result of the normalization of
heterosexuality. It is as if a stronger sense of independence is born out the experience of
coming out as a lesbian and being different from the norm. That this sense of
independence seemed to strengthen some respondent’s relationships infers that it is not an
independence within the relationship, but more so an independence from societal norms
and expectations.

So, as a response to the normalization of heterosexuality and as a result of
identifying as a lesbian the characteristics of independence and stronger sense of self may
contribute to higher satisfaction, a more holistic power balance and more constructive
conflict processes within lesbian relationships. This is reinforced in this study by 88% of
those respondents having high satisfaction, a holistic power balance and using constructive
conflict processes as also defining their sexual identity in terms of self. This sense of self seems to evolve from their experiences as a lesbian signifying that sexual orientation does contribute to relational dynamics.

The levels of independence and self awareness will certainly vary depending on one’s experience and directly affect satisfaction, how power is balanced and how conflict is processed. Therefore, it appears that through the interrelationship of particular aspects of lesbian experience the result may contribute to the overall dynamics within lesbian relationships in a way that affects satisfaction, power balance and conflict.

Satisfaction

Not surprisingly most respondents indicate high levels of satisfaction in their relationship. This is a common response to having voluntary participation for talking about one’s relationship. Most people do not voluntarily want to discuss their relationship with someone for research purposes if they are not satisfied in their relationship.

Factors that respondents from this study indicate as contributing to a high level of satisfaction do not corroborate findings in other satisfaction studies. Of those factors indicated by respondents, love, caring and kindness and good self image are the only two factors that resemble correlates of satisfaction revealed by previous studies (see table 1.3) (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984; Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Kurdek, 1991a; Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton, 1982). It is likely this is the result of not using similar scales as were used in those studies. Four of those studies focused specifically on high rewards/low costs or power. These elements were not specifically addressed in
regards to satisfaction by the respondents of this study.

One purpose of this study is to attempt to identify what lesbians deem important to their level of satisfaction and to ideal satisfaction. This sample provides five factors of which at least 25% of the respondents indicate to contribute to current levels of satisfaction and to ideal satisfaction - communication; respect, honesty and trust; good self image and commitment to personal growth; a special connection with their partner; and love, caring and kindness. Other factors contributing to current levels of satisfaction which were represented by at least 25% of the respondents include - emotional support, acceptance of each other's differences and support for each other's growth. These factors are a starting point of identifying particular factors which are important for satisfaction in lesbian couples. More qualitative research could help identify and narrow factors contributing to satisfaction and perhaps more accurately identify factors in regards to lesbian populations, and from there determine if traditional relationship satisfaction scales based on findings in heterosexual couples are valid for lesbian couples.

That communication ranks highest suggests its importance in lesbian relations. As mentioned above, more communication processes may be necessary in order to redefine roles and balance power. 71% of those indicating communication contributing to their current level of satisfaction have a more holistic approach to balancing power and use more constructive conflict processes. What's important here in regards to communication, satisfaction, power balance and conflict processes is that the communication processes need to be productive and forward moving in order to reach higher levels of satisfaction, a more holistic power balance and constructive conflict
Power Balance

It appears that the social exchange notion of power (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1962; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) suffers from some limitations. That power is a property of the relationship is apparent in the efforts to attain and maintain some balance. However, it still seems that the notion of social exchange seems somewhat static. The process seems to assume that one has power over another and the less powerful person tries to balance power. This would be the “exchange” that occurs. From here then, another “exchange” may occur depending on the outcome of the initial exchange and so on.

Additionally, the economic nature of exchange, cost and rewards or dependence relations demands a linear communication process. In each exchange one party tries to gain power from the more powerful party in effort to find balance. I’d suggest that given the “transactional” (Wilmot, 1987) nature of dyadic communication being an ongoing and continuous process among the communicators, shaping and reshaping the relationship, that a balance of power involves each party simultaneously working to maintain a balance. This suggests a more relational nature than that implied by social exchange theories.

Additionally, those in relationship may not be perceiving one having power over the other, yet there can still be a process of maintaining a balance of power. Blau (1964) claims that “interdependence and mutual influence of equal strength indicate a lack of power” (p. 118), suggesting that in an egalitarian relationship there is no power. Yet,
clearly, equality of power does not mean the absence of power, but rather a balance of power. This notion is especially significant for those respondents holding a negative or indifferent view of power. Recognition of various forms of egalitarian power balance or power *with* can empower couples to attain and maintain such a balance.

A balance of power is evident among those couples reporting equal influence and the various processes they appear to use to balance power. For these couples, their power is more evenly distributed than not (they do not see one having more power *over* the other), and it is more of a process of both individuals working simultaneously to maintain a balance of power (rather than an exchange). This is especially apparent in those couples accepting each other's opposite differences, those incorporating give and take plus and those with a utilitarian egalitarian approach.

**Influence and Power Balance**

In regards to couples reporting unequal influence it does not appear that this imbalance is explained by age, income or level of education which corroborates other lesbian couple research (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Lynch & Reilly, 1986; Reilly & Lynch, 1990). That is those individuals supposedly having more influence are not necessarily older, more affluent or more educated than their partners.

The apparent direct relation that those couples with an equal influence also seem to balance power from a more holistic approach suggests that a more relational approach is a more equal approach. Likewise, a more individualistic approach to balancing power will likely be a more unequal approach. As might be implied with an egalitarian approach,
power is viewed as power with rather than the traditional view of power over. However, in comparing power balance among those accepting opposite differences, those using give and take plus and the utilitarian egalitarian, it appears there are varying levels of egalitarian power balance especially in regards to relational aspect. By taking a close look at each of these approaches to balancing power it is apparent there is more depth to the relational aspect of those accepting opposite differences and those using give and take plus than in the utilitarian egalitarian approach. While the utilitarian egalitarian suggests some relational aspects in that the couple works together jointly to attain an equal approach, it is clearly not as obvious in its relational goals as are the other two. Recognizing these various levels of egalitarian approaches can inform further research into egalitarian power balance and at the same time can provide practical information for lesbian couples seeking egalitarian relationships. The notion that there are different levels of egalitarian power balance and seeing what some of those levels can be, as those revealed in this study, can be a starting point for envisioning what egalitarian relationships may entail. For those couples using a more individualistic approach to balancing power and desiring a more egalitarian approach and not having models from which to learn, this information can be helpful.

Dependency

Clearly the notion of dependency is interesting in lesbian relationships. The results of this study indicate that having a strong sense of self and a sense of independence are important. This may contribute to more than half of the sample preferring to have less
dependency on their partner or their partner having less dependency on them. However, just as this is so, 81% and 75% readily admit to being dependent on their partners for social companionship and emotional support respectively. It appears likely that the sense of independence and self awareness stems from their experience as a lesbian and not sensing support from society for their lesbianism and therefore readily seeking companionship and support from their partner.

The paradoxical nature of this dynamic seems to manifest in relationships in varying forms ranging from having a great sense of pride to feeling isolated as a couple. Further research into dependencies in lesbian relationships may reveal more specifically how this paradox affects relational dynamics.

**Power and Satisfaction**

In this study, the only noticeable link between power and satisfaction occurred as a result of having separate interviews - as a couple and individually. Looking at the Power Balance Continuum (table 3.14), of those couples having a more individualistic approach to balance power, at least one individual in each of those couples changed her response across interviews. If indeed, power is a correlate of satisfaction, as indicated in other studies (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984; Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton, 1982), perhaps power dynamics are a factor in reporting level of satisfaction when in the presence of one’s partner. Of those individuals changing their response in regards to current level of satisfaction between interviews, they did report a higher level of satisfaction when in the presence of their partner. Another factor that may contribute to
the change in response may be that level of satisfaction does not remain constant and the satisfaction level could have changed between interviews.

Conflict

Given the relational focus of constructive conflict processes it is not surprising that those couples using constructive processes have a more holistic approach to balancing power and more equal influence in decision making. These couples were also the couples to have altered their approach to conflict from what they learned in their families of origin. Most respondents indicated unproductive family conflict styles, so it is not surprising that those altering their approach to conflict employed more productive and therefore constructive conflict processes.

Additionally, couples using more constructive conflict processes and holistic power balance appeared to recognize the underlying issues of conflict which helped move the conflict forward. Typically, these underlying issues were relational goals and identity goals (Wilmot & Hocker, 1998) relating to defining who they were to each other and who are they as an individual, whereas those couples tending to remain stuck in repetitive conflict did not seem to recognize underlying issues and were focused more on content goals. It would seem that identifying relational goals in conflict, or defining who they are to each other, would be especially significant for those lesbian couples desiring to define relationship roles in terms other than traditional male/female roles. Again, competent interpersonal communication skills could facilitate this process.
Metaphor and Conflict Process

The notion that the type of conflict metaphor matching one’s conflict process was not as reliable as expected. The metaphor analysis presumes such a link will occur (McCorkle & Mills, 1992; Wilmot & Hocker, 1998). While the link did occur for 56% of the respondents it cannot be assumed that how one describes conflict metaphorically is how one processes conflict. However, for those respondents providing metaphors that expand the potential of conflict there is more isomorphism than for the other types of metaphors. That is, of those using expansive metaphors their conflict process more likely matched than those using neutral or limiting metaphors. This could be attributed to the fact that conflict is traditionally perceived as negative in Western culture and to have a more positive and expansive perspective would likely alter one’s behavior in conflict toward that perspective. However, it is necessary to recognize the impact race or ethnicity may have on perceptions of conflict. While a person of a particular race or ethnicity may have an expansive perspective of conflict, in mixed race or ethnic relations, the conflict behavior may not necessarily appear to be constructive. This was somewhat evident for one couple of this study who suggested ethnicity contributed to conflict perception and behavior, and that over the period of the relationship the respondent modified her behavior from what would have been acceptable in relations with others of her ethnic background.

Likewise, factors likely to contribute to such variance for those not having metaphors that match conflict process include 1) changing perspectives toward conflict, 2) recognizing the overriding value and opportunity for self and relational growth while at
the same time feeling uncomfortable addressing conflict and, 3) being asked outright to
describe conflict metaphorically. Perspectives toward conflict can vary depending on
one’s history and experience with conflict. At the same time, some individuals may
change the way they approach conflict but the way they view conflict may not keep up
with that change. Finally, while some individuals may easily provide a conflict metaphor
when asked it may be more accurate to observe every day talk to get a better sense of
metaphoric language used to describe conflict experiences.

These findings reinforce the complex process of conflict analysis and the number of
factors to consider when investigating conflict perceptions. While metaphor analysis can
be a part of that process, there are other factors to consider in order to get a more
accurate and complete portrayal of one’s perceptions of conflict. Such factors include the
combination of general feelings toward conflict, race and ethnicity and conflict history and
experience.

**Conflict Process, Power Balance and Satisfaction**

The results of this study in power balance and conflict processes reinforce the
notion that power and conflict are fundamentally interrelated (Wilmot & Hocker, 1998).
The analysis of power balance for each couple investigated how couples managed their
relationship conflict. Likewise, the analysis of conflict processes investigates particular
processes relevant to balancing power.

That so many couples indicated fairly high satisfaction is not consistent with what
was expected in relation to the findings for power balance and conflict processes. What it
does portray is that some couples appear to feel comfortable enough with the particular levels of individualistic power balance and destructive conflict processes to remain in relationship with each other to continue their efforts to resolve relational issues. Factors contributing to the variance in satisfaction, power balance and conflict processes may include varying levels of self growth and self acceptance, varying levels of interpersonal communication competency, and denial. Having a good self image seemed to be an important factor for many respondents in communicating their self and relational needs and desires with their partners, and respondents varied in their levels of self image. Additionally, those couples with a more holistic relational approach to balancing power appeared to have more skills and abilities to communicate interpersonally. Finally, some respondents did not appear to have a clear sense of the particular dynamics occurring in their relationship that may have contributed to unequal power balance and destructive conflict processes and therefore less satisfaction.

Comparison of Conflict Processes To Other Couples

Much of the research on conflict in lesbian couples focuses on comparison to heterosexual and/or gay couples. Again, while it is not the intent of this study to provide comparisons, the couples’ own comparison may provide insight for further comparison studies. Given the responses in regards to comparing their own conflict process to heterosexual couples, the responses are not surprising. The respondents offered responses that corroborate what they said about how their gender or lesbianism affects their relational dynamics.
Overall, respondents believe they process conflict better than heterosexual couples because of more communication depth, having less power differential with less rigidly defined roles and gender. While these factors tend to overlap, the respondents provide some description that may explain factors other than affects of gender socialization. Again, some respondents indicate their experience as a lesbian seemed to contribute toward self acceptance & awareness and in turn helped develop more openness to dealing with conflict. Likewise, those couples balancing power dynamics through a more holistic approach seemed to suggest a greater awareness and understanding of who they are to each other and as a result may have more competent communication with each other.

Given the results of their comparisons to heterosexual couples and the previously discussed factors contributing to relational dynamics, it appears that differences between heterosexual, lesbian and gay couples may not be simply explained by gender. It appears there is a complex interconnecting web of gender socialization and lesbian experience affects, and while it's difficult to distinguish precisely how, it does appear that the result of particular experiences as a lesbian may contribute toward how they relate in conflict.

Likewise, responses comparing their conflict processes to other women couples are also not surprising. Most respondents saw their processes as similar or better than other women couples’ processes. It is common to attribute better qualities to one's own process when comparing with others. It is interesting that 19% of the sample viewing their processes better than other women couples and 38% viewing their processes better than heterosexual couples use more destructive conflict processes themselves. They may not have a clear sense of their own conflict processes and/or perhaps the couples they
compared themselves to are much more destructive.

Third Party

Not surprisingly, those couples using a third party or that would consider a third party to help resolve conflict turned to therapists or counselors. Most had little knowledge of what a mediator might be able to do and most thought mediation would not be appropriate for the emotional level of issues involved. While mediation is not the answer for all relational problems, these results indicate the need for educating lesbian populations of the option of mediation for relational conflict.

Conclusion

The purpose for this research was to explore relational dynamics in lesbian couples in regards to satisfaction, power and conflict. Identifying considerations relevant to lesbian populations and determining their affect on relational dynamics illuminates our understanding of satisfaction, power and conflict in lesbian couples.

What this research does reveal is:

- Common factors contributing to current and ideal satisfaction by at least 25% of the respondents include - communication; respect, honesty and trust; good self image and commitment to personal growth; special connection with partner; and, love, caring and kindness. That communication ranks highest suggests its importance in lesbian relations. This provides a beginning for further research to develop scales for lesbian couple satisfaction or to determine if traditional
relationship satisfaction scales based on heterosexual couples are valid for lesbian

couples.

- Power balance is more relational than social exchange theory implies. Power is
present in egalitarian relationships, and both parties, regardless of the balance of
power, work simultaneously to balance power.

- There are varying levels of egalitarian power balance as is revealed by the power
balance continuum. Some levels may be more relationally oriented than others.

- Analysis of conflict processes reveal a symmetrical continuum with power balance
reinforcing the interrelationship of power and conflict.

- The power balance/conflict continuum provides a practical model for relationship
assessment from a communication perspective in regards to power and conflict
processes.

- Those couples using more individualistic power balance and destructive conflict
processes were not significantly less satisfied in their relationships. These couples
feel comfortable with their current dynamics to remain in the relationship and
continue their efforts to resolve relational issues.

- Identifying features, in particular, self and global connection to women, indicate
that for some women there is more to being lesbian or a lesbian couple than just
partnering with women. Providing identifying features helps to more clearly define
the sample when definitions in regards to lesbian and lesbian couples are not
consistent and continue to evolve.

- Factors related to sexual orientation contribute to relational dynamics as a result of
lesbian's experiences and responses to the normalization of heterosexuality. This contributes new explanations for research in regards to relational dynamics for lesbian couples.

- Respondents describing their sexual identity in terms of self were more likely to have high satisfaction, use a holistic approach to balancing power and use more constructive conflict processes.

- Corroboration that gender socialization does contribute to relational dynamics in lesbian couples.

This study challenges the common single attribution, of gender, for conflict differences when comparing heterosexual, gay and lesbian couples. Given the factors of homophobia, less defined roles and other factors of lesbian experience and that women are socialized to be concerned for equity, lesbian couples' approach to power balance and conflict processes may entail more complex communication processes to attain equity. This may manifest itself in the relationship in regards to identifying or recognizing relational and identity goals in conflict. The couple's combination of affects of factors relating to their lesbian experience and how they manage that will become apparent in their power balance and conflict processes.
APPENDIX A

Interview questions for couples

Identification - how the couple identifies themselves

Do you define yourselves as a "lesbian couple?" If not, how would you define yourselves?

Using what term you use to "define" your coupleness, describe what it means to you.

Outness - how "out" the couple is

As a couple, with whom do you feel most comfortable?

With whom are you out to as a couple?

How public are you with your outness? For example, what kind of affection do you display in public?

What, if any, discrepancies arise between you in determining who you are out to as a couple?

Satisfaction in relationship

Considering the following scale, as a couple, how satisfied would you say you are?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very Satisfied</th>
<th>Fairly Satisfied</th>
<th>Somewhat Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Very Dissatisfied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

What contributes to this level of satisfaction?

As a couple, what do you think are the most important factors that contribute to a satisfying relationship?

Power

As a couple, who do you think has more say about what you do together?
How do you go about determining what decisions are to be made jointly? separately?

What are some examples of decisions you see yourselves making jointly? (from small tasks to large investments)

What sources of power do you see each other having when it comes to making joint decisions? (use particular examples of decisions they just provided)

What are some examples of decisions you see yourselves making separately?

What sources of power do you see each other having when it comes to making these decisions?

How would you describe your dependency on each other?

How do you feel about these dependencies?

What do you, as a couple, to balance power in your relationship?

How would you describe an "ideal" power balance in your relationship?

How does the balance of power in your relationship measure against that ideal?

How have you felt threatened, if you have, in any decision making processes?

Conflict

How do you feel about conflict, as a couple?

As a couple, how would you describe your perception of conflict metaphorically?

What are some of the issues, in which you have serious differences, that stand out to you, as a couple?

How frequently do these issues arise?

How is it that these issues come to your awareness?

Describe what happens when they do come to your awareness? What is your response? How do you behave?

Describe how you communicate to each other, if you do, what it is you want when
such issues arise.

Describe what gets in the way of issues getting resolved.

Describe what happens to get conflict resolved.
Have you ever used a third party to assist in resolution of problems? If so, who has that been? (not names, but profession or relation)

Closing

Describe how you think that your being a same sex couple has anything to do with the relational dynamics in your relationship.

What more would you like to tell me about the relational dynamics of your relationship?

Interview questions for individuals

Self Identity

Do you define yourself as a lesbian? If not how do you define yourself?

If so, describe what about being a lesbian shapes your identity of yourself.

Do you and your partner have differing views of your how you identify yourselves? Describe these.

Outness

To whom are you out?

Would you say you are more, less or similarly out as your partner? What makes you believe so?

What issues arise for you in any differences between your partner and you and who to be out to or how out you are?

Satisfaction with relationship

Considering the following scale, how satisfied would you say you are with your
relationship?

| Very Satisfied | Fairly Satisfied | Satisfied | Somewhat Dissatisfied | Very Dissatisfied |

What contributes to this level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction?

What do you see as being the most important contributors to a satisfying relationship?

Power

What tasks and/or decisions do you consider to be the most significant in your relationship with ____?

Who do you think has more influence in those tasks or decisions? What makes you say this?

What do you do to gain influence for what you want in your relationship?

How would you describe your dependency on your partner? or, In what ways are you dependent on your partner?

How do you feel about your dependency on her for this?

How would you describe her dependency on you? or, In what ways is your partner dependent on you?

How do you feel about her dependency on you for this?

What sources of power do you see yourself having in this relationship?

What sources of power do you see your partner having in this relationship?

What do you and your partner do to balance power?

Do you ever feel threatened by your partner? Explain how.

Who do you think has the most influence in your relationship? In what ways?
Conflict

Describe how you feel about conflict.

If you were to describe conflict metaphorically, what would that metaphor be?

Even though you and your partner might be quite satisfied with your relationship, you and your partner may sometimes have serious differences on some issues. What are some of these issues that stand out to you?

How often do these issues arise?

How does this problem come to your awareness?

How is it, or is it, dealt with?

How do you communicate your goals when these issues arise? What do you do/say to communicate what you want in this (each issue) situation?

How does your partner get in the way of what you want?

How does ____ communicate what she wants in this situation?

How do you get in the way of what she wants?

In what ways have your goals in these situations changed over time? To what do you attribute this to?

In what ways have ____ goals in these situations changed over time? To what do you attribute this to?

How would you characterize your behavior in these situations?

How would you characterize ____ behavior in these situations?

In what ways do you think your behavior affects your partner's response?

In what ways does her behavior affect your response?

What other alternatives have you considered when it seems issues will not get resolved?

Have you ever considered involving a third party to help resolve problems? If so,
who?

Closing

Describe how you think your sexual identity affects how you relate in this relationship.

Describe how you think that being in a same sex couple affects your relational dynamics with _____.

What more do you wish to tell me about the relational dynamics of your relationship with _____.


APPENDIX B

Interview Consent and Confidentiality Form

To the participant:

As a graduate student in Communication Studies at the University of Montana, I am researching relational dynamics of women couples for my Master’s Thesis. My research involves interviewing various women couples.

Each interview should last approximately 1 - 1 1/2 hours, and I will conduct interviews with each couple and with each individual. I will ask questions regarding communication and relational dynamics in your current relationship.

Interviews will be recorded on audio tape and then transcribed. Tapes and transcriptions will remain in my security.

Your name, any other names and any other identifying factors which are mentioned during the interview will remain confidential. False names will be used in place of real names on the transcripts and in my final report.

Participation in the interviews is voluntary, and you may refrain from answering specific questions or request to end the interview for any reason at any time.

Although I believe there are no risks involved in your participation in this research, the University of Montana requires the following statement:

In the event that you are injured as a result of this research you should individually seek appropriate medical treatment. If the injury is caused by the negligence of the University or any of its employees, you may be entitled to reimbursement or compensation pursuant to the Comprehensive State Insurance Plan established by the Department of Administration under the authority of M.C.A., Title 2, Chapter 9. In the event of a claim for such injury, further information may be obtained from the University’s Claims Representative or University Legal Counsel.

By signing this consent form, you understand the above conditions and agree to be interviewed for the research stated above.

Participant signature ___________________________ Date ___________
APPENDIX C

Background Information

Age __________

Race ________________________________

Level of Education ____________________________

Occupation ___________________________________

Individual Average Income ______________________________

   Do you pool money with your partner?       Yes       No

   If so, how much do you pool?               All       Partial

   If partial, for what types of purchases? _______________________

How long have you been in relationship with your current partner? ________________

How long have you identified as “lesbian?” _____________________________________

If you identify as other than “lesbian,” please indicate that identification and how long identified: ____________________________________________

How did you find out about this study? __________________________________________
References


McWhirter, S., Sanders, & J. Reinisch (Eds.), Homosexuality/heterosexuality: Concepts of sexual orientation (pp. 321-349). NY: Oxford University Press.


Records.
