THREE

Friends, Lovers, and Families: The Impact of AIDS on Gay and Lesbian Relationships

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In many Western societies, one of the most contested cultural debates centers on lesbian and gay relationships, such as legalized same-sex unions, child custody and adoption cases, domestic partner benefits, and social and legal redefinitions of the concept of family and friendships. Although many of these issues have been a part of lesbian and gay life for decades, others are a result of the encounter with HIV/AIDS in the early 1980s. This chapter traces the historical and contemporary ways in which many lesbians and gay men have organized their romantic, sexual, familial, and friendship relationships and how these may have been affected by the changing times brought about by HIV.

As the everyday lives of gays and lesbians become more visible, attention to the range of our interpersonal relationships similarly grows. And with the appearance of HIV/AIDS, sexual, romantic, and friendship relationships have emerged as central concerns both within and outside lesbian and gay communities. Both anecdotal evidence and popular discourse allege that significant changes related to romantic relationships, family life, and sex have occurred during the AIDS decades.

For example, in the early years of the growing AIDS pandemic, an opinion piece in The Advocate by gay activist/writer Doug Sadownik (1985: 8) claimed that AIDS “hasn’t only changed the way gay men make love . . . it’s also made a serious dent in the way we sometimes fall into it—and stay in it. . . . [T]he health crisis refereed as the built-in ‘marriage counselor’ of the ’80s.” He argued that the post-Stonewall generation looks to relationships and monogamy as one way of dealing

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with gay identity in an era of health concerns and survival. "How can one be sexually liberated when the answer, even from gay men, is to marry?" he asked (1985: 9).

What's interesting in Sadownick's article is not only the perceived relationship between the appearance of AIDS and the supposed turn toward monogamy and commitment, but also his use of the word "marry." That it is clearly understood to mean a committed relationship between two men, and not a legal marriage license for same-gender couples, or a reference to some heterosexual "marriage of convenience," represents a significant shift over the years of the changing concepts of marriage, relationships, and family for gays and lesbians.

But his article also represents the way in which some gay men and lesbians began to talk about their lives and communities, often as a result of the discourse used in the mainstream and gay media to construct the impact of AIDS on gay "lifestyles." Seidman (1992: 161, 165) argues that

The liberal media has used AIDS to rehabilitate a pre-gay liberation ideal of the 'respectable homosexual': discreet, coupled, monogamous and cohabiting, bound by love, shared responsibilities, and property. . . . Stories abound in the gay media . . . [that] describe a pre-AIDS period of immaturity and indulgence, with AIDS marks [sic] the great turning point where, after a protracted period of soul-searching, one is reborn, and the profligate, self-destructive ways of the past given up for the new morality of health, romance, and monogamy.

It is a difficult task to demonstrate a direct cause-effect connection between the encounter with HIV and how gay men and lesbians changed the way they talked about and enacted their relationships. Still, it is possible to illustrate some of the differences in the language, the images, and the behavior associated with gay men's and lesbians' sexual, romantic, familial, and friendship lives before and during the HIV/AIDS years.

**Friends and Families**

Many of the ways in which gay men and lesbians encounter AIDS/HIV emerge when discussing the changing organization of, and discourses about, family and friends. Weston (1991: 196) states the argument succinctly:

The emergence of gay families represents a major historical shift, particularly when viewed against the prevalent assumption that claiming a lesbian or gay identity must mean leaving blood relatives behind and foregoing any possibility of establishing a family of one's own, unless a person is willing to make the compromise of hiding out in a marriage of convenience. . . . This entire shift has happened within a relatively brief period of time.

The concept of "chosen families," in contrast to biogenetically based families of blood, challenges the cultural assumptions that procreation alone determines kinship (see Maxey, 1986). Because of changes in the social context for disclosing gay identity to others, in attempts to build an urban gay community, and in a lesbian baby boom, images and discourse have been transformed from "lesbians/gays = no family" to "lesbians/gays = chosen families" (Weston, 1991). Although some gays and lesbians—particularly those from ethnic, racial, and class backgrounds that emphasize strong concepts of family—continue to restrict family terminology to biological kin, the language of kinship among friends and lovers has developed quite visibly in the past decade.

This change, especially prominent during the AIDS decades, has its roots in the early years of an emerging gay community. There was a developing understanding that gays and lesbians were an oppressed minority, imprisoned by the hegemonic heterosexual culture. For many, the debate to organize a "highly ethical homosexual culture" centered on issues of assimilation: whether to seek respectability within the framework of the dominant ideologies or to create alternative socio-political structures that challenge the social order (D'Emilio, 1983). This tension—which is apparent in the issue of gay marriage—has also persisted to the present day in discussions about sexuality and relationships.

The language used to describe the growing sense of community and identity among many lesbians and gay men illustrates these arguments. Before Stonewall, the word "family" was often limited to family of origin, as in Cory (1951). But it was not uncommon then (and even today) for people to signal that others were also gay or lesbian by suggesting that they were "a member of the family," and sometimes with even more explicit kinship terminology. Chauncey (1994: 291) describes how many gay men in the 1920s adopted fictive kinship relationships and called each other "sisters" (those never "married" to each other) or "aunties" (elderly men). Both of these categories of people remain protected by "incest" taboos from sexual involvement.

Warren (1973: 109–110) found similar kinship concepts forty years later among the gay men she got to know in "Sun City" from 1968 to
1973: “several words used to describe community relationships are social kinship words like mother, auntie, and sister. . . . Gay people are bound by bloodlike ties of fate and community as are aunts and nephews or mothers and sisters, and their sociable interaction has the same formal and obligatory character as visits from relatives.”

Rodgers’ (1972: 181) definition of “sister” in his gay dictionary shows the “incest” taboo of these fictive kinships: “[He will share anything but his bed with friends. A sister is sexually neutral with his comrades; he is a chum, not a lover. Sisters are in the same business, but only as competition.” Other entries in the book include such terms as “auntie,” “sugar daddy,” “brother,” “mother,” “mom,” and “daughter,” some used by lesbians and others by gay men.

For the most part, kinship terms were one way of signifying who were nonsexual, “just friends” in opposition to those who were “more than friends” in a sexual sense (see Nardi & Sherrod, 1994). This is evident in Crowley’s (1968: 134) play The Boys in the Band: “No man’s still got a roommate when he’s over thirty years old. If they’re not lovers, they’re sisters.” Sonenschein (1968) made a similar argument that gay men separated those who met their sexual needs from those who met their social ones. And Weston (1991: 120) observes that “This reservation of kinship terminology for nonsexual relations represents a very different usage from its subsequent deployment to construct gay families that could include both lovers and friends.”

Interestingly, in the years after Stonewall, as gay identity became more politicized and as sexuality and friendship became more openly discussed, many of these kinship terms became “camp” references to preliberation years or were transformed into political and community terms, such as in the gay (“we are family”), women’s (“sisterhood”), and civil rights movements (“brother to brother”). References to “daddy” and “son” appear in sexual classified ads in gay men’s publications, but not always in the same way in which “sugar daddy” was once defined. Rather than “an auntie with money,” or an older man who supports a younger lover (Rodgers, 1972: 191), the contemporary terms “daddy” and “son” reflect physical types, intergenerational attraction, and sometimes sexual relationships of dominance and submission.

Although kinship terminology was often used to describe others in one’s nonsexual friendship circle in the past, it could be argued that many were not quite yet defining themselves as a family, either metaphorically or as an alternative form. Part of the move in that direction began by reconstructing friends and lovers as two ends of a continuum rather than as oppositional categories (see Nardi, 1992a). Weston (1991: 122) argues that “the shift from contrast to continuum laid the ground for the rise of a family-centered discourse that bridged the erotic and the nonerotic, bringing lovers together with friends under a single construct.”

The importance of friends in the organization of gay identity was evident, of course, long before Stonewall, as Chauncey (1994) demonstrates, but it took on more political meanings in the 1970s and more family terminology during the AIDS years. Although she did not use the word “family” to describe the gay men she studied, Hooker (1965: 101) notes that they regularly gathered in “cliques, groups, and networks of friends” to celebrate anniversaries, birthdays, and other special occasions together. Similarly, with the rise of counterculture communities during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Barnhart (1975: 92) describes a lesbian residential community in Oregon as a “partial alternative form of family unit. . . . a psychological kin group” made up of “sisters,” many of whom were lovers and ex-lovers.

Conceptualizing their relationships as alternative family forms, and not just metaphorically as brothers and sisters, has been a significant part of the “house” subculture of drag balls and voguing for some time, best depicted in the documentary “Paris Is Burning.” The predominantly Latino and African American working-class men organize a kinship structure in which a “mother and father supervise the training and activities of their ‘children’” (Goldsby, 1989: 35). For many of them, often alienated and rejected from their families of origin, these houses are not metaphors or fictive kinship structures, derivative of “real” kinship, but transformations of kinship relations organized around the principle of choice.

The saliency of families of choice was also recognized in the larger culture, especially in the therapeutic professions (see Sherhoff, 1984; Stein, 1988), and the national movement in the alcohol and drug rehabilitation fields toward family therapy. Many agencies and recovery programs restructured during the late 1970s and early 1980s to incorporate family members of the client on the belief that the entire social unit contributed to the problems and that the abusing was not simply an individual pathology (Nardi, 1982). Many, if not most, of these family programs allowed for a broader definition of family, encouraging friends, lovers, and even housemates to participate in the recovery program. As Hall (1978: 380) stated almost twenty years ago in an article on lesbian families, “As the traditional nuclear family declines as the norm in this country—in numbers if not in influence—members
of alternative families are appearing with greater frequency in the agency offices and clinical practices of social workers."

In the years just before AIDS was recognized, the importance of friends as family was an acknowledged part of gay and lesbian life. Vetere (1982: 61) observed that “friendship is a prime developmental and maintenance factor in the respondents’ lesbian love relationships.” Altman (1982: 190) also wrote:

> what many gay lives miss in terms of permanent relationships is more than compensated for by friendship networks, which often become de facto families. . . . Former lovers often are drawn into such networks, so that many gays are surrounded by a rich network of friends (often originally sexual partners) and past and present lovers, which can be far more supportive than are most nuclear families.

Thus the shift from kinship terms to indicate nonsexual friends in the pre-Stonewall years, to the ideology of family metaphors and fictive kinship to describe an identity-based sociopolitical community of lovers and friends in the 1970s, sets the stage for the AIDS years. “Friends as family” took on a variety of political, sexual, and relationship meanings (Nardi, 1992b) and, as Hayden (1995: 49) said about lesbian kinship, it “refigures the alignment of gender and power roles which have traditionally marked the American family.”

The power of the chosen family is evident when AIDS becomes an issue. Often the family gets defined as those who are available to offer care, money, and emotional support during the illness, regardless of biology. For many, the family of origin was not the major source of assistance. But some gays and lesbians of color, in particular those from Latino cultures, often remain in close contact with their families, thereby creating some possible tensions around identity and illness (see Murray, 1995). Conflicts can arise over care and, if death occurs, “disputes over whether families we choose constitute ‘real’ or legitimate kin can affect wills, distribution of possessions . . . listings of survivors in obituaries, and dispositions of the body” (Weston, 1991: 186). Hence the rise in importance of domestic partner legislation in the 1980s.

What once was a debate within the gay and lesbian communities over what defines a family soon became larger political, religious, economic, and media issues. Newspapers were challenged to redefine family members and next of kin to include “longtime companions” in obituaries (Nardi, 1990) and courts were asked to rule on whether lesbian and gay couples were families, as the New York State Court of Appeals (in Braschi v. Stahl Associates) did in 1989, when it held that unmarried cohabitants constitute families under the state’s rent-control law (Harvard Law Review Editors, 1990).

Part of the shift from a collective to an interpersonal kinship language is illustrated by the legal and social challenges related to the birthing and raising of children, especially among lesbians (Burke, 1993). Riley (1988: 87) argues that “Parenting relationships are perhaps the most significant changes in kinship among lesbians.” Definitions of what constitutes parents and kinship, in the absence of heterosexual intercourse and both genders, have been challenged by the lesbian baby boom (Lewin, 1993) and by court cases seeking to clarify the legal rights of a same-gender coparent (Harvard Law Review Editors, 1990). Legalization of second-parent adoptions in New York and California and a New Mexico ruling granting a nonbiological parent visitation rights have led Nonas (1992: 52) to conclude that “lesbians and gay men with children are one more segment of the population redefining what constitutes a functional family.”

But Crawford (1987) makes an insightful point when she argues that the lesbian family most conveniently recognized in our culture is the single-parent model, not the two-parent version, thereby avoiding the lesbian dimensions of the relationships. Still, these ideas of gay parenting are a long way from Cory's (1951: 189) characterization of gay men getting heterosexually married to fulfill a desire to have children because, as an orthodox Freudian told him, they have “a strong mother instinct, actually desiring to give birth. . . . they want to become a mother, not a father.”

Advertisements in gay and lesbian publications also illustrate the shift from a collective kinship terminology to individual relationships. The back cover of the 1993 Community Yellow Pages (Los Angeles's lesbian and gay directory) featured an ad for a medical group claiming, “Families today are different. So are their Doctors”. The tag line read “Family Practice for Today's Families” and accompanied four photographs, one of a lesbian couple with a cat, one with a male and baby, another of two women of very different ages (possibly a mother with a teenage daughter), and one of a gay male couple with dog. All imitated traditional heterosexual images (including gendered stereotypes about pets); none was a family of friends.

Soon after the 1992 Republican National Convention’s attack on the lack of “traditional family values,” more ads appeared appropriating the concept, but always in terms of individual relationships, rather than the collective concept that described the gay community of the
1970s. The cover of the October 8, 1992 issue of *Frontiers*, a Los Angeles gay newsmagazine, proclaimed “Family” and was illustrated with a framed photo of a Black man hugging a White man, holding their dog, with an old family photo of mom, dad, and baby in the background.

Other ads in the magazine included one encouraging people to vote for Bill Clinton for president, headlined “Defend Our Family Values” and illustrated with a photo of two women and their young boy; another was for gay and lesbian greeting cards stating, “Family Values to put your stamp on” and showing a card with two men walking arm in arm with their two dogs. And several chapters of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation put up billboards depicting a lesbian couple, one pregnant, with the phrase “Another Traditional Family.”

What is missing, however, are the depictions of gay families made up of friends as well as lovers. It is also not clear how gay families are constituted by gays and lesbians of different races, ages, and social classes. Although Clunis and Green (1988: 106) claim that “for lesbians and lesbian couples, this network of friends, children, and relatives constitutes a chosen family,” the discussions and images have decidedly favored the concept of gay and lesbian families primarily as a couple with child and/or pets and secondarily as a more collective one.

Whatsoever the configuration, the current definitions of gay and lesbian families emphasize the notion of choice over genetic ties, as Weston (1991: 202) argues: “By substituting images of creation and selection for the logic of reproduction and succession, discourse on gay families can—and does—remind people of their power to alter the circumstances into which they were born.” And this has been the major change since the era when “family” typically signified a discussion of family of origin.

**Romantic and Sexual Relationships**

Anecdotes about the increasing emphasis among gay men on “settling down” with a lover, dating more before sex, and staying in relationships longer proliferated throughout the 1980s as responses to the AIDS pandemic. Weston (1991: 159) has argued that “The appearance of AIDS, too, had ushered in a renewed emphasis on relationships among gay men,” and Marks (1988: 70) quotes a San Francisco psychologist who claims that “Everyone is looking to couple up.... People are coming out to settle down instead of coming out into an atmosphere to be wild.”

For lesbians, anecdotal evidence appears in the popular press about the growing commercialization of sex and the increasing desire to have or raise children in reconstructed families. For example, Miller (1989: 178) claims (without much empirical evidence) that “as lesbians moved towards a more openly sexual stance, many men, facing AIDS, were retreating towards the very sexual patterns lesbians were questioning or abandoning.” He observes that while gay men were confronting issues of mortality, lesbians were dealing with issues of having babies; while men were moving away from sexual experimentation, women were moving away from sexual repression; and while men moved toward questions about living a life away from the “fun and frivolity” of the ’70s, lesbians were becoming less dogmatic and earnest about their lives.

The implication of these writings is that many gay men are settling down more into committed, longer-term, and monogamous relationships during the AIDS decades to a greater extent than in the 1970s or earlier, although many lesbians are becoming more sexually active. These points are not easy to verify, given the lack of longitudinal survey data. Furthermore, any variations related to class, race, and region cannot be assessed, since almost all of the studies and documents cited below emphasize White, middle-class, urban gays and lesbians. From a review of some accounts about gay romantic and sexual relationships before HIV, however, we can evaluate how discussions about same-sex coupling, “gay marriage,” and sexual monogamy were presented.

**Gay Marriage: Some Historical Comments**

To understand romantic and sexual relationships in the AIDS era, it is important first to remind ourselves about the ways in which some gay men and lesbians organized their lives before HIV. Books and articles about gay marriage often referred to gays and lesbians getting heterosexually married. If there was a need to signify a gay relationship instead, the word “marriage” was typically put in quotation marks, as Hooker (1959: 30) did when referring to long-lasting homosexual couples as “‘marriage’ partners.” Donald Webster Cory’s *The Homosexual in America* (1951) also illustrates this distinction between heterosexual marriages of convenience and homosexual “marriages.” A chapter entitled “Till Death Do Us Part” is not about committed gay relationships; it is a discussion of how some men find it necessary to marry women to cope with the hostilities of being alone and gay.

Although many gay men and lesbians found some form of commu-
nity in a few large urban centers and many were in same-sex couples (Chauncey [1994] describes uses of the word “husband” and “marriage with fairies” among some working-class men in 1920s New York), for others, the “homosexual lifestyle” was a lonely, isolated experience filled with short-term sexual adventures, often out of sight of a legal spouse. Gay people needed to hear stories from each other about how they could have a committed relationship with someone of the same gender and were not just limited to a series of lonely sexual episodes. Hence a typical question of the early gay literature would phrase it as Cory (1951: 133) did: “Is it possible or desirable for two people of the same sex to be in love with each other, just as a man is in love with a woman; to show the same affection and interest, to offer the same loyalty, to form a union as permanent?” Negative answers to this question often stated that it was not impossible, but that psychological and biological barriers were more likely to prevent love and commitment. The “nature” of gay men was seen to be promiscuous, due in part to the belief in the inability of achieving real sexual pleasure with another man.

But some men were seeking permanent unions and mimicking heterosexual marriages. Stearn (1961: 215) said: “Many homosexuals living together speak of themselves as married, occasionally referring to their partners as ‘my husband’ or ‘my wife.’ And while the majority of homosexual relationships are fleeting affairs, some relationships are as enduring as heterosexual unions and the principals seem as devoted.” As an outsider observing the homosexual world, however, Stearn (1961: 217) described a gay marriage ceremony as a way of providing “a twisted link with the normal world whose approval they secretly covet.” For him and other writers of that era, committed gay couples were seen to be seeking traditional middle-class respectability by imitating heterosexual life. In a December 1963 New York Times article, headlined “Growth of Overt Homosexuality Provokes Wide Concern” Doty wrote, “Many homosexuals dream of forming a permanent attachment that would give them the sense of social and emotional stability others derive from heterosexual marriage, but few achieve it.”

In much of the early gay literature, “marriage” was almost a code letting gay men and lesbians know that they, indeed, were not alone, and could find someone else such as themselves with whom to settle down and gain social respectability, difficult as it might be. It did not signify an alternative form of heterosexual marriage with its own religious ceremonies, legal recognition, and spousal benefits. Marlowe (1965: 149) believed that “homosexual ‘marriage’ is a very real and greatly desired experience. In general, it is impractical and nearly impossible, but not improbable.”

Hauser (1962: 51) wrote that “Only the homosexuals who have a lasting affair and are faithful to one another will be considered ‘married’. . . . [These couples do not normally mix with other homosexuals.] Because of the belief in fidelity as an essential characteristic of marriage, Hauser felt that the chances were slim for homosexuals to form relationships, since it is rare to remain faithful. But, as Plummer (1963: 55) wrote, “most homosexuals regard the ‘married’ state or ‘affair’ as the ideal for all of us, even if at times it seems unobtainable.” Some of this language and conceptualization of gay relationships as “marriage-like” can be found in articles in One, a 1950s magazine that grew out of the original Mattachine Society in Los Angeles. What is first noticeable is the dearth of articles on the topic of gay marriages. Using the index, I found only four major articles on the subject. In a cover story for the August 1953 issue, Saunders (1953: 11) argued that “even among the most stable and respectable of homosexuals, there are very few who have lived together an appreciable time.” He made a case for homosexual marriages as a way of gaining social acceptance, but he (p. 12) also warned that with equal marriage rights come equal limitations: “necessary homosexual monogamy.” Clearly, for Saunders, copying heterosexual marriage also meant copying the ideology of what marriage supposedly meant. And part of that 1950s ideology was the assumption that sex and marriage were for procreation, as several letters in the October and November issues of One reminded the readers.

Another side of the debate was presented in April 1959, in the context of a society’s rapidly changing values and attitudes toward marriage. Sounding a refrain similar to today’s, Stoessel (1959: 7) claimed that the family as “the basic unit of loyalty” had collapsed, but for him that was not such a bad thing: “Often marriage has served as a legal sanction for possessing another human being, or for being possessed. At times its rights have resembled property rights.” So why marry? The freedom of not having to marry, he argued, allowed homosexuals to seek other reasons for association and to experiment with other forms of relationships.

Stoessel (1959: 7) concluded, “One can only hope that homosexuals will not spend their part of freedom on getting a crack at the old marital system with its ownership and jealous rights, traits that ought to be disappearing into man’s ancient and primitive past.” But Baker (1959), in a response to a letter from a reader of her column, praised perma-
sent gay marriages and discussed how some homosexual couples have adopted and reared children. Wetmore and Arlec (1956), writing in the *Mattachine Review*, similarly sung the virtues of their nine-year “moral and spiritual union.”

In 1963, an article entitled “Let’s Push Homophile Marriage” presented gay marriage as “new, a modern concept” and a way of life that was “much, much superior” to the lonely, promiscuous single life of the homosexual (Lloyd, 1963: 5). Letters in later issues about this article included a rebuke for copying heterosexual life (August 1963) and one arguing that since marriage is a sacred rite, if gay marriage were allowed, the heterosexual world could accuse homosexuals of making a mockery of the institution (September 1963). To assimilate our lives to the heterosexual culture or to transform the institutions to fit our lives remains a heated debate thirty years later (see Kirk & Madsen, 1989; Sullivan, 1995).

What is most telling, however, is the relative absence of much discussion about the topic during the pre-Stonewall years. The call was not to reshape the institution of marriage or to challenge the existing laws and religious ceremonies, but to get homosexuals to adjust to the conventions of society to be accepted. Robert Wood (1960: 198–199), a Congregationalist minister from Spring Valley, New York, made perhaps one of the first published cases in this period for religiously and legally recognizing homosexual marriages:

I am not now discussing a legal marriage between a man and a woman, both of whom are homosexuals, but, rather, a union between two members of the same sex. . . . [W]e must not lose sight of the validity of a union between two men or two women who are truly in love and who really want to spend the rest of their lives together. . . . It follows, then, that if he is seeking a home life, a lifelong, life-sharing relationship with one person, there is no reason why such a relationship should not be considered a marriage. If we are to treat him like everyone else in our parish or community or office, why put his union in a distinct classification?

But a political dimension to gay marriages had not yet emerged, since a political concept of gay identity was only starting to develop. Part of the process of creating identity was an attempt to get gays and lesbians to see themselves not in pathological individualistic terms, but as people who, when organized into some collective sense of identity, could have a happy and successful life. Seeing the possibility of romantic relationships as committed, marriage-like unions was one of those attempts: “you have a bond as firm as that of a great many legal marriages” (Cory, 1951: 238).

A growing public awareness of gay identity and politics emerged more rapidly after the Stonewall rebellion in 1969. And with it came an increase in media attention to gay and lesbian lives and relationships, especially gay marriages. A front-page, two-part feature on “The Boom in Gay Marriages” in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in July 1970 (Grieg, 1970) reported several attempts around the country (including Louisville, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles) by gay and lesbian couples to get legal marriage licenses. Claiming that San Francisco was “in the forefront of the ‘odd couple’ situation,” Grieg (1970: 16) quoted Martin Mongan, county clerk, as saying he was tolerant and would not stand in the way of same-sex couples seeking a license: “Why, one of these days a man may come in here with a sheep or dog he may want to marry. This is a sophisticated city, and I’m prepared for anything.”

The second part of the article introduced some of the possible benefits of legal gay marriages, including joint tax returns, adoption, insurance benefits, and a greater acceptability of homosexuality by society and the church. What was emerging in the coverage of gay marriages was no longer simply a recognition that gays and lesbians could have committed relationships, but also a growing understanding of the political and legal aspects of the issue.

Some of this was fueled by Rita Hauser, American representative to the United Nations Human Rights Commission, in a speech before an American Bar Association panel in August 1970, in which she said that laws banning marriage between persons of the same sex were probably unconstitutional. President Nixon’s press secretary, Ronald Ziegler, was forced to respond, saying Nixon “doesn’t think that people of the same sex should marry. . . . [He] hasn’t been for it, he’s not for it, and he won’t be for it” (quoted in Tucker, 1970: 1).

Throughout the early 1970s, newspapers and magazines continued to report on attempts by lesbians and gays to marry legally. The August 22, 1971 *San Francisco Examiner* and *Chronicle* (Ellsworth-Jones, 1971) claimed that homosexual marriages were commonplace and the *New York Post* (Trecher, 1971) found some gay people who objected to the notion on the grounds that legal marriage would give the state power to regulate sex and would be just aping heterosexual customs.

In an article in *The Advocate*, Cole (1972: 6) wrote, “Gay marriages have been discovered by the major American news media in recent weeks.” . . . The tone of such reports still tends to be arch, but under-
neath the archness can be discerned for the first time a serious effort to understand.” By April 1974, even *Pageant* magazine featured three pages of photos of “the first U.S. homosexual wedding” in San Diego, headlined “The Bride was Male.”

One of the most famous cases of the era was the wedding of Anthony Sullivan of Australia and Richard Adams of California in Boulder, Colorado, on April 21, 1975. This drew national attention by raising the issue of immigration of a same-sex spouse of an American citizen. In a ruling from the U.S. Department of Justice denying the visa petition, the Los Angeles district director wrote on November 24, 1975 (copy on file in the International Gay and Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles), “You have failed to establish that a bona fide marital relationship can exist between two faggots.” This was rewritten, on December 2, 1975, after an uproar over the language, to read, “A marriage between two males is invalid for immigration purposes and cannot be considered a bona fide marital relationship since neither party to the marriage can perform the female functions in marriage.”

Meanwhile, religious ceremonies had begun in Troy Perry’s Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) in Los Angeles. A July 7, 1970 article in the *Hollywood Citizen News* (Stumbo, 1970) reported that thirty-six ceremonies between people of the same sex had been performed at Perry’s church. Cole (1972: 1) reported that “Despite widespread derision even in the gay world, many homosexuals continue to seek church weddings and to press with more and more determination for legal sanction of their unions.” By the mid-1970s, the concept of homosexual marriage primarily referred to attempts to recognize gay couples in a religious or legal ceremony, not just to call for gay people to gain respectability among heterosexuals or to acknowledge that they could indeed couple like heterosexuals.

Academic research in the early to mid-1970s reflected some of these concepts about gay marriages. Warren (1974: 71), in her ethnography of a middle-class, urban gay community, wrote about gay couples: “Their relationship is sometimes described as ‘marriage’. . . . More recently, another meaning has been added—gay marriage-ceremony marriage, which of course is rare in the secret community.” Jensen (1974) referred to lesbian couples as “quasi-marital unions” and described one partner as the “husband.” She claimed (1974: 361) that homosexuals use “heterosexual courtship and marital norms as models.”

Saghir and Robins (1973: 72) found that “most homosexual men express a desire to establish homosexual ‘marriages’” but that 83 percent of their male sample and 72 percent of their female sample did not usually assume distinct male and female roles in their relationships. When Jay and Young (1979) asked their male respondents if they considered themselves “‘married’ to another man,” 25 percent of those with lovers said “yes” and 3 percent said they had been in a ceremony. Almost 46 percent strongly or somewhat favored gay marriages, 32 percent were neutral, and 21 percent somewhat or strongly opposed them. By 1994–1995, 46 percent of lesbians and 30 percent of gay men who responded to *Advocate* questionnaires said they “exchanged rings or had a commitment ceremony” [Lever, 1995].

One indicator of the interest in gay marriages is an analysis of the index to *The Advocate* (Ridinger, 1987) and its references to gay marriage. From 1967 to 1970, there were no entries for gay marriage, but there were fifteen in 1971, twenty-two in 1972, and ten in 1973, the peak years for articles on the topic, most of them focusing on the attempts to get marriage licenses in the cases noted above. Between 1974 and 1977, there were twenty-six and from 1978 to 1982, there were only four. Many of the articles in the late 1970s focused on religious ceremonies, often conducted by the MCC, rather than on attempts by gays and lesbians to get legal marriage licenses. The message was typically not to try to mimic heterosexual marriages with legal licenses, but to create our own ceremonies in our own institutions, even if the event followed traditional heterosexual unions. Then an interesting and telling shift occurred.

Beginning in 1983, *The Advocate* introduced a new category in its indexing: Domestic Partners and Domestic Partner Legislation. In 1983, only three entries were listed under gay marriage and thirteen under domestic partners and domestic partner legislation. (The first domestic partner ordinance was enacted in 1982 [Whitacre, 1993]). In 1988, the category for gay marriage was dropped. The number of entries for the domestic partner categories dramatically increased: from seventeen in 1984 to forty-eight in 1991. Many of these entries were for a feature *The Advocate* introduced in the mid-1980s that highlighted couples coping with domesticity and sexuality in the time of AIDS.

But the introduction of domestic partner language and concepts almost exclusively focused on recognition of spousal-type benefits, such as health and life insurance; bereavement time off from work; inheritance issues; legal contracts; housing; guardianship; domestic violence issues; getting acknowledged in obituaries; hospital visitation rights; and recognition of relationships for frequent flyer programs, automo-
and political system to recognize broader definitions of personal relationships. In either case, the issues of what to do with gay and lesbian couples and how to incorporate the diversity of personal relationships into the larger social system seem to have emerged more forcefully in the AIDS decades.

**Coupling: Some Survey Findings**

But has the actual number of couples changed dramatically over the years, or just the amount of media attention to the topic of coupling? In the data in Table 3.1 from a variety of surveys (which are limited by the absence of similarly worded questions over the decades and by differences resulting from nonrepresentative sampling), approximately 40 to 50 percent of gay men—both before and during AIDS—responded that they were involved with another man and about two-thirds of them were living with that man.

The median duration of relationships before AIDS varied from 2.9 years (Harry & DeVall, 1978) to 3.5 years (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983) to 5 years (McWhirter & Mattison, 1984), and between 2 and 3 years in the Bell and Weinberg (1978) survey. These figures are not much different from the 3.7 years in a marketing survey conducted by Overlooked Opinions (1992) in the AIDS years.

Among lesbians, there has been remarkable consistency in the few

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year data collected</th>
<th>In a relationship</th>
<th>Living together (of those in a relationship)</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1969–70</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>56% (W)</td>
<td>Bell &amp; Weinberg (1978)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>51% (Whites)</td>
<td>50% (B)</td>
<td>Bell &amp; Weinberg (1978)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>Harry &amp; DeVall (1978)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>Jay &amp; Young (1979)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978–79</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>Harry (1984)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late 1970s</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>Spada (1979)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>McKinnon &amp; Peterson (1989)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late 1980s</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>Hays et al. (1990)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td></td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>Overlooked Opinions (1992)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>Kanouse et al. (1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td></td>
<td>Overlooked Opinions (1992)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>Overlooked Opinions (1992)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>Lever (1994)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
surveys available. As Table 3.2 shows, close to three-fourths are in relationships and living together. The median duration of lesbian relationships has ranged from between 2 and 3 years (Bell & Weinberg, 1978) to 2.2 years (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983) to 3.5 years today (Overlooked Opinions, 1992). The 1959 survey of The Ladder subscribers (Armon, 1959) reported a mean between 4 and 5 years.

Without other longitudinal data and more diverse sampling (i.e., non-White, non-middle-class lesbians and gay men), it is difficult to arrive at generalized conclusions. But these data do suggest that the discourse of the 1980s about more gay men “settling down” may, in fact, be just symbolic talk. It is also possible that the people who control the discourse in the gay media are part of the aging cohort of White, middle-class gay men who came out in the 1970s and might have “settled down” anyway, regardless of AIDS (Gorman [1992] and Murray [1996] make similar arguments).

Certainly age is related to changes in relationships, as some pre-AIDS research on gay men suggests. Saghir and Robins (1973: 56) found that “Establishing long lasting affairs was age related. . . . 41% had had long-lasting relationships during the age period of 20 and 29 and about one-half (48%) had similar relationships during the age period of 30 and 39.” Harry and DeVall (1978) reported that 35 percent of the 18- to 29-year-olds in their sample and 46 percent of the 30- to 39-year-olds have a lover. In another sample, however, Harry (1984) found lower percentages involved with a lover in the older age categories: 56 percent of the 25- to-29-year-olds, 54 percent of those in their 30s, 43 percent of the 40- to 44-year-olds, and 45 percent of those between 45 and 54.

Writer Michael Bronski (quoted in Miller, 1989: 143) disputes the notion that AIDS was “suddenly causing gay men to discover the joys of being in a couple”: many gay men in the 1970s and earlier wanted to couple as much as gay men did in the 1980s, just as there is still a great desire for sexual freedom, as there was before AIDS. He states, “To imply that there was only wholesale sexual license in the seventies and that now, wholesale coupling is the correct, healthier response is ridiculous.”

A 1988 survey of readers of OutLook (“Questions For Couples: The Results,” 1989), a lesbian and gay quarterly now out of print, lends some support to this perspective. Gay and lesbian couples were asked about the role of AIDS in forming their relationships and in continuing their relationship. Of four hundred responses, 90 percent of the women and 73 percent of the men said AIDS was not a factor in getting into a relationship, although 27 percent of the women and 45 percent of the men said it was relevant in continuing the relationship.

In short, the data do not indicate a greater percentage of gay men coupling or a lower percentage of lesbians leading a single life; the surveys do not describe the nature or content of the relationships. What may have changed from the years before AIDS is the way gays and lesbians talk about their relationships. Is there now just more rhetoric that gay couples are like heterosexual marriages, with more discussions about monogamy, child-raising, and other ideologies associated with “traditional family values?”

### Sex and Monogamy

One way to assess this question is to look at sexual practices among those both in and out of relationships. Although the percentage of those in relationships may be about the same, are those in couples engaging in fewer “extramarital” relationships? Is monogamy, which Sadownik (1985) said characterized his relationship, characteristic of other couples’ relationships in the AIDS years? Or is it just a claim increasingly made to make one appear more desirable in an era of AIDS?

Again, comparable data over time have not been collected: survey questions were not always worded the same way and the sampling was often limited to White, middle-class gay men and lesbians. In addition, the reliability of data on sexual behavior needs to be kept in mind when interpreting them, especially in years when admission of certain sexual acts and nonmonogamy may be considered more taboo and when such concepts as “monogamy,” “sexual partner,” and “sex act” are ambiguous (Bolton, 1992b).

It is also important to remember that monogamy rates change over
the duration of a relationship and by age, as Saghir and Robins (1973) and Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) demonstrated. Since the median years of these relationships are between three and four, the monogamy rates reflect the early stages of the relationships and, thus, are not reliable predictors of monogamy over a longer period. As Table 3.3 shows, though, recent data on sexual behavior suggest some possible changes during the AIDS decades.

There are some indications that an increase in claiming monogamy, particularly among mostly White, middle-class gay male samples, has occurred among those in relationships. But whether actual behavior has changed is not easily assessed. Patton (1990: 47) argues that a change in the “mythology of promiscuity” has occurred and that non-monogamous gay men with lovers “now talk more publicly of their long-term relationships, while often retaining the same number of partners.”

What about gay men and lesbians not in committed relationships? Has there been an increase in abstinence or claims of previous monogamous relationships? Have gay men been moving away from recreational sex, as some writers in the more popular gay press have intimated (such as Marks, 1988 and Miller, 1989)? Has the number of sexual partners decreased in response to the AIDS pandemic? Are gay men becoming less sexual and “promiscuous” as lesbian sexuality more visibly increases and becomes commercialized? Or is this just part of the changing discourse on sexuality as it starts to mimic the ideological rhetoric of heterosexuality and “traditional family values”?

In his review of research on the number of sexual partners among gay men, Bolton (1992a) states that although the numbers of partners declined somewhat during the AIDS years, they were still “high” and, furthermore, the rates of abstinence did not significantly increase. Despite the ambiguity of questionnaire wording, vague definitions of sexual partners and contacts, and limitations in sampling, several studies are illustrative of these trends during the AIDS years. Calzavara et al. (1991), Doll et al. (1991), Hays et al. (1990), McKinnon and Peterson (1989), McKusick et al. (1990), and Stall et al. (1992), demonstrate some reductions in sexual partners, although the numbers remain large and abstinence has not significantly increased during the AIDS years.

These studies also show that risky sexual practices have been reduced during the AIDS era, especially in urban areas and among older gay men. Stall et al. (1992: 686) report the highest rates of abstinence among those over forty: “Cohort differences in sexual activity are exemplified by the changes in prevalence of sexual activity and the meaning of sex that occurred among the generation that came of age in America during the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. These same kinds of intergenerational differences may also exist within the gay male community.” In short, as Bolton (1992a: 183) concludes, “What is quite clear in the data is that most gay men made changes in specific sexual practices more readily than they reduced the number of their partners.” It is thus reasonable to conclude that gay men probably talked more about monogamy and sexual partner reduction than actually practiced them.

Unfortunately, survey data on lesbian sexual behavior have not been collected as systematically. What data do exist, especially in the pre-AIDS years, from Bell and Weinberg (1978), Blumstein and Schwartz (1983), and Saghir and Robins (1973), show that lesbians have fewer sexual partners and lower rates of sexual frequency than heterosexual or gay male couples. Although more current data from Advocate readers (a generally higher income and education sample) also suggest this, findings show that lesbians are having more “high-quality sex . . . than are most American women” (Lever, 1995: 24).

In the AIDS years, arguments have been made that lesbians—given the relatively low risk of HIV transmission through female-to-female sex—are becoming more sexual or are, at least, talking more about sex (Van Gelder, 1992). But changes and debates about women’s sexuality were already under way just as AIDS emerged. Until the antipornography feminist attacks, many women were involved in an active sexual movement. The appearance of On Our Backs and Bad Attitude, lesbian erotic magazines, as well as other lesbian S & M publications and an important conference in 1982 at Barnard College entitled “Towards a Politics of Sexuality” (Vance, 1984) illustrate some of the early

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year data collected</th>
<th>Gay men</th>
<th>Lesbians</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early 1970s</td>
<td>25–75%</td>
<td></td>
<td>Saghir &amp; Robins (1973)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td></td>
<td>Harry &amp; DeVall (1978)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late 1970s</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td>McWhirter &amp; Mattison (1984)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978-1979</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>Blumstein &amp; Schwartz (1983)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late 1980s</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hays et al. (1990)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td></td>
<td>Kanouse et al. (1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>Out/Look (1989)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>Overlooked Opinions (1992)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
changes. Throughout the past decades, Loulan's (1984, 1987) books on lesbian sexual passion and Susie Bright's (1990, 1992) writings on lesbian videos have also been widely distributed. Lesbian-produced sex videos are more available since the mid-1980s, from the first lesbian-made lesbian sex video in 1985, Private Pleasures and Shadows, to over twenty on the market in the early 1990s (Roxzie, 1992).

Lesbian sexuality literature did not, of course, begin to appear in the 1980s, nor was it directly related to AIDS. Pat Califia was writing about lesbian sex in the 1970s; indeed, her book, Sapphistry: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality, was first published in 1980 and is now in its third edition. And for some lesbians, non-monogamous sexuality has always been a political statement, as Krestan and Bepko (1980: 285) argued some time ago: “Within the gay community it has become politically suspect in some quarters for two women to choose a monogamous relationship. This ‘aping of heterosexual structure’ violates the more radical principles of the women’s movement.”

This trend toward more open discussion and recognition of lesbian sexuality and the diversity of lesbian lives is evident in The Lesbian News, a Los Angeles monthly newspaper. The cover story in July 1992 issue, for example, “Inside a Sex Club,” describes the events of “Ozone,” the women-only night at The Zone, a sex club in West Hollywood that has since closed. With subheadlines of “She likes to get handcuffed, spanked,” “Where you can explore sexuality,” and “Monogamy is not for everyone,” the article details the lowering of inhibitions traditionally associated with women’s sexuality (Wilde, 1992).

The advertisements in the same issue also illustrate more sexually explicit attractions, such as “Hot star-spangled go-go’s” at Girl Bar; women’s night at the traditionally all-male Studio One Backlot; “Liberated Go-Go Girls” and “Bikinis, Beach Balls and Babes” at Club Ms.; and “Hottest Women,” accompanied by a photo of a seductive woman holding a metal chain at Girl Bar. The schedule of events for Lesbian Visibility Week lists all-day seminars on lesbian sex with such titles as “Lesbian S/M 101” and “Lesbian Sex/Lesbian Passion.” The only other all-day seminar is on “cultural and political” topics. Comparison with earlier issues of The Lesbian News indicates that these are more openly discussed aspects of lesbian subculture and they represent a newer form of marketing. The commercialization of lesbian sexuality and culture and the emergence of more venues for sexual interaction—long since established in gay male communities—for women seem to have grown significantly in the late 1980s and early 1990s in urban areas. The annual “Dinah Shore” weekend in Palm Springs now boasts that it is the nation’s largest lesbian event.

But these changes in the discourse on lesbian sexuality and its commercialization are not directly related to AIDS or the perception that lesbians are relatively more likely to be HIV negative. Social changes in the 1970s affecting women’s sexuality in general probably have had as significant an impact on contemporary lesbian sexuality and its expression. It is important that further work be done studying these changes, especially among lesbians of color and more working-class communities.

Conclusions

The main goal of this chapter was to uncover the impact AIDS has had on lesbians’ and gay men’s interpersonal relationships from the years before Stonewall, during the liberation years of the 1970s, and into the decades of AIDS. In general, there is little evidence supporting the claims of increases in coupling and settling down into domesticity that characterized many of the popular gay and mainstream media reports on gay men. Although there is research supporting a decrease in number of sexual partners and an increase in claims about monogamy, there is stronger evidence that what changed most as a result of AIDS was the discourse used to describe interpersonal romantic, sexual, friendship, and familial relationships. For lesbians, discussions about sexuality and passion became more open and less tied into stereotypical images of female sexuality.

How much of what has been discussed can be linked to the appearance of AIDS is, of course, difficult to demonstrate conclusively. By analyzing the discourse and images used over the decades with respect to family, friends, and romantic relationships, however, it becomes clear that a significant alteration has occurred in the AIDS decades. The change has evolved from language that attempted to show how gays and lesbians really were just like heterosexuals with the same type of romantic and relationship needs, and not just defined in sexual terms. Describing relationships as marriage-like, the early literature bought into the ideologies of a middle-class, ideal monogamous relationship and recommended mimicking it to gain respectability.

Then, as the liberation movements started to organize gays and lesbians around a shared identity, the discourse focused on more sociopolitical images of a family of oppressed brothers and sisters, made up of
Early attempts by a few to get legal recognition of gay relationships through marriage, in an oppressive heterosexist society, are thus best understood in the context of contemporary struggles for civil rights and equal treatment. The movement to gain legal recognition for gay and lesbian relationships was a collective effort that began in the early 1980s and continued into the 1990s. This movement took many forms, including litigation, lobbying, and grassroots organizing. The movement was led by activists who sought to create a legal framework that would recognize and protect the rights of gay and lesbian couples. This movement was part of a broader struggle for civil rights that included the movement for women's rights, the disability rights movement, and the movement for racial justice.

The movement for legal recognition of gay and lesbian relationships was influenced by a number of factors, including the rise of the AIDS epidemic, which highlighted the need for greater recognition of the rights of gay and lesbian couples. The movement was also influenced by the work of activists and scholars who sought to challenge the prevailing legal and cultural norms that excluded gay and lesbian relationships. This work included research and writing on the history of gay and lesbian relationships, the legal status of gay and lesbian couples, and the social and cultural implications of these relationships.

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Saunders, E. B. (1953). "Reformer's Choice: Marriage License or Just License?" One, 1, 10-12.


