Psychological intimacy in the lasting relationships of heterosexual and same sex women

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Psychological intimacy

in the lasting relationships of heterosexual and same sex women

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Abstract

Psychological intimacy in the lasting relationships of heterosexual and same sex women

Research suggests that psychological intimacy, defined as the sense that one can be open and honest in talking with a partner about personal thoughts and feelings not usually expressed in other relationships, is important to individual well-being and overall mental health. Studies of gender differences dating back to the 1970’s suggest further that the relational orientations of males and females differ; women compared to men tend to value and be more comfortable with psychologically intimate communication in loving relationships. Relatively little attention has been paid to the meaning of intimacy to gay and straight women in lasting relationships, however. In this paper, the meaning of psychologically intimate communication to women in homosexual and heterosexual relationships that have lasted an average of 30 years is explored. The paper is based on data from a larger study of couples, which employed in-depth interviews to explore how partners adapted over the years in their relationships. A sub-sample of 24 lesbian and 24 straight partners (N=48) with similar social characteristic was selected from the larger database. Qualitative and quantitative procedures were employed in the data analysis. The meaning of psychological intimacy among women in these same sex relationships differed from women in heterosexual relationships. The two factors that contributed significantly to that finding were the understanding and sensitivity of the partners of respondents. Compared to lesbians, heterosexual women in these relationships viewed their male partners as less understanding and sensitive. The data suggest that understanding and sensitivity of partners may have enhanced the quality of psychological intimacy to respondents in lesbian relationships, a finding that needs further exploration and testing in future research.
Psychological intimacy in the lasting relationships of heterosexual and same sex women

For over two decades, we have been engaged in research on relationships with a diverse sample of heterosexual and same sex partners (216 partners in 108 relationships) who had been together an average of 30 years (S.D.=10.28). A central concept in the research was adaptation, which was defined as the ways in which partners coped with various aspects of their relationships over the years, which included psychological intimacy (Mackey & O’Brien, 1995; Mackey, O’Brien & Mackey, 1997; Mackey, Diemer & Mackey, 2000).

In addition to its value in understanding loving relationships, psychological intimacy - characterized by trust, acceptance and openness between partners - is important to individual well-being (Prager, 1995). Research has suggested that openness within a meaningful relationship may reduce stress, enhance self-esteem and ameliorate symptoms of physical and psychological impairments. Conversely, studies of isolated individuals who were unable to engage in relationships that promoted openness about inner thoughts and feelings were at risk for developing physical and psychological symptoms. Prager concluded "people … are likely to develop symptoms of psychological disturbance in the face of stressful events if they lack confiding relationships (pp. 2-3)."

The goal of this paper is to understand the meaning of psychological intimacy in these lasting relationships from the perspectives of heterosexual and lesbian partners. There is no pretense that the findings can be generalized, an important distinction between research designed to test hypotheses and research designed to explore new territory and to develop theory.

The paper addresses the following questions:

How did heterosexual and lesbian women view psychological intimacy in their relationships?
What themes emerged from the interview data that help in understanding the meaning of psychological intimacy to these women?

In the next section, an understanding of psychological intimacy that emerged from our research on lasting relationships is discussed along with the effects of gender and sexual orientation on psychological intimacy. The research methodology is then discussed. Findings are presented that include both quantitative results and qualitative themes from interviews with individual partners in these relationships. A discussion of the potential meaning of the data is presented followed by the limitations of the research and conclusions.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INTIMACY, GENDER AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Beginning in the 1970's, the paradigm for understanding development - cognitively, psychosocially and morally - was enriched as researchers attended to the differing ways in which males and females were socialized in their formative years (Chodorow, 1978). Based on these studies, females were hypothesized to value personal attachments compared to males who view relationships as a means to other ends. In general females were hypothesized to experience a sense of security within intimate relationships while males experienced security in a sense of separateness (Gilligan, 1982).

Studies have also found that men and women differed in their relational behaviors when specific variables were examined. For example, in heterosexual marriage males tended toward avoidance in contending with relational conflict compared to women who were more likely to be confrontive (Gottmann, Coan, Carriere & Swanson, 1998; Mackey & O’Brien, 1995). In one study, a majority of husbands compared to wives continued to avoid face-to-face discussions about relational conflict over the lifespan of their
relationships (Mackey, Diemer & O’Brien, 2000; Mackey, Diemer & O’Brien, 2000). In the same research, while many lesbian partners also avoided face-to-face discussions of relational conflict during the early years of their relationships, lesbian partners reported growth in their skill to confront problems by face-to-face discussions, which was also associated with the development of psychological intimacy in their relationships (Mackey, Diemer & O’Brien, 2000).

These data raised questions about how psychological intimacy may be experienced by straight and gay women in relationships that last. Do differences in the gender of partners in marriage temper the quality of psychological intimacy to heterosexual women? Conversely, does sameness in gender between lesbian partners mutually reinforce the quality and development of psychological intimacy?

Since the year 2000, there have been few studies reported in the literature on the nature of psychological intimacy in relationships. Those studies that have been conducted (Mitchell et al, 2008; Fehr, 2004: Heller & Wood, 2000), have focused more narrowly on aspects of intimacy in relationships, but not on long lasting relationships. Those studies supported earlier findings related to gender differences and psychological intimacy that were the focus of studies prior to 2000.

In the same time period, no studies were found that focused specifically on how women in heterosexual and same sex relationships that have lasted as long as those in our research viewed the quality of psychological intimacy with their partners. The exploration of the research literature utilized several data bases that included Social Work Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts and PsycInfo (Databases, 2009). Queries were made using various search terms such as women, gender and sexual orientation with
relationships, lasting relationships and intimacy in relationships. No publications were uncovered for relationships comparable to those in the research reported here; that is, relationships that had lasted for a more than 20 years and included both homosexual and heterosexual female partners. Therefore, the following discussion focuses on studies of psychological intimacy in relationships conducted in the years prior to 2000 and those that have lasted for considerably shorter lengths of time than those in our research.

Peplau (1991) observed that "research on gay male and lesbian relationships dates mainly from the mid-1970's" (p.197). No significant differences have been found between gay males and lesbians on measures of dyadic attachment and personal autonomy within relationships (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Peplau, 1991). High dyadic attachment and low personal autonomy have been associated with the quality of relationships, a positive aspect of which was effective communication. Research was not conclusive about the quality of communication in same sex relationships, however. Some studies have found emotional distancing (Levine, 1979) and impaired communication (George & Behrendt, 1987) between gay male partners. Perhaps, those characteristics of gay male relationships suggest gender differences, rather than differences based on sexual orientation, which fit with earlier research data on gender behavior. In gay male relationships, distancing may become mutually reinforcing and compromise psychologically intimate communication between partners.

There has been much discussion about fusion in lesbian relationships based on hypotheses that have emerged from women's developmental research. Fusion, as an element in lesbian relationships (Burch, 1982), has been characterized by high levels of self-disclosure between partners (Slater & Mencher, 1991). Elsie (1986) found that lesbian partners tended to merge emotionally compared to gay male partners who maintained emotional distance from each
In contrast, we (1997) found that lesbian partners valued autonomy within attachment and tended to reject the idea of fusion in their relationships. Although these discrepancies may also reflect gender differences within the context of committed relationships, they may also be affected by how attachment and autonomy were defined operationally and how they were measured. Moreover, there is the issue of clarifying self-disclosure, fusion and differentiation as elements in psychological intimacy, especially in lesbian relationships.

A sense of equity or fairness has been identified as a central value in relationships that last, especially those of lesbians (Kurdek, 1988; Schneider, 1986). Equity in couple decision-making characterized by negotiation and discussion about roles, household responsibilities and finances has been linked to relational satisfaction and potentially to perceptions of psychological intimacy (DeCecco & Shively, 1978).

Kurdek (1998) compared relational qualities among heterosexual, gay male and lesbian couples yearly intervals over a 5 year period. Of particular interest to our research were the scales that purported to measure "intimacy." Although there were many similarities between the three groups on other measures, such as problem solving and conflict management styles, lesbians reported "higher levels of intimacy than partners in heterosexual relationships" (Kurdek, p. 564). That finding resonated with research on gender differences and has been attributed to the relational orientation of women. The valuing of mutuality, rather than autonomy within relationships (Surrey 1987), may nurture the development of psychological intimacy in the same sex relationships of women.

In summary, the research on the significance of psychological intimacy in relationships point to its importance in facilitating and maintaining well-being. Past research pointed to the instrumental value of psychological intimacy in loving relationships to individual well-being
regardless of the sexual orientations of partners, although those studies did not focus on the meaning of psychological intimacy in relationships that have lasted as long as those in the our research. Given that data, the present study on which this paper is based was designed to explore how women in these lasting relationships viewed the significance of psychologically intimate communication with their partners.

METHOD

A semi-structured interview format was developed after an extensive review of the research literature on close relationships. An interview guide was designed to elicit how respondents viewed several dimensions of their relationships. Colleagues reviewed the guide and offered feedback about its efficacy as a data collection tool. The principal investigators then conducted pilot testing with partners in three lasting relationships that led to further refinement of the interview guide.

The guide, which was used in all interviews, is available (see Mackey, 2014). It was divided into four sections:

1. the relationship, which included dimensions such as communication, sexual relations, equity, modes of managing conflict, decision making, and psychological intimacy;
2. social influences including economic, racial/ethnic and other cultural variables;
3. the relationships of their parents’ marriages (all respondents had been reared by heterosexual parents); and
4. the experiences of respondents and views of their relationships from early to recent years.

The recent years, which are the focus of this paper, were the last 5-10 years prior to the interviews. The early years were the years prior to the birth of the first child for couples who had
children or the first 5 years for those without children or those couples that adopted children after being together for 5 years.  

The interview structure was designed to acquire in-depth information from the point of view of individual respondents in order to develop an understanding of how partners adapted over the life span of their relationships. An open-ended style of interviewing allowed for freedom of expression in order to elicit information from the perspectives of respondents about interactions with their partners. The approach, which adapted clinical interviewing skills to the needs of the research, explored the experiences of individuals within relationships as they remembered and reported them.

Interviewers, who were advanced doctoral students at Boston College with extensive clinical experience, were trained in the use of the interview guide. There were nine interviewers who had completed or were in the process of completing their third year of full-time clinical internships. All of them had completed clinical field instruction during the first two years of the doctoral program and most had at least a few years of paid counseling experience before enrolling in the program. Their clinical training as well as their backgrounds in mental health and counseling contributed to their empathic interviewing skills, which were very important in collecting this type of data (Hill, Thomson & Williams, 1997). Each interviewer conducted 24 interviews with partners in 12 relationships. Each set of 24 respondents was selected based on the goal of the research, which was to study a diverse and purposive sample of couples that had not been included in previous research. As a result, the sample consisted of groups identified by race/ethnicity (Black and Latino couples), sexual orientation (lesbian, gay male and heterosexual couples), socio-economic status (white and blue collar couples) and other characteristics such as religion.

The interviews were held in the homes of respondents, which provided additional information about lifestyles and environments. Prior to each interview, respondents were told about the purpose of
the study, given an overview of the interview schedule and were assured that their identities would remain anonymous. Informed consent for audiotaping and the research use of interviews were obtained. Each partner was interviewed separately; the length of each of the interviews was approximately two hours.

Sample

Couples, from which the sub-sample of women in this study were selected, were recruited through business, professional and trade union organizations as well as through churches, synagogues, and a variety of other community organizations. Most couples resided in the northeast part of the country.

The sample was chosen purposively to fit with the goal of developing an understanding of psychological intimacy among an older group of heterosexual and homosexual partners in lasting relationships. Couples were selected who met the following criteria:

1. married or in a committed same sex relationship at least 15 years (note: the data was collected before states, like Massachusetts, had adopted laws that provided legal marriage for same sex couples);

2. diversity of race/ethnicity, education, religious background and sexual orientation.

Of the original 216 partners who were interviewed, 76% were White and 24 % were people of color (African-Americans and Mexican-Americans). Religious background was as follows: 46 % were Protestant; 34 % were Catholic; and 20% were Jewish. Fifty-six percent were college graduates and 44% were non-college graduates. The mean age for the sample as a whole was 57 years (S.D.=10.24): 27% of respondents were in their 40’s, 33% in their 50’s, 26% in their 60’s, and 14% in their 70’s. Sixty-seven percent of couples were heterosexual and 33% in same sex relationships. The mean number of years together was 30.22 (S.D.=10.28): 18% of couples had been together 40 years or
longer; 29% between 30 and 39 years; 34% between 20 and 29 years; and 19% less than 20 but more than 15 years. Seventy-seven percent of couples had children; 23% did not have children. By total gross family income, 7% of couples earned less than $25,000; 25% between $25,000 and $49,999; 29% between $50,000 and $74,999; and 39% had gross incomes of $75,000 or more.

In order to compare the perspectives of heterosexual and lesbian women in these relationships, a sub-sample of 48 women from the larger study was selected. One partner from each of the 48 lesbian relationships in the larger study was selected. A comparable group of heterosexual women from the 72 married couples in the larger study was then selected. Table 1 shows the socio-demographic characteristics of the two groups.

Since all of the lesbians were White, we selected only White heterosexual women for the comparison group. Although there were differences between the two groups in the chi-square analysis, only the variable of years together reached significance (X²=5.58 (2DF) p=<.05). All of the women in same sex relationships were together for less than 30 years (but more than 15 years). Twenty one percent of the heterosexual women were married for more than 30 years. Because of the age distributions between the two groups in the chi-square analysis, a t test was conducted on that variable. The mean age of heterosexual women was 58.08 years compared to 51.04 for lesbians (t = 2.78, sig. = <.01). The mean age difference of 7 years between the two groups was not surprising in view of the difference in “years together.”
Table 1
Demographic characteristics of heterosexual and lesbian respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40's</td>
<td>05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50's</td>
<td>09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 and over</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college or less</td>
<td>06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduate or more</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family income</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 50,000.</td>
<td>05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50,000. - 74,900</td>
<td>07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75,000. and over.</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years together</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 - 30</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 30</td>
<td>05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 or less</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 or more</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=48 * p= <.05
Given the fact that all of these women were in stable relationships for at least 15 years, we did not think that the difference in years together compromised the goal of exploring the meaning of psychological intimacy to women in relationships that had lasted for a considerable number of years.

**Dependent Variable**

Psychological intimacy referred to the meanings associated with relational experiences as respondents reported them in interviews. Operationally, psychological intimacy was defined as the sense that one could be open and honest in talking with a partner about personal thoughts and feelings not usually expressed in other relationships. This concept of intimacy was different from actual observations of verbal and non-verbal interactions that may have contributed (or not contributed) over time to an inner sense of being psychologically intimate in relationships. The focus of our research was on inner psychological themes (i.e. schemas of intimacy) as reported by respondents that were assumed to be contingent on the quality of specific relational experiences between partners (see Mackey, Diemer & O’Brien, p. 208, 2000).

Arriving at that definition involved an assessment of responses to questions that asked individual partners to talk about various aspects of their relationships. These questions included a range of topics, such as what the partner meant to the respondent, how their relationships may have been different from other relationships, how respondents felt about being open with their partners, and what words best described the meaning of the partner to a respondent (for a copy of the interview guide, see Mackey, 2014).
When responses reflected themes of openness, reciprocity and acceptance between partners, psychological intimacy was coded as “positive” and assigned the value of 1. Opposite responses were coded as “negative.” If there was noticeable ambivalence in responses to these explorations, a “mixed” category was selected. As the research progressed and the database expanded, the latter two categories were collapsed into a “mixed/negative” category and assigned the value of 0, which facilitated the use of statistical procedures such as logistic regression. This collapsing process was also used for other independent variables with the exception of sexual orientation, which was already a dichotomous variable.

Of particular importance to understanding the concept of psychological intimacy were questions that elicited responses about the quality of communication between partners, such as: How would you describe the communication between you? Communication was coded "positive" when respondents spoke positively about their comfort in carrying on discussions with their partners about a wide range of issues. Otherwise, communication was coded as "mixed/negative." Positive communication was essential for the development of psychological intimacy. Although positive communication could be present without having a sense that the relationship was psychologically intimate, at least in a theoretical sense, the two variables were correlated substantially (phi = .50). Psychologically intimate communication is, therefore, a more precise way of capturing what is referred to as psychological intimacy in this research.

**Independent Variables**

Sexual orientation was based on how respondents identified themselves, either lesbian or straight.
Satisfaction was based on how respondents talked about their relationships. Interviewers focused on predominant patterns in relationships. A central theme was the observation of relationships as fulfilling individual needs, so that respondents were usually content and happy about being with their partners. Interview questions used to assess satisfaction were focused on how respondents felt about their relationships, what the partner meant to them and what was good and not so good about their relationships over the years. If the predominant theme reflected joy and/or happiness, satisfaction was considered “positive” and assigned the value of 1. If respondents talked about their relationships as unhappy or were obviously ambivalent about life with their partners, satisfaction was considered “mixed/negative” and assigned the value of 0.

Sensitivity and understanding were based on how respondents viewed these qualities in their partners and in themselves. We asked specifically how sensitive and understanding they and their partners were from the perspectives of respondents. The meaning of these qualities was also gleaned from explorations of other inquiries such as what partners meant to respondents, how they viewed their roles and those of partners and what words best described their partners to them. “Positive” responses to these explorations were assigned the value of 1 and “mixed/negative” responses the value of 0.

Coding

Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed. Interview passages were coded for relational themes that were then developed into categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, psychological intimacy was coded into 3 categories: positive, mixed and negative. As already noted, the negative and mixed categories were collapsed later
into one category, mixed/negative, to facilitate the use of statistical procedures, such as logistic regression.

Initially, a research team (2 women, 2 men) coded eight transcriptions independently. Detailed notes were kept; themes were identified and categories were generated. A relationship-coding sheet was developed and used in subsequent coding of eight additional interviews. As new categories arose previous interviews were re-coded in keeping with the constant comparative process. Having both genders involved in that process helped control for gender bias and contributed to the development of a shared conceptual analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Using this method, a scoring system was developed to identify themes and to generate categories that evolved from each section of the interviews. There were over 90 categories in 24 thematic areas for every respondent.

Once a relationship coding system was developed, subsequent interviews were coded and scored independently by two raters (one male and one female) who noted themes and categories as they emerged from the transcripts. One member of the research team coded all interviews to insure continuity in the operational definitions of variables and consistency of judgments from case to case. Based on the original coding procedures on all 216 cases before the categories were collapsed, the agreement between raters, determined by dividing the number of identical judgments by the total number of codes, was 87%. Cohen’s kappa, used as a measure of inter-rater reliability on all cases, ranged from .79 to .93.

HyperResearch software (Hesse-Biber, Dupuis and Kinder, 1992) enabled the researchers to complete a content analysis of approximately 8000 pages of interview transcripts and to identify, catalogue and organize specific interview passages on which themes and categorical codes were based.
**Data Analysis**

Initially, data from the interviews were analyzed using grounded theory procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and HyperResearch software (Hesse-Biber, Dupuis & Kinder, 1992). As the database expanded, quantitative procedures were added to the analysis using SPSS software. With psychological intimacy as the dependent variable, cross tabulations were computed with other relational variables that had been explored in the interviews (see Table 2). Using an Alpha criterion of .001, which was appropriate given the small size of the sample (Lane, 2008), chi-square analysis was used to identify those variables that appeared to contribute significantly to psychological intimacy from the perspectives of these 48 women.

The chi-square statistic was appropriate since certain conditions were met. First, it has been very difficult to ensure randomness of samples in social and behavioral research, especially in studies that focus on new territory. This non-probability sample was selected deliberately to include older couples who have been understudied in previous research; namely, heterosexual and same sex relationships that had lasted an average of 30 years. Second, compared to other tests of statistical significance, chi-square has fewer requirements about population characteristics. Third, the expected frequency of 5 observations in most cells was met.

To assess the strength of the associations between psychological intimacy and the independent variables, a correlation analysis was also conducted. Because of the dichotomous nature of the variables, a phi coefficient was computed for the dependent variable and each independent variable.
Based on the chi-square analysis, a theoretical model was constructed and tested with logistic regression (see Table 3). Independent variables related significantly to psychological intimacy (<.001) were incorporated into the model. Logistic regression was a useful tool in this exploratory research where the goal was to develop theory rather to test theory (Menard, 1995). Although the sample was small for regression analysis, the criterion of an expected frequency of five (5) in “no more than 20% of cells” was met, which supported the use of this procedure (Garson, 2008).

Finally, we returned to the interview data to enrich the understanding of how those variables contributed to and shaped the meaning of psychological intimacy.

**FINDINGS**

The bivariate analysis of psychological intimacy by the relational variables is shown in Table 2. These data focus on the observations of respondents about their relationships during recent years (the last five to ten years prior to the interviews). The alpha criterion was set at .001 although the table also includes variables significant at the .05 level.

At the Alpha level of <. 001, the relational variables that were related significantly to psychological intimacy were:

- the sexual orientation of respondents,
- satisfaction with relationships,
- the sensitivity of partners toward respondents, and
- the understanding of partners toward respondents.
Phi coefficients were also computed. Although a weak to moderate correlation with psychological intimacy was found for sexual orientation (phi = .49), partner sensitivity (phi = .50) and understanding (phi = .49), relational satisfaction had a moderate to strong correlation with the dependent variable (phi = .65).

Table 2
Psychological intimacy by relational factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Psychological intimacy</th>
<th>No/mixed</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Totals</th>
<th>X^2(1DF)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexual orientation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heterosexual</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lesbian</td>
<td></td>
<td>02</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>totals</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>11.49**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical affection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>negative/mixed</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>totals</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>8.81*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>negative/mixed</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>totals</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>19.97**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>negative/mixed</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>totals</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>6.82*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner sensitivity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>negative/mixed</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>totals</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>11.72**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner understanding</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>negative/mixed</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Based on the results of the chi square analysis, these variables were incorporated into a theoretical model and tested with logistic regression. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3  
Logistic regression coefficients for factors associated with psychological intimacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>Exp(B)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexual orientation</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>8.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational satisfaction</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>45.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner sensitivity</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>2.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner understanding</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Constant: -10.90 3.62

N=48  
Model $X^2$ (4DF) = 28.86  p<.001

Of the four variables that made up the model, relational satisfaction had the most powerful predictor of psychological intimacy followed by sexual orientation. The role of satisfaction was not unexpected given its moderate to strong correlation with psychological intimacy. The elimination of satisfaction from a second model did not
change the values of the regression coefficients for sexual orientation, partner sensitivity and partner understanding.

To amplify upon these findings, we examined the interview data to explore what these variables meant to respondents as they discussed the meaning of psychological intimacy in their relationships.

**Sexual Orientation and Satisfaction**

Of the 69% of respondents who viewed their relationships as psychologically intimate in recent years, 67% were lesbians and 33% were heterosexuals ($X^2 = 11.49$ (1DF) $p = <.001$). Of the eight out of 10 respondents who reported being satisfied with their relationships, 58% were lesbians and 42% were heterosexuals. From a different perspective, 67% of heterosexual women were satisfied with their relationships in recent years compared to 92% of lesbians. The following woman identified the close connection between the quality of communication between partners and psychological intimacy. Kim, a 44 year old heterosexual woman who had been married for 23 years, spoke to that connection and also commented on what she perceived as the source of poor communication:

*The communication's poor. I think that's probably his worst problem. He's a clone of his father. He cannot express emotion. And he doesn't like to get into these philosophical, psychological conversations ... I can't talk to him about, you know, like things that make me crazy because he either doesn't want to hear it or just can't relate to it. He's not communicative at all; like last night, we had a discussion. I said to him, "You think that everybody is a mind reader. Nobody knows what's on your mind because you don't tell them." He's not verbal ... so now I feel guilty that he doesn't communicate. It's got to be my fault. But he's always been that way... he doesn't seem to want to or be able to change. He said to me ... "I'm not changing. This is the way I am. Take it or leave it." Those were his words ... so I decided to take it 'cause I didn't leave.*
Kim also expressed the level of dissatisfaction with that aspect of her relationship:

\[ \text{The only thing that doesn't satisfy me is his lack of communication and support - emotional support. But other than that, he fills the bill.} \]

Kim’s comments were not unusual especially among heterosexual respondents. When individuals expressed how they felt about their relationships, they usually talked about specific aspects of relationships with which they were not satisfied. At the same time, they often acknowledged other aspects of relationships with which they were satisfied. For example, Kim described her spouse as kind, loyal and a good provider. More often than not, respondents differentiated among several variables that either contributed to or compromised satisfaction with their relationships.

In contrast to the marriage of Kim, Felise described how her lesbian partner, Flora, facilitated the development of psychologically intimate communication in their relationship of 29 years:

\[ \text{We have an extraordinarily close emotional connection... except for the reserved part. We talked about things that I never talked about in certain heterosexual relationships. Flora never let me do all the things I had done which were to go away and hide, to sulk, to be angry, to distance. She made me hang in there over and over again. Talking about what was going on with me but she didn't talk about what was going on with her often. She would say that nothing is going on with her but that she just wanted to understand what was going on ... I was euphoric about being in a relationship where you could talk about emotional things and where you could process almost anything that came up.} \]

The response of Flora was compromised somewhat by the “reserved” quality in her partner although not to the extent that “poor” communication undermined satisfaction in Kim’s marriage. As she talked about the meaning of the relationship with Flora, Felise said:

\[ \text{She is the most important thing in my life. I don't really enjoy things without her. Not really ... to me a committed relationship is that central thing in life and everything else goes around it. I don't know where that notion came from. But it has worked pretty well; we are still here.} \]
A heterosexual woman, Emily, age 51 and married for 28 years, spoke of the development of a sense of mutual intimacy with her spouse. Unlike, the relationship of Kim, Emily was an instrumental figure in developing a sense of mutual intimacy with her spouse:

He's my best friend, and I think I'm his best friend ... what keeps the marriage together is when you care more about the other person than you do about yourself, when you lose and give up the selfish part of your life ... I think when you first get married, for some strange reason, you bite your tongue a lot, and you don't let out a lot of your true feelings, ... I don't know if all marriages are that way, but for me, I was still trying to make an impression. I married the guy and didn't even know him,; I hardly knew him. I was trying to be, you know, my better self ... we never got that familiar because we didn't know each other. As the years went on, If I was upset about something, he knew it ... I think I made him understand me ... I probably resented his not really understanding me or understanding where I was coming from. ... Down through the years, I tried to confide in him. It was difficult for him at first, to confide in me. I don't think he ever had that kind of relationship with a woman.

Emily’s comments reflected a theme that was frequently expressed by these women. Usually, the feeling of satisfaction with their relationships was the result of a long journey with periods of difficulty and relational challenges. Satisfaction tended to ebb and flow depending on how close and connected respondents felt with their partners. There was an inherent interdependence between psychological intimacy and satisfaction, which was mirrored in the strong correlation between these two variables.

**Partner Sensitivity and Understanding**

As respondents spoke of the meaning of psychological intimacy to them, their responses reflected how they viewed the roles of their partners. Of those respondents who described their relationships in psychologically intimate terms, 83% assessed their partners as emotionally sensitive to their needs and feelings (\(X^2 = 11.72 \text{ (1DF)} \ p = .001\)), and 81% assessed their partners as understanding of them (\(X^2 = 11.09 \text{ (1DF)} \ p = .001\)).
In the responses of most women, it was difficult to differentiate between understanding and sensitivity since they seemed so closely connected in the minds of respondents and in what they said. The more important finding in these data was that psychological intimacy was related significantly to the sensitivity and understanding of partners and not to how respondents viewed their own sensitivity and understanding.

Alice, who had been in a committed relationship with Angela for 20 years, spoke of the importance of these variables in their relationship:

_On a real basic level, she knows who I am; she appreciates me. I feel wonderfully understood. There's a depth that long-term relationships get to, that's like very rich ... it just gets richer and deeper, so I would say maybe understanding has gotten more and more. I just hope it continues. I think we're both very sensitive. There are times when we do terribly insensitive things, but they're the exception not the rule._

For most respondents, the development of relational empathy was a challenge as partners struggled to understand and to become sensitive to each other. Joyce, who was 65 years of age discussed how the process occurred in her relationship of 25 years:

_In the beginning we both didn't understand a lot ... We laugh now when we think about it, but the issue around her mother was very difficult for us ... used to make me very angry. What I didn't understand was how different my mother was from hers. For a long time we were stuck on it. Eventually it dawned on me that what she was dealing with was not what I dealt with. I had a mother who could learn, who could hear you if you challenged her enough ... her mother couldn’t. Once I was able to put it together, I was able to back off. She does the same for me ... if I don't get it, she can get pissed off and sometimes if she doesn’t get it, I get pissed off. The issue is that you finally get what the other person is saying ... When she talks to me now, I get it. When I talk to her, she gets it._

The process of learning to become more sensitive and understanding was a struggle for both partners. Among most couples, that process often took place over many years. A major difference between heterosexual and lesbian respondents was in their descriptions of the mutuality of sensitivity and understanding that resulted in empathy.
Thirty-one percent of respondents reported that their partners were not sensitive or understanding of them, which resulted in an empathic void in their relationships. Most of these responses were from heterosexual women. Sixty-three year old Linda, who had been married to Lou for 39 years, spoke to that theme:

_I’m way too sensitive. I think maybe it comes from growing up in a family where nobody really talked too much. Lou’s not especially sensitive. I remember one time I was sad about something that was going on between us, and he later said, “Oh, I thought you were sad about that movie we watched.” But I think that he’s worked a lot on that. There are times when I could have been more sensitive ... I regret that ... I always think I know what’s going on in someone’s head. Right or wrong, I’m always thinking about what the other person is thinking. I don’t think Lou does that, but he tries hard to figure out where I’m coming from in a given situation._

Male partners of heterosexual women were not perceived similarly to the partners of lesbian respondents. While heterosexual spouses were frequently described in positive terms in other aspects of their relationships, they were not viewed as sensitive or as understanding as the partners of lesbians.

**DISCUSSION**

While psychologically intimate relationships, such as those reported in this paper, may be important to individual well-being, it is important to place a discussion of this data into a broader context. There are other factors that need to be considered in trying to understand psychologically intimate communication between partners in loving relationships that last. Biological and socio-cultural factors may have as much effect in shaping the quality of relationships, especially lasting ones, but there is little question that psychological intimacy is a critical variable in understanding relational stability and individual well-being. Given the relative lack of attention to research on what intimacy
means to women in relationships that last, our goal was to offer some understanding of the phenomenon that may be of use in subsequent research.

One of the most interesting findings was that the quality of psychological intimacy as reported by respondents was related significantly to the sensitivity and understanding of their partners and not to their own sensitivity and understanding. The two variables of partner sensitivity and understanding were very important in the development of psychological intimacy and concomitantly to relational satisfaction. When respondent were asked to describe how sensitive and understanding their partners were to them, their responses reflected the level of empathy that they perceived in their partners. That is, taken together, sensitivity and understanding may be thought of as the components of empathy. Sensitivity may have been the emotional component and understanding the cognitive component. The data suggested that there was a higher level of empathy among lesbian partners than among the husbands of heterosexual women. That observation fits with differences between males and females that have been reported in the research literature.

Although the three variables of satisfaction with relationships, sensitivity and understanding of partners contributed to the development of psychological intimacy, there may have been at least somewhat of a difference in how each variable made its contribution. A relationship may have become intimate as a result of the sensitivity and understanding of one’s partner, an offshoot of which was to enhance satisfaction, which may have reinforced one’s motivation to maintain a psychologically intimate relationship characterized by sensitivity and understanding. The process may have been dynamic and circular in nature with each variable, satisfaction and psychological intimacy, interacting and reinforcing the other and having a positive effect on the quality of relationships.
Even when there was a difference in the quality of psychological intimacy in recent years, relationships were still satisfying, although not as satisfying as those characterized by psychological intimacy. Other variables, usually personal qualities, most likely compensated for the empathic hole created by difficulties with being psychologically intimate. That theme was manifested in differences found in the observations of respondents, notably heterosexual women, about their male partners’ sensitivity and understanding. Apparently, relationships that last, notably heterosexual ones, may be satisfying even when they are not characterized by a sense of psychologically intimate communication between partners.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of variables that may shape psychological intimacy in loving relationships at different points in time. We focused here on the last five to ten years of relationships that had lasted an average of 30 years. At other points in the lives of these respondents, the quality of psychological intimacy was quite different. Many women talked of the challenges in developing and maintaining a psychologically intimate connection with their partners over the years. For many if not most of these women, there was considerable change in the quality of psychological intimacy from early to recent years.

LIMITATIONS

This research reported here explored only a small piece of a larger and highly complex pie and was designed to generate an understanding on an important dimension of relationships and not to test hypotheses nor to generalize to a wider population. In-depth interviews with a small sample were an effective means for beginning exploration of territory not previously
studied, the goal of which was to develop an understanding of new phenomenon that may contribute to theory.

The richness of data elicited through this method is quite different from data collected through other means, but there are concerns about validity and reliability as well as the nature of the sample, which was small and white. It is difficult to assess the validity of the data in the traditional sense of that concept since we were eliciting the personal perceptions and evaluations of these women about the meaning of psychological intimacy in their relationships at a particular point in time. The candor of respondents about other personal matters, such as their sexual relations, suggests that they were equally candid about other aspects of their relationships, such as psychological intimacy.

In a cross sectional design in which individuals are asked to report on their life today and in the past, traditional measures of reliability are inadequate. The meaning of life events and an individual's response to these events vary, and may even vary within the same person at different points over the life span. While longitudinal designs may be superior in contending with problems of validity and reliability, cross sectional designs that use interviews to uncover the meaning of behavior have the strength of eliciting the richness in the experiences of human beings. Retrospective observations also include a perspective on the total life span of a relationship, which is not possible longitudinally. Such a perspective is valuable in research that purports to explore new areas that may suggest new foci for subsequent studies.

To offset the potential reductionistic effects of coding data derived from interviews and to enrich the discussion, we incorporated excerpts of interviews into the results. The integration of qualitative and quantitative procedures was intended to support the objective of the research.
Quantitative analysis offered direction to the analysis of interview data. That is, the foci of the qualitative analysis were shaped by statistically significant findings in the quantitative analysis.

The use of an interdisciplinary team throughout the research process enhanced the quality of the study and helped to control subjectivity. Issues of bias and misinterpretation were discussed regularly by the research team along with other matters that could have affected the validity and reliability of the data.

CONCLUSIONS

In thinking about the data reported in this paper, it is important to underscore that the study focused on a very narrow sample of women in lasting relationships and was designed to begin exploration of a vital aspect of loving relationships that has received relatively little attention in the research literature. The goal of the study was to understand psychological intimacy in these relationships from the perspectives of these women. The data may be of use to researchers that study relationships, especially since loving relationships characterized by psychologically intimate communication has been identified with personal well-being and positive mental health.

Psychological intimacy referred to the sense that one could be open and honest in talking with a partner about personal thoughts and feelings not usually expressed in other relationships. The focus of the research on psychological themes (i.e. schemas of intimacy) was assumed to be contingent on the quality of specific relational behaviors between partners. Although a single approach to data collection was used – in depth interviews – both quantitative and qualitative modes were employed in analyzing the data. The goal of the study was to understand the
significance of psychological intimacy to lesbian and straight women in lasting relationships so as to contribute to the development of theory and to offer some suggestions for future research.

The variables that contributed to and shaped the quality of psychological intimacy were sexual orientation, relational satisfaction, the sensitivity and understanding of the partners of respondents. Twice as many lesbian respondents compared to heterosexuals viewed their relationships as psychologically intimate. The data suggested that the empathy of partners, as manifested in their sensitivity and understanding, was instrumental in the development of psychological intimacy, more so among lesbian rather than heterosexual couples. With one exception, lesbians viewed their partners as sensitive and understanding compared to one half of heterosexuals, data that resonate with previous research on gender differences. That finding is limited by the small sample size and suggests the need to explore and test that finding in subsequent studies more representative of the general population of gay and straight women in relationships that last.

Finally, psychological intimacy and relational satisfaction were closely intertwined and appeared to have a mutually reinforcing, positive effect on each other as relationships developed. Among lesbians, the perceived sensitivity and understanding of their partners, which we hypothesize are two inter-related components of empathy, were very important in shaping satisfaction with relationships. Many heterosexual women apparently derived satisfaction from other aspects of their relationships, since less than one half of them viewed their husbands as empathic toward them. Again, the study points to potential differences in heterosexual and lesbian relationships that need further exploration in subsequent research.
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