



Spring 5-20-2019

# Negotiations Around Power, Resources, and Tasks Within Lesbian Relationships: Does This Process Affect the Perception of Intimacy and Sexual Satisfaction?

Sarah Bohannon

*University of Pennsylvania*, [sarahbo@upenn.edu](mailto:sarahbo@upenn.edu)

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## **Degree Type**

Dissertation

## **Degree Name**

Doctor of Social Work (DSW)

## **First Advisor**

Marcia Martin, PhD

## **Second Advisor**

Lina Hartocollis, PhD

## **Keywords**

lesbian relationships, power, sexual satisfaction, intimacy, tasks

## **Subject Categories**

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Social Work

Fall 9-5-2019

# Negotiations Around Power, Resources, and Tasks Within Lesbian Relationships: Does This Process Af- fect the Perception of Intimacy and Sexual Satisfaction?

Sarah Bohannon

*The University of Pennsylvania School of Social Policy and Practice, sarahbo@upenn.edu*

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Sarah Bohannon

A DISSERTATION

in

Social Work

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Social Work

2019

Marcia L. Martin, Ph.D. Dissertation Chair

Sara S. Bachman, PhD.  
Dean, School of Social Policy and Practice

Dissertation Committee

Lina Hartocollis, PhD

Marcia L. Martin, PhD

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**Dedication**

*To the little girl who grew up on Belmar Terrace:*

*You can.*

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to begin by thanking the most supportive person in my life. Gretchen, I will be forever grateful for your support during my work on, and leading up to, this dissertation. I never thought I would find the connection that we share, and that is what I am most grateful for in my life: you. You're a kind soul, the funniest person I know, and the most dedicated—especially when it comes to me. I can't thank you enough for believing in me. I will always save a seat next to me if you will have it. I love you.

To my sister, Bridget, thank you for being my constant throughout my life. You have always showed up for me, whether it was my orchestra concert, my soccer games, my softball games, Iceland, my graduations, my breakups, and, most of all, all those Friday nights you drove from New Jersey to Philadelphia to pick your little sister up for the weekend. Thank you for getting me out of there. You opened your home to me and made me feel like it was also my home. You have inspired me to be better and push harder. In my darkest moments I have always reached for you, and you have always been on the other side of that reach. You were robbed of your childhood, but you did an incredible job with your adulthood, and I am so proud and grateful that you are my sister. I love you.

To the chair of my dissertation, Dr. Marcia Martin, thank you for being a dependable, kind, and patient guide throughout this process. Your expertise and wisdom provided a well-lit path for me, and for that I will be forever grateful. To Dr. Lina Hartocollis, thank you so much for suggesting that Marcia be my chair, for being on my committee, for reading this dissertation,

and for knowing exactly how to button it up. Your presence has been an enormous comfort because I know that you know what you're doing.

To my brothers Tommy, Chrissy, and Davey, who always share in my excitement and are down to party: I love you guys. It's such a gift that you are all starkly different because for any issue I am having, there is always one of you I can call to talk about it. Thank you for being there for me.

To my late mother, Veronica. I'm so sorry that you never made it to the other side of your addiction and the ability to live a fulfilling life. I am inspired by you to not to wish things away but to take action in my life, despite my fears. Your heartbreak has fueled my scholarship. I wish I could have helped you more than I did. I love you.

# Negotiations Around Power, Resources, and Tasks Within Lesbian Relationships: Does This Process Affect the Perception of Intimacy and Sexual Satisfaction?

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## **Two-Paper Introduction**

This two-paper dissertation discusses the findings of a qualitative study that explores the connection between the way the distribution of power, resources, and tasks is negotiated within monogamous lesbian relationships and how this process may affect sexual satisfaction and relational intimacy.

The lesbian subculture is a fertile area of study because there is a dearth of research that focuses solely on lesbian relationships (Brewster, 2017; Cohen & Byers, 2014; O’Keefe, J. et al, 2018; Shelby, S., Ritchie, L., Knopp, K., Rhoades, G. & Markman, H., 2018). Considering that homosexuality was first documented in ancient Egyptian text more than 4,400 years ago, it is surprising that there continues to be a paucity of research looking exclusively into the lives of lesbians (Brewster, 2017; O’Keefe, J., et al., 2018; Shelby, S., Ritchie, L., Knopp, K., Rhoades, G. & Markman, H., 2018). A few of the reasons for the lack of research on lesbian couples throughout history can be attributed to homophobia, internalized homophobia, sexism, and disinterest in female sexuality, among many other factors that go into studying a minority population that fears being harmed physically, emotionally and verbally.

This researcher became interested in the lesbian subculture in the early 2000s. The interest was sparked because the researcher identified as a lesbian; however, she didn’t know a great deal about the lesbian population because of the lack of representation in popular culture and because she did not know any lesbians at the time. Identifying as a lesbian and being new to the subculture was exciting for this researcher, who grew up in Philadelphia, went to Philadelphia Catholic schools, joined the U.S. Navy after high school, and found herself in her early twenties as a new veteran beginning her college education and finding out what it was like to be a lesbian.

Over time this researcher began to observe a pattern with her lesbian friends that appeared as a cycle: Young lesbian women would begin a relationship with another lesbian; eventually, the couple would stop having sex. Some would cheat on their partner with another lesbian. Then they would break up, and the cycle would begin again. This researcher was surprised by this cycle and wondered why lesbian women seemed to have sex less frequently as their relationships progressed. There is a colloquial term within the lesbian subculture that is well known: lesbian bed death (LBD). This term was coined in 1983 by the researcher Pepper Swartz, co-author of the book *American Couples*, which revealed that lesbian couples engage in fewer sexual encounters compared with gay male couples and heterosexual couples (Blumstein & Swartz, 1983; Cohen, J. & Byers, S., 2014; Scott, S., et al., 2018).

This researcher was intrigued by LBD because it seemed to ring true within the lesbian community. Swartz coined the term when the researchers Blumstein and Swartz found that lesbians reported having less sex than heterosexual and gay male couples (Blumstein & Swartz, 1983). Rosmalen-Nooijens, Vergeer & Largo-Jansen (2008) defined lesbian bed death as “an expression that refers to a cessation of sexual activity in lesbian couples over time in spite of preserved intimacy.” There is a contentious debate within the academic community as to whether lesbian bed death should be thought of as a real thing because the term was invented based on this question: “About how often during the last year have you and your partner had sexual relations?” (Blumstein & Swartz, 1983). Despite the question being vague and holding questionable reliability, the term stuck with some within the lesbian community. Some researchers, authors, and health care providers oppose using the term for various reasons (Iasenza, 2000, 2002; Lindenbaum, 1985, Nichols, 1987, 2004), and other researchers, authors, and health care providers

believe the term is relevant based on what lesbian couples have reported to them in varying venues (Hall, 1984; Loulan, 1984; Nichols, 1987; Rosmalen-Nooijens, et al., 2008).

Iasenza (2002) reacts to Blumstein and Swartz's vague research question with great skepticism and thinks that researchers have taken the results from asking this question and created a genre of research that is not empirically sound. Iasenza (2002) feverishly condemns researchers who endorse the term "lesbian bed death" and further articulates that "as a sex therapist and researcher, I must admit my alarm at the acceptance of a clinical entity whose definitional clarity and empirical validity are highly questionable" (p. 112). The fact that the term "lesbian bed death" has prevailed for more than thirty years remains a curiosity within the academic community but not within the lesbian community. Recent articles continue to discuss LBD (Cohen & Byers, 2014; Hall, 2002; Iasenza, 2000; 2002; Meana, M. & Lykins, A., 2006; Nichols, 2014; Rosmalin, et al., 2008; Scott et al., 2018). Nichols (2014) articulates that LBD has been hotly debated within the lesbian community since 1980; however, she speaks to the focus on sexual frequency coming from Masters and Johnson's sexual response cycle, which is well known for being a heteronormative point of view. Nichols (2014) opposes using sexual frequency as a measurement of sexually healthy lesbians. It is clear Nichols believes that frequency is not the only measurement of lesbian sexual health and that there are other aspects that factor into sexual fulfillment for lesbians.

Researchers have considered several possibilities that may contribute to lesbian women's lower instances of sexual encounters. Hall (2002) notes that when lesbian women come to her office complaining of LBD, she tries to "coax into consciousness the ways their experiences, cultures, and temperaments have shaped their versions of sex" (p. 171). Hall (2002) further elaborates how complicated one's "erotic maps" are and how they are influenced by our culture,

trauma history, and belief systems. When two people have two different experiences with sex, it can be challenging for them to get on the same page and synchronize their desires (Hall, 2002). Hall (2002) discounts LBD on the basis that sex is too complicated to operationalize by using frequency as the only measure of a fulfilling sex life. Iasenza (2000, 2002) also discounts the term and thinks it was coined from a heteronormative perspective about how sex is defined, “lacking definitional clarity, empirical validity,” with problematic assumptions about how often a couple is supposed to have sex.

This dissertation, initially precipitated by an interest in the idea of LBD, focuses on the negotiation of power, resources, and tasks among lesbians couples, and the potential effect of these negotiations on intimacy and sexual satisfaction. While there are articles that support the existence of lesbian bed death (Hall, 1984; Loulan, 1984; Nichols, 1987; Rosmalen-Nooijens, et al., 2008) and research that debunks the term (Iasenza, 2000; Lindenbaum, 1985; Nichols, 1987, 2004), the identification of factors within monogamous lesbian relationships that contribute to a sense of intimacy and sexual satisfaction is a rich area for exploration. The aim of this dissertation is to collect data through interviewing eight to ten participants who identify as lesbians and have been involved in a monogamous relationship with another lesbian for a minimum of three years. The interviews will focus specifically on the ways in which respondents describe the negotiation of the distribution of power, resources, and tasks within their relationships with their partners and how, if at all, this negotiation process impacts their perceived levels of intimacy and sexual satisfaction.



**Paper One:**  
**Negotiations Around Power, Resources, and Tasks Within Lesbian Relationships:**  
**Does This Process Affect the Perception of Intimacy and Sexual Satisfaction?**

**Literature Review**

This paper will focus on currently existing research on lesbian couples and periphery research that is relevant to women's sexuality, lesbians, minority stress, intimacy, sexual satisfaction, heteronormativity, sex roles, and policy. In order to ascertain what researchers have studied with regard to lesbian relationships, this researcher went back as far as the 1980s to begin developing a picture of how lesbian culture and related research have evolved.

Academic research on lesbian couples is sparse for several reasons, including difficulty in finding a sample, as many potential participants may be closeted; researcher disinterest in targeting solely lesbian couples for their research subjects, possibly due to sexism; an inclination to group lesbians and gay men together as same-sex couples; greater interest in researching the newly trending gender-queer population; a tendency to group couples—lesbian, gay, straight, gender-queer and trans people.—into one study that is typically quantitative and which offers limited detail on the inner workings of a lesbian relationship. (Hall, 2002; Iasenza, 2002; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). This paper will identify and discuss relevant research specific to lesbian couples and highlight the evident gaps. Peplau & Fingerhut (2007) highlight that research with same-sex couples began to appear in the 1970s, picked up speed in the 1980s, and by the 1990s primarily focused on the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) epidemic because it was hitting the gay male community at a devastating rate. As a result of this attention on the AIDS epidemic among gay men, the lesbian population took a back seat to research interests (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). In addition, Meana & Lykins (2006), discussed how American cul-

ture views female sexuality as uninteresting and attempts to contain female sexuality because it feels like a threat.

In 2004, Massachusetts legalized same-sex marriage, catalyzing renewed interest in research on same-sex couples. However, when this research began to regain momentum, the focus seemed to be on same-sex couples as a whole rather than distinguishing between gay male couples and lesbian couples. Failure to make this distinction is problematic because there are differences in male and female sexuality, including hormonal differences, sexual roles, cultural differences, and differences in the ways males and females express emotion. (Cordova, Gee and Warren, 2005). In addition, Nichols (2004) points out that there are more sexual differences between men and women than there are between lesbians, bisexual women, straight women, and gender-queer women.

The United States has been undergoing significant changes in the collective opinion regarding same sex marriage. Since 2004, when same-sex marriage was legalized in Massachusetts, opinions have oscillated, with some states strongly supporting same-sex marriage while others attempted to ban it. While same-sex marriage was legalized in all fifty states by the 2015 Supreme Court ruling of *Obergefell v. Hodges*, some opposition to marriage equality remains. Frost (2011) discusses how policy and laws have been used to enforce discrimination against the LGBTQ population and how that discrimination manifests in not only precluding members of the LGBTQ community from celebrating their love publicly, but also affecting the health of the LGBTQ community. Factors that have affected the LGBTQ community's health include internalized homophobia; lack of social support from one's family, church and community; discrimination; low self-esteem; anxiety; and depression (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007; Todosijevic et al., 2005). In addition, lesbians' perceived sexual problems, which have been based on heteronorma-

tive sexual response cycles, have resulted in lesbians feeling as though they had sexual desire problems and arousal problems, creating anxiety for many lesbian couples, ultimately negatively impacting their sexual satisfaction (Hall, 2002).

Policy in the United States has a direct impact on the lives of the LGBTQ community, and it also sends a message to U.S. citizens about what the country's leadership thinks about this particular subculture within the population. For instance, Don't Ask, Don't Tell, instituted in 1994 as the official United States policy on gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals serving in the military, was overturned by the Department of Defense in September 2011, and the restrictions on gay men and lesbians serving in the military were lifted by federal law signed in November 2011. The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), signed into policy by President Bill Clinton in 1996, was, after a series of court cases, struck down by a Supreme Court decision in June 2015. The overturning of DOMA was a revolutionary moment for the LGBTQ community because it gave individuals the ability to build a family without legal barriers. It affected numerous areas of daily life, adoption, taxes, health care, veteran's benefits for LGBTQ spouses, visitation rights in the hospital, and death benefits. The ultimate impact of ending these two policies is unclear because it is still too early to discern the effects on LGBTQ individuals, couples, families, and society as a whole. Frost (2011) spoke specifically to Canada's passage of marriage equality and noted that "not enough time has passed to effectively detect the effect this policy change may have on perceived barriers and devaluation of LGBTQ's relationship projects" (p. 297).

Historically, the LGBTQ community has been a challenging group with which to conduct research because of closeting due to the negative stigma of being LGBTQ in a heteronormative society. Finding members of the lesbian community to participate in research has been considered a "methodological problem" for researchers in the past (Frost, 2011; Moore, 2008; Peplau

& Amaro, 1982). In 2011, Frost used an internet-based survey not only to cast a large net but also to ensure the anonymity of the participants. Anonymity was important to Frost and his research colleagues because without it, they believed they would not have been able to obtain their sample size of 431 participants (239 of the participants identified as LGBTQ, and 192 identified as heterosexual), because of fear of being outed.

### **Summary of Past Research on Lesbian Couples**

A review of the published literature investigating lesbian romantic relationships makes it clear that this fertile field of research is in its early developmental stages. The articles relevant to this research are divided into three categories: relational intimacy, relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction.

### **Intimacy**

Relational intimacy was investigated through multiple lenses, including the theory of intimacy, how minority stress affects intimacy, how gender influences intimacy, and how researchers can be creative in measuring intimacy (Frost, 2011; Lippert & Prager, 2001; Milek, Boderman & Butler, 2015). Without any available tools to measure intimacy in a romantic relationship, researchers Marelich and Lunquist (2008) created a scale to measure “motivations for sexual intimacy.” Their scale included “a pool of 23 items that were generated to measure the needs for sex, affiliation, and dominance,” and the researchers included heterosexual couples as their study participants (p. 179). While intimacy is an expansive term, it is commonly used to describe a romantic relationship; however, there is some evidence that shows that there is still more to learn about how intimacy is developed, maintained, and improved upon in relationships (Marelich & Lunquist, 2008). This dissertation will utilize a combination of definitions from past researchers to define intimacy. For example, using a wider perspective, Frost (2011) more ex-

PLICITLY defines intimacy as “experiences of emotional, communicative, and physical closeness or connection with another person” (p. 283); Blado (2001) discusses emotional fidelity, flexibility with sex, and openness with attitudes around sex roles in discussing intimacy; and Connolly (2005) focuses on maintaining a balance between connection and autonomy.

Marelich and Lundquist’s study included 347 participants and focused on needs for sex, affiliation, and dominance. While this study was conducted with heterosexual participants, this researcher finds the study relevant to this paper because it uses the first scale to attempt to measure intimacy, and this researcher finds that intimacy is defined similarly across varying types of romantic relationships (Marelich & Lundquist, 2008). Also, it has been found that lesbian women and heterosexual women have many similarities when reporting on their romantic relationships (Matthews, Tartaro & Hughes, 2002). Marelich and Lunquist (2008) found that the participants with a higher need for sex had a greater number of sexual partners and one-night stands, and those with higher needs for affiliation were more likely to be honest with their partner and practice safer sex (Marelich & Lundquist, 2008). There were also gender differences found between the heterosexual men and heterosexual women, in which the heterosexual men had a higher need for sex and the heterosexual women exhibited a higher need for affiliation (Marelich and Lundquist, 2008). The Marelich and Lundquist (2008) and Matthews, Tartaro & Hughes (2002) studies report that both heterosexual women and lesbian women report an increasing desire for affiliation above a need for sex.

As noted above, Frost (2011) conducted an internet-based study that included 431 participants, including those who identified as heterosexual and LGBTQ. The participants in this study included 239 LGB people, including 94 gay or bisexual men and 145 lesbian or bisexual women, and 192 heterosexuals, 38 of whom were men and 154 of whom were women (Frost, 2011). The

study looked at how straight and LGBTQ individuals are supported, or unsupported, by society in achieving intimacy with one another. Frost (2011) used planning for an “intimacy project,” otherwise known as a wedding or commitment ceremony, as a measure of how individuals felt supported or rejected by society during this planning. Frost (2011) found that homosexuals encountered more devaluation and challenges when planning an intimacy project than their heterosexual peers did. Frost (2011) and Marelich & Lundquist (2008) both used surveys to collect information from their participants, which allowed for anonymity and also the ability to cast a larger net to collect information from a larger sample of participants.

### **Relationship Satisfaction**

Researchers have conducted experiments exploring different methods to uncover similar interests involving what makes romantic relationships satisfying, how couples distribute power, and how sexual orientation affects negotiation of tasks. One study was a comparison study among heterosexual couples and homosexual couples. Falbo & Peplau’s (1980) research had a sample of 100 heterosexuals and 100 homosexuals, evenly divided by the participants’ sex assigned at birth, and used essays that the participants wrote to investigate how gender, egalitarianism, and sexual orientation influence power strategies used in romantic relationships. For instance, when Falbo & Peplau (1980) wanted to assess how a couple used power strategies with their significant other, they gave them the writing prompt “how I get ([name of partner]) to do what I want,” and then the participant would write an open essay to answer the question. Falbo & Peplau (1980) found that those who perceived themselves as having more power in the relationship (i.e., heterosexual men), were more likely to use direct strategies of power. Falbo & Peplau (1980) found two significant differences associated with sexual orientation: Heterosexual men scored higher on having a preference for greater personal power in their relationships with wom-

en and also used direct communication, whereas heterosexual women in relationships did not have a preference for power and often used indirect communication, like hinting, when they wanted to influence their partner. In comparison, the homosexual couples were not influenced by social gender norms and preferred to be equals and used direct communication with their partners (Falbo & Peplau, 1980).

There are many methods used to collect information from participants, and using surveys tend to be a quick way to gather information from a large number of people in a snapshot. These five studies used surveys (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984; Peplau, Padlesky & Hamilton, 1982; Markey, P. & Markey, C., 2013; Mathews, Tartaro & Hughes, 2002), including one study that used interview surveys conducted by a trained interviewer to conduct a comparison study, looking at the similarities and differences between heterosexual women and lesbians in their perception of values, division of labor, frequency and satisfaction with sex, relationship satisfaction, conflict resolution, relationship violence, and use of mental health services within romantic relationships (Mathews, Tartaro and Hughes, 2002). While this research found that heterosexual women and lesbians have more in common than they have differences, some of the differences included heterosexual women reporting that their partners wanted sex more often than they did, lesbians reporting participation in mental health services more frequently than heterosexual women, lesbian couples more frequently reporting that their partners “always” share in household tasks, and a greater percentage of lesbians reporting that sex was “very important” (Mathews, Tartaro & Hughes, 2002).

Another study researched 77 lesbians that inquired about the balance of power within their relationships (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984). Caldwell and Peplau (1984) found that 40% of these lesbian relationships had an unequal balance of power. This was investigated through

measuring the commitment each person had to the relationship, as well as their income, education level, and sex role (butch or femme). Despite the fact that the majority of lesbians valued equal power within a relationship, the reality of making that happen in their relationships was complicated. The study noted that women who were involved in an unequal relationship reported lower levels of relationship satisfaction and anticipated more relational problems (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984).

Peplau, Padesky and Hamilton (1982) conducted a study with 127 lesbian women and investigated satisfaction, which was defined as being “associated with equality and involvement and equality of power in the relationship” (p. 23). In addition, Peplau, et al. (1982) found evidence that satisfaction and similarity between the two women were also linked in having a satisfying relationship. Peplau, et al. (1982) also found that greater relationship satisfaction was associated with equal involvement in the relationship and equal power within the relationship. Peplau, et al. (1982) used Blau’s (1964) definition of balance of involvement “only when two lovers’ affection for commitment to one another expand at roughly the same pace do they tend mutually to reinforce their love (p. 84). Of the 127 lesbians in the Peplau, et al. (1982) study, 125 of them were white, all had a college education or were in the process of obtaining their bachelor’s degree or enrolled in a graduate program while the other half was working full time. Although this research is dated, it remains relevant to current cultural perspectives, according to researchers Patrick and Charlotte Markey (2013). Their research supported the idea that the more similar the heterosexual or lesbian couples are in demographics, background, and personality, the more likely the relationships will have positive outcomes (Markey & Markey, 2013). In addition, Sprecher (2013), found that the more similar the couple’s attitudes and beliefs, the more satisfied the couple was within their relationship; however, Sprecher also found



that through convergence, the couple was likely to find that they grew more similar as time passed.

In support of satisfaction and similarities among a couple, Carrie Yodanis (2010) wrote a chapter in, *Dividing the Domestic* (Treas & Drobnick, 2010) about the institution of marriage and how marriage is looked at through the lens of various cultures around the world. Yodanis spoke to the idea of homogamy—that people tend to marry people who have similar backgrounds, education levels, demographics, and religious beliefs—and elaborates that this happens because it is thought that the more similar the couple, the more likely they will have a successful marriage, because they will receive support from their family and community. On the other hand, when people marry people who are not similar to themselves in religion, race, and culture or are homosexual, they may sense that they are not being supported by their family and community, which could then cause stress to the relationship and also lead to dissatisfaction within the relationship (Sprecher, 2013; Yodanis, 2010). Having similar backgrounds to one's partner could potentially make it easier for the family of an LGBTQ person to adapt because they realize that although it was an adjustment for them to identify their family member as LGBTQ and dating someone of the same sex, it may not be as different as they had expected because they share a lot of the same interests with or come from similar social, economic, or religious backgrounds as their loved one's partner.

The history of research on lesbian couples cited above shows that a balance of involvement, (Blau, 1964; Peplau, et al., 1982), a balance of power, (Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton, 1982) similar backgrounds (Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton, 1982), and similar attitudes and beliefs about the world (Markey & Markey, 2013) all greatly influence the level of intimacy and connection that any romantically involved couple shares. Despite how homosexuals and heterosexu-

als were depicted as much different from each other, the above work makes it clear that lesbians and heterosexual women have more in common than not when it comes to intimacy (Marelich & Lundquist, 2008). Research also reveals how critical it is for a couple to feel accepted and have support from their families, friends, and community for their relationship to flourish outside of the walls of their home (Frost, 2011). The more loved, accepted, and celebrated the couple is, the more of an advantage the couple has creating and sustaining their romantic relationship (Frost, 2011).

## **Theory**

Two theories will be utilized to guide the framework of this study on the ways in which egalitarianism in relationships and the balance of power contribute to intimacy and sexual satisfaction for lesbian couples. The first theory is social exchange theory, which proposes that the person with the greater amount of resources and greater social status is likely the person within the relationship to garner the most power (Homans, 1958). Social exchange theory demonstrates how reciprocity, power, and bartering in relationships work and how power can affect relationship satisfaction. Social exchange theory is built on a foundation of an exchange of goods, both material and non-material, and the person with the most to offer is typically the person who has the most power in the relationship (Homans, 1958). The second theory is based on relational cultural therapy, which describes how crucial relationships are to our lives, our happiness, and feeling fulfilled (Jordan, 2009). We live in a capitalist society that values independence and competition and sends the message that we should be self-sufficient; however, where we thrive the most as human beings is in connection with one another and mutual growth (Jordan, 2009). These two theories combined within this study promote the idea that the more equality people have in their

romantic relationships, the more connected, intimate, and hopefully sexually satisfied the couple will be within their relationship.

### **Social Exchange Theory**

A sociologist and professor of sociology at Harvard, Dr. George Homans (1958) created social exchange theory which was founded on the basis of four tenets: “behavioral psychology, economics, propositions about the complexities of influence and the dynamics of small groups” (p. 597). Social exchange theory was conceptualized as an economic bartering system in a didactic relationship, in which two people involved in the relationship use material goods and non-material goods as a fluid system of reciprocity. To manage the equilibrium of exchange between two people, there is a balance in the give and take within their relationship (Homans, 1958). Homans (1961) described social exchange as commerce where there is a transaction of “activity, tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding or costly, between at least two people” (p. 13). Another major contributor to social exchange theory was Dr. Peter Blau, who was born in Austria in 1918, migrated to the United States, and completed his doctorate at Columbia University. Emmerson (1976) compared Homans’ and Blau’s view of social exchange theory and found that “Blau gave more emphasis to technical economic analysis while Homans dwelled more upon the psychology of instrumental behavior.” Homans looked retrospectively on reciprocity, where one remembers the reward of their exchange and if it was successful or unsuccessful, and, as a result, either repeats the exchange in order to be rewarded again or discontinues the behavior because it was not well received. Blau, on the other hand, focused on utilitarianism, which would be forward-looking, where an individual or a group performed a behavior that they thought would benefit the greater good in the future (Cook, Rice & Nakagawa, 2013).

When applied to romantic relationships, social exchange theory predicts that the person with the most resources, assets, and socioeconomic status within the relationship is the person who holds the greatest amount of power (Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton, 1982; Caldwell & Peplau, 1984; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). However, the more equal the relationship feels to both partners, the more likely that both people will feel satisfied and have more positive aspirations within their relationship (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984). Social exchange theory also anticipates that greater relationship satisfaction occurs with couples who view their relationships as having an equal balance of power and equal involvement within the relationship (Peplau, et al., 1982).

Division of household labor and power was traditionally divided by gender and following a preexisting foundation of heterosexist norms (Brewster, 2017). Within the context of traditional heterosexual norms, the man was expected to be the breadwinner and the woman was responsible for the work in the home—cleaning, child-rearing, cooking, and other domestic chores. Historically, men were afforded more work and educational opportunities than women, which reinforced women’s dependency on men to provide. Women have fought hard for equal rights with employment, equal pay, equal opportunity, and status; however, there continues to be areas in this country and in the world where “traditional heterosexual marriages” favor the man as having the most power within romantic relationships. Peplau & Fingerhut (2007) write, “Traditional heterosexual marriage is organized around two basic principles: a division of labor based on gender and a norm of greater male power and decision-making authority” (p. 408). Of course, there has been a major shift in gender roles within the American household over the past several decades. Women are a significant part of the workforce, having children later in life, and having fewer children (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000). In addition, men are more involved in the household and have significantly increased their participation in the home with childcare

and housework (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer & Robinson, 2000). Despite the research and the shift in roles that has men contributing more when it comes to housework, women are often known to do a “second shift,” where they come home after working all day and then do the housework that needs to be completed that day (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000). Whoever is doing the housework, Brewster (2017) recommends that whether one is involved in a heterosexual relationship or a same-sex relationship, it is imperative that one expresses “gratitude” for their partner’s work in order to cultivate relationship satisfaction and longevity.

LGBTQ relationships lack biological sex as the organizing component for defining expectations regarding division of labor, financial provider, decision-making, initiating sex, etc. (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). The majority of romantic relationships in general include dual earners, which means that both partners are able to maintain economic independence (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). A lack of role expectations based on gender within LGBTQ relationships provides fertile ground for research to ascertain how a couple negotiates various responsibilities within the relationship, how power is defined and distributed, and how well the couple navigates joint decision-making. Several researchers used social exchange theory to investigate how equality of involvement and equality of power leads to higher relationship satisfaction for lesbian couples (Peplau, et al., 1982; Caldwell & Peplau, 1984) and same-sex couples in general (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007).

### **Relational Cultural Theory**

Relational cultural therapy (RCT) is a feminist-based theory that was created to highlight the importance of women’s psychological health and illuminate how relationships influence human development (Jordan, 2009). In 1976, Dr. Jean Baker Miller published a book, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, which highlighted the importance of relationships in human life and

how relationships have been historically devalued in psychological theory. Miller points out that making the personal political and emphasizing the cultural values of competition, independence, and self-sufficiency doesn't mean that we should accept those principles as representing the most valued way of living a fulfilling life. Jordan (2009) points out that "RCT has been solidly anchored in social constructivist thinking" (p. 19) and further elaborates that *Toward a New Psychology of Women* is largely based on an analysis of the social construction of gender and the significance of power relationships in creating limiting images and expectations for women" (p. 19). Connection with people in our lives is placed at the center of our growth and serves as a necessary component to feeling fulfilled and emotionally healthy, and contributes to the ability to feel securely attached to another human being.

For the purposes of this dissertation, RCT is used as a theoretical lens that highlights how connection, mutual empathy, growth fostering relationships, disconnection, relational images, controlling images and shame, relational resilience, and relational courage can move us toward or away from meaningful relationships (Jordan, 2009). This paper will explore the theoretical framework and apply it to relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and intimacy within egalitarian lesbian relationships. Considering that lesbians have a history of isolation and hiding their sexuality, RCT proves to be well suited for a marginalized population that relies heavily on feeling connected with one another and taking pride in their community.

Culture is central to RCT because of the substantial impact that culture has on our societal belief system and the development of societal norms. For example, many developmental theories are anchored in a move from dependence to independence. However, one of the fundamental needs of being a human being is having the ability to connect with one another and feel safe in that connection (Jordan, 2009). RCT provides a framework that focuses on empowering wom-

en's connections with those close to them, starting from their first relationships (mother-daughter) and branching out to friendships and eventually romantic relationships. Women have historically been shamed for valuing belonging, togetherness, and love for another over competition, material success, and autonomy. Women have been marginalized in business, politics, and corporate America and categorized as overly emotional and unable or unwilling to prioritize work over family. RCT provides an alternative belief system for women that highlights the importance of vulnerability, connectedness, and authenticity within their relationships (Jordan, 2009). This theory does not cower to mainstream American beliefs that celebrate competition, autonomy, and self-actualization, but rather empowers people to feel comfortable relying on one another for fulfillment, connection, and intimacy (Jordan, 2009).

Social exchange theory and RCT, when considered together in this dissertation, serve to illuminate how egalitarian lesbian relationships can challenge the cultural expectations of autonomy, competitiveness, and suspiciousness of connection. RCT serves as the theoretical foundation on which lesbian couples feel empowered to create their own norm for sexual satisfaction, connectedness and intimacy. Social exchange theory and RCT provide a complementary union in which egalitarian relationships, mutual involvement, connection, and authenticity dovetail to create a feminist perspective on the ways in which women define fulfillment in their romantic relationships.

## **Relational Dynamics**

### **Demographics of Studies**

Demographics can influence the way research is conducted; for example, when investigating egalitarianism and power amongst lesbians, the most commonly used theory was social exchange theory (Taylor, 2010; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007; Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton, 1982;

Caldwell & Peplau; 1984). Social exchange theory was used to investigate how equality of involvement and equality of power lead to higher relationship satisfaction for white, college-educated, middle- to upper-class lesbian couples (Taylor, 2010; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007; Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton; 1982; Caldwell & Peplau; 1984). Unfortunately, relative to research conducted on heterosexual minority couples, there continues to be a paucity of research on lesbians who fall outside of the profile of “white, educated, middle class/upper class, young, women” (Brewster, 2017; Markey & Markey, 2013; Moore, 2008). Furthermore, Brewster (2017) reveals that in her literature review “Lesbian Women and Household Division: A Systematic Review of Scholarly Research from the Years 2000 to 2015,” 90% to 100% of her United States–based references included participants who were white, highly educated, and financially stable. Historically, it has been difficult to find racial-minority participants because the LGBTQ community is known to operate in cliques that are generally based on their specific subculture.

One article stood out for its in-depth study conducted with a difficult-to-reach population: Black lesbian families. The study focused on household decision-making that involved one biological parent and one nonbiological parent. Moore’s (2008) study was similar to what this researcher intends to explore: who controls the finances, how household chores are dispersed, and who holds more power when making decisions for the household. Moore (2008) purposefully became enmeshed with the Black lesbian population she was studying in order to gain trust and notoriety to collect her research. The measurements consisted of participant-observation field notes for about 30 months, a mail-in survey, four focus groups, and 57 in-depth interviews (Moore, 2008). Moore’s (2008) study included 32 Black lesbians who were actively part of a stepfamily. This study is exceptionally rare because of its focus on Black lesbian stepfamilies and its wide representation of various educational backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses



(Moore, 2008). The reason it is a vital part of this paper is that it reveals the varying subcultures that exist within the lesbian community and how differing variables—in this example, race and having children—can immediately skew the lesbian ideology on how a relationship is organized. For instance, Moore (2008) found in her research that the Black lesbian couples she investigated endorsed a gendered relations perspective, mostly because one lesbian woman was previously involved in a heterosexual relationship with a man with whom she had a child or children. Moore (2000) explained her endorsement of a gendered relations perspective within the Black community that she believes is rooted in a historical perspective, where labor for Black women “paid or unpaid, voluntary or coerced, has been a distinctive characteristic of Black women’s participation in family life” (p. 336). Moore (2008) references two studies within her research that include a study of Black heterosexual couples and how those couples managed their finances together (Kenney, 2006; Treas, 1993). In these two studies, each person in the union kept a separate bank account and both those bank accounts were maintained by the Black women within the union, which in turn endorses a “separate pot” mentality (Kenney, 2006; Treas, 1993). The “separate pot” and egalitarian ideologies represent differing ideologies on how to approach a romantic relationship (Kenney, 2006; Treas, 1993). Moore (2008) found that the women in this study valued autonomy and financial independence, but that the lesbian who is children’s biological mother is often the partner who undertakes significantly more household chores. However, in response to doing more, that person also has more say over the family’s finances and holds the most power when it comes to making household decisions (Moore, 2008).

### **Egalitarian Distribution of Power**

Throughout this research, egalitarianism (equal distribution of household chores and child-rearing, joint decision-making, shared finances, mutual respect) and power have been used

synonymously. However, power and egalitarianism are different concepts. For example, power has more to do with directing and influencing a partner, whereas egalitarianism is the idea that all people are equal in fundamental ways. This research will aim to investigate whether an egalitarian distribution of power contributes to a greater sense of intimacy and sexual satisfaction. Peplau & Fingerhut (2007), Peplau & Cochran (1980), and Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton (1982) all found a higher level of satisfaction for lesbian couples who perceived their relationships to be more egalitarian and felt that there was equal power and equal involvement. Meanwhile, Eldridge and Gilbert (1990) found that the lesbian in the relationship who reported having a “greater sense of influence”—which simply means that if she wanted to, she could influence the relationship, and does not equate to having more power than her partner—led to that partner feeling more satisfied within the relationship (p. 52). Brezsnayak and Whisman (2004) investigated heterosexual married couples and found that “egalitarianism was associated with higher levels of sexual desire for both husbands and wives” (p. 213).

This researcher is interested in how lesbian couples function within our present culture and how the egalitarian distribution of power affects their feelings of belonging, satisfaction, and intimacy with one another. Every intimate relationship has a power dynamic that manifests in ways that are often influenced by popular culture, early socialization, gender norms, race, geographic location, religious beliefs, education, and socioeconomic status. Women’s interest in personal power in relationships has been influenced and socialized through many modes of media (Rudman & Heppen, 2003). For instance, as children, women watched movies and cartoons that often depict a female as a princess who hopes to get rescued by a prince or a knight in shining armor (*Beauty and the Beast*, *Cinderella*, *Hercules*, *Johnny Bravo*, *The Princess Bride*, *Pop-eye*, *Snow White*, etc.) (Rudman & Heppen, 2003). These early messages of gender socialization

affect children's early impressions and schemas of gender roles and how those roles affect feelings of power within a romantic relationship (Rudman & Heppen, 2003).

Children's toys and clothes represent physical depictions of gender socialization and what we are teaching children about gender and power from the minute they open their eyes. Our culture has normalized gender roles in which women are expected to be more domestic than men, women continue to be paid less than men, and women continue to be sexually harassed in the workplace more than men. These social injustices send women the message that our culture is okay with women having less power than men in romantic relationships; however, there have been major changes over the past few decades as women now represent more than 50% of college graduates, most women with children work outside of the home, etc. Women continue to fight these gender expectations, but as recently as 2018, organizations like Time's Up were born to stop women from being treated like second-class citizens. Men are socialized to be masculine, powerful, and able to provide in order to have worth in a relationship with a woman (Rudman & Heppen, 2003). Rudman and Heppen (2003) conducted a three-part experiment designed to measure the relationship between working-class men and women's romantic fantasies and their interest in personal or professional power. They found that working-class women "who associated romantic partners with chivalric ideals also showed less interest in high-status occupations, the economic rewards that accompany them, and the educational commitment that they require" (p. 1,367). Although this research is dated, it highlights that women who associate romantic partners with chivalry and heroism may be unconsciously subscribing to gender socialization (Rudman & Heppen, 2004). Rudman and Heppen (2004) also found that these working-class women relied on men to rescue them and also relied on them for relationship progression from dating to marriage, which may also be an implicit barrier to gender equality (Rudman & Heppen, 2004). In

summation, power in heterosexual relationships appears to be undeniably linked to gender, not just income, education, or other variables (Brewster, 2017; Evertsson & Nermo, 2007).

It should be noted that the majority of the articles mentioned in this paper focus on white, middle- to upper-class, well-educated, and possibly more liberal-leaning lesbians who may value equality more than other lesbians in the LGBTQ community (Moore, 2008; Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton, 1982; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). For instance, in the outlying article, Moore (2008) articulates that the Black mothers who identify as lesbian do not subscribe to egalitarian beliefs as the best way to run a household, participate in an intimate relationship, or organize contributing roles to the relationship. The Black lesbians in Moore's (2008) study revealed that the power in the relationship was likely dealt to the lesbian who had biological children in their household; however, the article did not discuss relationships without children in the couple's home. Unfortunately, there continues to be a paucity of research conducted with minority lesbians.

The emphasis on egalitarian relationships is thought to be rooted in feminist values (Moore, 2008; Caldwell & Peplau, 1984; Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton, 1982). Caldwell & Peplau (1984) asked a sample of 77 lesbian women how they would prefer the power in their relationship to be distributed. An overwhelming 97% reported that they would prefer the power dynamic to be "exactly equal" (p. 592). This researcher will be investigating the differences and/or similarities with present day lesbian ideologies versus (white, highly educated, and financially stable) lesbian ideologies in the 1980s. In Caldwell & Peplau's (1984) study, the lesbians ideally wanted their partnership to be equal, even though their contributions to the relationship were often not equal (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984). Caldwell and Peplau (1984) also inquired whether the women in their study felt that their current relationships were equal in contribution, and 61% re-

ported that they felt both partners contributed equally, leaving a significant 39% either uncertain about the power differential in their relationships or clear that their relationships were not equal. Carrington (1999) also mentions how more affluent couples are better able to maintain a balance in equality based on their ability to hire help to assist with household chores. White lesbian women value equal power, but they rarely attain exact equality within their relationships (Brewster, 2017; Carrington, 1999). Research has shown that if women *perceive* that there is equal power within their relationship, their overall satisfaction (strong feelings of respect and affection for their partner) within the relationship increases (Brewster, 2017; Caldwell & Peplau, 1984). Lesbian women who value feminist ideology may have a more difficult time in their relationship if the distribution of power and the allocation of chores is felt to be unjust by one of the partners, because oftentimes in lesbian relationships, there is a higher expectation for equality (Brewster, 2017). Brewster (2017) articulates that we have to be careful drawing conclusions from research regarding distribution of chores and lesbian relationship satisfaction, because research on the topic remains too scarce to allow for such generalizations. However, Brewster (2017) proposes that in future research, researchers should reconsider the question of unequal distribution of chores leading to relationship dissatisfaction. Brewster (2017) suggests that the question instead be whether the distribution of chores is *unjust*, which could then lead to relationship dissatisfaction.

Several of the articles that measure power and egalitarianism in both heterosexual and lesbian relationships use social exchange theory as a theoretical perspective to “predict that greater power accrues to the partner who has relatively greater personal resources, such as education, money or social standing” (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007, p. 409). There was, however, one exception to this perspective in the lesbian literature. Moore’s (2008) article explored household

decision-making and power in Black lesbian families using the gendered relations perspective. How power is negotiated and used in a relationship can affect sexual satisfaction and overall satisfaction in one's relationship, meaning that typically, the more equal the partners feel in their relationship, the closer the couple feels to one another, which leads to feeling more satisfied within the relationship (Carrington, 1999; Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Moore, 2008; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). According to social exchange theory, in order to have an egalitarian relationship, both women have to feel as though they have equal power within their relationship to feel satisfied (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984). Although lesbians strongly endorse equal power, Peplau and Caldwell (1984) found that almost 40% of their lesbian sample reported an unequal balance of power within their relationships or equivocated about the balance of power in their relationships.

Brewster (2017) performed a literature review on lesbian women and household division of labor and found a plethora of research on heterosexual relationships and how labor is divided; however, there continues to be a dearth of research on lesbian couples and how their relationships are affected by equal or unequal chore division. From a historical perspective, Peplau and Amaro (1982) identify satisfaction in lesbian relationships as "strongly related to equality of involvement in the relationship" (p. 23). In addition to equality, they identified sexual frequency within the romantic relationship and having similar backgrounds, beliefs, and attitudes as factors that strengthened the success of the relationship with both LGBTQ and heterosexual couples (Peplau & Amaro, 1982). So far this research reveals that many factors contribute to satisfaction within a romantic relationship. Egalitarianism and power are concepts that have implications for sexual satisfaction and overall satisfaction, but it is also clear that demographics, socioeconomic status, education, culture, geographic location, and race influence one's perspective on the im-

portance of equal power within a relationship. Brezsnyak and Whisman (2004) noted “it is likely that people who are unhappy with their relationship and who feel powerless to effect change within their relationship will have particularly low levels of desire. It may be that it is the unique combination of marital distress and marital imbalance that is particularly likely to affect sexual desire” (p. 203).

## **Gender Roles**

Gender role socialization influences every romantic relationship because it is a social construct that provides guidelines for how one should participate in the relationship. Goodrich et al. (1988) defines gender as “a social construct; it involves the assignment of particular social tasks to one sex or the other. These assignments define what are labeled masculine or feminine and represent social beliefs about what it means to be male and female in a given society at a particular period in time” (p. 5). Women’s role in a heteronormative society has historically been linked to words like “passive,” “homemaker,” “caretaker,” “mother,” “wife,” “polite,” “secretary,” etc. Historically, gender was plotted on a binary system where a person either identified as a female or a male. Those who deviated from this binary system were often an object of ridicule. Over time this system has been challenged, and people began to deviate from this either/or gender binary. A romantic relationship in which both partners share the same gender can be beneficial or it could be a deficit (Connolly, 2005). According to Connolly, having the same gender can increase the couple’s understanding of one another and may contribute to an increased feeling of intimacy, closeness, and satisfaction when compared to heterosexual couples (Connolly, 2005). Sharing the same gender can also be a deficit because same-sex couples often lack a template, have undifferentiated roles, and may be challenged in negotiating the roles that each one will fulfill within their relationship (Connolly, 2005; Spatnick & McNair, 2005). In addition, there may

be an expectation that women should respect and fairly treat other women, so when there is unequal or an unjust distribution of housework within a lesbian relationship, that may breed resentment and/or negative relational outcomes (Brewster, 2017). Despite the lesbian stereotypes of being feminine or butch, it was found that lesbians are less likely to organize their relationship according to masculine and feminine gender roles (Spitalnick & McNair, 2005). Also in the 1980s, researchers were reporting that “role-playing in lesbian relationships and present findings debunk the myth that lesbian couples adopt characteristically ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ roles” (Peplau & Amaro, 1982). In support of this idea, Connolly (2005) reports, lesbian couples are not organized by gender expectations and find themselves negotiating how to fairly distribute responsibilities around household chores, finances, organizing schedules, prioritizing careers, and how to spend their free time. It has also been shown that some lesbian couples eschew gender roles all together and divide household chores based on one’s preferences, ability, and time (Brewster, 2017). There were a few exceptions within lesbian relationships where the women did adhere to a more heteronormative distribution of chores, where the woman who did not work outside the home and stayed home to care for children did more domestic work than the woman who worked outside the home (Brewster, 2017). In response to this heteronormative setup within their relationship, some women jokingly referred to the working lesbian woman as the “dad” in their family (Brewster, 2017).

We are now in a time where same-sex marriage is legal and lesbian women will have to figure out how to initiate relationship progression. They will have to decide who will have the children in their family, who does certain chores within the household, if they share a last name, whose name will they take or keep, and other tasks. Lesbians and gay men are creating their own paths on how to progress their relationships, organize their homes, and have children, and how to



do so in a way that is shared with their families and communities. Rosenthal & Starks (2015) highlight that same-sex relationships are becoming more accepted; however, they also found that these relationships continue to suffer and be challenged in ways of “investment, satisfaction, domestic violence, commitment, intimacy, trust, passion, love, sexual communication and sexual satisfaction” because their relationship is stigmatized by family, friends, the public, and some of their communities (p. 818).

Not having a historical organizing force that gender has provided for heterosexuals can invite some confusion about what the expectations are from each person in the couple. Meaning, if there are two feminine women in a relationship, who would initiate the engagement? Whose career would be prioritized? Who would be in charge of vehicle maintenance? That said, it appears that the margins of gender roles in heterosexual relationships are becoming increasingly challenged by younger generations and inviting a new movement of gender-queer. Despite an expanding view of gender, there is a plan in place for heterosexuals when it comes to having children, and nature has provided it. Lesbian women don't have the same prescribed outline on who will have the children and who will continue to work. Who will breast-feed? Will the non-biological mother induce lactation in order to bond with their child? Will there be a shared last name? Who typically initiates sex?

Gender has made assumptions for our heteronormative world and has organized our expectations, our households, and the rules in romantic relationships for many years. However, in same-sex couples these norms are being re-created and are bending in ways that historically seemed impossible. For example, Wilson, Perrin, Fogleman & Chetwynd (2015) reported a case study where a newly adopted child was provided human breast milk from his three mothers: his birth mother and both of his lesbian adopted mothers. Also, there are now websites

([www.surromomsonline.com](http://www.surromomsonline.com)) that assist in matching gay couples to prospective surrogate mothers in order to help facilitate potentially complicated communication between the two parties (May & Kenseck, 2016). As norms evolve, this researcher thinks that traditional, heteronormative ways of running a household and having and raising children will change, and the “normal” way of doing things will be much more inclusive to creativity and change.

There is some ambiguity around what will change now that marriage is legal for the homosexual community. Nichols (2013) articulates nicely how we are moving from a time when homosexual were encouraged to undergo conversion therapy to a time when “diagnosis, cure and treatment is not only unnecessary, it is oppressive to sex and gender atypical people, who consider themselves in need of civil rights, not mental health intervention” (p. 314). Information about a once closeted population will be increasingly more accessible to researchers as the LGBTQ community becomes more accepted by society. For instance, having an accurate census report would be helpful for larger-scale research projects that will provide more representative information with larger sample sizes and a more accurate representation of lesbians living in our communities. The LGBTQ community is currently going through many changes and transitions since the dissolution of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell and DOMA and researchers will be closely observing how these changes will affect the community as time passes.

Traditional gender roles have also provided a template for how a couple is socially constructed to have sex. Men are typically looked to for progressing a relationship, from initiating the first date to making the first physical move for a kiss to initiating sex and to progressing the relationship status (Sassler & Miller, 2011). Women are socialized to be more reserved when thinking about having sex with men. If women do attempt to progress a romantic relationship with a man from a first date, to the first kiss and eventually initiating sex, there are likely to be

judgments about her character. It is not a mystery that women and men differ sexually, but how many of those differences are a result of the social construction of gender?

### **Sexual Activity**

With relationships that involve men, both in gay male relationships and heterosexual relationships, there are differences in sexual drive, hormones, sexual desire, sexual duration, gender socialization, and motivation that exist and contribute differently when compared with lesbian relationships (Brezsnyak & Whisman, 2004; Nichols, 2014; Peplau, 2003; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007; Spitalnick & McNair, 2010). Marelich & Lundquist (2008) studied motivations for sexual intimacy by participants of an unknown sexual orientation (presumably heterosexuals) and developed a needs-based intimacy scale that identified sex for men as linked to “fun, pleasure, and physical enjoyment” and women’s motivations for sex as “linked to commitment, emotion and love.” Four articles shine light on the cultural socialization of gender and how women are less likely to initiate sex, women’s lower libido, and women’s lower rates of sexual activity in general in both lesbian and heterosexual relationships (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Matthews, et al., 2002; Peplau, 2003; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007; Spitalnick & McNair, 2005). Spitalnick and McNair (2005) suggest that lesbian relationships lack a “trained initiator,” resulting in less sex. Several studies have concluded that lesbians have less sex than heterosexual married couples, heterosexual unmarried couples, and gay male couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Laumann, et al., 1994). Some researchers have also investigated duration differences between heterosexual sex and lesbian sex and revealed that the average duration for heterosexual sex is eight minutes, while lesbian sex averages at least thirty minutes for a sexual encounter (Frye, 1992; Nichols, 2014). Another study found that lesbian couples have significantly less genital contact with one another than heterosexual couples and gay male couples (Laumann, et al., 1994). Several of the

articles, however, suggest that there are more similarities with women who are in lesbian relationships and heterosexual relationships than there are differences between the two groups (Matthews, A., Tartaro, J. & Hughes, 2002; Nichols, 2004). For instance, Matthews et al.'s (2002) findings highlight that there were no differences in the frequency of sex that heterosexual women are having versus what lesbian women are having.

A few authors have investigated how fusion has negatively impacted lesbian women's sex lives (Hall, 2002; Nichols, 2014). Hall (2002) defines fusion as "a relentless focus on nurturing [that] would increase exponentially when two women coupled. This forfeiture of individuality, compounded by our us-against-the-world outlaw stance, created a relationship greenhouse effect which suffocated passion" (p.164). It is also a joke within the LGBTQ community that lesbian women do not have as many bars to go to compared with their gay male peers because most lesbians stay home with their girlfriend instead of going out. One lesbian stereotype is that lesbians couple up, disappear into their home, and move quickly into fusion and/or a highly intimate romantic relationship, whereas gay men are known for keeping up with their social circles and continuing to network and socialize with other gay men. Nicknames like "U-Haul lesbians" and "merger queens" have become jokes within the community because of the common occurrence of lesbians moving quickly into romantic relationships and possibly losing the excitement because of the "greenhouse effect" (Hall, 2002). According to Nichols (2014), coupled lesbians frequently lose their individuality, and regaining that individuality has become a common goal in couple's therapy in an attempt to regain passion and excitement (Nichols, 2014).

In opposition to these stereotypes, Iasenza (2002) believes that researchers and clinicians overgeneralize stereotypes and use them in research and therapy when in reality, lesbians having less sex may come from a much more complicated space. For instance, Iasenza remarks, "Les-

bian Bed Death,' besides its obvious pejorative tone...overgeneralizes and essentializes lesbian women's sexual experiences, obscuring the passion and play of lesbian sexual relating that is shaped by so many factors, besides gender, including the intrapsychic, familial, and interpersonal, as well as race, ethnicity, class, age, able-bodiedness, religion, the coming out process and political stance" (p.112). In other words, researchers frequently narrow their research question to a small, specific topic, which leaves out many possibilities that could potentially help them obtain a better understanding of lesbian women's sexuality.

### **Intimacy**

Intimacy can be an elusive term to define, and people's opinions regarding intimacy are influenced by factors including socialization, sex, gender, race, class, upbringing, age, and trauma history. Maslow (1966) identified intimacy as a basic interpersonal need involving feelings of belonging and acceptance. Milek and Butler (2015) define intimacy in a general sense, as "an interpersonal process evolving from interactions over time and that spending time together facilitates intimate interactions" (p. 831). Four of these articles investigating intimacy used solely heterosexual participants (Cordova, Gee & Warren, 2005; Lippert & Prager, 2001; Marelich & Lundquist, 2008; Milek, Bodenmann & Butler, 2015), one of the articles looked at the similarities and differences in intimacy between homosexuals and heterosexuals (Frost, 2011), and one article looked specifically at lesbians (Connolly, 2005). Intimacy has been examined through the lens of emotional intelligence and the ability to accurately communicate emotions (Cordova, Gee & Warren, 2005). When one person in a relationship is purposely vulnerable with their partner, and that partner responds positively to the vulnerability (either in a heterosexual relationship or a homosexual relationship), that lays the foundation for intimacy within their relationship (Cordova and Scott, 2001).

Other authors described intimacy as feeling understood, feeling validated, disclosing private information, and expressing positive emotions towards their partner (Lippert & Prager's, 2001; Milek, Bulter & Bodenmann, 2015). Frost (2011) more explicitly defines intimacy as “experiences of emotional, communicative and physical closeness or connection with another person” (p. 283), and Blado (2001) uses terms such as “emotional fidelity, flexibility with sex and openness with attitudes around sex roles (p.88),” while Connolly (2005) focuses on “maintaining a balance between connection and autonomy (p.267).” Finally, Marelich and Lundquist (2008) looked at intimacy through the lens of needs, including sex, affiliation, and dominance.

Two of these articles focus on intimacy through the lens of sexual minorities (Connolly, 2005; Frost, 2011). Minority stress is a main focus in these articles, reflecting the effects that discrimination, social exclusion, rejection from family, isolation, secrecy (being closeted), and oppressive environments, along with being “pathologized for being too close” within their own minority community (fusion and “merger queens”), have on sexual minorities. In addition, being morally condemned by several religious organizations and conservative cultures can have a detrimental impact on the LGBTQ individual as well as on the romantic relationships themselves, not to mention the atmosphere of acceptance for lesbian relationships is not as welcome in certain geographic locations in the United States. A factor that also contributes to minority stress and intimacy is the sexual identity development of each person involved in the romantic relationship (Connolly, 2005). For example, often people experience coming out of the closet at different times, and if these times are not in sync, then this could affect intimacy within the romantic relationship. If one person is out to their friends and family and the other person in the relationship is not, this can be compromising to the intimacy shared, because being closeted can be shame-inducing and cause disagreements that cause stress on the relationship. Bennett and Douglass

(2013) say that issues regarding the LGBTQ community's struggles are evolving from coming out to "issues related to developing intimate relationships, fostering generativity and ego integrity in later adulthood" (p. 278). Connolly (2006) discusses the role that sexism plays in lesbian relationships: "lesbian couples continue to be accorded only second-class status, are thwarted in attempts to legitimize their relationships, and must fight the internalization of those negative and sometimes hostile overt and covert messages" (p. 141). Oppression and second-class status in society continues to be a struggle for lesbians in relationships. Messages of embarrassment from families of origin continue to be communicated in subtle but hurtful ways.

The articles included in this literature review that focus on sexual minorities all identify the negative effects that heteronormativity, homophobia, discriminatory laws, discriminatory policies, and societal oppression have had on the LGBTQ community (Bennett & Douglass, 2013; Blando, 2001; Bradford, Ryan & Rothblum, 1994; Connolly, 2006; Davis-Delano, 2014; Frost, 2011; Iasenza, 2002; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007; Rosenthal & Starks, 2015). It has been shown that couples' pursuit of furthering their intimacy through marriage is both "highly meaningful" for both same-sex and heterosexual couples (Frost, 2011). As a result of *United States vs. Windsor* and the defeat of DOMA, there will be many changes; equal rights under the law will now challenge what was once considered institutional discrimination to equal rights for all. Marriage equality for the LGBTQ community was a moment that signified breaking the ties of oppression that were bound tight for many years and sent a sincere message that sexual minority oppression is no longer supported by U.S. policy and laws. A couple who falls in love and eventually wants to deepen their ties and intimacy through marriage now have equal opportunity to do so in our society. How these new policies will affect the LGBTQ community, particularly with regard to issues of intimacy and the egalitarian distribution of power and equality remains

to be seen and researched; however, it can be speculated that health and well-being within the LGBTQ community will rise considering a major source of social stigmatization has been removed from U.S. laws and policies (Frost, 2011).

Intimacy in lesbian relationships can be more accessible because of the similar female gender needs for affiliation and the ability to communicate about emotions in a similar way can increase the couple's understanding of one another at a quicker pace (Connolly, 2005; Marelich & Lundquist, 2008). Connolly (2005) observed that within lesbian relationships, the ability of both partners to communicate similarly regarding their intimacy needs can “contribute to their exceptional flexibility, closeness, and satisfaction, as compared with other gender variant couples. In addition to high satisfaction and cohesion, similarities in gender role socialization might influence the emotional expressiveness and egalitarianism experienced by many lesbian couples” (p. 267). The gender differences in affiliation extend to stress responses that were once thought of as a human experience to exhibit “fight or flight”; however, more recent research suggests that there are gender differences to stress responses. For example, women are more likely in stressful situations to “tend and befriend,” get closer to one another and take care of each other, reduce individualized vulnerability, and share responsibilities (Taylor, Klein, Lewis, Gruewald, Gurung & Updegraff, 2000).

### **Minority Stress**

On April 11, 2017, four North Carolina Republican legislators proposed a House bill (#780) that would ban same-sex marriage in North Carolina. They are initiating the bill in an attempt to overturn *Obergefell v. Hodges*, a landmark civil rights case in which the Supreme Court decided that same-sex couples had the fundamental right to get married. This bill proposal is just one example of homophobia and discrimination that continues to exist within the ranks of the



U.S. government and society in general. Proposing this bill is also a message to same-sex couples and young LGBTQ people that they are not welcome in the state of North Carolina, that their fundamental rights as humans can be voted on, and that their fate can be decided by the popular vote. Bill 780 is used here to highlight the continuing social devaluation against same-sex couples and the government using its power to, in a sense, legalize discrimination.

In discussing minority stress theory, Frost, Lehavot & Meyer (2015) note that “sexual minority individuals are at greater risk for health problems than heterosexuals, because LGBTQ people face greater exposure to social stress related to prejudice and stigma. Sexual minorities are exposed to excess stress from a variety of stigma-related experiences that stem from their sexual minority status: prejudice-related events, such as being attacked or fired; everyday discrimination like microaggressions and slights; expectations of rejection, regardless of actual discriminatory circumstances; the cognitive burden associated with negotiating outness; and self-devaluation inherent to internalized homophobia” (p. 1). There have been significant gains for the LGBTQ community within the past decade in fighting homophobia, but setbacks occur and require determination and patience in the ongoing fight for equality. It is clear that laws alone do not change the attitudes of individuals, communities, or society as a whole toward homosexuality and the LGBTQ community.

The climate of either acceptance or rejection of the LGBTQ community is shifting rapidly from the country being against gay marriage to a majority of the country believing that the LGBTQ community has a fundamental right to marry whomever they want to marry. The change in opinion of gay marriage has drastically changed in the past decade, which means people are changing their minds instead of an opinion shifting because of a generation being aged out. The General Social Survey (GSS) is a project of the independent research organization National

Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, with principal funding from the National Science Foundation. In 2004, the NORC staff conducted the survey, which revealed that 45% of the participants supported gay marriage. In the same survey in 2012, the number went up to 48%, and when the same question was asked again in 2014, 56% of the participants indicated they were in support of gay marriage (GSS, 2015). Despite this major shift in opinion about whether same-sex couples should have the right to marry that occurred in just ten years, struggles remain for same-sex couples who live in more conservative and/or rural geographic locations (Randall, A., Totenhagen, C., Walsh, K., Adams, C. & Tao, C., 2017; Hatzenbuehler, 2010; Lee & Guam; 2013).

Geographic location for LGBTQ individuals has many effects on the way they live their lives, and residing in a rural area will likely negatively impact the LGBTQ individuals level of “outness.” They will likely be inclined to conceal their sexual orientation from their friends, workplace, neighbors, family, medical providers, and religious community (Randall, A., et. al., 2017; Lee & Guam, 2013). Lee & Guam (2013) discuss in their research how “geographic area stands out as a noteworthy variable that may point to differences in the ways that cohort members experience aging due to proximity to other identifiable LGBTQ people, sociopolitical climates that inhibit acceptance of non-heterosexual or gender-varying identities, availability of material and psychosocial support from biological family or close friends, and disparities in per capita income and job availability between rural and urban areas” (p. 115). Gates (2014) published a paper that included and compared information collected from four population-based surveys (National Survey of Family Growth, 2006-2010 (NSFG), General Social Survey, 2008, 2010, 2012 (GSS), National Health Interview, Survey, 2013 (NHIS) and Gallup Daily Tracking Survey, 2014) that included LGBTQ demographics, and he found that “adults are more likely to

identify as LGBTQ in the Northeast and West than in the South and Midwest” and that younger adults are more likely to openly identify as LGBTQ (p. 1).

Minority stress impacts one’s mental health, overall well-being and quality of life (Randal, A., et al., 2017). Because minority stress impacts one’s overall well-being, it will affect the way one sees themselves when they are making the transition from identifying as a heterosexual to identifying as LGBTQ. Weber’s (2008) research speaks to the transition that a LGBTQ person makes and how that decision to transition will reconstruct their whole life, their self-concept, and how they will transition into a “nontraditional” sexual identity, or homosexuality. The transition to LGBTQ will change the way the person sees themselves fitting in with the world and with their family, friends, and society (Weber, 2008). In the midst of this transition when someone is struggling with their identity and perhaps also with internalized homophobia and “emotional pain,” one might turn to substances to cope (Weber, 2008). Cabaj (2000) explains how “substance use allows the expression of suppressed and repressed desires and needs” when a person is struggling with their sexual identity and perhaps internalized homophobia (p. 2). LGBTQ people are more likely than the general population to have alcohol and substance abuse problems (Bradford, Ryan & Rothblum, 1994; Cabaj, 2000; Weber, 2008). One of the reasons for an overuse of drugs and alcohol would be that the gay community was forced to socialize in the gay bar scene if they wanted to be with other sexual minorities, not to mention the lowering of inhibitions to make room for one’s true desires that may go unmet without the help of substances (Bradford, Ryan & Rothblum, 1994; Cabaj, 2000). It is important for researchers and mental health clinicians to remember that not all geographic locations in the United States are as accepting of the LGBTQ population as the Northeast and West Coast are (Hatzenbuehler, 2010; Lee & Guan, 2013; Randal, A., et al., 2017). The stigma and minority stress for LGBT people is more pronounced in

rural areas, and the quality of life for the LGBT population is much more stressed in rural areas of the country (Hatzenbuehler, 2010; Lee & Guan, 2013; Randall, A., et. al., 2017).

Bennett & Douglass (2013), whose study was conducted in a New York City community health center, looked at how homosexuality can affect psychosocial development through the lens of Erik Erikson's developmental stages. Mental health providers have been noticing a shift in the presenting problems in an initial therapy visit. The shift has gone from LGBTQ people needing support with coming out to "issues related to developing intimate relationships, fostering generativity and ego integrity in later adulthood" (p. 277). When an LGBTQ person is presented with discrimination or ridicule based on their sexual orientation or gender expression, there will be challenges for the individual and the couple, if the individual is in a relationship, and it will be critical for mental health clinicians to inquire how shame, self-doubt, low self-esteem affects the LGBTQ person and the couple (Bennett & Douglass, 2013).

There are many discussions about what creates a long-lasting and satisfying romantic relationship between two people; however, long-lasting and satisfying can be two different concepts. (Beals, Impett & Peplau, 2008). Beals, Impett & Peplau (2008) conducted a secondary analysis on 301 lesbians who participated in Blumstein & Schwartz's (1983) American Couples Study using Rusbult's Investment Model Scale and found that in order for lesbians to feel satisfied within a relationship, the rewards (great sense of humor, feeling loved, enjoyment of joint activities) have to be greater than the costs (conflict, partner's annoying habits). Rusbult's scale (1998) was created as a result of curiosity about how some couples persist despite challenges while other relationships do not (Rusbult, Martz and Agnew, 1998). "The Investment Model Scale [is] an instrument designed to measure four key predictors of persistence, including commitment level and three bases of dependence—satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and in-

vestment size” (Rusbult, MArtz & Agnew, 1998). When researching lesbian couples, one has to keep in mind that there are additional stressors that are placed on sexual minorities. Examples include having to conceal one’s sexual orientation, a situation where one person in the relationship is more “out” than the other, discrimination in the workplace, their children being hazed in school for having same-sex parents, and being ostracized from social circles.

In circling back to Rusbult’s (1998) model of what fosters a long-lasting relationship, it must be considered that minority stress and discrimination at the time the study was conducted could impact relationship satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and the investments made in the current relationship. For example, relationship satisfaction within the minority couple may be negatively impacted by the lack of support by one’s community, elected officials, family, culture, and religion, as well as rejection from society in general. If a couple is constantly struggling with a lack of support from outsiders, this could negatively impact both members of the couple but eventually could also affect the overall satisfaction within the relationship. The second factor is the quality of alternative partners. This is tricky because the presence of a gay community is dependent on where one is located geographically and whether they are located in a rural or urban area (Hatzenbuehler, 2010, Lee & Guan, 2013, Randall, et. al., 2017). In a more urban area there will be more alternatives, and in a more rural area of the country there will be fewer alternatives (Lee & Guan, 2013). A lack of alternatives may keep the couple together; however, it is unlikely that they will feel satisfied within their relationship if a lack of alternatives is the primary reason they are staying together. A third contextual factor contributing to the longevity and satisfaction of a relationship is marriage (Beals, Impett & Peplau, 2008). Marriage provides a barrier to dissolution of a relationship because of the investments legally shared between the couple: children, joint property, dependence on one another financially, etc. (Beals, Impett &

Peplau, 2008). When marriage was not an option to the LGBTQ community, there was also no social recognition of a commitment being made between two people that reinforced the idea of “for better or for worse” (Beals, Impett & Peplau, 2008). Marriage also provides a barrier to quickly ending a relationship and moving on, which provides time to heal wounds and work toward bringing the couple back together (Beals, Impett & Peplau, 2008). There is also a lack of role models for long-lasting lesbian couples that have been in a marriage because the idea of a long-lasting same-sex couple being married is a relatively new concept. So, for the LGBTQ population, their role models for successful marriages will be created by themselves and their peers.

There are many factors that contribute to whether someone feels satisfied within their relationship. This paper has delineated that minority stress, resources, gender roles, background, time in the relationship, sex, power, and intimacy all affect the connection that two people feel with one another. This next paper is going to examine how these factors have influenced a couple’s connection; how the couples negotiated power, resources, and tasks within their relationship; and whether this negotiation has affected their sense of intimacy and sexual satisfaction with their partner.

## Paper Two

### Introduction

Women in relationships with other women is not a novel occurrence among the human race. However, until the last few decades, if a woman was romantically involved with another woman, she was encouraged to keep it to herself. Women in romantic relationships with other women and/or identifying as gay, bisexual, queer, lesbian, or homosexual was first documented in ancient Egyptian text more than 4,400 years ago (O’Keefe, J. et al., 2018). Despite this long history chronicling the existence of homosexuals, there continues to be a paucity of research that examines the intimate lives of lesbians and how they negotiate power, resources, and tasks within their relationships, especially compared with the plethora of research conducted about these interests in the heterosexual population (Brewster, 2017; Cohen & Byers, 2014; O’Keefe, J. et al., 2018; Shelby, S., Ritchie, L., Knopp, K., Rhoades, G. & Markman, H., 2018). This paper is looking to redress the voids in research by examining the intimate lives of ten self-identifying lesbians and how the perception of negotiations around power, resources, and tasks affects their perception of intimacy and sexual satisfaction within their relationship.

This study will examine the responses of ten self-identifying lesbian participants through the lens of relational-cultural theory and social exchange theory, as elaborated in paper one these theories consider the ways power is negotiated and distributed in intimate relationships—and if these women perceive that those negotiations affect their levels of intimacy and sexual satisfaction with their partner. The participants in this study were asked to define power, intimacy, and sexual satisfaction and then to briefly describe how those concepts were operationalized within their specific relationships. This paper will highlight the themes that these women uncovered as they spoke to their experiences within in their romantic relationships.

## **Recruitment**

This study sought to recruit eight to ten self-identifying lesbians who had been in monogamous relationships for at least three years, lived together for at least one of those years, were between the ages of eighteen and forty years old, did not have any children, and did not know the researcher personally. Recruitment for this study was first approached by posting paper flyers in LGBTQ community centers in Manhattan and Brooklyn. There was no response to that outreach. The researcher also contacted well-connected lesbians in Manhattan and Brooklyn to inquire whether they knew of any lesbians who met the recruitment requirements for this study. The feedback was that the qualifications for this study limited the scope more than the researcher had anticipated. After a few weeks of failed attempts to recruit a participant, the researcher reappraised the recruitment method and resubmitted to the University of Pennsylvania's Institutional Review Board. The resubmission requested that the flyer be posted on social media outlets and that the geographic boundaries be expanded beyond the New York City area to the entire Northeast coast. When the researcher received permission to post the flyer on social media, the response from perspective participants was immediate. Once the recruitment flyer was posted to the researcher's social media account, people within the researcher's social media network shared the post, and participants began to contact the researcher through the email address on the flyer.

## **Sample**

Participants for this study were acquired through convenience sampling. The sample consisted of ten self-identifying lesbians who were recruited through social media outlets and by the researcher asking friends and acquaintances whether they knew of any lesbians on the Northeast coast who fell within the required criteria and had never met the researcher. The sample was



comprised of ten self-identifying lesbians between the ages of twenty-three and thirty-eight years old, with a mean age of thirty-one. Eighty percent of the women identified their race as white or Caucasian, and twenty percent of the women identified as Hispanic. The lesbians within this sample have been in monogamous relationships between three and seventeen years, with a mean of seven and a half years. They lived in New York, Pennsylvania, Maine, Connecticut, and New Jersey. Sixty percent of the lesbians in this study were married, twenty percent were engaged, and the remaining twenty percent identified their marital status as single, although they stipulated that they were in serious relationships with their partners. All ten identified as female and also identified their partners as female. All six of the married women identified their significant other as their wife, partner, and/or spouse. The participants in this study represented a range of educational experiences: one is a high school graduate, two had obtained their associate's degree, three had obtained their bachelor's degree, and four had obtained their master's degree. All of the participants' partners had college educations: Five have undergraduate degrees and five have graduate degrees. Only one of the ten participants identified as having a religious affiliation, which was Catholic; the rest of the women replied "no" for a religious affiliation or stated that they were a "non-practicing Catholic." Ninety percent of the women were employed full-time, and ten percent of the women were employed part-time.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection was conducted by facilitating a face-to-face interview with one participant, and the remaining nine interviews were conducted over the phone. All of the interviews were audio-recorded using an application on the iPhone called Voice Memos. All ten of the participants willingly signed consent forms and agreed that this researcher could use their information and directly quote them anonymously for publication purposes. The University of Penn-

sylvania Institutional Review Board preapproved this research project. The interviews ranged from twenty to thirty minutes, and the participants were compensated with a ten-dollar Amazon gift card after completing the interview. Each interview was guided by a semi-structured interview protocol that consisted of the same set of questions. The questions were intentionally opened-ended to extract participants' points of view without direction from the researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

This researcher conducted and audio-recorded all ten of the interviews and transcribed them verbatim. After transcription, the researcher coded all of the interviews line by line. This researcher used focused coding techniques and organized the codes into developing categories. Then the categories were organized. The researcher found similarities in some of the categories and collapsed them into six themes (Charmaz, 2006).

### **Findings**

This researcher will organize the themes that were found within this research under the headings Power, Intimacy, and Sexual Satisfaction. The following themes will be discussed in detail:

- Power equating to decision-making
- Having a special skill set or interest in a task
- Intimacy tightly associated with physical touch
- Intimacy as a vulnerable conversation about feelings
- Discomfort with defining sexual satisfaction
- Sexual satisfaction within relationships

## Power

Power within romantic relationships remains a factor that influences a couple's dynamic and connection. The preference for power or equality within a romantic relationship varies from relationship to relationship and is influenced by a person's background, gender, culture, race, and education (Rudman & Heppen, 2003). Through the lens of social exchange theory, the researcher analyzed the participants' responses to questions of how reciprocity, power, and bartering within their relationships work and how, or if, this exchange process affects their level of intimacy and sexual satisfaction with their partner (Homans, 1958). Research within the lesbian community mainly endorses a feminist ideology that lesbian women prefer equality within their romantic relationships regardless of whether they are actually able to operationalize that ideology in their specific relationships (Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton, 1982). The first theme that revealed itself came from asking the participants to define power within their relationships with their partners/spouses. The theme that emerged focused on the equating of power with decision-making.

“I think power is kind of who tilts the scales towards decision-making. Whatever that might look like. I think the factors for people are different, but whoever kind of pushes what should be uh, you know, a couple's decision to be one way or the other.” —Participant B

Similarly, Participant A said:

“I kind of equate power to decision-making. Like, who decides.”

Participant D concurred:

“Whoever the person is who kinda makes the decisions.”

Participant G:

“I would say, who was able to direct the decision-making. I think it’s primarily around that.”

Participant C:

“I guess who has more say in the comings and goings of the relationship, I guess, is how I see power.”

A second theme that revealed itself when asking the participants how they negotiate the distribution of power, resources, and tasks was that typically, one partner was naturally drawn to certain tasks because of a specific skill set, strength, interest, and/or insight in those particular tasks. This theme is not a novel discovery among the LGBTQ community. Peplau & Fingerhut (2007) highlighted that “although members of gay and lesbian couples do not divide household labor in a perfectly equal manner, they are more likely than members of heterosexual couples to negotiate a balance between achieving a fair distribution of household labor and accommodating the different interests, skills, and work schedules of particular partners (p. 408).” The participants in this study provided examples of certain skill sets they had that their partners did not, or otherwise stated that they just enjoyed doing certain things more than their partner did and so didn’t mind doing them.

“I think normally it’s kind of: who has more kind of natural inclination towards some things. We have a piece of property that we’re kind of trying to turn into a farm. I enjoy a lot of the farming-type activities, so those tasks kind of fall to me. We also have gone through variations of, you know, having kind of like set rules, about whose day it is to cook and whose days it is to do dishes. Um, that stuff sticks for a while, and you get into a good routine, but then it kind of happens more naturally. Um. Yeah. My partner does a lot more of the grocery shopping and cooking; that’s because she enjoys that more, and I therefore do a lot more of the laundry and dishes as well.” —Participant B

Similarly, Participant C said:

“Yeah, kind of like whoever has the know-how about the subject would kind of have more power in it. A perfect example would be planning our wedding. When it came to planning for that, it was kind of based on what we know about each other and what our strengths are is how we allocated who would do what. Um. I would communicate with vendors, where she would kind of actually plan out ‘This is what the flowers are going to look like, this is what this is going to look like,’ so we did it that way.”

Participant E observed:

“She does all the gross man chores [*laughter*] and I do all the lady chores. She, uh, you know, it’s stuff she doesn’t mind doing and stuff that I hate doing, and I do the stuff that I don’t mind doing and that she hates doing. So, like, she cleans the gutters, takes out the trash, and cleans up the dog waste in the yard, and, um, I’m the cleaner and the shopper. Some things we split fifty-fifty, but like, if I’m looking at it as a whole and who does what as far as chores go, mine are on the more domestic, housekeeping end of it.”

As a follow-up, the researcher asked: Do you knowingly organize your tasks around gender roles?

Participant E:

“No, no. I just think it’s like she hates vacuuming and I don’t think she does it right, so I do it myself [*laughter*]. And I don’t like the way gutters smell, so she does it for me.”

Initially, this particular response appeared to be an outlier, as the participant appeared to use traditional gender norms to describe how the chores were allocated. However, when the re-

searcher asked if they divided the chores based on gender roles, the participant said no and explained their preferences. The participant explained that they negotiated their division of tasks by task preferences.

Finally, Participant J said:

“We just happen to be two people who have different types of strengths, and so it helps to create that balance in our life together.”

Historically, power, resources, and tasks were not negotiated within heterosexual relationships. Rather, they were “organized around two basic principles: a division of labor based on gender and a norm of greater male power and decision-making authority” (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). The participants in this study highlight how times have changed societal norms to the point where we are now talking about, researching, and witnessing in mainstream media how lesbian couples organize their lives in their romantic relationships. The participants in this study share how they distribute tasks within their households, and they do it by capitalizing on their partner’s strengths, interests, or skill set as a guide to what would make sense for them in their relationship.

## **Intimacy**

The participants were asked two questions about intimacy in their relationships. They were asked to define intimacy and then to define what intimacy looks like within their specific relationship. From these questions, two themes emerged under the umbrella of intimacy:

1. Intimacy as being tightly associated with physical touch, such as cuddling, holding hands, small displays of affection, and sex
2. Intimacy as a vulnerable conversation about feelings.

Eighty percent of the participants used some form of physical touch to describe intimacy. Fifty percent of the participants who identified physical touch as a describing factor also specifically named sex as a form of intimacy with their partner.

“My partner and I have open honesty with each other about pretty much everything. I mean, she’s, uh, certainly seen me more emotionally vulnerable. She knows all the things that have happened to me in my life, in ways in which they have impacted how I’m thinking and how I’m feeling. Uh, that I think that we are physically and sexually intimate. You know, the kind of obvious ways.”

—Participant B

Participant I noted:

“So, like, whether it’s like holding hands and cuddling and things of that nature and obviously having sex. Um, you know, physical touch.”

Participant J:

“Right. Okay. Definitely making each other smile. Um, when almost every evening there is some point when we’re intimate by just stopping for a little bit just to hug each other in the kitchen or something like that, and then being intimate by kissing each other when one of us is cooking or something like that, and then every night before falling asleep, kissing each other and then every once in a while having sex.”

Participant C explains how she experiences intimacy within her relationship:

“Um, for us it would be, you know, greeting each other when we come home. Taking an interest in each other. Uh, spending time together when we’re not working. Um. Yeah, sleeping in the same bed. Physical touch.”

Participant A:

“Intimacy is like when we have a really good talk about like our feelings. Um, I’m really good at being emotional and showing my feelings, and my partner doesn’t so much. So whenever we have like a deep talk and we go out on a date and we have a glass a wine first and we kinda, like, debrief a little bit. It’s nice to kind of break walls down communication-wise. And obviously when we have sex that’s kind of like a big part of being intimate.”

Participant E:

“I think it’s sexual, it’s cuddling, it’s talking, it’s laughing together, it’s bonding, it’s feeling connected, um, it’s doing things together.”

In addition, to physical touch and sex, several of the participants also described intimacy as feeling a connection to that person and also having vulnerable conversations about feelings.

“I would say intimacy is how often you feel emotionally connected to your partner, and you feel comfortable and accepted when you have a vulnerable conversation with your partner. It doesn’t necessarily have to be a physical thing but just emotionally—that would be intimacy to me.” —Participant C

:

“Um, I’d say it’s an unspoken closeness between two people and being able to talk to one another about things that you can’t with most people.”

Participant F concurred:

“Oh, just, like, the little things in the relationship where, like, let’s say you’re, like, spending time with one another and it’s just you guys. It’s, like, romantic and it could be like laying on the couch together, watching a movie, or, um, like, talking about your feelings. Um, stuff like that.”



Finally, Participant G explains intimacy as a “deep connection to one another. It’s not just touch but, uh, an emotional tie that goes beyond mere friendship. To me it’s always expressed a lot through time—how much time you spend with someone and how much you convey your love to them.”

One other noteworthy observation a participant provided when asked to describe what intimacy looks like within her specific relationship was the mention of how minority stress or possible homophobia may be considered when a lesbian thinks about intimacy and her expression of affection toward her partner.

“Um, I’m trying to think how to answer this. Um, I guess there is more to intimacy than sex. It’s more like wanting to be around each other and enjoying being around each other and not being afraid to be in public together. Does that make sense? Like, there is a level of intimacy that, you being comfortable with each other, especially in a same-sex relationship—like, I think that is very intimate. When you can, when you’re very comfortable being in your relationship.”

—Participant H

This research did not include any questions regarding the effects of minority stress, homophobia, internalized homophobia, and/or level of outness on the negotiation of power and perceived intimacy and sexual satisfaction. This researcher did not ask the participants questions about the effect of being a lesbian in a heteronormative society; however, the topic of being a sexual minority organically emerged during a few of the interviews. Two participants mentioned minority stress when the researcher asked, “Have you ever engaged in individual therapy? If so, what was the focus?”

“Just me, like, figuring out my life, being overwhelmed. Kinda talking about my family, they’re kinda weird about the gay thing.” —Participant A

When one of the participants was asked if she and her partner had similar religious backgrounds, her response clearly delineated how religious affiliation and geographic location can affect one’s self perception, especially as a sexual minority. How someone feels within her family and community affects her self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. Those feelings play into whether one can handle being a sexual minority and whether it’s safe for a person to express her true self among her family and community.

“I grew up in a small town, but it was more open-minded, if that makes sense. Um. My parents were pretty lenient and I was allowed to do things. Where, she [her partner] grew up in Oklahoma, and her parents went to Bible school and she went to church every day. She grew up very different. Her parents were very strict.” —Participant H

The researcher asked Participant H to describe what intimacy looks like within her specific relationship.

“Um. We’re very cuddly. We’re very comfortable with each other. We’re very comfortable going out in public and holding hands and not afraid of what people think.”

Participant H’s response to defining intimacy and identifying what intimacy looks like in her specific relationship was in contrast to the other participants’ responses to the same question. It was clear that being affectionate in public for Participant H and her partner was a significant occurrence for them and important to their relationship. Minority stress continues to be an obsta-

cle for some lesbians, and further research on the effects of how minority stress impacts one's perception of intimacy and sexual satisfaction is needed.

Jordan (2009), who writes about relational cultural theory, emphasized how it is a “fundamental need of being a human being” to feel safe in intimacy and connection with someone they love. When first describing a connection between a couple, one may think sex is the ultimate form of love and connection, but these interviews suggest that the ultimate adhesive to true connection is intimacy first, a feeling of safety second, and physical touch third, as an expression of intimacy and safety. From the researcher's perspective, the intimacy portion of this interview felt like a natural flow. When the researcher asked the participants to define intimacy and then what it looked like within their specific relationships, the participants responded with a fluidity and ease, almost as if they were describing their favorite aspects of their relationship.

### **Sexual Satisfaction**

There were three specific areas of inquiry within the interview guide, with sexual satisfaction being the last. By the time the researcher reached the point in the interview where an inquiry was made about sexual satisfaction, there was a sense of comfort and trust between the researcher and the participants. However, when the researcher asked the participants to describe their sexual satisfaction, there was a sudden halt to the flow of questioning and answering for the majority of the participants. After explicitly describing their demographics and power and intimacy, they balked at defining sexual satisfaction.

“That's, like, a loaded complex question. [*Laughs.*] Well, obviously, you know that feeling. Getting a sense of pleasure. Umm. Uh. I don't [*laughs*]— obviously something that is mutual and, um, yeah. I don't know how else to really describe it without, um, yeah.” —Participant I

Participant D used indirect language to define sexual satisfaction and presented as uncomfortable with answering this question. The interview went from comfortable questioning and answering to a sudden refusal to define sexual satisfaction, instead responding with “Ummm, all right.” The participant had easily defined the negotiation of power and intimacy within her relationship earlier in the interview with no delay or second thought. In retrospect, if the researcher had prepared more probing questions for participants who were uncomfortable defining sexual satisfaction, perhaps the researcher would have been able to further explore a participant’s discomfort and reticence in defining sexual satisfaction. The researcher was attempting to stick with the interview guide in hopes of eliciting varying points of view from the same question, and in doing so, the researcher missed an opportunity to ascertain why the participant was not answering the question to define sexual satisfaction and in return is left with speculation. Earlier in the interview the researcher asked this same participant if she has ever engaged in couples therapy or individual therapy, and she replied by saying, “She [her partner] has. I have not.” The researcher asked the participant if she knew the focus of her partner’s therapy, and the participant responded by saying, “Uh, I would say: runs the gamut. Um, I try not to get too personal with her on what it was about. But I’m guessing all of the above.” After this response the participant laughed, and the researcher felt like there was tension between the participant and her partner. Despite this, the researcher asked the participant, “Are you sexually satisfied in your relationship?” The participant responded, “Yes.” Throughout the interview, it seemed like the participant and her spouse were going through a particularly stressful time in their relationship.

Participant J also seemed to feel uncomfortable describing sexual satisfaction:

Hmm. *[long pause]* Um. So again, I guess, hmmm. I would say, um, sexual satisfaction is, um, when you are, um, mutually intimate with someone else and you both make each other feel very good.

The following is an example of a participant who initially felt uncomfortable describing sexual satisfaction but then decided to risk vulnerability and share her perspective to provide insight into why defining sexual satisfaction was difficult.

“Ummm. It’s like, ummm, hm. That’s like...a hard question. *[laughter]* Probably just like each of you feeling, like, comfortable. Like, in the sexual life *[pause]* and not worrying about whether your significant other is still attracted to you in that way or, umm, like, you both feel like—ah, it’s just a hard question to answer. Um, you both feel comfortable and attracted to one another.” —Participant F

Participant A seemed anxious about what questions were going to be asked. When the researcher asked Participant A to describe sexual satisfaction, the participant appeared to be slightly embarrassed. She laughed, looked down at the floor, and thought for a while about how she was going to answer to this question. Then she laughed and said, “Um. I guess, like, being pleased sexually by your partner.”

The researcher felt that the participant was uncomfortable defining sexual satisfaction so the participant tried doing so in a way that avoided using sexually explicit terms.

Finally, Participant E: “Umm. Uhh. Hmm. *[pause]* Feeling full and warm.”

One participant provided a very direct definition of sexual satisfaction and appeared comfortable doing so:

“Uh, orgasming. And obviously, I think, that’s kind of on a per-time basis. I think there is obviously something about, um, having sexual encounters at a frequency

that, uh, both people find is, like, acceptable and appreciated by both sets of people in a partnership.” —Participant B

After asking the participants to define sexual satisfaction, the researcher asked the participants if they were sexually satisfied within their specific relationship. Ninety percent of the participants reported that they currently felt sexually satisfied in their relationship. The majority of the participants seemed guarded and responded to this question by just saying, “Yes.” There was one response from a participant—Participant H—who, throughout the interview, expressed satisfaction with her relationship and also expressed that she was sexually satisfied within her relationship:

“Yes! Absolutely, I married her! *[laughs]* But yes, I am very satisfied.”

Participant A paused to think about how she was going to answer the question. Then she responded, “Um. Great question. Uh, I would say, uh, yes. This has also been something that we talk a lot about over the last couple years. Um, yes. Currently, yes. *[/]*”

One participant said no, she was not sexually satisfied:

“Honestly, no, we were both kinda like struggling with our self-image. We both gained a lot of weight in the beginning of our relationship, so neither one of us feel comfortable with our own bodies, so we don’t have sexual stuff often.”

—Participant F

### Relationship Between Power and Intimacy and Sexual Satisfaction

The last question of the interview encouraged participants to incorporate all the main aspects of this study and ascertain whether they identified a connection between the ways in which power was understood and negotiated and the level of intimacy and sexual satisfaction. The question was: “Do you think that there is a connection between the ways in which you and your partner/spouse have negotiated the distribution of power, resources, and tasks and your level of

intimacy and sexual satisfaction within your relationship? If so, in what specific ways, and if not, how do you understand the differentiation between the negotiation of power, resources, and tasks and your level of intimacy and sexual satisfaction?” Seventy percent of the participants answered yes, they felt there was a connection between the negotiation of power, resources, and tasks and their level of intimacy and sexual satisfaction with their partner. The following are a few examples of the seven participants who perceived a connection:

“Yes, absolutely. Obviously when you feel that your partner is pulling their weight and contributing to the house. Um, especially if there are certain quirks, like, my wife likes me to make the bed.... Um, and that maybe sex is more like second nature for her as it is for me. *[pause]* Just, you know the extra stressors that come with, whether it’s financial or things of that nature—that definitely plays a role and affects, um, you know, sexual experiences down the line.”

—Participant I

Participant J agreed:

“Yes, I think, um, especially since I observe other relationships too, I think that everyone has their own type of need or desire in terms of what power is going to look like within their relationship. So, like, for me and for my wife, we really, even though we may not talk about it as much, I think that we both really respect and love how when it comes down to all these other aspects of our relationship, it really is fifty-fifty and, but, I notice there are other people who really wouldn’t want that. They might want to be the person who needs more power from their partner, or they might want to be the person who has more power in the relationship. So, for us specifically, when there is that imbalance of a give-and-take from the both of us, from the power from both of us, I think that kind of like in that time in our relationship, I think that we are less sexually active. Um *[pause]* and I think it does come from—the imbalance causes a little unhappiness in the relationship, and then we notice it and we discuss our way through it, and then we

work on it and then we fix it. When that time is happening, when we are mending that, um, imbalance that we've noticed, it changes everything in the relationship and it kind of like, uh, it reinvigorates it, and that includes our sex life, and so I think that at different stages within our relationship, our sex life has been much more intense and much less intense, and I think a lot of it has to do with kind of like that power that you're talking about."

Participant C, responded similarly:

"I do because I feel like when we are on the same page, then so is our sexual intimacy. It kind of goes hand in hand. Then, if we're not on the same page and we have a power struggle or something like that, then the sexual relationship kind of goes out the window for a little while."

Participant A said:

"Yes. So, like, if I'm irritated with her about not taking the dog out, then I definitely don't want to have sex with her, or then she'll try to be really sweet and like kiss up to me, like that kind of stuff. It definitely impacts it. Um, money, not so much, but like, the tasks. I'm trying to think. Like, resources. There is definitely a connection."

The researcher asked Participant A if she could name any specific ways, and she responded:

"I feel like if I cleaned the apartment all week, it definitely changes it. Or if we do have sex, it also changes the level of intimacy. Like, whenever I feel like we participate equally within the relationship, then I feel like we have better sex. *[laughs]* Um, tasks, mostly. Because I think so much about tasks because I do so much of them. Like taking the garbage out and the cleaning. Um. She's started doing dishes more, and we are starting to figure out what we're gonna do on a daily basis, but that definitely impacts the level of connectedness for me."  
*[laughs]*



There were three participants who did not perceive that the negotiations of power, resources, and tasks affected their specific relationship's intimacy and sexual satisfaction.

“So, I think the answer for us is no? I don't think we necessarily connect our roles and things we do in kind of support for each other with household duties or finances with our sexual intimacy, but I think that's very specifically because the way that we set up those decisions about resources and responsibilities is, uh, is through, like, open communication with one another and ensuring that the system that we developed is like co-owned and -managed. I mean, for me, I don't think it ever puts us in a power-over type situation that trickles into our sexual relationship.” —Participant B

Participant B's response showcases a perspective that suggests the distribution of power is dependent upon the experienced level of intimacy and sexual satisfaction. This opposes the perspectives of most of the other participants. Participant B's interview highlighted that for her and her partner, there was first a strength within the relationship's intimacy and sexual satisfaction, and that connection may have influenced the perception of how power, resources, and tasks were negotiated. Participant B proposed that the level of intimacy and sexual satisfaction was a catalyst for the negotiation of the distribution of power, tasks, and resources.

Meanwhile, seventy percent of the participants believed that the negotiation of power, resources, and tasks affected their level of intimacy and sexual satisfaction within their relationship, and they have worked to find ways to make the negotiation of daily activities and distribution of resources work best for them. These results suggest that having an egalitarian relationship where power is shared, resources are shared, and tasks are shared may very well increase the participants' sense of intimacy and sexual satisfaction within their relationship.

## Discussion

Research focusing on the intimate lives of lesbians in committed romantic relationships is important for therapists, scholars, policy influencers, professors, and popular culture as a whole. Anyone who speaks, writes, or teaches about lesbians, treats lesbians, or conjures up a policy related to the lives of lesbians must be informed about the experiences and perspectives of lesbians who live with the label. Disseminating reliable information about a minority group who has experienced oppression is critical, because education is the gateway to a world in which we all understand one another's perspectives and experiences. This particular research study was qualitative, inductive, and exploratory in nature. The topic sought to explore the ways in which lesbians negotiate power, resources, and tasks, and whether that affects their sense of intimacy and sexual satisfaction with their partner/spouse.

This study was motivated by three factors: an interest in lesbians' feelings on intimacy and sexual satisfaction with their partners; the researcher's experience of living with her heterosexual sister and her family, who exhibited traditional heterosexual gender norms; and the *New York Times Magazine* article "Does a More Equal Marriage Mean Less Sex?" which discussed egalitarian heterosexual marriages and how they were becoming more gender-fluid (Gottlieb, 2014). The article explored the transition of heterosexual marriage from a traditionally gender-dominated union to a more egalitarian, more intimate, and more long-lasting union that is also less likely to be sexually satisfactory. The article highlighted that "the very qualities that lead to greater emotional satisfaction in peer marriages, as one sociologist calls them, may be having an unexpectedly negative impact on these couples' sex lives" (Gottlieb, 2014). The article suggests that the majority of women in heterosexual marriages crave a teammate who will help them through mundane, everyday tasks, but when it comes to their sex lives, they want their husbands

to exhibit opposite attributes. One couple's therapist suggests that perhaps people can't have everything they want all in one person and that perhaps having one person in our lives to fulfill all our needs is not realistic. Psychotherapist and author Esther Perel spoke to this conundrum: "There is a certain part of you that with this partner will not be fulfilled. You deal with that loss. It's a paradox to be lived with, not solved" (Gottlieb, 2014).

In contrast to the perspective presented in the Gottlieb article, the lesbian women who participated in this study reported that they valued equality within their romantic relationships, and that the majority of them felt a deeper sense of intimacy and connection when they shared responsibilities and resources with their partner. The majority of these participants also reported that the more equal their relationship was and the more evenly distributed the household tasks and other resources were, the more likely they were to feel a sense of intimacy and sexual satisfaction in their relationship with their partner. Setting sexual orientation aside, perhaps the majority of women look for the same things when entering a romantic relationship. The Matthews, Tartaro & Hughes (2003) study included a sample of women that incorporated an equal number of heterosexual women and lesbian women, and the results showed that when any of them are looking for a romantic partner, they want the same things: similar values, similar backgrounds, a teammate, and an equal division of labor (Matthews, et. al., 2003).

This research study revealed that the majority of the lesbians in this study valued an equal distribution of power, resources, and tasks, and felt negotiations around this distribution affected the level of intimacy and sexual satisfaction they experienced with their partners. The participants provided the researcher with anecdotes about times when they felt that the negotiation of power, resources, and tasks were on point and, in response, made them feel more emotionally connected and sexually satisfied with their partner. The same participants also provided exam-

ples of times when they felt there was an imbalance in the way that power, resources, and tasks were being distributed among them. The result that they reported was not feeling as connected or sexually satisfied with their partner until they recalibrated what it was that was off balance or unequal.

The results of this small study highlighted that lesbian women in committed relationships value and prefer equality when it comes to the distribution of power, resources, and tasks within their relationships. This finding supports the research that has been conducted previously in which Peplau & Fingerhut (2007), Peplau & Cochran (1980), and Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton (1982) all concluded that there was a higher level of satisfaction for lesbian couples who perceived their relationships as sharing power and endorsing equal involvement. In addition, Caldwell and Peplau (1984) asked a sample of 77 lesbian women how they prefer power to be distributed, and 97% of the lesbian participants reported that they would prefer that the power distribution be “exactly equal” in their relationships (p. 592). Although Caldwell and Peplau’s (1984) research study is dated, this researcher found in her interviews their conclusions of lesbians valuing equality in their relationship remains true. While the results of this study of ten participants are not generalizable, they can provide guidance for future researchers looking to explore the negotiation of power, resources, and tasks and the relationship between this and perceived sense of intimacy and sexual satisfaction among the lesbian population.

In retrospect, this researcher would have expanded the questioning regarding the distribution of power, resources, and tasks by asking: Do you feel as though the distribution of power, resources, and tasks within your relationship are unjust (Brewster, 2017)? The reason for adding that question would be to ascertain if there is a perceived inequality to the allocation of power, resources, and tasks, which, if perceived as unjust, could lead to unhappiness in other aspects of

the relationship (Brewster, 2017). Brewster reveals that many lesbian couples want to achieve equality but rarely are able to achieve a fifty-fifty split; however, despite this unequal distribution, the women in these relationships reported that they mostly felt the allocation of chores was fair based on each person's time availability, employment responsibilities, child care, and so on. There is a careful distinction between the allocation of power, resources, and tasks being unequal and being unjust, and in retrospect, this researcher would have inquired about whether the participants felt there was an unjust distribution. There may have been more information regarding the negotiation if asked about with that careful distinction (Brewster, 2017). Brewster (2017) articulates this point nicely: "Perhaps then, perceived fairness (and subsequently relationship satisfaction) is not linked to the number of tasks or the tediousness of the chores, but consent in the process of delegating these jobs (p. 65)."

This dissertation study is limited because of its small sample size (ten participants), and results can be used only as information that will highlight areas for further research. There were also limitations regarding the diversity of the participants. The sample of participants consisted of eighty percent Caucasian middle-class lesbians, and the remaining twenty percent of the participants were Hispanic middle-class lesbians. Recruiting women of color in lesbian research studies continues to be a methodological challenge for researchers and proved to be a challenge for this study as well. The attempt to randomly recruit lesbians for this study was not successful, so this researcher used convenience sampling methods. The researcher began recruitment efforts by placing flyers at two LGBTQ community centers in the New York area, but these attempts were not successful. The researcher then placed the recruitment flyer on social media, and that immediately proved to be a useful recruitment tool: Within a few days of posting the flyer, a sufficient number of participants responded. The drawback to convenience sampling is that it limits

the scope of participants that would be able to see the recruitment flyer, and the sample would not be representative of the lesbian population as a whole.

Another limitation is that there are many factors that influence one's sexuality and, for the purposes of this study, the ways in which power, resources, and tasks are negotiated and distributed and the perception of intimacy and sexual satisfaction. For example, gender identity can affect one's sexuality along with the community one lives in, one's trauma history, able-bodiedness, self-esteem, medication intake, religious background, geographic location, mental health diagnoses, sexual dysfunction, culture, and stress. Clearly there are complex intersecting aspects of one's identity that contribute to an individual's sense of their sexuality. Because of the limited scope of this research, this researcher could not control for participants' intersectional identities. In addition to the above variables that contribute to one's sexuality, we have to consider the theoretical framework through which mainstream culture thinks about sex. That framework is typically influenced by "male and heterocentric biases" that value a sexual response cycle where the hallmarks of a satisfying sex life are frequency and orgasms are the goal for a sexual encounter (Iasenza, 2000). Frequency and orgasms as a goal of sexuality in our culture is limiting. Sex could be thought about in a way that is more fluid and open and considers placing value on the quality of a sexual encounter instead of quantity (Iasenza, 2000).

In retrospect, this researcher also should have prepared several probing questions around defining sexual satisfaction and would have extended the length of each interview. When the participants relied on an indirect definition of sexual satisfaction, the researcher would ask the participant, "Why do you think you're having a difficult time defining sexual satisfaction?" In addition, instead of the researcher asking "Are you sexually satisfied within your relationship?" the researcher would ask, "Can you tell me if you are or are not sexually satisfied within your

relationship, and why or why not?” Open-ended questions would prevent the participant from providing a yes or no answer. The researcher had an inclination that the participants were forced into a yes or no answer, when in reality, sexual satisfaction is complicated and affected by many contributing factors. The researcher was attempting to stay aligned with the interview’s protocol of questions that were approved by the University of Pennsylvania’s Institutional Review Board; in retrospect, the researcher should have adapted to each participant during the interviews and asked probing follow-up questions depending on the needs of that particular interview. If the interviews were longer, allowing for more of a rapport to be established between the researcher and the participants, the participants would feel more comfortable elaborating on such topics as sexual satisfaction and would feel more comfortable exploring their experiences in more detail.

This research study, although small, established that the participants valued having an equal partner with whom to make decisions, share the burden of chores, share a high level of intimacy, and experience a deep emotional connection while having a satisfying sex life with their partner. These findings suggest that further exploring the connection between the distribution of power, resources, and tasks and the level of experienced intimacy and sexual satisfaction within the context of lesbian relationships remains a fertile ground for research. In addition, research that examines this relationship in comparison with heterosexual and gay male relationships may help us to determine the universality of this connection between the distribution of power, resources, and tasks and the experience of intimacy and sexual satisfaction, or to identify distinct differences.

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