

8 Sex, Dating, Passionate Friendships, and Romance

Intimate Peer Relations Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescents

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Although the raw number of adolescent romantic and sexual involvements is well documented, the actual experience and meaning of these relationships for adolescents receives little attention. As a result, these relationships are frequently classed together on the basis of surface similarities, despite important structural and functional differences. Attention to these differences, however, reveals how young men and women craft adaptive constellations of peer relationships to meet changing needs for intimacy and social support during the multiple transitions of adolescence. In this chapter we put forth a typology of intimate peer relationships based on the *motives* prompting adolescents to pursue them, their specific *characteristics*, and the *functions* they serve. We specify four varieties of adolescent relationships – sexual relationships, dating relationships, passionate friendships, and romantic relationships – representing prototypical combinations of some of the most salient motives, characteristics, and functions.

Three qualifications are in order. First, our use of this typology is primarily heuristic. We do not suggest that all adolescent intimate relationships can or should be shoehorned into one of these categories or that such a task has any intrinsic value. Rather, we elaborate these relationship categories to demonstrate how an analysis of the motives, characteristics, and functions underlying adolescent intimate relationships elucidates their developmental significance better than an analysis of surface features alone. Second, our usage of otherwise general terms such as *romantic relationship* should be assumed to be specific to this chapter unless otherwise noted. *Romantic relationships*, *dating relationships*, *sexual relationships*, and *passionate friendships* will be defined with regard to the specific combination of motivations, characteristics, and functions we perceive to define archetypal examples of these relationships. Third, although certain relationships may prove more salient early in adolescence, whereas others take

center stage later, our typology presumes no *inherent* developmental sequence. We hope, in fact, to provide an explicit counterpoint to the dominant developmental paradigm that specifies a normative progression from childhood infatuations to early adolescent dating to late adolescent and young adult romantic and sexual bonds. The most obvious drawback of any such normative model (implicit or explicit) is its failure to conceptualize adequately the development of individuals who deviate from its parameters. However, such a model has additional shortcomings when applied to adolescent intimate relationships. For example, because dating is considered the primary conduit through which adolescents make the transition to the mature intimacy, passion, and sexual relations of adulthood, it typically receives a disproportionately large share of attention.

Also, normative models often employ a reductionistic view of sexuality. For example, although the onset of sexual activity is typically considered an important developmental event, few investigate the meaning and personal relevance of sexual activity for the adolescent. The mountain of empirical data on the frequency of various sexual behaviors among adolescents, the number of sexual partners, and the negative outcomes associated with sexual activity (disease and pregnancy) tells us little about the role of sexuality in motivating different types of relationships and altering the course and experience of relationships already underway. Finally, atypical relationships – such as casual friendships involving regular sexual activity or intense romantic bonds *lacking* such activity – are undertheorized within such models, typically interpreted as temporary aberrations on the road to more “mature” relationships. Although this characterization may sometimes prove accurate, it is usually made on a presumptive rather than an empirical basis.

The distinctions set forth in our typology are pertinent to any analysis of adolescent peer relationships, but they are particularly critical for understanding the experiences of sexual-minority (i.e., lesbian, gay, or bisexual) youths, who have been historically neglected by researchers on this topic. Adolescents are almost always presumed to be heterosexual by the researchers who study them, and even firsthand reports of same-sex behavior are frequently dismissed as drive reduction or experimentation. When the existence of sexual-minority youths *is* acknowledged, it too often receives only a cursory examination. Researchers may disclaim that too little data exist to permit a substantive discussion (a characterization that is no longer accurate) or may argue that the relationship experiences of sexual-minority youths mirror those of heterosexuals save for the gender of their partners and the added stress of social stigma.

In actuality, sexual orientation exerts a far more significant and wide-ranging press on adolescent intimate relationships than these accounts imply. Consider a lesbian teenager who perpetually loses to boys the intimate female friends to whom she is powerfully drawn but to whom she is never permitted to reveal her true feelings. The emotional repercussions and threats to her sense of self-efficacy are direct and profound. So too for the gay male adolescent who imagines that his only prospect for establishing an intimate interpersonal connection with another male is through furtive sexual encounters, or who never enjoys the opportunity to date someone to whom he is *both* erotically and emotionally attracted until adulthood. The bisexual adolescent faces a particularly confusing set of hurdles. He or she may have no knowledge that bisexuality exists and may therefore lack an explanatory context in which to make sense of dual attractions and the conflicting paths, opportunities, and identities they represent.

Fortunately, the number of school and community support groups for sexual-minority youths has increased dramatically over the past 5 years, providing an unprecedented number of youths with the opportunity to meet supportive and similar peers. Formidable barriers remain, however, for those who wish to establish intimate peer relationships. The difficulty inherent in simply identifying other sexual-minority youths creates onerous risks. If an adolescent mistakenly attempts to initiate a same-sex relationship with a heterosexual acquaintance, he or she risks severe peer rejection and perhaps physical danger. In response to such risks, many sexual-minority adolescents may strike a tenuous balance between risk and reward, pursuing exclusively emotional or exclusively sexual relationships that allow them a measure of same-sex intimacy without placing them in social jeopardy. The particular compromise an adolescent makes may depend on his or her ethnic and racial identity, social class, religious identification, and geographic location.

By focusing attention on issues facing sexual-minority youth, we seek both to grant them a greater voice in adolescent research and to widen our discipline's perspective on the range of relationships that can be considered normative, adaptive, and developmentally appropriate for adolescents in different circumstances. The value of focusing on the motivations, characteristics, and functions underlying different relationships is perhaps most evident when considering adolescents whose relationship options are constrained. If researchers were routinely to assume diversity in sexual orientation when formulating research questions and designing sampling strategies, we might find that current interpretations of adolescent peer relationships fail to do justice to the experiences of *either* heterosexual *or* sexual-minority adolescents.

Thus, it is within both an appreciative and a critical context concerning existing research that we offer our perspectives regarding adolescents' intimate peer relations. Although prior research has made great strides in parsing the landscape of the adolescent's social and emotional world, we argue that closer attention to the distinctions between sexual relationships, dating relationships, passionate friendships, and romantic relationships is critical to modeling their developmental significance for all youths. In discussing each type of relationship, special attention is devoted to describing the experiences of sexual-minority adolescents and outlining key areas for future research on this population. These suggestions will not only increase our understanding of sexual-minority social development, but will also help to clarify how diverse populations of both heterosexual and sexual-minority adolescents strategically weigh desires and opportunities against risks and social constraints in seeking and sustaining a differentiated network of peer relationships to meet their needs.

Sexual Relationships

Motivations, Characteristics, and Functions

Adolescents are participating in sexual activity in large numbers and at increasingly younger ages (see Hofferth, 1990, for a review). By age 18, the majority of adolescents – regardless of gender, ethnicity, geographic region, and sexual orientation – are sexually active, despite the proliferation of educational campaigns advocating abstinence. The risks of unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases facing these youths make it imperative to investigate the antecedents of these behaviors. Although an excellent body of research has succeeded in identifying predictors and correlates of first coitus among male and female adolescents (Bingham & Crockett, 1996; Udry & Billy, 1987), this research continues a long tradition of studying sexual activity outside of the diverse relational contexts in which it may be embedded. When such contexts receive attention, they are usually presumed to be dating or romantic relationships.

We focus here on *sexual relationships*, defined as peer relationships extending for any period of time whose primary focus is sexual activity. Attraction between partners is a frequent but not necessary component; similarly, a high or even moderate degree of mutual emotional engagement is not integral to these relationships. Instead, sexual activity constitutes their defining characteristic. We define *sexual activity* to include a continuum of behaviors motivated by sexual desire and oriented toward sexual

pleasure, even if these activities do not culminate in sexual release. It bears noting that the distinction between affectionate and sexual behavior is a vague one that baffles both adolescents and the researchers who study them. When, for example, might an intimate but nongenital caress be considered sexual rather than affectionate? Some might argue that such a determination is impossible and therefore meaningless. However, we maintain that as long as adolescents *themselves* perceive boundaries between sexual and affectionate behavior, researchers should honor the normative significance of these distinctions even when they are based on ambiguous or situationally variable criteria. Importantly, however, researchers must allow adolescents the final say in delimiting these categories. The interpretation of any instance of physical contact will vary according to an adolescent's personal and cultural standards concerning intimate touch. Thus, although we classify as sexual any physical contact motivated primarily by sexual pleasure and desire (rather than, for example, the provision of emotional support or the signaling of a certain degree of reciprocal intimacy), determination of which behaviors fit this description is left to the adolescent.

Sexual *relationships* may be easily conflated with the sexual *activity* that occurs within a dating or romantic relationship, but attention to their unique motivations, characteristics, and functions reveals important differences. Most notably, sexual activity that takes place within a dating or romantic relationship does not, according to our typology, constitute the *defining* characteristic of such a relationship. Alternatively, participants in a sexual relationship may rarely engage in the public activities typical of dating and romantic relationships, such as attending parties and events together. The entire relationship may take place out of public view. Also, sexual relationships typically lack the mutual emotional attachment characteristic of romantic relationships. Both partners may intentionally eschew emotional intimacy; in other cases, one participant may accept the terms of the relationship in the hope that over time, repeated sexual contact will inadvertently lead to an emotional bond. Finally, unlike either dating or romantic relationships, sexual relationships may entail little or no expectation of continued involvement from week to week or day to day. Termination of the relationship may require little more than the simple and unexplained withdrawal of one participant from the other.

Why might an adolescent pursue a sexual relationship instead of a dating or romantic relationship? Sexual relationships indisputably provide pleasure, an outlet for sexual gratification, and a means to explore one's sexuality, but researchers must additionally consider motivations revolving around the larger peer group. To the extent that adolescents associate sexual

activity with maturity, sexual relationships may allow an adolescent to *feel* mature and to *convey* an impression of maturity to others, thereby achieving a measure of social status or prestige quite distinct from the status and maturity associated with dating and romantic relationships. Adolescent males may be particularly interested in telegraphing the fact that they engage in sex with a large number of women but refuse to be “tied down” by any particular partner.

Sexual relationships may also serve intimacy-related functions in spite of their disavowal of intimate engagement. In particular, adolescents whose peer and even familial relationships lack physical affection or emotional intimacy may turn to sexual relationships to compensate (Martin, 1982; Tripp, 1975). The physical contact inherent in these relationships may function to soothe and comfort these adolescents, allowing them to feel attractive and desired without requiring them to risk emotional vulnerability. For others, sexual relationships simply afford easy companionship outside the constraints of more established bonds. Finally, as discussed later, they can provide an important context for the negotiation of sexual identity. Because such relationships require no ongoing commitment, emotional attachment, or public acknowledgment, they may be viewed by sexual-minority youths as an ideal testing ground for confirming or disconfirming the strength and authenticity of same-sex attractions.

It must also be recognized that just as a significant number of adolescents forgo sexual *activity* (Miller & Moore, 1990), many adolescents never participate in sexual relationships as we have defined them. For some, moral and/or religious standards and fears of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases provide a motivation to abstain from sexual activity altogether; others may view such behavior as acceptable only within the context of an established and enduring relationship. Finally, some youths may forgo sexual relationships for reasons beyond their control. They may find few partners willing to accept the restricted parameters of such a relationship, or they may possess physical, personality, or social characteristics that reduce sexual involvement with peers.

Issues Regarding Sexual-Minority Youth

Participation in Other-Sex Sexual Activity. In order to discern the relevance of sexual *relationships* for sexual-minority youth, it is important to clarify that such youths typically engage in *both* same-sex and other-sex sexual activity (D’Augelli, 1991; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1990, 1998). In the majority of youth samples, approximately one-half of

gay and bisexual men and three-quarters of lesbian and bisexual women report having engaged in heterosexual sex; the rates of same-sex sexual activity are approximately 90% for both groups (D'Augelli, 1991; Lever, 1994, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1990; Sears, 1991). Other-sex sexual activity may represent authentic heterosexual interest, an effort to stimulate such interest, an attempt to hide or deny same-sex attractions, or a means of confirming one's predisposition for the same sex. The existing data do not clarify the context in which sexual-minority youths typically engage in heterosexual sexual behavior, but it is plausible that such behavior is most likely to occur within established and publicly visible dating or romantic relationships (Savin-Williams, 1998).

The higher rates of heterosexual sex among young sexual-minority women have several possible explanations. Women report later onset of same-sex attractions and fantasies than men, later participation in same-sex sexual contact, and later identification as lesbian or bisexual (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Sears, 1989), leaving women with a longer period of time during which they may experiment with or engage in sex with males. Additionally, Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor (1994) suggest that due to social and cultural influences, it may simply prove more difficult for a young lesbian than a young gay man to avoid heterosexual experiences. Finally, research suggests that a greater proportion of women than men experience attraction for both sexes (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994), and some lesbians with exclusive *current* same-sex attractions report having been attracted to men *in the past* (Diamond, 1998; Weinberg et al., 1994). These findings suggest that not all heterosexual sexual activity among sexual-minority women is wholly attributable to social pressure. Instead, the interplay between the female adolescent's social context and her emerging and fluctuating attractions must be assessed to understand her participation in heterosexual sex.

Same-Sex Sexual Activity and Relationships. Sexual activity with a member of the same sex may allow an adolescent to test homoerotic attractions and validate an emerging sexual-minority identity. Again, however, we rarely know the context in which this activity takes place. Although many assume that same-sex sexual activity occurs within developing same-sex romantic relationships, Herdt and Boxer (1993) found that less than 20% of sexual-minority adolescents had their first same-sex sexual experience in this context. In actuality, same-sex sexual activity frequently takes place within friendships, within sexual relationships, or outside of *any* relational context.

For some sexual-minority youths, sexual relationships with same-sex peers may provide the only avenue for same-sex intimacy. This is most true of young sexual-minority men, many of whom may lack opportunities to forge emotionally intimate bonds with other males. Additionally, youths may fear that establishment of such bonds will arouse suspicion among friends and family, possibly leading to rejection, harassment, or violence. Although homophobia is a concern for sexual-minority adults as well, it poses greater threats to the well-being of adolescents. A sexual-minority adolescent may already be privately plagued by the sense that he or she is profoundly different from other youths. To have this differentness acknowledged and perhaps ridiculed by peers may prove intolerable. Furthermore, adolescents' economic dependence on parents raises the stakes of familial rejection, and unlike adults, sexual-minority adolescents may have no knowledge of gay, lesbian, and bisexual support resources that could provide them a safety net. A gay male adolescent under these circumstances may find clandestine sex with other men considerably easier and safer to pursue than a dating or romantic relationship. Finally, youths who find themselves ejected from their homes and forced to live on the streets may rely on "survival" sexual relationships in order to acquire shelter, money, food, and emotional support (see the review in Savin-Williams, 1994).

For a variety of reasons, young sexual-minority women are less likely to pursue exclusively sexual relationships. Most notably, women place less emphasis than men on the sexual component of their lesbian or bisexual orientation, both during and after the process of sexual identity questioning (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1990; Cass, 1990; Esterberg, 1994; Sears, 1989). Instead, emotional attachments to other women often take precedence. Because expressions of physical affection are more culturally normative among women than among men, a young sexual-minority woman may manage to obtain both physical and emotional intimacy within same-sex friendships without disclosing her sexual identity. This may be particularly true within certain ethnic communities, many of which allow expressions of physical affection between women friends, such as prolonged hand holding and the sharing of sleeping quarters, that would arouse suspicion in mainstream culture.

Ethnicity can exert a critical influence on the pursuit of sexual relationships among sexual-minority youth. Many traditional cultures strongly condemn same-sex sexuality, and sexual-minority youths from these cultures may feel that their same-sex attractions deeply violate their cultural identity and familial loyalty. These youths may fear that disclosure of their sexual orientation would lead to rejection from their entire ethnic community, not

just their immediate family. These factors often operate to prevent many youths of color from identifying themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (see Manalansan, 1996, and Savin-Williams, 1996a, for reviews). Although young women may safely pursue same-sex intimacy in the context of emotionally intimate and physically affectionate friendships, young gay or bisexual men seldom have this option. Thus, secretive sexual relationships may constitute a male youth's sole outlet for same-sex intimacy. He may reason (to self or to others) that sex, pursued for its own sake and divorced from any emotional and/or relational context, serves simply as a physical release and has no relevance to sexual identity.

Directions for Future Research. Future research should attempt to document the frequency of sexual relationships among all adolescents, clarify the diverse motives propelling them into these relationships, and explore their developmental implications. For example, how might they affect a youth's emerging sense of self, emotional well-being, and overall perspective on the role of sexual intimacy within close interpersonal relationships? Investigation into the role of self-regard in influencing the timing of a sexual-minority adolescent's participation in same-sex sexual activity holds particular promise. It is possible that adolescents with high self-regard and a high level of comfort with their sexuality may be more likely to engage in sex with same-sex peers and to do so at an earlier age. Sexual relationships may or may not provide the primary context for this activity.

It should be noted that participation in *same-sex* sexual activity and relationships by sexual-minority youths and participation in *other-sex* sexual activity and relationships by heterosexual youths should not be presumed analogous. The social and psychological contexts in which sexual-minority adolescents pursue sexual activity and sexual relationships with *both* same-sex and other-sex partners render these activities distinctive phenomena worthy of substantive exploration. Attention to the motives propelling youths to pursue sexual activity across different contexts, the associated mental health benefits and drawbacks, and the developmental implications of adolescents' choices is clearly needed.

Dating Relationships Among Adolescents

Motivations, Characteristics, and Functions

Of all relationships under discussion, dating is the most public, the most culturally condoned, and the most socially scripted. For these rea-

sons, both participation in and eschewal of dating relationships carry unique meanings and consequences for adolescents. As we define them, dating relationships entail a mutual expression of romantic interest between partners that is publicly expressed via participation in shared activities usually visible to the adolescents' peers and parents. Unlike romantic relationships, participants have not yet committed themselves to, and may not even be seeking, a sexual or romantic relationship. Thus, dating relationships may be easy to terminate. It is important to note that the public acknowledgment of a dating relationship is quite distinct from the public acknowledgment of the "couplehood" that accompanies romantic relationships. In the former case, there may be little expectation (among participants or their peers) that the pair will continue their association over time. A dating relationship may, in fact, last only as long as one or two dates. Although one may question whether such a brief association constitutes a dating relationship, we argue that this determination must be based on the specific motivations and functions underlying the dating relationship rather than its absolute duration.

For example, dating symbolizes an adolescent's entry into the adult arena of heterosexual relationships, and adolescents who date are generally considered attractive, popular, and mature by others (Samet & Kelly, 1987). Thus, adolescents may be motivated to date in order to convey precisely this impression to the imagined audience of their peers (Elkind, 1980) or to privately confirm that they are "mature" and "normal." These aims may be served in the course of only one or two sufficiently visible dates. Similarly, adolescents who seek dating relationships with particular peers in order to gain access to a socially desirable group may also find that a limited number of dates successfully accomplishes this goal.

Adolescents who seek dating relationships for the sheer excitement of pursuing someone and the feeling of achievement or conquest that ensues from dating a variety of people may participate in a series of brief dating relationships. In such cases, the significance and relevance of each relationship may prove less meaningful than the overall pattern of peer associations over time. Such patterns are similarly important in assessing the role of dating relationships in promoting familiarity with the other sex and fostering social competence (Paul & White, 1990). Because adolescents who are particularly shy or unfamiliar with the other sex may forgo dating altogether, they may prove less socially competent by the close of adolescence than their peers. Although it has been noted that adolescents who do not date exhibit depression as well as personality and emotional disorders (Bornstein & Bruner, 1993; Weiner, 1992), the extent to which an adoles-

cent's lack of dating exacerbates or is itself a by-product of such problems is often unclear.

Of course, adolescents often date for the simplest and most obvious of reasons – the prospect of developing a romantic or sexual relationship with an attractive and riveting peer. Consequently, it is often difficult to disentangle motivations underlying dating relationships from motivations underlying romantic relationships. The functions served by each type of relationship, however, remain distinct. For example, dating interactions frequently take place in group contexts and are often characterized as superficial (Douvan & Adelson, 1966). Thus, regardless of what an adolescent hopes eventually to glean from a dating relationship, it will not typically provide substantive reciprocal intimacy and mutual validation until it develops into a romantic relationship.

It is difficult to identify the precise moment at which this transition occurs. Commitment is not the sole criterion, for even romantic relationships with low levels of commitment may entail the strong feelings of mutual emotional attachment that characterize romantic relationships. By the same token, some adolescents may pursue long-standing, committed romantic relationships that remain as emotionally guarded as casual dating relationships. Sexual behavior, of course, may take place in either type of relationship. Perhaps because researchers have not taken adolescents' love relationships as seriously as adult relationships, little is understood about the process by which an adolescent moves from the awkwardness and hesitancy of a dating relationship to the exhilaration of a budding romance to the comfort and security of a committed romantic relationship. Attention to the role of underlying motivations and functions in this process, rather than to shifts in the surface structure of a relationship, will yield the greatest insight into the developmental implications of these transitions.

Issues Regarding Sexual-Minority Youth

Participation in and Functions of Dating. Because dating relationships provide a common route to romantic relationships, many of the special considerations constraining sexual-minority youths' pursuit of same-sex dating relationships constitute de facto constraints on romantic relationships and should be interpreted as such. Most often, sexual-minority adolescents face two options: They can date members of the other sex or they can choose not to date at all. Only rarely can they glimpse the possibility of asking out a peer of the same sex (Sears, 1991). For this reason, dating is not a well-developed institution among sexual-minority youths, particularly in rural

areas where such youths are likely to be few in number and less openly identified. When same-sex dating relationships *are* available, they may provide youths with a crucial sense of being normal, demonstrating that a lesbian, gay, or bisexual orientation does not prevent them from enjoying many of the activities and pleasures of a typical adolescence.

Dating relationships also provide a template for relationship norms within sexual-minority communities. Prior to the first dating relationship with a same-sex peer, a sexual-minority adolescent may wonder how same-sex dating differs from opposite-sex dating: Which person does the asking? Who pays? Whereas examples of heterosexual dating scripts abound in movies, television, and advice-giving tracts, few comparable cultural models exist for same-sex dating. Participation in same-sex dating may provide a youth's only practical, firsthand knowledge of how such relationships are conducted.

When a newly identified sexual-minority adolescent dates a more experienced same-sex peer, these relationships may serve to socialize the adolescent into larger sexual-minority communities. By attending community functions and activities with a seasoned peer, sexual-minority adolescents gain exposure to facets of the community that they might have been too intimidated to explore on their own. These experiences provide the adolescent an important sense of belonging within his or her local lesbian, gay, or bisexual community that may well outlast the initial dating relationship.

Of course, a sexual-minority adolescent need not *date* an experienced sexual-minority peer in order to experience this informal socialization. Friendships with peers and friendly contact with older mentors can serve this function equally well. Adolescents with access to youth-focused community resources may find it easy to meet and make friends with sexual-minority peers. However, adolescents without access to these resources may find it far more difficult to gain entry into the existing social circles of their local lesbian, gay, or bisexual community. Participation in a dating relationship with an experienced companion often provides easy access to social networks and community resources.

Finally, dating may serve as a "trial balloon" for the sexual-minority youth's emerging sexual identity, allowing him or her to decide whether the benefits of publicly acknowledging same-sex attractions are greater than the risks of peer and parental rejection that this acknowledgment all too frequently entails. On the basis of several dating experiences, some youths may decide not to pursue same-sex relationships until they finish high school, leave town, secure a job, or reach college. These and other life-course transitions often provide a buffer of distance between the youth and

his or her family and community. In addition, they frequently put youths in contact with a larger array of lesbian, gay, and bisexual support resources and a larger pool of potential partners than are available in their high schools or home communities.

Although heterosexual dating is often viewed as a critical transition to adult heterosexual *relationships*, same-sex dating among sexual-minority adolescents may clearly function as a critical transition to a gay, lesbian, or bisexual *identity*. The casual and uncommitted nature of dating relationships allows recently identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents to experiment with their newfound sense of self without making daunting and premature commitments. For these reasons, such youth may be more eager to date than more experienced sexual-minority adolescents, who may often prefer sexual or romantic relationships.

Places of Contact. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to same-sex dating among sexual-minority youths is the identification of potential partners. Whereas heterosexual adolescents routinely assume that a peer of the other sex is available for a dating relationship, sexual-minority youths must first determine the sexual orientation of a desired peer. Mistakes can be costly. The repercussions for an adolescent who expresses romantic or sexual interest in a heterosexual peer of the same sex might involve inadvertent disclosure of his or her sexual orientation to parents, peers, and school officials, as well as pervasive stigmatization. Because of these risks, few sexual-minority adolescents attempt to meet potential dating partners in traditional school or extracurricular settings.

Instead, a youth may seek same-sex dates through lesbian, gay, and bisexual community resources. As such resources have become more widely available in recent years, they have vastly expanded adolescents' opportunities to meet similar youths. Because the first hurdle of same-sex dating – identifying sexual-minority peers – is eliminated in these contexts, these youths are free to engage in the same awkward, exciting, and public process of dating as heterosexual adolescents.

Many adolescents' first contact with other sexual-minority adolescents takes place in the context of a youth support group. Within the last 5 years, hundreds of such groups, often under the auspices of gay-straight alliances, have formed in local high schools throughout the United States. They are most common on the East and West coasts, in urban areas, and in liberal academic communities. These groups, which may meet as often as once a week, provide an informal setting in which to discuss concerns about coming out, parents, relationships, and any other topics of interest

(for a detailed description of the workings of one such group, see Herdt and Boxer's 1993 ethnography of the Horizons youth group in Chicago). Because many sexual-minority youths have no other contact with sexual-minority peers, the simple opportunity to meet and share experiences with a group of sexual-minority age-mates is perhaps the most important service these groups provide. Adolescents often socialize after regular meetings at a local cafe or restaurant, engendering opportunities for all sorts of relationships.

Unfortunately, youth groups are often completely inaccessible to sexual-minority adolescents living in rural, isolated, small, or conservative communities. Although some may travel several hours by car or bus to attend meetings of groups in nearby cities, many do not have ready access to transportation. If an adolescent's hometown is large enough to support lesbian, gay, or bisexual community establishments or activities (such as bars, coffeehouses, Pride parades, picnics, or political organizations), he or she may meet friends and/or potential partners in these settings. Unfortunately, a bar may be the only establishment that a small community can support, and one can speculate that adolescents (as well as adults) who rely on bars for social interaction with other sexual minorities might face an increased risk of alcohol abuse.

Some urban areas have been increasingly successful in providing alcohol-free outlets for sexual-minority adolescent social contact, such as coffeehouses or juice bars. In large cities with dense sexual-minority populations, proms for sexual-minority youth have been organized to provide all the trappings of this classic adolescent rite of passage – live music, adult chaperones, slow dancing, crepe paper streamers, and the crowning of a king and queen – in a safe, affirmative setting. Such events have become increasingly popular. The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that 800 youths between the ages of 14 and 25 were expected for the Second Annual Northern California Gay Prom. On balance, however, these options are few and far between, and most youth who venture into sexual-minority community settings will find themselves consistently outnumbered by adults.

The Internet has greatly expanded the range of available options for sexual-minority youths who want to meet same-age peers. Chat rooms, bulletin boards, list servers, and Web pages geared to sexual minorities in general and youths in particular have become increasingly common. Adolescents with access to networked computer systems have seized the opportunities presented by these forums to develop "pen-pal" friendships or engage in electronic courtships that may or may not culminate in actual relationships. These

modes of interaction with other sexual-minority adults and adolescents provide an unprecedented degree of privacy, anonymity, and safety for sexual-minority youths who have no access to sexual-minority community resources or who cannot risk disclosing their sexual orientation by attending a lesbian, gay, or bisexual event. Of course, few youths from lower- or working-class backgrounds have the access to networked computer systems that wealthier adolescents enjoy. Until more public high schools are able to install the appropriate hardware and software, Internet sexual-minority resources will remain segregated by class and computer literacy.

Although the upsurge in community resources geared to sexual-minority youth has made it easier for such youths to meet and date same-sex partners, the majority of sexual-minority adolescents continue to face difficulty finding such partners. Women, in particular, tend to be less well represented in youth support groups than their male counterparts, largely because women tend to self-identify as lesbian or bisexual at later ages than men (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Califia, 1979; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Troiden, 1988). Thus, a young lesbian attending a support group might meet only two other women in the group, neither of whom she may find attractive (a point that is all too often overlooked). Because of the restricted pool of potential dating partners, their characterization of desirable partners, and their level of self-disclosure and self-identification, even sexual-minority youths with access to other such youths may rarely date these peers. Some may choose not to date, and others may expand their pool of potential partners to include sexual-minority adults.

Dating Adults. A sexual-minority adolescent is far more likely to meet sexual-minority adults than same-age peers in his or her local community, and these adults may be more willing to pursue a dating relationship openly than adolescents. Although dating relationships between adolescents and adults need not be considered inherently harmful (Savin-Williams, 1998), they introduce a number of special concerns. For example, an adolescent's expectations for a dating relationship may be starkly different from those of his or her adult companion, particularly in light of robust cohort differences regarding the definitions and meanings of dating. Furthermore, the age gap between adolescents and adults could introduce a sizable power differential that compromises an adolescent's ability to direct the course of the relationship or his or her confidence to do so; a youth's relative inexperience with same-sex relationships can have the same effect.

It bears noting that some adolescents may consciously seek dating relationships with adults for the security and experience that they represent or

because they simply find older peers more desirable and attractive than same-age peers. Adults who are extremely familiar with the lesbian, gay, or bisexual community may serve as consummate socialization agents for adolescents, introducing them to local community norms and expectations regarding dress, relationship behavior, and even political ideology. An older peer who is more secure in his or her sexual identity may be (or, importantly, *seem*) better able to support the adolescent's process of self-identification and self-affirmation than another adolescent. Alternatively, some youths may wish to speed through this process, dating older peers in order to feel and/or appear more established in their lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity. Finally, an adolescent who has successfully traversed the process of identity development may not want to date peers who are still negotiating a nascent sexual-minority identity.

Thus, an adolescent who can choose to date either same-age or adult partners may prefer to form friendships with the former while dating the latter. It should not be forgotten that among heterosexuals and sexual minorities alike, older dating partners confer a coveted sense of status or maturity on adolescents. Thus, researchers should not assume that sexual-minority adolescents who have opportunities to meet sexual-minority age-mates will prefer to date these peers over adults. Nor should researchers assume that adult-adolescent relationships constitute a *de facto* danger for the adolescent. As noted earlier, such relationships offer both benefits and drawbacks, and the resulting balance depends largely on the individual adult an adolescent meets. Overall, however, opportunities for dating age-mates should be supported by the provision of greater resources for sexual-minority youth.

Interracial Dating. Just as youths are proportionately outnumbered by adults in sexual-minority community settings, lesbian, gay, and bisexual ethnic minorities of all ages are outnumbered by whites. Although large urban centers often have diverse sexual-minority communities and may even boast distinct and sizable sexual-minority communities of color, sexual and ethnic minority youths in all but the largest cities will likely find that their limited dating pool of same-sex peers is predominantly white. Although some may not object to dating white youths, others may strongly prefer to date peers with whom they share an ethnic culture, history, and community. These youths must therefore face a difficult choice: Either they can sacrifice this preference and date white youths or they can forgo same-sex dating altogether.

The pitting of sexual identity against ethnic identity may be all too familiar to these adolescents, as noted previously. The threat of stigma and

ostracization from one's community may altogether crush an ethnic-minority adolescent's interest in dating same-sex youths, causing him or her to postpone same-sex dating until after leaving the community of origin. Sadly, the provision of physical distance between family life and sexual-minority community life may seem the only solution to incompatible identities. Again, the provision of greater services for ethnic-minority youth, through which they may access peers and mentors who have managed similar negotiations between sexual and ethnic identity, is the most effective means to increase the level of support and the range of relationship options available to these adolescents.

Other-Sex Dating. It must not be overlooked that, for a number of reasons, the majority of sexual-minority youths date heterosexually throughout adolescence (see Savin-Williams, 1996b, for a review). Heterosexual dating may provide an effective "cover" for a youth's true sexual orientation. Because dating relationships need not develop into romantic or sexual relationships, they might also allow sexual-minority adolescents to present a public façade of heterosexuality without requiring extensive involvement in heterosexual relationships.

Of course, many sexual-minority youths participate in dating relationships before they come to a realization of their nonheterosexual orientation. These youths may simply be performing a normative role, not understanding why their experiences seem less satisfying than those of their friends. Some may question and begin to recognize their sexual identity as a result of unsatisfactory heterosexual dating. Others may date repeatedly, hoping that finding the "right person" will eliminate their same-sex attractions or seeking to test the strength of their same-sex attractions against their heterosexual experiences (Herdt & Boxer, 1993). Bisexual youths, on the other hand, may be confused by their enjoyment of heterosexual dating. A bisexual youth may think, "If I like the person I'm dating so much, then I must not be gay. But I know that I'm still attracted to the same sex, so I must not be straight." Because many youths are unaware of the existence of bisexuality or do not understand its complex meaning and multiple permutations, they may see no explanation for their feelings.

Gay and lesbian adolescents, too, may face this confusion, especially those who recall their dating and relationship experiences with the other sex as highly pleasurable and enjoyable (Diamond, 1998; Savin-Williams, 1998). In some cases, sexual-minority adolescents may find their *same-sex* dating experiences less satisfying than their *other-sex* relationships, sim-

ply because their limited pool of eligible same-sex peers makes it harder to find a compatible partner. Thus, researchers should not presume on the basis of a youth's current sexual identity that his or her prior heterosexual involvements were universally devoid of meaning and pleasure. Traditional dating, as we have shown, serves a number of different purposes, and adolescents may derive pleasure from these experiences for a number of reasons. The nature, quality, and import of *both* same-sex and other-sex dating experiences should be considered open empirical questions.

Directions for Future Research. Although prior research has focused on the dating *activities* of heterosexual and sexual-minority adolescents, few investigations have examined the *meanings* of both same-sex and other-sex dating among sexual-minority youths. Rapid cultural changes in mainstream perceptions of sexual orientation and in the availability of opportunities for same-sex dating will have numerous and profound effects on these meanings. Future research should take advantage of the cultural changes underway by examining not only whether and how many sexual-minority adolescents date same-sex peers, but also how such dating affects sexual identity and self-concept at successive points along a youth's developmental trajectory. Furthermore, as the category *bisexual* becomes more widely known and appreciated, increasing numbers of bisexuals will likely identify as such during adolescence rather than after a temporary identification as lesbian or gay. The dating experiences of bisexuals have much to tell us about the ways in which sexual-minority adolescents evaluate the evidence of their own behavior, feelings, and attractions in coming to understand their sexual identity.

Finally, to the extent that heterosexual adolescents who do not engage in dating or romantic relationships have fewer opportunities to master the social skills relevant to those interactions, one might question whether the constraints on sexual-minority adolescents' dating and relationship opportunities systematically alter their social developmental trajectories. Sexual-minority adolescents who feel awkward in social situations may attribute the discomfort to their sexual orientation, perhaps supposing that they will never experience the social ease and self-confidence of heterosexual peers. Given the opportunity to engage in the range of dating and relationship interactions readily available to heterosexual youth, however, a sexual-minority adolescent may discover a pleasure and comfort in social discourse previously thought unattainable.

Passionate Friendships Among Adolescents

Motivations, Characteristics, and Functions

The propensity for young women to develop more emotionally intimate same-sex friendships than men has been widely noted (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987). Largely neglected, however, is the small but notable number of dyadic friendships that become infused with an intensity resembling that of romantic relationships, though lacking a sexual component. These relationships can be conceptualized as *passionate friendships*, a term borrowed from Faderman's (1981) discussion of 18th- and 19-century *romantic friendships* but intended to denote contemporary rather than historical instances. Both Faderman (1981, 1991) and Smith-Rosenberg (1975) demonstrated that emotionally primary relationships between women have a rich cultural history dating back to the 16th century. Faderman argued that by the mid 19th and early 20th centuries, passionate attachments between women were not only acknowledged but considered normative, especially at the women's colleges that were springing up in New England during this time. These relationships were called *smashes*, described in 1882 as "an extraordinary habit which they have of falling violently in love with each other . . . with as much energy as if one of them were a man. . . . They monopolize each other & 'spoon' continually, & sleep together & lie awake all night talking instead of going to sleep" (Sahli, 1979, p. 22).

The cultural categories of romantic friendship and smashing dissolved around 1920, when intense same-sex bonds between women became subject to attributions of lesbianism. These intense, nonsexual bonds between young women continued, however. Crumpacker and Vander Haegen (1993) described young women whose conflicts with best friends were recalled with the heartbreak, grief, and intensity more typical of love relationships than our usual portrait of peer friendships. Indeed, in a recent study of young women's sexuality, Diamond (1997) reported that many heterosexual women listed their best friend as the object of one of the most intense, yet nonsexual, attractions they had ever experienced. Cole (1993) noted that a number of heterosexual college students, after reading accounts of primary, asexual bonds among women, reported similar bonds:

My primary relationships have always been with women, even when I'm involved with and committed to a particular man. Rather than sexual desire, I think I have soulful desire for women. My two closest

friends and I are talking about a lifelong commitment to each other and are trying to figure out how to actualize it. (p. 190)

Over and over, I develop highly intimate, very sensual relationships with women. Many people have asked if we're "involved" and I haven't known what to say. (p. 190)

Unlike other types of relationships under discussion, passionate friendships are not sought out by adolescents. They evolve over time, and the depth and intensity of the eventual relationship often take both participants by surprise. However, it is still meaningful to discuss an adolescent's motivation to form strong best friendships, out of which passionate friendships most commonly develop. These motivations include the desire for a trusted and reliable confidante, dependable companionship, intimacy, and a sense of being understood and accepted (Buhrmester & Furman, 1986; Sullivan, 1953). Although many of these qualities are sought in romantic relationships as well, best friendships provide a source of intimacy and support that is not dependent on enduring sexual/romantic interest. They may also be less fervently discouraged by parents. Some parents, however, may view the unusual level of intimacy between girls as indicative of lesbianism and may thus discourage the friendship. Clearly, although passionate friendships share certain motivations, functions, and characteristics with both best friendships and same-sex romantic relationships, their unique course and content necessitate that they remain conceptually distinct from either of these relationship types.

Although characteristics of passionate friendships may vary widely from case to case, common features can be discerned. As the preceding discussion suggests, both participants are usually women. Although passionate friendships need not be considered an *exclusively* female phenomenon, the high levels of reciprocal intimacy characterizing women's same-sex friendships (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982) make them more likely to develop in this context than between two young men or within a cross-sex friendship. One possible exception concerns two sexual-minority male adolescents who become emotionally enamored of each other but who do not yet experience their mutual interest as explicitly sexual in nature. Additionally, a sexual-minority male youth may become strongly, but non-sexually, attached to a close female confidante. Their passionate attachment might be mistaken for a traditional romantic relationship, providing cover (to self as well as others) for the youth's sexual orientation. Passionate friendships between young heterosexual men and women would probably spill over into explicit sexual interest and might therefore prove uncommon. Because of the apparent asymmetry in the prevalence of

passionate friendships between men and women, the following discussion focuses on women's experiences.

Participants in a passionate friendship are unusually preoccupied with each other and often commit quite seriously to the relationship, sometimes even making joint plans for the future. Similar to lovers, they may affectionately stroke, hold, or cuddle each other and experience feelings of jealousy, possessiveness, and intense separation anxiety. Although a small number of passionate friendships eventually evolve into full-fledged romantic or sexual relationships, they are always initially asexual. Although some might argue for an expanded definition of sexual contact that includes the affectionate touching characteristic of passionate friendships, it is useful to maintain a distinction between the latter (which may be highly sensual and which may *border* on the sexual) and forms of touch that are clearly generated by sexual interest and build for the purpose of sexual release. Additionally, the forms of touch common to passionate friendships are often more similar to the caregiving interactions of parents and children than the sexually intimate interactions of lovers (Diamond, 1997).

The ego-related functions of passionate friendships are numerous and overlap considerably with the functions of traditional romantic relationships. For example, each participant in a passionate friendship feels highly valued and needed by the other. The adolescent gains a high level of intimacy, companionship, and affectionate physical contact, as well as a sense of stability and trust. Social learning takes place regarding the daily practice of building and maintaining a loving, committed relationship with another person. In fact, during the 19th century, some considered such relationships a form of rehearsal for adult marriage (Faderman, 1991). Passionate friendships are unique in that they serve these functions outside the context of a sexual bond and therefore without the special pressures, risks, and concerns that accompany sexual involvement.

To the extent that passionate friendships resemble asexual romantic relationships, it is fruitful to consider their developmental implications from the perspective of attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1982), conceptualizing them as primary attachment bonds in the same way that researchers have viewed adult love relationships as primary attachment bonds (Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1988). Recent attention has turned to the process by which young men and women transfer the fundamental components of attachment – proximity seeking, separation distress, utilization of the caregiver as a safe haven, and utilization of the caregiver as a secure base from which to explore – from par-

ents to peers during the course of adolescence. Romantic relationships are generally considered crucial for this process (Furman & Wehner, 1994). Hazan and Zeifman (1994) found that among the 41% of adolescents in their sample who considered a peer to be their primary attachment figure, 83% were involved in romantic relationships with this peer.

The key question, then, concerns the remaining 17%. Considering that adolescent women's same-sex friendships are highly emotionally intimate, some young women may form their first nonparental attachment to a female friend rather than to a male romantic partner. Perhaps it is the status of these relationships as full-blown attachments that renders them more intense than normative best friendships.

The physical affection that is common to passionate friendships may play an important role in this distinction. Hazan and Zeifman (1994) argued that because intimate physical contact fosters a feeling of security, such contact is a prerequisite for both the mother–infant attachment bond and adult attachment bonds. They noted that the forms of physical intimacy that characterize the infant's relationship to his or her primary caregiver – kissing, suckling, belly-to-belly contact, and extended mutual gazing – reemerge only in sexually intimate relationships. Passionate friendships appear to involve an unusual degree of physical affection, even taking into account the considerable latitude granted women in exchanging platonic physical affection with same-sex friends. The unusual degree of physical affection in passionate friendships may promote their transformation from normative best friendships into full-blown attachments, in spite of the absence of sexual contact.

Because passionate friendships have not received systematic study, it is difficult to discern their overall role in adolescent social development. For example, one might speculate that adolescents who form passionate friendships eventually develop more intimate and satisfying romantic relationships because they come to expect a deeper degree of intimacy from their closest relationships. Alternatively, an adolescent may form *less* intimate bonds with subsequent romantic partners, preferring to meet primary emotional needs through a stable platonic friendship. Importantly, researchers should not presume that these relationships are substitutes for, or transitions to, traditional romantic relationships without thorough investigation into the meanings these relationships hold for those who participate in them.

Issues Regarding Sexual-Minority Youth

Involvement in a same-sex passionate friendship does not necessarily suggest that one or both of the young women is lesbian or bisexual. To the

contrary, these relationships occur regardless of sexual orientation. Among sexual-minority youths, however, passionate friendships may hold a special status. For young lesbians, bisexuals, and those women who are questioning their sexuality, these bonds constitute an important context for the process of clarifying their sexual identity. Many sexual-minority women first begin to question their sexual identity in response to unusually close attachments to their best friends, even in the absence of explicit sexual feelings (Butler, 1990; Hall Carpenter Archives, 1989; National Lesbian and Gay Survey, 1992).

For a young lesbian or gay man who is unable to find other sexual-minority youths or is unwilling to assume the risk of revealing his or her sexual identity, a passionate friendship may satisfy needs traditionally met by romantic relationships without entailing heterosexual sexual activity. Thus, these relationships may constitute one of the most important routes by which sexual-minority youths obtain the nurturing, support, and intimate contact that alleviates some of the inevitable stress of growing up gay in a heterosexual world. This does not suggest, however, that passionate friendships simply represent substitutes for romantic relationships or way stations on the road to such relationships. This characterization mistakenly assumes that traditional romantic relationships represent the universal pinnacle of adult intimacy and the natural endpoint of an adolescent's relational development. This view is incompatible with the finding that some lesbians choose to sustain *both* romantic bonds and intense, platonic friendships during adulthood, often privileging the latter over the former (Weinstock & Rothblum, 1996).

It bears noting that the distinction between a passionate friendship and a same-sex romantic relationship may not be clear to an individual woman and her family, friends, or community. To the extent that Western culture presumes that the most emotionally intimate and physically affectionate nonkin relationships necessarily involve sexual intimacy (O'Connor, 1992), women involved in a passionate friendship may wonder whether they are "actually" sexually attracted to their friend without having realized it. These concerns may prompt sexual questioning among women who might otherwise never consider themselves lesbian or bisexual. In some cases, women may sexually consummate their passionate friendships, yet may never again desire or engage in same-sex sexual activity. This activity does not resemble traditional sexual experimentation, yet neither does it necessarily signal a same-sex sexual orientation. Investigation of such cases might significantly enrich understanding of the role of sexual behavior, emotional intimacy, and sexual orientation in prefiguring an adolescent woman's trajectory of intimate relationships and the meaning she ascribes to them.

Directions for Future Research. Because passionate friendships are easily misperceived as either normative best friendships or unconsummated love relationships, researchers have consistently overlooked them in charting the role of intimate relationships in adolescent development. Little is therefore known about their prevalence among youth in general and among demographic subpopulations in particular. Just as it remains unknown whether passionate friendships have unique developmental implications, it remains unknown whether sexual-minority youths, particularly lesbian and bisexual women, are substantially more likely to engage in passionate friendships than their heterosexual counterparts. Similarly, it is unclear whether heterosexual women who have had a passionate friendship are more likely than other heterosexual women to consider experimenting with same-sex sexual activity later in life. The role of passionate friendships in different ethnic communities is also a fruitful area of study. Because many such communities permit greater expression of platonic affection among women than does mainstream culture, it is possible that passionate friendships are more common or more socially condoned. Finally, the conditions under which passionate friendships occur among *male* youths deserve systematic investigation.

Of particular interest are questions concerning the occurrence of such relationships in adulthood as opposed to adolescence. Adults engaged in romantic relationships are likely to sustain primary attachments *exclusively* to romantic partners. However, those without romantic partners may meet primary needs for intimacy and support through asexual relationships analogous to passionate friendships. Rothblum and Brehony (1993) found that a number of adult lesbians maintained such bonds to former lovers, often continuing to cohabit, raise children, and share expenses even after breaking up. Although sexual and/or romantic relationships with other women were sometimes pursued outside of this platonic bond, its primacy and centrality in each woman's life were never questioned. They called these relationships *Boston marriages*, a term originally referring to 19th-century American women living together in a romantic friendship.

The developmental tasks of adolescence, however, may render these relationships particularly likely. Because adolescents are engaged in transferring attachment functions from parents to peers, peer relationships may easily become infused with an unusual and perhaps unprecedented level of reciprocal intimacy. Clearly, linkages between adolescent and adult participation in intimate, primary, and yet asexual bonds provide a fascinating area for future developmental research. This research first requires, however, that developmental psychologists expand contemporary relationship

categories and resist making hasty conclusions about the nature of unusually close bonds among adolescents. This may significantly enrich our understanding of heterosexual as well as sexual-minority adolescents.

Romantic Relationships

Motivations, Characteristics, and Functions

Romantic relationships are typically, though not universally, distinguished from dating relationships by a mutual agreement between partners to sustain the relationship and by public acknowledgment of the status of the participants as a couple. By declaring their relationship to family, friends, and the greater society, adolescents may receive validation and support for their mutual commitment. Public acknowledgment may also reinforce the strength of the relationship; a couple may sense that family and peers would be sorely disappointed if they were to dissolve the relationship. Of course, romantic relationships may take place in secret, in which case mutual commitment to the relationship is expressed privately between the partners.

Most adolescents desire romantic relationships and anticipate participating in them; the motivations underlying these relationships are numerous. For many adolescents, such a relationship represents the consummate mark of adulthood (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1986), and participation in romantic relationships may most effectively communicate maturity to peers. Parents, too, may view these relationships as more mature than dating relationships and may extend privileges and freedoms to children actively sustaining a commitment to a single partner that they might withhold from children bringing home a different date each week.

Most important, however, adolescents may seek such relationships simply for the reciprocal intimacy, comfort, and security they provide. The degree of emotional intimacy achieved in romantic relationships is typically higher than that achieved in adolescents' other peer relationships, and these may be the first bonds in which adolescents experience full-blown attachment to someone other than a parent (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994). For this reason, feelings of love and passion typically shared by participants in a romantic relationship may be experienced as unusually intense and all-consuming. Although some adolescent romantic relationships are turbulent, others furnish stability, constancy, and a coherent picture of the future during a period otherwise marked by change and uncertainty (Ainsworth, 1989). This stability also derives from feelings of being loved, desired, and

even prized that usually accompany participation in romantic relationships. Particularly for male adolescents, who less frequently engage in the intimate disclosure common to female friendships (Camarena, Sarigiani, & Petersen, 1990), romantic relationships may provide a critical context in which to confide previously unexpressed thoughts and feelings.

Although participants in romantic relationships almost always report sexual attraction to each other and usually engage in highly affectionate behavior, *sexual* behavior should not be assumed to be a necessary feature of these relationships. As indicated previously, a significant number of adolescents abstain from sex, despite their relationship status. However, the presence of mutual sexual attraction and interest distinguishes these relationships from passionate friendships, as does the fact that romantic relationships are *socially acknowledged* as primary bonds rather than “just friendships.”

As noted earlier, commitment is a frequent but not universal feature of romantic relationships; in fact, some adolescents perceive it to be a *negative* attribute of such relationships (Feiring, 1996). Although the commitment between adolescents is certainly not equivalent to that between married adults, we maintain that adolescent romantic relationships involve a degree of mutual commitment frequently unappreciated by adults. Participants both think of and present themselves as a couple (“we”) rather than as consistently individuated partners. They display a future orientation toward the relationship, including each other in plans for the short-term future and in decisions about the long-term future. Exclusivity on the part of both partners is a frequent component of participants’ commitment to the relationship. Individuals typically avow to take part in only one romantic relationship, whereas they might pursue numerous dating relationships simultaneously. For these reasons, romantic relationships provide adolescents with the opportunity to master a number of relationship skills that are relevant for future romantic relationships: consistently taking another person’s interests into account, successfully managing minor disagreements and major fights, and providing sustained comfort and security to another person.

However, romantic relationships also carry a number of drawbacks: The time and energy required to sustain these relationships may jeopardize competing interests such as friendship networks, the desire for multiple sexual partners, career goals, or extracurricular activities. Some parents may actively discourage romantic relationships until educational plans have been completed and the adolescent’s career path is underway, viewing them as a hindrance to, rather than a mark of, full maturity. Parents who dislike

their child's romantic partner may decree certain privileges conditional on the termination of the relationship. The willingness of many adolescents to pursue romantic relationships in spite of such obstacles testifies to their importance.

Issues Regarding Sexual-Minority Youth

Obstacles to Participation in Romantic Relationships. Like their heterosexual counterparts, most sexual-minority youth desire traditional romantic relationships (D'Augelli, 1991; Savin-Williams, 1990). Yet the larger society creates many barriers to the development of same-sex romantic relationships, such as the lack of positive role models of same-sex couples, failure to recognize these couples formally, and the constant threat of hate crimes against individuals who dare express common affection toward a same-sex partner. Just as many sexual-minority youths avoid dating in order to hide their same-sex orientation, many eschew sustained involvement with a same-sex partner for the same reason.

In addition, many sexual-minority youths are plagued by internalized homophobia, resulting in an aversion to same-sex romantic relationships. Some youths may view romantic relationships as definitive proof of their nonheterosexual orientation, whereas isolated dates or sexual encounters can be explained away as experimentation. Other youths may absorb social stereotypes of same-sex relationships as predominantly sexual, fleeting, and scarce. Because they may perceive that sexual-minority individuals are not expected to desire or participate in long-term relationships, they may come to share these low expectations and consequently forgo romantic relationships altogether. An added concern for young sexual-minority men in particular is the perception that romantic relationships are discouraged among certain factions within gay communities in favor of more casual pairings (Myer, 1989). This perceived lack of support, coupled with the dearth of positive models for same-sex relationships, may contribute to low rates of participation in romantic relationships among sexual-minority youth.

Finally, the social isolation encountered by many sexual-minority youths prevents them from encountering opportunities for initiating romantic relationships or gaining support for their continuance. As indicated earlier, simply finding a desirable, available, interested partner can be a significant hurdle for many sexual-minority adolescents seeking romantic relationships. As a result, some youths may choose to meet their needs for intimacy through friendships with sexual-minority peers or adult mentors, passionate

friendships, and sexual relationships, postponing the pursuit of romantic relationships indefinitely or until they have found a large pool of potential partners and a more supportive community.

Unique Characteristics of Sexual-Minority Romantic Relationships.

The limitations placed on sexual minorities create significant differences between sexual-minority and heterosexual youth regarding the motivations, characteristics, and functions of romantic relationships. For example, the public recognition of a same-sex romantic relationship may place a youth at risk for family and peer rejection. Thus, although typical romantic relationships are characterized by public acknowledgment, disclosure of such relationships among sexual-minority youths may be limited to the partners' closest social networks.

Furthermore, just as sexual-minority adolescents may date across age and ethnic lines due to the limited pool of potential partners (as well as for other, often idiosyncratic reasons), they may form romantic relationships across such lines as well. The complications of these relationships, discussed previously, are compounded when they become more serious. Romantic relationships between adolescents and adults may be beset by discrepancies in expectations, as well as capacities, for commitment. In addition, although some peers may admire an adolescent for having a "mature" relationship, others may strongly disapprove and withdraw needed support. Adolescents who are romantically involved with adults probably avoid disclosing these relationships to parents. Even parents who accept their child's sexual orientation may forbid him or her to date a sexual-minority adult, perhaps suspecting the adult of seducing the youth into homosexuality. Managing the difficulties of such relationships while keeping them secret places additional burdens on the sexual-minority adolescent.

Interracial relationships, too, present special challenges for sexual-minority youth. A traditional ethnic family that grudgingly permits a child to date a white peer may view romantic relationships as a more direct threat to family loyalty. Ethnic-minority youths caught in such a situation may conclude that their most intimate, satisfying, supportive relationship is incompatible with their ethnic or cultural identity. Obviously, the sacrifice of a full-fledged romantic relationship may devastate a youth more profoundly than the sacrifice of a casual dating relationship and may represent a more serious compromise at the level of sexual identity.

The very form of romantic relationships, and not only the choice of romantic partners, is frequently distinctive among sexual minorities. For example, although sexual exclusivity may be normative among and central

to heterosexual couples, many gay and bisexual men are not involved in and do not desire sexually exclusive relationships (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985–1986; Lever, 1994). Despite the stigmatization of nonmonogamous relationships as unhealthy and uncommitted, research has found no psychological differences between men in monogamous and nonmonogamous relationships (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985–1986). Particularly noteworthy is the fact that gay and bisexual men displayed equally high levels of emotional commitment within sexually exclusive and nonexclusive relationships. It must not be assumed, therefore, that sexual and emotional commitments are equivalent, interchangeable, or uniformly linked within all relationships.

This does not suggest a norm of nonmonogamy among gay and bisexual men but rather a *plurality* of approaches to sexual and romantic relationships within this population. Types of relationships sought by a particular individual may be influenced not only by local community standards but also by the individual's sexual and relationship history. For example, Dubé (1997) identified two unique relationship trajectories among sexual minority men. Those who reported engaging in same-sex sexual contact *prior* to identifying as gay or bisexual eventually participated in a higher proportion of sexual than romantic relationships, whereas those who engaged in same-sex sexual contact *after* identifying as gay or bisexual participated in relatively fewer sexual relationships. The long-term developmental implications of these patterns clearly deserve systematic attention.

Unique Motivations and Functions of Sexual-Minority Romantic Relationships. Sexual-minority youth who have never had a same-sex romantic relationship may have long engaged in elaborate fantasies regarding such relationships and the satisfaction they are anticipated to bring. Consequently, adolescents in the early stages of identity development may be especially eager to enter into a romantic relationship with the first eligible partner they meet and may vastly accelerate the transition from a dating relationship to a romantic relationship. Alternatively, they may skip the dating phase altogether by initiating a romantic relationship within a preexisting friendship. These patterns may be especially likely among adolescents who are most isolated from established sexual-minority communities, such as those living in rural areas, and who face the most limited pool of available partners.

Romantic relationships often facilitate the process of coming to terms with same-sex attractions and provide, for many adolescents, a definitive confirmation of their sexual orientation. Romance may also hasten the dis-

closure of sexual identity to others, whether intentionally or unintentionally. To be frequently seen in the company of a particular same-sex peer may elicit suspicion from family and friends, perhaps compromising a youth's efforts to keep his or her sexual identity a secret. Among youths who *choose* to disclose their sexual identity, serious romantic relationships can create a critical safety net of support in the event of a negative or rejecting response. For this reason, many adolescents may decide to conceal their sexual orientation from their families of *origin* until they have managed to develop a nurturing family of *choice* composed of close friends, older mentors, and an intimate romantic partner. Sexual-minority youths who become isolated from their nuclear and extended families or religious and ethnic communities as a result of their sexual orientation may invest considerably more importance in romantic relationships than do their heterosexual counterparts.

This importance is reflected in the fact that the chosen families crafted by sexual minorities often incorporate *former* lovers as well as friends and current romantic partners. This is particularly true among lesbians, who frequently remain close friends with previous lovers (Becker, 1988; Hite, 1987; Nardi & Sherrod, 1994). Because many lesbian relationships are *initiated* in the context of an existing friendship (Gramick, 1984; Rose, Zand, & Cimi, 1993; Schafer, 1977; Vetere, 1983), the maintenance of a close platonic friendship after romance has ended is not entirely surprising. In some cases, this fluidity between friendship and romantic love creates confusion concerning the distinction between them (Rose et al., 1993). However, the maintenance of close ties with former lovers is certainly adaptive and beneficial for individuals who may not have access to traditional familial support. In some cases, these relationships may develop into the Boston marriages described earlier (Rothblum & Brehony, 1993).

Directions for Future Research. Research on romantic relationships among sexual-minority adolescents should examine the importance of these relationships for the well-being of the individual and the role they play in the overall process of coming out to self and others. Of equal importance are the ways in which sexual-minority youths define and regard romantic relationships. Researchers are often unaware of what these youths seek in romantic relationships and how their expectations fluctuate during adolescence and over the course of sexual identity development. Future investigators must also broaden the scope of their research to include adolescents of diverse ethnicities and social classes and must make concerted efforts to incorporate longitudinal observation. These improvements will

clarify how expectations for and participation in romantic relationships change over time across different sexual-minority populations.

Additionally, researchers should not assume that a gay or lesbian adolescent's other-sex romantic relationships are meaningless, unsatisfying, fake, or devoid of authentic intimacy. Although sexual-minority youths often experience these relationships differently than do their heterosexual peers, they may still constitute a critical source of intimate friendship. Many lesbians recall their adolescent other-sex relationships as positive experiences characterized by warmth, affection, and even excitement; in a few cases, a particularly sensitive boyfriend was the first to delicately ask his girlfriend whether she might be happier with women than men (Diamond, 1997). Because adolescent males are less well versed in reciprocal intimacy than adolescent females, a sexual-minority male youth may derive more sustenance from a romantic relationship with a close female friend than from same-sex relationships. Again, researchers must explore the actual experiences and underlying motives and functions of an adolescent's entire constellation of peer relationships in order to assess their developmental significance.

Because of the increasing visibility of diverse sexual-minority populations and the growing number of sexual-minority youths who enjoy opportunities to meet and establish romantic relationships with other sexual-minority youths, this is an optimal time to ask these questions. Furthermore, considering recent discussions of the legal standing, moral value, and potential healthfulness of same-sex marriage, the answers to these questions are being sought with increasing urgency. Investigation of adolescents' participation in committed same-sex relationships has much to tell us about the role of relational intimacy in moderating both typical and atypical stressors during adolescence and the role of sexual identity in shaping adolescent intimacy development.

Conclusion

The importance of drawing careful distinctions among the motivations, characteristics, and functions of different types of adolescent relationships may not immediately strike researchers who have examined exclusively heterosexual relationships. After all, as long as adolescents themselves blur the boundaries among sex, dating, and romance, perhaps it is not a serious error for researchers to do the same. However, even a cursory examination of the experiences of sexual-minority adolescents provides a compelling argument for maintaining and investigating these boundaries. Each time a

sexual-minority adolescent considers participating in a sexual, dating, or romantic relationship (whether with the same sex or the other sex), he or she must negotiate a distinct array of desires, risks, and benefits. Heterosexual youths must similarly balance these considerations, albeit less consciously and with lower stakes. For this reason, research on sexual-minority youths highlights competing concerns and criteria that are relevant to *all* youth.

At the same time, the most important insights to be gained from this research concern its target population. The contemporary cohort of self-identified sexual-minority adolescents is unprecedented in its size and visibility, and we have yet to discern how such visibility and openness will affect the types of relationships they seek and pursue throughout and after adolescence. For this reason, we have chosen to emphasize research questions that directly address the concerns of this population. How do differences in motivations affect participation in exclusively sexual *relationships* rather than simple sexual activity? How do sexual-minority adolescents use and experience other-sex dating relationships in the process of developing, questioning, or hiding a sexual-minority identity? How do these adolescents form enduring romantic relationships with same-sex peers, and how do these relationships shape identity? What outcomes are associated with disproportionate participation in one type of relationship?

As noted earlier, these questions are clearly relevant to heterosexual adolescents as well. Research that *assumes diversity* in sexual orientation and identity will most effectively discern the ways in which adolescent relationships shape and are shaped by other features of adolescent development. Passionate friendships provide an example of this point. These relationships remain invisible to both heterosexually oriented and sexual-minority oriented research programs; the former cannot distinguish them from normative best friendships, and the latter cannot distinguish them from unacknowledged and unconsummated same-sex romantic relationships. Only an approach that avoids blanket assumptions concerning sexuality and that provides room for unexpected variation will be able to account for the unique characteristics of these relationships.

Sociocultural changes are clearly leaving their mark on contemporary adolescent relationships. We may soon face a generation in which experimental same-sex dating and romantic involvement become common among *both* sexual-minority and heterosexual youths. To successfully investigate both the immediate and long-term effects of these changes on the development of intimate relationships over the life span, researchers must devote

substantial attention to the understudied experiences of adolescents who have sought and experienced same-sex intimacy. The most important and successful research will integrate findings from both sexual-minority and heterosexual populations in order to construct dynamic working models of relationship formation, dissolution, and impact that apply across sexual orientations and over the life course.

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