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# Passionate Friendships Among Adolescent Sexual-Minority Women

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Adolescent friendships containing the emotional intensity of romantic relationships, yet lacking sexual activity, have been documented in numerous cultures and historical periods. This research explores these relationships among contemporary young sexual-minority women. Phone interviews with 80 lesbian, bisexual, and unlabeled women between 18 and 25 years of age ( $M = 21.8$ ,  $SD = 2.1$ ) assessed characteristics of their closest adolescent friendships. Cluster analysis differentiated conventional from passionate friendships, the latter containing more characteristics of romantic relationships. Same-sex friendships were not more likely than cross-sex friendships to be classified as passionate, and passionate friendships were not disproportionately likely to involve sexual attraction. Same-sex passionate friendships were initiated at earlier ages than same-sex conventional friendships, and those that developed prior to a young woman's first same-sex sexual contact were less likely to involve sexual attraction. Future research should investigate the incidence and developmental implications of such relationships among all adolescents.

Historians and anthropologists have long documented the existence of unusually intense friendships among adolescent girls that appear as emotionally intimate as romantic relationships but lack explicit sexual interest, sexual activity, or both. These bonds inspired their own unique terms in different cultures and historical periods, such as *romantic friendships* (Faderman, 1981), *smashes* (Sahli, 1979), *Tom-Dee relationships* (Ng, 1996), or *mummy-baby friendships* (Gay, 1985). They typically contain emotional and

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behavioral features characteristic of romantic relationships, such as preoccupation, jealousy, inseparability, cuddling, and hand holding (Faderman, 1981, 1993; Gay, 1985; Sahli, 1979). Intense friendships have also been documented among young men, albeit less extensively. Nardi (1992) and Williams (1992) called attention to intense, affectionate bonds between male friends in ancient Greece, 19th-century America, medieval Europe, and modern Java.

Such friendships were considered normative for unmarried youth in these environments, and were often viewed as safe, structured alternatives to mature heterosexual relationships (Gay, 1985; Ng, 1996). This folk interpretation mirrors Sullivan's (1953) analysis of the social developmental function of adolescent same-sex chumships. Sullivan argued that same-sex best friendships provide adolescents with the opportunity to practice intimate interactions, such as mutual confiding and validation, without the distractions and pressures of sexual interest.

However, since the problem of homosexuality was introduced into public discourse in the late 19th century, unusually intimate same-sex friendships have been suspected of being unconsummated, repressed, same-sex romances (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988; Faderman, 1981). This reflects a widespread assumption that intense feelings, such as passion, jealousy, separation distress, and possessiveness, are uniformly attributable to sexual interest; an assumption that influences interpretations of highly intimate cross-sex friendships as well. Research reviewed by Fehr (1996) found that sexual involvement is often considered inevitable between heterosexual men and women who form highly intimate friendships. This may be particularly true during adolescence, when sexual maturation heightens the salience and desirability of romantic relationships. Overall, the conventional wisdom suggests that only youths who are forbidden to pursue romantic relationships with one another will develop an intense, platonic friendship, presumably as a substitute. Applied to same-sex bonds, this view implies that the romantic friendships of the 1890s and the mummy-baby relationships of Lesotho would have developed into explicitly sexual lesbian affairs had their participants only lived in the permissive environment of the contemporary West.

Yet, this may not be the case. Although they have not received systematic attention from developmental psychologists, passionate bonds that straddle the conventional divide between friendship and romantic love continue to develop among contemporary adolescents (Brehony, 1993; Crumpacker & Vander Haegen, 1993). In a recent interview study of sexual identity development among young nonheterosexual (i.e., sexual-minority) women (Diamond, 1998), many respondents described adolescent same-sex friendships that contained the passion, devotion, exclusivity, and physical

affection characteristic of romantic relationships. Because these were sexual-minority women, one may presume that this intensity resulted from unacknowledged same-sex sexual desire. Many respondents made this presumption themselves when they first identified as sexual minorities, and they reported having dissected memories of these friendships in search of subverted sexual interest. However, to their surprise and even disappointment, most found little or none, and they finally concluded that these relationships belonged in a different category altogether: neither unconsummated love affairs nor conventional friendships, but somewhere in between.

This research explores this phenomenon further through follow-up interviews with the same sample of women. The first aim was to provide a retrospective snapshot of young sexual-minority women's closest adolescent friendships, on which no known empirical data exist. The second aim was to systematically explore the most intimate and intense of these bonds, here denoted *passionate friendships*. This term intentionally alludes to the aforementioned category of romantic friendships but is intended to differentiate contemporary from historical instances. It is important to clarify that this category is established for heuristic purposes. This research does not claim to discover or validate the existence of relationships that fall somewhere between friendship and romance—as previously noted, such relationships appear to have been discovered numerous times already. Instead, the concept of passionate friendships is used to organize such observations into a coherent conceptual framework that can guide future research on this topic.

### PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS OF PASSIONATE FRIENDSHIPS

To clarify the observational and theoretical bases for the concept of passionate friendships, the original reports that motivated this study are reviewed. Detailed interviews on sexual identity development, each lasting 70 to 90 min, were conducted with 89 adolescent and young adult sexual-minority women (Diamond, 1998). Interview questions were modeled on those represented in existing survey and interview data on sexual identity development (Golden, 1996; Rust, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1998). More specifically, each participant was asked to recount her process of sexual questioning, beginning with the moment that she first consciously assessed her sexual identity and including reflections on childhood experiences. Toward this end, each participant was asked to describe three individuals to whom she recalled being most attracted during her lifetime, even if the attraction had been exclusively emotional.

Approximately one third of the sample listed a same-sex high school friend as one of their strongest nonsexual attractions. In addition to the emotional intimacy typical of young women's best friendships, these bonds contained the heightened intensity and physical affection traditionally associated with romantic relationships. As one participant noted, "Our relationship was so intense it was nearly spiritual." Another remarked, "We spent the kind of time together that you usually only spend with a lover." Similar to romantic couples, some of these young women made mutual vows of lifelong dedication to one another and arranged college plans to avoid substantial separations from each other. Nonsexual physical affection was common. As one young woman said, "We had the kind of deep love where I knew I could *hold* her, which is something I normally wouldn't do with a friend." Women reported sitting on each other's laps, walking arm in arm, cuddling with one another on couches, and sleeping in the same bed. Although this physical affection often incurred suspicion of a sexual relationship among a young woman's friends and family, respondents typically insisted that it was not sexually motivated. As one woman claimed, "If there had been some sexual element, I could never have been so physically comfortable around her."

Nonetheless, several of these friendships eventually became sexually intimate, a factor that contributes to the conflation of passionate friendships with unrequited romantic relationships. However, sexual feelings typically only emerged after the relationship had been in existence for several years, and such feelings often came as a complete surprise to both participants. Several women claimed that their sexual feelings resulted from, rather than caused, the unusual intensity of the relationship. Along the same lines, sexual activity with these friends was often described as an expression of emotional closeness rather than a manifestation of sexual desire. As one woman claimed, "It was the only place left to go in the relationship."

### ATTACHMENT THEORY AND PASSIONATE FRIENDSHIPS

Attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1982) and its application to adult love relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1988) provides a useful framework for conceptualizing these unique bonds and explaining their unusual intensity. Bowlby (1958, 1982) postulated attachment as an evolved behavioral system designed to regulate an infant's proximity to a caregiver. In times of distress or danger, the infant seeks contact with the caregiver and is reliably

soothed by this contact. After many such interactions, the infant comes to prefer the caregiver to all other individuals as a source of security and distress alleviation. The selective social bond formed with the caregiver is an attachment bond, and its chief function is the provision of felt security. Attachments are characterized by four components: seeking and maintaining physical closeness to the attachment figure (proximity seeking); turning to the attachment figure for comfort and reassurance (safe haven behavior); experiencing distress as a result of long separations from the attachment figure (separation distress); and using the attachment figure as a reliable, dependable base of support from which to explore the world (secure base behavior; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1982).

For children and early adolescents, the primary attachment figure is typically a parent; for adults, it is typically a romantic partner (Fraley & Davis, 1997; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Shaver & Hazan, 1993; Shaver et al., 1988; Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997), and this transfer of attachment from a parent to a peer is a key developmental transition of adolescence. Hazan and Zeifman (1994) demonstrated that this transition takes place incrementally during adolescence as youths increasingly satisfy attachment-related needs (companionship, comfort, security) through contact with friends and romantic partners rather than parents. When a youth preferentially directs all attachment-related needs to a single peer, it is nearly always a romantic partner (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994; Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997). Hazan and Zeifman attributed this to the fact that sexual desire and activity are powerful motivators for the repeated, intimate, comforting interactions that appear to promote attachment formation.

It is for this reason that the passionate friendships of sexual-minority women are intriguing. Although platonic, they contain the heightened proximity seeking and contact seeking that characterize romantic attachments (see Shaver et al., 1988, for a review), including marked preferences for the friend's company, intimate physical affection when together, and frequent and persistent thoughts about one another when apart. One possibility is that these feelings and behaviors signal the presence of unacknowledged sexual attraction; another is that they signal the formation of a primary attachment bond. Sexual-minority youths may be particularly likely to develop primary attachments to friends rather than romantic partners, given that these youths often have limited opportunities for forming romantic relationships in adolescence (Diamond & Dubé, 1999; Savin-Williams, 1996). Furthermore, they may be highly motivated to direct attachment needs to peers if their parental relationships are strained because of their sexual orientation. Therefore, passionate friendships may be an adaptive solution to the unique social-developmental issues faced by many sexual-minority youth.

This research takes a first step toward exploring these possibilities by retrospectively analyzing the attachment-related characteristics of young sexual-minority women's most intimate adolescent friendships. The goals were to identify same-sex and cross-sex friendships with the most characteristics of romantic relationships and to explore the circumstances under which they occurred, focusing primarily on the participant's age, sexual history, the presence of sexual attraction or activity, and the existence of competing romantic relationships. These analyses will be useful in guiding future investigations of the developmental significance of intense platonic friendships among all adolescents.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 80 women between the ages of 18 and 25 years ( $M = 21.8$ ,  $SD = 2.1$ ) who were initially interviewed as part of a longitudinal study of sexual identity development among young women (Diamond, 1998). The data presented here were collected during 2-year follow-up phone interviews. The original sample included 89 sexual-minority women and 11 heterosexual women; 90% of the original sample was successfully recontacted. Data for the heterosexual women are not included here because the small sample size and the highly self-selected nature of the participants did not permit valid comparisons with the sexual-minority participants. Original sampling took place across a wide range of settings, including (a) lesbian, gay, and bisexual community events (i.e., picnics, parades, social events) in the New York Finger Lakes region (Ithaca, Cortland, Elmira, Freeville), in Syracuse, New York, and in Rochester, New York, as well as lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth groups in the latter two cities; (b) classes on gender and sexuality issues taught at Cornell University; and (c) lesbian, gay, and bisexual student groups at Cornell University, the State University of New York at Binghamton, and Wells College (a single-sex institution in central New York). The recruitment strategy succeeded in sampling sizable numbers of bisexual women and nonheterosexual women who decline to label their sexual identity, both of whom are underrepresented in most research on sexual minorities. However, the sample shares a chronic drawback with other samples of sexual minorities in that it comprises predominantly White, highly educated, middle- to upper-class individuals. Nearly all of the college-aged participants had enrolled in college at one point, and 75% came from families in which at least one parent had completed college.

Sixty-three percent of women came from families in which at least one parent had a professional or technical occupation, and 84% were White.

Participants were categorized according to the identity labels they chose during the first interview. Women who declined to label their identities or who were actively questioning their sexual identities were categorized as unlabeled. Table 1 displays the proportion of lesbian, bisexual, and unlabeled women recruited from each site. Four lesbians, one bisexual woman, and four unlabeled women could not be located for a follow-up interview. None of the women who were successfully relocated declined a follow-up interview. The mean and median age of the participants was 22 years, and there were no age differences across settings or sexual identity categories.

## Procedures

Scripted telephone interviews were conducted with each participant by the primary investigator, each lasting approximately 30 min. The confidentiality of the interview was stressed, and each participant was instructed of her right to refrain from answering any of the interview questions or to terminate the interview at any time. None of the participants did so. At the close of the interview, each woman was given the opportunity to revise her answers to any of the questions or to add additional remarks. Because of the sensitivity of the subject matter, interviews were not recorded. Instead, the primary investigator typed verbatim transcripts as the interview was conducted. The interview schedule was designed to assess the extent to which a participant's most intense adolescent friendship (denoted the *target friendship*) contained feelings and behaviors related to attachment. To identify target friendships, each woman was asked whether she had ever had a platonic friendship that was as emotionally intense as a romantic relationship. Those who had (87%) answered all interview questions with regard to

TABLE 1  
Number of Participants in Each Sexual Identity Category by Recruitment Site

Site	Lesbian		Bisexual		Unlabeled		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Cornell University	2	6	17	65	11	55	30	38
Syracuse and Rochester, NY	9	27	1	4	1	5	11	14
State University of New York-Binghamton	5	15	4	15	5	25	14	18
Wells College	8	23	2	8	1	5	11	14
Finger Lakes region	10	30	2	8	2	10	14	18
Total	34	100	26	100	20	100	80	100

this friendship. All other women were asked to discuss the closest friendship they ever had.

Participants reported (a) their age at the beginning and end of the friendship, (b) their friend's age and gender, (c) whether they had been involved in any serious romantic relationships (with individuals other than the target friend) during the time of the friendship, (d) whether they had ever experienced any feeling of sexual attraction for this person, even if only fleetingly, and (e) whether they ever became romantically or sexually involved with this person, even if it was just experimentation. Respondents also provided general information regarding their participation in same-sex and cross-sex sexual-romantic relationships during adolescence, including the age at which they first engaged in same-sex sexual contact.

Participants then indicated whether their friendship contained a set of feelings and behaviors that previous research has found to differentiate romantic relationships from friendships. These included the aforementioned attachment components—proximity seeking, safe haven, separation distress, and secure base—along with inseparability, cuddling, holding hands, gazing into each other's eyes, preoccupation, fascination, possessiveness, and inseparability (see Davis & Todd, 1982; Hazan & Zeifman, 1994; Jones & Yarbrough, 1985; Shaver et al., 1988). These features, their operationalization in this study, and their prevalence in the sample are presented in Table 2. The items assessing attachment components were taken from Hazan and Zeifman's WHOTO measure, which

TABLE 2  
Relationship Features, Their Operationalization, and Their Prevalence in the Sample

<i>Relationship Feature</i>	<i>Operationalization</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Proximity seeking	Who did you most enjoy being with at that time?	63	79
Safe haven	Who did you most want to talk to or be with when you had a problem?	70	88
Separation distress	Who was it hardest to be apart from?	46	58
Inseparability	Would you say that you were inseparable from X?	50	63
Secure base	Who did you feel would always be there for you, no matter what?	40	50
Cuddling	Did you ever cuddle side-by-side with X?	50	63
Hand holding	Did you ever hold hands with X?	48	60
Mutual gazing	Did you ever look into X's eyes without speaking?	38	48
Possessiveness	Were you ever possessive of X's time or attention?	54	68
Preoccupation	Did you ever find yourself thinking about X a lot or wondering where X was when you weren't together?	58	73
Fascination	Did you ever find yourself fascinated with details about X's behavior or appearance?	58	73



asked respondents to list, in order of importance, the people in their lives that provide various attachment functions. This measure has been used to identify a respondent's primary attachment figure (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994) and to compare the respondent's degree of attachment to different individuals in his or her social network (Fraley & Davis, 1997; Mayseless, 1998). The original measure contained 12 items, 3 for each component. Any individual in the respondent's social network can be given a score representing his or her mean rank for each item (e.g., first, second, third, etc.). A recent study of heterosexual and sexual-minority youth found high internal consistency on the WHOTO, with Cronbach's alphas for the four components ranging between .79 and .89 (Diamond & Dubé, 1999), and some researchers have used an abbreviated form of this measure containing only two items per component (Fraley & Davis, 1997). This research used a single item for each component, given that the aim was simply to determine whether the target friend ever served as a primary provider of attachment functions. Respondents named the person who was most important for a particular component. If the target friend was listed, this component was scored *present*; if not, it was scored *absent*. This forced-choice format was used in the WHOTO's initial development and administration (see Hazan & Zeifman, 1994). Although it would obviously be more informative to know the specific degree of attachment in the target friendship at different points in its development, it seemed unlikely that such information could be validly assessed retrospectively. Given this limitation and the time constraints of the interview, single-item, dichotomous assessments were used.

Regarding the remaining features, it is important to note that psychological states, such as fascination and preoccupation, are obviously more difficult to operationalize than concrete behaviors, such as hand holding. The operationalizations used in this study were based on the detailed descriptions of these experiences provided by Davis and Todd (1982), but the validity of such assessments for recollected friendships is not yet known. For example, possessiveness is probably more common in friendships than mutual gazing, and thus, this characteristic may be more frequently overendorsed. These considerations should be kept in mind when interpreting the results. It is hoped that the findings of this research will prove useful in refining the measurement of all of the relationship features in Table 2 for future study.

## RESULTS

Lesbian, bisexual, and unlabeled participants were combined for all analyses after a series of chi-square tests detected no associations among sexual

identity and any of the variables under study. With regard to respondents' adolescent sexual histories, 90% had participated in a heterosexual romantic-sexual relationship by the age of 18, and the rest had casually dated male peers by this age. These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that the majority of sexual-minority women participate in heterosexual relationships during adolescence (see Savin-Williams, 1996, for a review). Half of the respondents had their first same-sex sexual contact by 18 years of age ( $M = 18.2$ ,  $SD = 2.1$ ).

### Analytic Strategy

K-means cluster analysis (Statsoft, 1993) was used to provide an empirically based typology of friendships based on the features listed in Table 2. Cluster analysis was used to derive the typology, rather than preestablished criteria, because it was not known which (if any) of these features were most relevant. Cluster analysis is designed for heuristic use rather than confirmatory hypothesis testing, and thus, it is well suited to the exploratory aims of the study. K-means cluster analysis sorts cases in a sample into a prespecified number of mutually exclusive groups according to their responses on a set of variables. The sample is subdivided so as to maximize within-group similarity and between-group differences. The difference between any two cases is the sum of the squared differences between their scores on the variables of interest. Although it is usually used with continuous variables, k-means cluster analysis can also be used for dichotomous variables (similar to factor analysis, as shown in Rubenstein, 1986). In such instances, the difference between any two cases is simply the number of variables on which they have discordant responses.

For this study, the number of clusters was set to two to differentiate friendships containing many of the features in Table 2 (denoted *passionate friendships*) from those containing relatively fewer of these characteristics (denoted *conventional friendships*). Although cluster analysis is typically performed with a broader selection of variables, this study used only the variables listed in Table 2 because a typology based on characteristics that usually differentiate between friendships and romantic relationships was the explicit focus of the study. However, the use of a circumscribed range of variables necessarily yields a somewhat artificial dichotomy, and thus, the results of this analysis should not be interpreted to suggest that the passionate and conventional typology is inherently more meaningful, descriptive, or valid than other typologies that may be derived from analyses using entirely different sets of variables.

### Cluster Analysis of Relationship Features

Nearly 80% of respondents selected a female friend for discussion. Cluster analyses were performed separately for same-sex versus cross-sex friendships because there are different cultural expectations for intimate feelings and behaviors in same-sex than in cross-sex friendships. In all, 63% of the same-sex friendships and 65% of the cross-sex friendships were classified into the passionate cluster (meaning that they contained a greater number of the features in Table 2). There was no association between the gender of one's friend and passionate and conventional classification,  $\chi^2(1, N = 80) = 0.04, p = ns$ . Figure 1 represents differences between friendship types by dis-

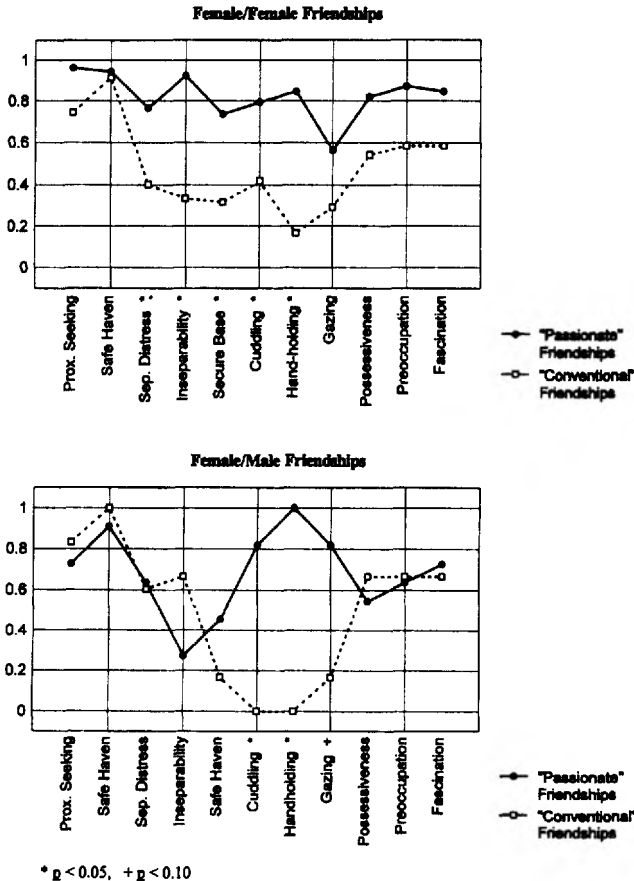


FIGURE 1 Percentage of passionate and conventional friendships containing features typically found in romantic relationships, stratified by friendship type (female-female vs. female-male).

playing the proportion of same-sex and cross-sex passionate and conventional friendships containing each of the relationship features in Table 2.

Bonferroni-corrected chi-square tests identified features that were more common in passionate than in conventional friendships. In same-sex friendships, these features were separation distress,  $\chi^2(1, n = 59) = 8.96$ , corrected  $p = .03$ ; inseparability,  $\chi^2(1, n = 63) = 24.5$ , corrected  $p = .0001$ ; secure base,  $\chi^2(1, n = 59) = 11.41$ , corrected  $p = .03$ ; cuddling,  $\chi^2(1, n = 63) = 9.35$ , corrected  $p = .02$ ; and hand holding,  $\chi^2(1, n = 63) = 28.3$ , corrected  $p = .001$ . In cross-sex friendships, these features were cuddling,  $\chi^2(1, n = 17) = 10.43$ , corrected  $p = .01$ ; and hand holding,  $\chi^2(1, n = 17) = 17.0$ , corrected  $p < .001$ . The corrected probability value for gazing was significant at the trend level,  $\chi^2(1, n = 17) = 6.8$ , corrected  $p < .10$ . A log-linear analysis found that passionate friendships were not disproportionately likely to involve sexual attraction or sexual contact after controlling for friend's gender, both partial chi-square values were less than 1.5,  $p = ns$ . However, cross-sex friendships were more likely to involve sexual contact, controlling for passionate and conventional status, partial chi-square values were equal to 5.7 (1,  $N = 80$ ),  $p < .02$ . In same-sex passionate friendships, 49% of women reported sexual attractions (including momentary or fleeting attractions), and 18% reported sexual involvement. In cross-sex passionate friendships, 36% of women reported sexual attraction, and 54% reported sexual involvement. Respondents' overall histories of same-sex and cross-sex sexual contact were not associated with becoming sexually involved with either female or male friends, all chi-square values were less than 1.50,  $p = ns$ .

Forty-eight percent of respondents had been involved in a serious romantic relationship (with someone other than the target friend) during their friendship. Of these women, 55% had a female romantic partner and 45% had a male romantic partner. A series of log-linear analyses detected no associations among passionate and conventional status, the gender of the target friend, and participation in a same-sex or cross-sex romantic relationship; all chi-square values were less than 3.0,  $p = ns$ .

The mean age at which participants' target friendships were initiated was 16.6 years ( $SD = 3.4$ ). Analyses of variance were conducted separately for same-sex and cross-sex friendships to examine differences between the ages at which passionate and conventional friendships were initiated. Age at the beginning of the relationship was the dependent variable, and both friendship type and presence of sexual attraction were between-subjects factors. Sexual attraction was included because it was considered potentially related to both friendship type and age of initiation. For same-sex friendships, there was a significant main effect of friendship type and a significant main effect of sexual attraction, but no interaction. Passionate friendships were initiated at younger ages,  $F(1, 58) = 17.11$ ,  $p < .001$ , and friendships contain-

ing sexual attraction were initiated at older ages,  $F(1, 58) = 4.14, p < .05$ . Means and standard deviations for each group were as follows: passionate–no attraction,  $M = 14.0, (SD = 3.2)$ ; passionate–attraction,  $M = 16.3, (SD = 2.5)$ ; conventional–no attraction,  $M = 18.0, (SD = 2.9)$ ; conventional–attraction,  $M = 19.1, (SD = 4.2)$ . For cross-sex friendships, there were no significant effects. Means and standard deviations were as follows: passionate–no attraction,  $M = 16.9, (SD = 3.6)$ ; passionate–attraction,  $M = 18.5, (SD = 1.3)$ ; conventional–no attraction,  $M = 18.0, (SD = 1.7)$ ; conventional–attraction,  $M = 17.0, (SD = 1.0)$ .

Finally, respondents were stratified into two groups according to whether they had experienced their first same-sex sexual contact prior to the initiation of their target friendship. Log-linear analyses detected a three-way association between the passionate and conventional classification of a same-sex friendship, the presence of sexual attraction in the friendship, and a young woman's history of same-sex sexual contact. Same-sex passionate friendships that were initiated before a woman had ever experienced same-sex sexual contact were less likely to contain sexual attraction than those that were initiated after a young woman had gained such experience (46% vs. 100%),  $\chi^2(1, n = 63) = 4.9, p < .03$ . This association did not hold for cross-sex friendships,  $\chi^2(1, n = 17) = 1.4, p = ns$ .

## DISCUSSION

As noted earlier, one of the chief social-developmental tasks of adolescence is the process of transferring attachment from parents to peers. Although this process typically culminates in the development of a primary attachment to a romantic partner, this study converges with historical and anthropological accounts to suggest that other outcomes are possible. Many of the sexual-minority women in this sample developed friendships containing feelings and behaviors typically associated with romantic attachment—such as inseparability, separation distress, and hand holding. Yet these friendships were not more likely than more conventional friendships to involve sexual attraction and thus, should not be considered unrequited love affairs. Rather, they may represent nonsexual attachment bonds between platonic friends.

### The Developmental Context of Passionate Friendships

The timing of passionate friendships may help explain their unique intensity. Same-sex passionate friendships were initiated at significantly earlier ages than same-sex conventional friendships, and those that were initiated

before a respondent ever experienced same-sex sexual contact were less likely to involve sexual attraction. Hazan and Zeifman (1994) argued that during adolescence, sexual attraction begins to play an important role in motivating the types of affectionate behaviors that promote attachment formation (such as cuddling and nuzzling), explaining why older adolescents typically develop primary attachments to romantic partners rather than friends. Yet, sexual attraction may play less of a role in motivating such affectionate behaviors among younger adolescents, who may not yet associate them with explicit sexual intent and who may, therefore, pursue them more liberally with close platonic friends.

This may explain why same-sex passionate friendships were disproportionately likely to involve sexual attraction (even if only fleetingly) among women who had already gained experience with same-sex sexual contact. Such women may have found it difficult to avoid considering their passionate friends as potential romantic partners, whereas this possibility would be substantially less salient for young women without previous same-sex experience. Whether previous cross-sex sexual experience is associated with the sexual attraction in the cross-sex friendships of heterosexual adolescents is a key topic for future study. This would help clarify whether the characteristics and developmental implications of unusually intense friendships are comparable for heterosexual and sexual-minority youths (an issue revisited later).

### **Do Passionate Friendships Influence Sexual Identity Development?**

Although the findings of this research suggest that the intimacy and intensity of passionate friendships cannot be uniformly attributed to sexual attraction, it has, nonetheless, been found that emotionally intimate same-sex friendships often provide the foundation for women's first experiences of same-sex attractions (Gramick, 1984; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994). Therefore, the distinction between passionate same-sex friendships and budding love affairs may be difficult to draw among young sexual-minority women. Future research should address whether sexual-minority adolescents' emerging same-sex attractions propel them into intimate same-sex friendships (even before these attractions are named or recognized), or whether their unusually intimate same-sex friendships help them to name and recognize their same-sex attractions. Both interpretations are plausible and should be systematically examined.

Another important issue concerns sexual-minority women's cross-sex passionate friendships. Approximately one fifth of participants in this sample listed a male peer as their target friend, and over 60% of these

friendships were classified as passionate. It is important to note that half of the women with male target friends indicated that the friend was gay. Passionate friendships between female and male sexual-minority youths may be mistaken for traditional romantic relationships, providing cover for each youth's sexual orientation and supplying critically needed social support. In addition, such relationships may provide a safe context in which sexual-minority youths can pursue intimate, mutually validating peer interactions without the pressure of an unwanted heterosexual relationship or a risky same-sex romance. In this sense, such friendships may serve some of the same social-developmental functions for sexual-minority adolescents as do same-sex chumships among heterosexual adolescents.

### **Passionate Friendships Among Heterosexual Women**

This study cannot address whether passionate friendships also occur among young heterosexual women, but historical and cross-cultural accounts suggest that they do. Intense same-sex friendships between heterosexual women appear most likely when young women have substantially more opportunities to interact with female than with male peers (Gay, 1985). For example, in explaining the passionate bonds that frequently emerged between adolescent girls in the 19th century in the United States, Smith-Rosenberg (1975) pointed out that these girls' social worlds were populated almost entirely by other women. Similarly, smashes (Sahli, 1979), Tom-Dee friendships (Ng, 1996), and mummy-baby friendships (Gay, 1985) all took place in sex-segregated environments. Young heterosexual women who have regular contact with male peers would probably be more likely to develop cross-sex than same-sex passionate friendships, especially given that cross-sex friendships tend to become more intimate and important over the course of adolescence (Blyth, Hill, & Theil, 1982; Buhrke & Fuqua, 1987; Buhrmester & Furman, 1986, 1987; Sharabany, Gershoni, & Hofman, 1981). Yet, it is likely that unusually intense cross-sex friendships would eventually develop into romantic relationships. It is clear that comparisons between heterosexual and sexual-minority women regarding the incidence, antecedents, and developmental significance of same-sex and cross-sex passionate friendships are needed.

### **Passionate Friendships Among Men**

As previously noted, some male adolescents may form passionate friendships with female peers, although such friendships may frequently develop into romantic relationships. What about passionate friendships between male adolescents? Given that young men's same-sex friendships are typically

less physically and emotionally intimate than young women's same-sex friendships (see Prager, 1995, for a review), same-sex passionate friendships among male adolescents may be less common. Furthermore, they would probably incur greater suspicion of homosexuality among friends and family than women's passionate friendships do, given that highly intimate and affectionate friendships are more normative for women than men (Derlega, Lewis, Harrison, Winstead, & Constanza, 1989). Alternatively, passionate friendships may simply have different behavioral manifestations when they occur between two young men. For example, Swain (1989) argued that many of the shared activities men pursue with same-sex friends (such as joking, roughhousing, and playing sports) serve the same social bonding functions that are served by verbal and physical affection in women's same-sex friendships. This may be particularly true among sexual-minority male youths, who may consciously avoid explicit verbal or physical displays of affection toward male friends to avoid stigma. Cultural differences in normative male friendship behavior must also be considered. Both Williams (1992) and Nardi (1992) noted that the contemporary West is somewhat unique in its adherence to a rigid notion of heterosexual masculinity that precludes openly affectionate same-sex bonds. Therefore, passionate friendships between young men may be more common or more openly expressed in cultures that are more accepting of affectionate ties between men. It is clear that these are worthy topics for future research.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this research demonstrate that relationships analogous to 18th-century romantic friendships and 19th-century smashes, in which the emotional and physical boundaries between friendship and romance are blurred, continue to exist among contemporary adolescent sexual-minority women. Therefore, although social acknowledgment of such friendships is historically and culturally circumscribed, young women's experiences of these bonds are not. It is important to note, however, that most of the participants in this research assumed that their friendship was utterly unique, perhaps even abnormal, reflecting the fact that young women themselves do not seem to know how to conceptualize these relationships. We lack a language with which to describe attachments between individuals who are neither friends nor lovers, who enjoy a physical closeness akin to that between parents and children, as well as between romantic partners. It remains for future research to establish the overall prevalence, antecedents, and developmental significance of the types of relationships that are called passionate friendships. For the moment, it is clear that these relationships are critically important to many sexual-minority female adolescents and



deserve systematic attention by psychologists charting the development of intimacy and attachment during adolescence and beyond.

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