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Lesbian Dating and Courtship from Young Adulthood to Midlife

Suzanna M. Rose
Debra Zand

SUMMARY. Lesbian dating and courtship were explored based on interviews with 38 predominantly white lesbians (ages 22-63) representing young adult, adult, and midlife age groups. Friendship was found to be the most widely used courtship script across all age groups, followed by the sexually explicit and romance scripts, with friendship and romance scripts being preferred. Unique aspects of lesbian dating cited by participants included freedom from gender roles, heightened intimacy/friendship, the rapid pace of lesbian relationship development, and the effects of prejudice. Friendship was found to be differentiated from romance by two main criteria: emotional intensity and sexual energy or contact. Verbal declarations of interest and nonverbal behaviors were the primary means of communicating sexual attraction. Few lesbians adhered to traditional gender roles in dating, and those who reported assuming the feminine reactive role nevertheless rejected the traditional notion that

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women should limit sexual contact. Overall, midlife lesbians were more purposive in their dating and more free from gender roles. Specifically, they were more concerned about the “attachment-worthiness” of a prospective partner and were significantly more likely than young adults to view dating as having a serious goal, to proceed at a rapid pace, to ask for a date, and to initiate physical intimacy. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>>]

KEYWORDS. Lesbian, midlife, friendship, dating, courtship, gender roles, intimacy, relationship development, sexual attraction

INTRODUCTION

The question “What will we be?” is one of the most exciting, mysterious, and confusing aspects of dating and courtship among lesbians. Will the relationship that has just been initiated result in being lovers, partners, or friends, or some combination? Moreover, exactly how do lesbian relationships typically get initiated? Is dating a clearly defined concept, or is the establishment of contact usually more ambiguous in its intent? These questions are of considerable interest to lesbians. A great many advice and humor books and social commentaries have addressed these issues (e.g., Bechdel, 1997; Eisenbach, 1996; McDaniel, 1995), but a lack of empirical evidence on the topic has ensured that descriptions largely remain anecdotal or speculative.

Our intent in the present research was to provide an in-depth descriptive account of lesbian dating and courtship that would begin to close the gap in knowledge concerning lesbian relationship formation. We examined what courtship scripts lesbians had used in past relationships, how they defined lesbian dating and what was unique about it, and how romantic relations versus friendship were solicited and developed. Also evaluated were the extent to which lesbians adopted gender roles when dating and the impact previous lesbian and heterosexual dating experience had on behavior. Last, a qualitative post hoc analysis was conducted to determine whether developmental changes in views about courtship emerged among the three age groups of participants, including young adult, adult, and midlife lesbians.

Dating and Courtship Scripts

Contemporary (heterosexual) courtship typically relies on dating as a way to initiate romantic relationships (Bailey, 1988). Dating refers to informal in-

teractions with no specific commitment or goal between two individuals with the implied intent of assessing each other's romantic potential (Cate & Lloyd, 1992; Laws & Schwartz, 1977). Although often the labels "dating" and "courtship" are used interchangeably, courtship is a term arising from an earlier era that refers to the system of searching for a mate with whom to make an emotional commitment and enter into a permanent marriage (Cate & Lloyd, 1992). A graduated series of dates is considered the first step to a serious romance (Modell, 1983). Once an exclusive pairing has been established, a couple may enter into a more formal courtship phase.

The extent to which lesbians follow patterns of heterosexual dating and courtship has not been established. That some lesbians date is obvious. Personal advertisements written by lesbians often expressly state an interest in dating. Likewise, lesbians who participated in research by Cini and Malafi (1991) and Klinkenberg and Rose (1994) were able to provide detailed descriptions of dating. However, others declined to participate because they had gotten involved with a friend and never dated. Thus, dating and courtship as they traditionally occur may not apply to lesbians.

Three courtship scripts that have been used by Rose, Zand, and Cini (1993) to describe lesbian couple formation include a romance, friendship, and sexually explicit script. A script refers to a set of stereotypical actions defined by cultural norms that serve as a guide for what feelings and behaviors should occur in a specific situation (Gagnon, 1977; Ginsberg, 1988). The lesbian romance script depicts emotional intimacy and sexual attraction as being intertwined in two women's attraction to each other. The relationship usually rapidly proceeds towards commitment. Dating may be one means of initiating a relationship, but it appears that the dating phase for lesbians may be very short or that a more serious courtship may be preferred from the beginning. For instance, Cini and Malafi (1991) found that by a fifth date, respondents reported being both sexually and emotionally involved and tended to regard themselves as a couple.

In the other two major patterns of lesbian courtship, the friendship script and the sexually explicit script, the components of emotional intimacy and sexual attraction hypothetically play out differently. Neither script requires dating for its initiation. The friendship script, believed to be the most common courtship script among lesbians, emphasizes emotional intimacy over sexuality. According to this script, two women become friends, fall in love, and establish a committed relationship with each other that may or may not be sexual, as in the case of lesbian Boston marriages (e.g., Rothblum & Brehony, 1993). In contrast, the sexually explicit script primarily focuses on sexuality and attraction; emotional intimacy is less important or may not even be present. In

this script, two women who are physically attracted to each other purposefully initiate sexual contact with no implied goal of future commitment.

The most immediate questions raised by the preceding discussion are: What courtship scripts do lesbians actually use, and what script is most preferred? Related issues concern how lesbians define dating and whether lesbian dating has unique characteristics not associated with heterosexual models. These were addressed in the present research. In addition, the degree to which scripts may overlap may create ambiguity. The courtship scripts described above may not be as distinct in practice as in theory. The friendship script is one that is particularly confusing, because it is often difficult for lesbians to know whether an informal interaction with another woman is a date or a non-romantic friendship overture. What script is followed may be easier to discern in retrospect than during its enactment. If the pair becomes a couple, they later may tend to classify the interaction as a date/romance script; if not, it may be seen as just getting together as friends. The motives of the two women involved also might differ, with one assuming they are “just friends” and the other assuming it is a date. Or, scripts might be blended, with both friendship and romance as the goal. Lesbians place a high value on friendship and appear to act quickly to establish an intimate connection within the context of a dating relationship (Rose et al., 1993). Two questions raised by script ambiguity that also were explored in the present research concerned how lesbians distinguish friendship from romance and what rituals signal the progression of the relationship to a more serious level, such as from friendship or dating to commitment.

Gender Roles and Courtship

The impact of gender roles on lesbian courtship also was investigated in the present research. First, it was expected lesbians would use more indirect than direct means of communicating interest in a partner. Traditional gender roles prescribe that men initiate the relationship; women are expected to wait to be asked for a date. As women, lesbians may not have been socialized to initiate dating or courtship. This is perhaps one reason lesbians have been described as notoriously inactive in approaching another woman in whom they are interested (e.g., DeLaria, 1995; Sausser, 1990). For instance, Jacqueline Lapidus (1995) labeled the non-initiating style of lesbian dating she practiced “procrasti-dating.” In addition, although the direct initiation of contact in heterosexual interactions is traditionally the man’s prerogative, research on nonverbal behavior indicates that women actually may do the choosing by signaling a partner to approach them using “proceptive behaviors” such as a darting glance, moving close, or touching (e.g., Perper & Weis, 1987; Moore, 1985). What is perceived as male choice may be, in fact, the final step of a selection and artful so-

licitation by the woman using eye contact, positive facial expressions, smiling, laughing, and light touch. Thus, as women, lesbians may be especially skilled at sending and interpreting nonverbal cues. Subsequently, we predicted that lesbians would rely on nonverbal proceptive behaviors more than direct verbal approaches (e.g., asking for a date) to convey romantic interest.

Second, based on gender socialization, we predicted that lesbians would prefer the friendship script over the romance or sexually explicit scripts. For instance, the need for one woman to assume the traditional male role of initiator in dating relationships may be circumvented by the friendship script. Women also generally are socialized to value intimacy and expressiveness over sexuality in relationships, a pattern of interaction that is most compatible with the friendship script. Moreover, the process of coming out occurs within the context of a friendship for many lesbians (e.g., Grammick, 1984).

Third, although heterosexuals' dating scripts have been shown to adhere strongly to gender roles, particularly among experienced daters, with men assuming an active role and women a reactive one (Rose & Frieze, 1989; 1993), lesbians were not expected to follow suit. When dating, lesbians tend not to assign the active role to one person, instead preferring to share the responsibility for orchestrating the date (Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994). In other words, lesbians typically behave consistently with gender roles, that is, most do not adopt the male role. The prediction that few lesbians would adopt heterosexual roles was explored in the present research by asking participants the extent to which they assumed either a traditional masculine role when dating (i.e., asking for a date, planning it, picking her up, performing courtly behaviors such as holding doors open, paying for the date, and initiating sexual contact), or a feminine role (i.e., waiting to be asked for a date, and allowing or refusing sexual advances). Previous heterosexual and lesbian dating experience also was assessed in order to test whether dating experience affected gender role behavior.

In summary, it appears that an exploration of lesbian dating and courtship would be a fruitful place to begin the study of lesbian relationship initiation. In the present research, the four issues raised above were investigated, including: (a) what courtship scripts lesbians used and preferred; (b) how lesbians defined dating, including what was unique about it; (c) how romantic relations were distinguished from friendship, including how they are solicited and progress; and (d) the extent to which lesbians adopted gender roles and how previous dating experience affected roles.

Developmental Issues

Whether courtship among lesbians is affected by adult development remains an open question. On the one hand, courtship scripts might be quite ro-

bust and show little variation over the life span. For example, scripts for a first date among both young heterosexual adults in their 20s and lesbians and gay men in their 20s and 30s were found to be quite similar, suggesting that compliance with cultural norms occurs across age and is particularly likely at the early stage of a relationship (Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994; Rose & Frieze, 1989; 1993).

In contrast, the little information we have about lesbians' adult development suggests that notions of dating and courtship may be affected by age. Key developmental tasks for adolescent and young adult lesbians include coming out and establishing an intimate relationship (Savin-Williams, 1995). Rose (1996) has suggested that lesbians entering their first relationship may be particularly likely to adopt a friendship script because cultural scripts for same-sex romance are not widely available. Thus, a same-sex attraction initially may be labeled or encoded as friendship rather than attraction. In young adulthood, lesbians also may lack opportunities to learn or apply other scripts due to confusion about their sexual identity, lack of role models, lack of same-age partners, or fear of anti-lesbian violence from peers (Savin-Williams, 1995). Even so, many lesbians establish their first serious relationship in their 20s.

Research on adult (30-39 years) and midlife (40-65) lesbians largely has been aimed at understanding couple relationships rather than courtship. This research emphasis reflects the heterosexist linearity of life span and relationship research, which assumes that young adult courtship will be followed by lifelong monogamy. Although often not true for heterosexuals today, this linearity may be even less applicable to lesbians for several reasons. First, although many lesbians aspire to the cultural norm of establishing a lifelong monogamous relationship with a partner, few achieve this during their early adulthood, as is prescribed by traditional values. Instead, there is a strong likelihood that lesbians may have several episodes of same-sex dating, courtship, and partnership in their lifetimes. Available research indicates that a majority of lesbians in their thirties have had at least one previous lesbian relationship (Bryant & Demian, 1990). At midlife, most lesbians in committed partnerships have had more than one previous significant relationship and a substantial proportion (33 to 43 percent) are single (Bradford & Ryan, 1991; Hall & Gregory, 1991; Sang, 1991). Second, not all lesbians endorse the concept of lifelong monogamy. West (1996) has contended that a substantial proportion of lesbians—about one in five—practice polyfidelity, that is, they are openly romantically and/or sensually involved with more than one woman concurrently. Thus, we expected to find that many lesbians would be actively dating and courting well beyond their 20s.

By midlife (40-65), it is possible to speculate based on limited information that developmental changes in dating and courtship might occur in a few areas. Lesbians between the ages of 40 and 60 have a strong sense of self as a conse-

quence of establishing an identity separate from others and proving themselves as independent persons during their early adulthood (Kimmel & Sang, 1995). Subsequently, they may adhere less to gender roles. Because most lesbians work from economic necessity, work continues to be a strong part of their identity. However, lesbians persist in deeply valuing relationships all their lives, often wanting more time at midlife to enjoy partners, friends, and personal interests. Lesbian couples often follow a "best friend" model in their relationships that promotes equality (Rose & Roades, 1987). Friends play a particularly strong role in the lives of both coupled and single lesbians. Lesbian friends around the same age, often including ex-lovers, constitute one of the greatest sources of support for a majority of midlife lesbians (Bradford & Ryan, 1991). In addition, for at least some midlife lesbians, the idea that they would live "forever after" with one partner has been tempered by their experience (Hall & Gregory, 1991). Thus, midlife lesbians may approach dating and courtship with more maturity. For instance, they may have used more courtship scripts, developed clearer preferences for how and what kind of relationship they wish to establish, be more skilled at interpreting or signaling romantic interest, and be less affected by gender expectations.

The pattern of adult development is affected further by social age norms, historical effects, and idiosyncratic transitions (Kimmel & Sang, 1995). Lesbians who enter their first courtship today face an immensely improved social climate compared to those who came out decades ago. How these different experiences interact with age to affect dating and courtship remains to be determined.

Overall, the multiplicity of influences on dating and courtship for lesbians across the life span makes developmental changes difficult to predict. Not enough groundwork has yet been laid in terms of lesbian adult development or cohort effects to anticipate reliably how dating might be affected. Thus, our intent in the present research was to investigate how and why lesbians date, without specifically focusing on developmental issues. However, a qualitative post hoc analysis of lesbian dating was undertaken to determine whether developmental changes could be identified. To that end, responses from 38 lesbians we interviewed were examined as a function of three age groups, including young adults (20-29), adults (30-39), and midlife (40-65).

In summary, the research on lesbian dating and courtship presented here was intended to provide an exploratory descriptive analysis of lesbian relationship formation. Intensive interviews were conducted with lesbians to obtain the answer to 12 questions addressing the following themes: what courtship scripts were used, how dating was defined, how romantic relationships versus friendships were solicited and developed, and what impact gender roles and previous experience had on dating. The impact of adult development on dating and courtship for lesbians at three stages of life also was examined.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 38 lesbians between the ages of 22 to 63 years ($M = 35.9$, $SD = 10.5$). All participants were recruited at lesbian and gay community events or through friendship networks in a large midwestern city. The group studied was mostly white and middle class as determined by education and income. Ninety-two percent were white and 8% were African-American. The mean educational level of the participants was 17 years with a range of 12 to 21 years. The average income of participants was \$22,687 with a range of \$5,000 to \$58,000. Most lesbians (89%) currently were involved in a committed relationship with another woman.

The age groups represented by participants included young adults (20-29 years; $N = 13$), adults (30-39 years; $N = 12$), and midlife adults (40-65 years; $N = 13$). The education and income of the sample are reported by age group in Table 1. Mean scores for the following variables also are included in Table 1: number of years as a lesbian, number and length of previous romantic relationships, length of current relationship, and amount of lesbian and heterosexual dating experience. Analyses of variance indicated that adult and midlife lesbians earned significantly more than young lesbians and had embraced a lesbian identity longer. Mean length of romantic relationships (excluding current relationship) also was significantly longer for adult and midlife lesbians than young adults.

Measures

An interview consisting of 12 open-ended questions was administered to all participants. Age, race, income and other demographic information also was obtained. In addition, participants were asked to evaluate the extent of their lesbian and heterosexual dating experiences on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = no experience to 5 = extensive experience. Last, participants rated the frequency with which they engaged in eight gender role behaviors (e.g., asks for date, pays for activities) found by Rose and Frieze (1989) to be highly stereotyped on first dates for heterosexuals (5-point scale, 5 = occurs frequently).

Procedure

The second author interviewed all participants in their homes. Interviews took approximately 15 minutes to three hours to complete; median interview length was 45 minutes. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

TABLE 1. Characteristics of Lesbian Participants by Age Group

Characteristic	Age Group								
	Young Adulthood (20-29 yrs.) (N = 13)			Early Midlife (30-39 yrs.) (N = 12)			Later Midlife (40-65 yrs.) (N = 12)		
	%	M	SD	%	M	SD	%	M	SD
Race									
White	100			75			100		
African-American	0			25			0		
Relationship status									
Single	15			8			8		
Coupled	85			92			92		
Relationship length									
Education		1.9	(2.2)		4.8	(4.2)		5.4	(4.3)
Income		17.0	(1.4)		16.7	(1.3)		6.2	(2.5)
Years as a lesbian		14K	(9K)		24K	(12K)		27K	(14K) ^a
Number previous relationships		8.1	(5.2)		16.3	(3.9)		14.8	(7.2) ^b
Length of previous relationships (yrs.) ^c		3.5	(2.6)		4.8	(2.1)		3.6	(2.4)
Dating experience ^d									
Lesbian		1.8	(2.4)		3.1	(2.9)		4.6	(3.6)
Heterosexual		2.8	(1.2)		3.2	(1.1)		3.2	(1.3)
		2.8	(1.1)		2.4	(0.8)		3.3	(1.2)

^aAdult and midlife groups earned significantly more, $F(2,27) = 4.36, p \leq .03$.

^bAdult and midlife groups had been lesbians significantly longer, $F(2,27) = 4.44, p \leq .03$.

^cAdult and midlife groups had significantly longer previous relationship than younger adults $F(2,35) = 3.09, p \leq .06$.

^d5-point scale, 5 = extensive experience

Coding

A coding system consisting of 48 categories was used to classify responses to the 12 open-ended questions. The categories were generated from a content analysis of the transcripts. Individual statements then were coded as belonging to specific categories. The reliability of assignment of statements to a coding category was 83%; this percentage represents the frequency of agreement between two raters who independently scored 25% of the transcripts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Courtship Experience and Scripts

Participants had considerable courtship experience. As shown in Table 1, on average, lesbians had 3 to 4.6 previous romantic relationships, in addition to their current relationship. Thus, most had from 4 to 6 relationships as a basis

for describing their courtship script usage. The use of courtship scripts was assessed by reviewing each transcript to determine whether respondents had ever engaged in the romance, friendship, or sexually explicit script. About 29% of participants had used all three scripts, 47% had used two, and 29% had used only one.

As predicted, the results indicated that the friendship script was the most widely used. About 74% of lesbians reported having been friends with a woman, on at least one occasion, before becoming romantically involved with her. In comparison, 55% had used the romance script and 63% had engaged in a sexually explicit script. An example of each script taken from participant transcripts is presented in Table 2. Script preference followed a slightly different pattern, however, with half of the lesbians preferring the friendship script and half preferring the romance script across all age groups. None of the participants indicated a preference for the sexually explicit script, despite the prevalence of its use.

The most used script, friendship, generally proceeded according to the following schema. A friendship was established between two women who highly valued the emotional intimacy of their connection. The intimacy and companionship of the friendship gradually led the women to a deep emotional commitment that was expressed physically as well. The motive for establishing a

TABLE 2. Examples of Courtship Scripts Classified as Friendship, Romance, or Sexually Explicit

Friendship Script

We had known each other for nine years in total, and we've been a couple for almost seven of those years. We had a really strong foundation as friends. We drank together and went to the movies together. It made some foundation for a relationship. There was not that intense physical part that came all at once. I was interested in her and she had been interested in me, but neither one of us knew about the other's lesbianism. *(A 25-year-old lesbian)*

Romance Script

We started out dating. It wasn't like we had been friends first. After we saw each other for a few times, she said she wanted to be more than friends. Then she was expecting me to spend more time with her. It was difficult because I had four kids, school, and work, but we found that time. I started to feel like [we were] a couple after about a month. It kind of reminds me of the old joke, "Friday night you go out, Monday, you're married, and Tuesday, you make the appointment with the therapist." *(A 42-year-old lesbian)*

Sexually Explicit Script

I was out of town at the time. It was at a low point in my first relationship and I went traveling for a little while to San Francisco with my gay buddy. We went to a bar and there was a woman coming on to me and my friend said, "Go for it." I thought, "OK, since you are insisting." We had a great time. We essentially had a long weekend. After that, I wasn't interested. *(A 51-year-old lesbian)*

friendship before getting romantically involved varied. For some, a friendship was developed first because one (or both) was unaware of her lesbianism. In other cases, the women were aware of their sexual attraction but were constrained from acting on it because one was in a serious relationship with someone else.

Although the friendship script had been used by a majority of lesbians (72%), the finding that it was preferred by fewer (50%) suggests this script may have some drawbacks. One disadvantage that was mentioned by a number of lesbians was the script's ambiguity. As one participant (age 33) explained:

The thing that really gets cloudy in lesbian relationships for me is that I tend to fall in love with best friends—a person you would be able to confide in or go to dinner with or share secrets with or just to share a good time with. And if I'm close enough to that person, I'm going to find a love relationship and be attracted. That's where it gets real cloudy. Once I embraced a lesbian identity, it seems the people that I am best friends with wind up becoming a partner.

Even so, those who preferred the friendship script frequently did so because they believed it led to a more secure basis for a permanent commitment.

The romance script, the preferred courtship script of half of participants, had two major characteristics, including an emotional intensity and a conscious sexual attraction between the two women. The pair often began by dating or flirting with each other and, occasionally, by being fixed up on a blind date by a friend. The development of an intimate friendship, often forged by long hours on the telephone or many lengthy one-on-one conversations, combined with a strong physical attraction, quickly led to overt sexual contact. Being sexual, in turn, enhanced the couple's emotional bond. For many, becoming sexual also served as a "marker" that signified they were a couple.

One reason given for preferring the romance script was participants' emotional and physical enjoyment of the seduction. The seduction was seen as being both playful and exciting. As one lesbian (age 35) described it:

I am the one who made the first physical move in my current relationship, and that usually is not the case. But [one night] she had this lounging appearance, with her arms up behind her head, in a kind of daring position, like, "Come over here and kiss me. I dare you." There was a playful energy between us as to which one of us was going to make the first move. So, she had kind of set the stage for it, and it was up to me to go ahead with it or not. So I did. It was fun!

A second reason given for preferring a romance script was that some individuals made a clear distinction between sexual attraction and friendship and tended not to be sexually attracted to their friends. However, some of those who rejected the romance script specifically mentioned feeling uncomfortable with sexual play and seduction.

Responses classified as fitting the sexually explicit script strongly emphasized physical attraction over other aspects of the interaction. Of the 63% of respondents who had engaged in this script at least once, most had initiated the relationship at bars (46%), followed by parties (13%), ads in lesbian/gay newspapers (8%), work settings (4%), and public places (4%). A typical script involved two women meeting, being aware of a mutual sexual attraction, acting on it, and either parting ways immediately or after a relationship of relatively short duration (e.g., a few weeks or months). For instance, one woman (age 25) indicated, "On three different occasions, I went into a bar, got to know a few people there, had drinks with a woman, and went home with her. It was very casual. Just a convenient couple of weeks resulted. No long-term relationship."

Evaluations of the sexually explicit script by participants were mixed. Some felt it had been a negative experience. "It was obviously lust at first sight," a 30-year-old lesbian explained. "Before I knew it, we had gotten involved and we hadn't established any kind of friendship. That was a disaster. We had a relationship for a few turbulent months." However, positive outcomes, including the development of a friendship or romantic relationship, were cited by 58% of participants who had used this script, for example:

I was at a conference. I was involved in a lot of grassroots organizations in various cities and she is someone I met at a conference. She had come in late, and there wasn't any room for her with the party she was staying with. I said, "We can fix this." We went home and didn't sleep all night. I heard from her several times after that. It then became more of a friendship. We lost touch after about 10 years. (a 36-year-old)

In summary, most young adult, adult, and midlife lesbians had participated in several successful courtships. A majority had used the friendship script at least once, but many also used the romance and sexually explicit scripts. However, lesbians were split about equally in their preference for friendship versus romance scripts, whereas the sexually explicit script was not endorsed by anyone as a preferred script. These results show that lesbians are versatile in their use of courtship scripts and, as expected, that issues concerning courtship are salient to lesbians throughout the life span.

Lesbian Dating and Uniqueness

Questions about whether lesbian dating existed and what was unique about it were asked to determine how much lesbians conformed to traditional views of dating. Three responses to the question of whether lesbian dating existed were obtained. Those who replied “yes,” indicating they had dated in the past, were in the majority (63%). They defined dating as being a way to get to know another woman and have a good time or to explore the romantic or sexual potential of the relationship without any specific commitment in mind. This definition parallels the modern one of (heterosexual) dating as involving informal, unchaperoned, male-female interaction with no specific commitment (Murstein, 1974). One lesbian (age 23) described dating as “like what the traditional American teenager considers a date . . . I’ve had women call me up and say ‘Would you like to go to the movies? I’ll pick you up.’ And they bring flowers and all that jazz.” Dating was described variously as providing a chance “to go out and see what it is all about before you hop into bed or move in with somebody,” “to get to know someone before you have them in your apartment,” and “to pursue an interest in another woman in a social context.” One woman (age 23) offered the advice, “I agree with a gay man friend of mine who says, ‘The first two months that you go out with somebody, you shouldn’t have any real deep conversations. You should just have fun.’”

The second most common response to the question of whether lesbian dating exists, endorsed by 24% of participants, was to assert that courting, rather than dating, was the correct term to use. Midlife lesbians comprised the majority of participants in this group. Courting implied a more serious purpose than dating; establishing a permanent partnership was the goal. For instance, one 46-year-old woman indicated, “I prefer [the term] ‘courting.’ ‘Dating’ is not a courting process. In my experience, courting has always been [for the purpose of] getting to know the person for a potential lifetime commitment.” Another lesbian (age 60) said, “Yes, dating exists [among lesbians], but minimally . . . Unlike heterosexuals, lesbians get seriously involved more immediately instead of having a trial or dating experience. That’s been my experience.” “There is dating, but it is difficult dating,” explained another (age 41). “We [older lesbians] tend to get very territorial, and I think that’s because there are so few of us. We’re like the dinosaurs—a dying breed.”

The remaining 13% of participants, distributed about equally across age groups, said they had never dated and believed that dating did not exist among lesbians. These women had established all their romantic relationships via a friendship. “I never felt I was dating,” indicated one lesbian (age 45). “I felt that I was going out with a friend and that we were building something greater than friendship.” “I don’t know if I’ve ever dated,” claimed another (age 29).

“For me, it has been kind of a mutual discovery process.” Similarly, one (age 36) explained, “It has always been more knowing someone and at some point becoming attracted to them and moving from there. The period of dating isn’t there.”

The diversity of definitions provided above suggest that cultural norms based on heterosexual dating enjoyed limited acceptance among the lesbians we interviewed. Responses to the question “What is unique about lesbian dating?” provided further evidence that lesbian dating did not conform to a heterosexual model. Only 23% to 31% reported that there was nothing unique about lesbian dating. (See Table 3.) The remaining participants cited four major categories of uniqueness, including freedom from gender roles, heightened

TABLE 3. Descriptions of What Is Unique About Lesbian Dating by Category of Response and Age Group

Category of Response	Examples	Percentage Responding by Age Group ^a		
		Young Adult (N = 13)	Adult (N = 12)	Midlife (N = 13)
Not anything unique	It [lesbian dating] follows the heterosexual model. Someone has to adopt the male role.	31	33	23
Freedom from gender roles	One person is not in control; the roles are less defined. It's not clear who initiates.	38	25	38
Heightened intimacy/friendship	The friendship develops as well as the sexual part. I'm more comfortable with women; I can be myself.	23	17	15
Rapid pace of relationship	Women are just ready to move in. A date could last for days and be a really intense experience.	15	0	54 ^b
Effects of prejudice	There are limits on where you can go and what you can do. The need to conceal or explain the relationship.	7	25	31
Other	You can lose the friendship if being lovers doesn't work out. It's hard to know if it [the date] is a friend thing or a date thing.	15	8	7

^aColumns do not add to 100% due to multiple responses.

^bMidlife lesbians differ significantly from other two age groups, $X^2(2) = 9.99, p \leq .01$.

intimacy/friendship, the rapid pace of lesbian relationship development, and the effects of prejudice. A fifth category, other, was used to classify miscellaneous responses mentioned only once.

The characteristics “freedom from gender roles” and “heightened intimacy” suggest that lesbian dating is more egalitarian than heterosexual dating. Behaviors usually associated with the masculine role, such as who initiates and pays, were usually shared. The interaction also appeared to be less geared toward trying to impress the other person by spending money, doing courtly behaviors such as opening doors, or worrying about appearance, and more towards genuinely getting to know each other. Participants also pointed out that societal prejudice against lesbians placed limits on how openly they could date.

Significantly more midlife lesbians (54%) cited the rapid pace of relationship development as a distinctive feature of lesbian dating compared to the young adult (15%) or adult group (0), $\chi^2(2) = 9.99, p \leq .01$. As one woman (age 41) explained, “the shortness of it [is unique]. You immediately find yourself in a lot more serious relationship than what you might want.” Another (age 46) elaborated, “[Lesbians] get involved really quickly and then think of themselves as being in a relationship and not dating anymore. That means they live together; they’re in a partnership.” There are at least two possible explanations for the finding that midlife lesbians view the rapid pacing of relationships as unique. First, due to age and experience, midlife lesbians may have different values and expectations for relationships. For instance, they may be more clear about what they are looking for in a partner or be less willing to spend time in casual interactions than younger lesbians. Subsequently, they may go out with someone only if they feel there is a strong possibility for the relationship to develop. This interpretation is partially supported by findings described earlier showing that many midlife lesbians favor the term “courtship” over “dating,” to signify that their goal was to establish a long-term relationship. Alternatively, midlife lesbians may have fewer available partners from which to choose. If so, the resulting anxiety about finding a companion among those who desire one may cause them to escalate the course of the relationship. Two midlife lesbians supported this interpretation by contending that it was extremely rare to find a single lesbian in the 40 to 65 age group and that, if they found one, they would feel considerable pressure to pursue her. However, more research would be required to accurately explain why midlife lesbians saw the rapid pacing of lesbian relationships as unique more so than younger ones.

In summary, dating was viewed as an informal interaction with no goal of commitment across all age groups by a majority of lesbians, most of whom had dated. However, “courtship” and “friendship” were two alternatives to dating

that were preferred by some. Lesbian dating was described as being relatively free from gender roles, intimate, and quick to develop. Constraints on dating due to societal prejudice against lesbians also were noted. Midlife lesbians differed from younger lesbians in two important areas: (a) they were more likely to be seeking a serious commitment when dating or courting, and (b) they were more likely to view lesbian relationships as proceeding at a fast pace. These findings indicate that midlife lesbians may approach dating and courtship with different expectations.

Friendship versus Romance

Three questions were asked in the present research to explore how romantic relationships develop between lesbians: (a) What distinguishes a friendship from a romantic relationship? (b) What signifies to you that a change in relationship status [to being a couple] has occurred? (c) How do you let a woman know that you are interested in her romantically or know she is interested in you?

Confusion about whether a friendly versus a romantic interest motivates interactions between lesbians is a common phenomenon. One challenge for lesbians is to interpret whether friendly interest has the potential to develop into sexual attraction or is consciously or unconsciously motivated by it. In terms of distinguishing a friendship from a romance, five lesbians (13%) maintained that there was no distinction between the two. They only became partners with friends and saw the sexual aspects of the relationship as being an extension of a deep emotional commitment to the friendship. A majority (87%), however, used two main characteristics to discriminate between friendship and romance. Of these, 58 percent described friendships as being both less emotionally intense (for example, "don't invest as much emotional energy," "less tension," "talk about surface things") and lacking in sexual energy or contact. Participants also indicated being more direct about their intentions (25%) and more relaxed with friends (21%) than with potential lovers.

Lesbians may find it difficult to discern if or when a friendship has moved "over the line" into a romance. They also must create their own "markers" for transitions in their relationships due to lack of access to public rituals of commitment such as engagement and marriage. A majority of the lesbians we interviewed (68%) regarded the presence of sexual energy or contact as marking a change in status from friendship to romance. Sexual desire or behavior signaled that the relationship had become "more than friendship." Other indicators of a change in status that were commonly cited included: increased emotional closeness (40%), verbal declarations of love or commitment (37%), and living together or buying a house together (29%). On average, it took six

months for this change to occur, with a range of two weeks to two years. Markers varied for many depending on the relationship, for example:

It's been different with everybody. I've gone from knowing it's leading that way because we became more serious and gradually spent more time together—to waking up one morning and finding that all her clothes were there and she had moved in. With one woman, I realized we were a couple when every plant that she owned was in my house. I woke up one morning and had a house full of green stuff and her. I thought, "Oh, wow, I guess she's gonna stay." (a 41-year-old)

Lastly, how lesbians convey and interpret sexual attraction is an interesting question, given neither woman is likely to have been socialized to assume the initiator role. One current stereotype about lesbians is that they approach dating and courtship passively, like sheep; that is, they wait to be asked out and to be pursued sexually (Rose et al., 1993). Based on this stereotype, we predicted that lesbians would tend not to favor a direct verbal approach. This prediction was supported for two categories of behavior, including "asking for a date," and "waiting to be asked for a date." Relatively few lesbians indicated they had directly asked another woman for a date. (See Table 4.) In addition, 50% indicated on the gender role measure that they "always" or "almost always" waited to be asked for a date.

However, contrary to expectation, a majority of lesbians used direct verbal declarations to convey and read romantic interest (e.g., "tell her how I feel," "proposition her sexually," and "declare my affection"). This suggests that lesbians are far from shy in terms of signaling attraction. The second most frequently cited category of sexual signaling was the use of nonverbal proceptive behaviors. As expected, lesbians relied heavily on the nuances of touching,

TABLE 4. Percentage of Participants ($N = 38$) Citing Behaviors that Convey Attraction

Behavior	Definition	Percentage Citing	
		Used by Self	Used by Partner
Ask for a date	Invite to an activity	18	16
Direct statements	Verbal declaration of interest	79	74
Nonverbal cues	Touching, smiling, eye contact	45	66
Attentiveness	Sexual energy, listening to partner, intuition	40	42
Indirect	Draw attention to self indirectly	18	13
Nothing	No behavioral displays	3	8

smiling, and maintaining eye contact to convey interest, behaviors that were described in elegant detail by many participants. The finding in Table 4 that more lesbians depended on nonverbal signals to decipher interest than they did to signal interest might imply for some a reticence to assume an active role. Alternatively, it may indicate simply that more lesbians are aware of the other woman's behavior than their own in a romantic situation. Attentiveness to the partner was the third most often mentioned means of signaling attraction. Attentiveness was defined as actively giving their attention by listening or being attuned to the needs of their prospective partners. Indirect means of attracting a partner, such as "showing off" or "telling a mutual friend," were cited by only a small percentage. An even smaller number insisted that they engaged in no behavioral displays of interest.

One age difference was observed for the measure "ask for a date." Significantly more young adult lesbians than adult or midlife lesbians said they always or almost always waited to be asked for a date, $\chi^2(2) = 11.7, p < .005$. Conversely, older lesbians were more likely to have asked someone for a date. It is reasonable to speculate that, as lesbians age, they may move farther away from the traditional feminine role, or they may become comfortable adopting either role depending on the occasion.

These findings challenge the stereotype of lesbians as being passive when it comes to approaching another woman. Many participants were quite sophisticated about the process of seduction. One lesbian (age 38) described her sexual signaling system as follows:

[If I wanted to show a woman I was interested], I would let her know by letting my sexual energy be felt—to let it flow. [That means] I would be relaxed around her and be more myself, which means that she is going to feel a sense of my sexuality, as opposed to being around someone straight or a friend. I would be perceptive about her nonverbal language. She may make slight innuendoes. I can tell if she's interested by the way she waits for my responses to the cues that she gives me. She may lean forward when I am talking as opposed to looking off to the side. A lot of eye contact. Light touching usually happens. A softness to her voice. Her voice tone may change to being a slower paced rate of speaking, maybe with a little sexy edge to it. Her voice may drop. It is definitely not a normal speaking tone. That is a sure indication of her attraction. [To convey attraction] I would use more direct types of touching. Maybe my full hand on her arm or a couple of fingers on her leg. Legs tend to be more sexual. It's hard to give a formula. It just depends on my mood, how

much I like the person, her style as it meshes with mine. It depends on so many different things.

The results concerning how romantic relationships progress suggest that lesbians have been creative in coping with the ambiguity of the friendship script, have developed markers for relationship transitions that are based primarily on sexual and emotional intimacy, and are verbally and nonverbally expressive about their attractions during courtship. Evidence that young lesbians are more tied to gender roles in terms of asking for a date than older lesbians also implies that age may be related to greater flexibility in dating.

Gender Roles and Dating Experience

A majority of lesbians (55%) rejected gender roles by either mutually negotiating their interactions or switching roles depending on the specific interaction. Others opted more consistently for a particular role as either the initiator (16%) or noninitiator (29%).

Correlational analyses were conducted on ratings of gender-role behaviors to determine if lesbians' assumption of a role paralleled that of heterosexual roles. Behaviors associated with the traditional masculine role were significantly related. How often a lesbian asked for a date was found to be positively related to how often she picked her date up ($r(33) = .51, p < .001$); planned the date ($r(31) = .36, p < .02$); did courtly behaviors during the date, such as buying flowers, giving compliments, and holding doors open ($r(33) = .43, p < .006$); paid for the date ($r(33) = .34, p < .023$); and initiated physical intimacy on the date ($r(32) = .35, p < .024$). Thus, it appeared that if a lesbian initiated a date, she also assumed other aspects of the traditional male role.

Conversely, lesbians who waited to be asked for a date were significantly unlikely to pick up the date ($r(34) = -.39, p < .05$); plan it ($r(32) = -.54, p < .01$); do courtly behaviors ($r(34) = -.36, p < .05$); or initiate physical intimacy ($r(33) = -.48, p < .01$). However, waiting to be asked for a date did *not* correlate with ratings for the item, "turned down physical intimacy," a behavior that traditionally has been assigned to heterosexual women (e.g., Peplau, Rubin, & Hill, 1977). What these findings suggest is that lesbians who assume the feminine reactive role in dating, unlike heterosexual women, do not play a restrictive role in terms of limiting sexual contact.

Previous research has demonstrated a relationship between dating experience and gender roles, with more experienced heterosexual daters engaging in more stereotypical behavior (Rose & Frieze, 1989). The impact of lesbian and heterosexual experience on ratings of the eight gender role behaviors was examined using analysis of variance to test for mean differences between inexpe-

rienced daters (i.e., those with ratings of 1 or 2 on a 5-point scale) and experienced ones (i.e., ratings of 4 or 5 on the scale). Experienced lesbian daters were found to have initiated physical intimacy on their dates ($M = 3.19$) significantly more often than those with little lesbian dating experience ($M = 1.93$), $F(1,28) = 6.84, p < .02$. Lesbian dating experience was not significantly related to other gender behaviors. Those with extensive heterosexual dating experience were found to reject physical intimacy more often ($M = 2.66$) than those with little experience ($M = 1.83$), $F(1,30) = 5.83, p < .02$; no other effects were found.

Last, the relationship between age and the "initiate physical intimacy" measure was explored. Adult and midlife lesbians were found to be significantly more likely to have initiated sexual behavior ($M = 3.00$ and 2.87 , respectively) than young adult lesbians ($M = 1.82$), $F(2,32) = 3.24, p < .05$.

In sum, the findings concerning gender roles and dating experience suggest that lesbian dating experience enables women to freely initiate sexual interactions, whereas heterosexual dating experience reinforces the role of the woman as the sexual "limit setter." Thus, it appears that the use of gender roles as practiced by lesbians does not dictate sexual interactions. Also, as lesbians get older and have more lesbian dating experience, they appear to become more comfortable with initiating sexual intimacy.

Age and Courtship

Research on adult development and romantic relationships has not yet been undertaken with a lesbian life cycle as the norm. For example, courtship has been rooted in the developmental phase of young heterosexual adulthood by most relationship researchers and developmental psychologists. Most lesbians do not follow this model. Thus, only a few tentative predictions concerning courtship and age were advanced. Specifically, midlife lesbians were expected to be less bound by gender roles, to be more mature in terms of how they approached courtship, as expressed in terms of having more realistic expectations and being aware of their own needs, and to be more skilled at communicating or interpreting interpersonal attraction.

The four significant results reported earlier provide support for the general direction of our predictions; that is, midlife lesbians undertake courtship with greater freedom from gender roles and with more maturity. Midlife lesbians were found to differ significantly from young adults in terms of having been a lesbian longer, perceiving lesbian dating as having the serious goal of commitment, describing lesbian relationships as developing at a rapid pace, and to be more likely to ask for a date and to initiate physical intimacy. Based on our review of each transcript as a whole, we labeled the midlife lesbians as being

more “purposive” in their attitudes and behaviors than the young adult or adult group. Midlife lesbians often spoke specifically to the issue of having approached relationships more casually in their youth or having been motivated by physical attraction, sexual gratification, or other needs unrelated to what they considered now to be more important. As they aged, they became more concerned about the “attachment-worthiness” of a partner; that is, whether the necessary warmth, respect, and reciprocal liking necessary to sustain a relationship was present before pursuing a sexual relationship. Once they judged these attributes to be present, they acted quickly. Thus, their current behaviors seemed to be motivated by a more accurate assessment of their needs and greater experience concerning what will sustain a relationship.

Midlife lesbians also spoke to other changes over the course of their lifetime that affected courtship. Many mentioned enjoying no longer having to conform to the butch-femme roles that dominated the bar scene in their youth. They also appreciated the relatively greater freedom they felt to be openly lesbian and being able to find partners outside the bars due to the growth of the lesbian community.

CONCLUSIONS

Courtship was found to be highly relevant to lesbians throughout the life span. Most had established several long-term relationships and utilized a variety of courtship scripts. The friendship and romance scripts were most preferred, with the sexually explicit script having been widely practiced but not preferred. These results suggest that lesbians prefer courtship and relationships that emphasize emotional intimacy either more so or equally with sexual desire, as opposed to favoring sexual attraction over intimacy. Both increasing intimacy and sexuality were used to mark when a relationship was “going beyond” friendship. Contrary to the stereotype of lesbians as being passive in approaching partners, most were found to be quite direct in their verbal expressions of affection, as well as very skilled in the use of proceptive non-verbal cues to signal attraction.

Definitions of lesbian dating and uniqueness, as well as the findings concerning gender roles, illustrated that lesbians either rejected or modified contemporary heterosexual practices. Freedom from gender roles contributed to an egalitarian approach to dating that may have enhanced the intimacy and rapid pacing regarded as unique to lesbian courtship. Most lesbians did not adopt active versus reactive roles in dating. However, those who did rejected heterosexual notions of the woman as the sexual limit-setter. Age and lesbian dating experience also were found to be related to initiating sexual intimacy.

These findings imply that even when lesbians conform to some aspects of heterosexual roles, they do not necessarily reproduce heterosexual power relations in terms of sexual behavior. Furthermore, their courtships may be more sexually satisfying, because satisfaction with sex has been shown to be linked to equality in initiating and refusing sex (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983).

Courtship among older lesbians was found to differ from younger ones as a function of both maturity and historical change, with midlife lesbians being more oriented toward establishing an emotional commitment, being less tied to gender roles, and expressing appreciation for greater societal tolerance of lesbians. However, conclusions concerning adult development were limited by the small sample size and narrow scope of questions investigated. In addition, the relatively few age differences that were observed suggest that courtship is a strong script in the sense that it is highly codified by cultural norms and may not change much with age. Nevertheless, the results suggest that one interesting area for future research might focus specifically on retrospective evaluations of how courtship has changed over the life course.

Clinical Implications

The findings from the present study have implications for therapists who have lesbian clients. Understanding oneself in relation to others is central to the therapeutic process. Information regarding how lesbians from different age groups negotiate dating and courtship can facilitate this process for clients. Although our sample was limited in size, certain guidelines for therapists can be derived from the data which are consistent with five of the tenets of a feminist theory of psychological practice (Brabeck & Brown, 1997).

Remaining close to the "data of experience." Any theory of lesbian relationship development must remain close to lesbians' real-life experiences—it should be "sappho-centric." Throughout the interview process, participants discussed their relationship histories with candor. We sought meaning of their stories within the context of the relationships we developed with them, and it was our hope to give an accurate voice to their stories. We acknowledge, however, that neither their nor our understanding of relationships is static. Given a different setting or point in time, participants' stories may have varied, and we may have drawn different conclusions. We hope that therapists reading this article will learn as much from the process of our research as they do from the content, and create understanding from both the "data of experience," as well as from human connection.

Embracing diversity. Historically, little has been written about lesbians across the life span. The present research was intended to begin to close this gap in knowledge. Although the participants we interviewed were homogeneous in terms of race and class, their life experiences were quite diverse. It is

likely that even more diverse stories may have been obtained using a sample that was more heterogeneous in terms of race, ethnicity, class or ability. We caution therapists to be mindful of the differences among lesbians and to embrace diversity as a foundation for their practice.

Expanding notions of identity and multiple subjectivities. Throughout the research process, we viewed the women as active participants in defining their realities. The interview process was interactive, and at no point did we view ourselves as the only or most important voice of knowledge. During the interviews, we witnessed participants derive new meanings from their relationships and give voice to experiences that previously had been unspoken. Throughout the process, we learned as much about ourselves as we did about participants. For example, based on female socialization, we anticipated that only a minority of lesbians would have participated in casual sexual encounters. Instead, we found that many women had engaged in this script, as well as reported as having learned a great deal about themselves in the process, whereas others rejected the casual sex script entirely. Thus, we recommend that clinicians acknowledge multiple subjectivities within the context of the therapeutic relationship.

Reformulating understanding psychological distress from feminist theory. Traditional psychology places the experiences of the dominant group (e.g., men, heterosexuals) at the center as “normal,” “right,” or “healthy.” The functioning of marginalized groups (e.g., lesbians) is viewed as being deficient by comparison. In terms of relationship development specifically, contemporary heterosexual norms endorse lifelong monogamy as superior to other types of romantic pairings. If the dominant view of permanent pairings as being “better” is internalized by a lesbian client, it may be helpful for the therapist to help her explore alternative paradigms for assessing her own behavior that are based more on lesbian experience. This reformulation takes what was formerly considered to be evidence of a deficit or defect and reinterprets it as evidence of creative resistance in the face of oppression (Brabeck & Brown, 1997).

In conclusion, the findings of the current study can inform therapists’ work with lesbian clients. It is our hope that therapists will benefit from both the content and process of the research presented here and will use it to foster growth in their clients.

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