Intimacy in Lesbian Relationships: A Critical Re-Examination of Fusion

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About the Author

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Abstract

Based on a male-derived model which views separation as the cornerstone of healthy development, the concept of fusion has been noted and pathologized in the literature on lesbian relationships. This paper will re-examine the relational patterns of lesbian couples within a perspective more attuned to female development which views connection as vital to growth. As women whose relational preferences are not compromised by the differing relational needs and behaviors of men, lesbians may offer a unique window to the specific intimacy patterns preferred by most women, but not often achieved in heterosexual relationships.

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I appreciate the opportunity to be here tonight to share with you my work on intimacy patterns in lesbian relationships. The work of Surrey, Stiver, Miller, Kaplan, and Jordan has been crucial to my understanding of women’s development and has greatly informed my analysis of lesbian psychology. I congratulate and thank these women for their growing acknowledgment that the relational experience of lesbians is a critical topic of inquiry for any students of women’s development. My presence here tonight reflects the recognition that diversity exists among women, that the experience of some women can inform our understanding of all women, and that women must speak for ourselves — while there are many commonalities among us, we must enrich our understanding of women through work by lesbians about lesbians, by women of color about women of color.

Underlying the relational perspective is the notion that context is fundamental, that the social and psychic context of gender decisively shapes the female experience. In that vein, I would like to make clear that my personal and professional context consists primarily of white women, of varying ages, classes, educational backgrounds, and physical abilities. In our discussion tonight, I would welcome the input of women of other contexts to add to our collective understanding.

Recent endeavors in feminist psychology have questioned the male bias of traditional theoretical frameworks which emphasize separation and autonomy as the hallmarks of healthy human development. Instead, some feminist theorists propose that women grow through connection, that women’s development relies on participation in mutual, authentic relationships. However, attempts to
study the relational nature of women have been colored by a predominant focus on women in heterosexual relationships. In these relationships, the woman’s authentic expression of self may be hindered by the need to adjust to the different developmental pathway of her male partner, which may produce distinct behavior in relationships. An examination of women’s behavior, emotional dynamics, and patterns of intimacy in lesbian relationships may offer a unique window through which to view women’s psychological development.

Several researchers have measured patterns of intimacy in lesbian relationships by a male standard of separation and autonomy and have pathologized as “fusion” the intimacy they observe. This paper will explore lesbian relationships within the context of women’s relational development and will critique traditional notions of healthy and unhealthy relational dynamics, particularly the notions of fusion and intimacy.

Tonight I will be weaving together an examination of several different questions:

- What are the sources of fusion in lesbian relationships, i.e., why is fusion a predominant relational pattern for lesbians?
- Is fusion in lesbian relationships inherently maladaptive or pathological?
- How are traditional notions about fusion altered by new understandings of women’s development?
- How does an understanding of lesbian relational patterns of fusion contribute to a more generic understanding of female patterns of intimacy?

“Fusion in lesbian relationships” is a topic which has received much air time in settings as diverse as lesbian dinner party conversations and articles in the psychological literature. In the relatively small body of literature on lesbian couples, at least fourteen articles have appeared in the last ten years which feature fusion as the prominent issue; it is rare to find an analysis of lesbian couples which does not address fusion (Burch, 1982, 1985, 1986, 1987; Decker, 1983-84; Elise, 1986; Kaufman, Harrison, & Hyde, 1984; Krestan & Bepko, 1980; Lindenbaum, 1985; Lowenstein, 1980; Pearlman, 1988; Roth, 1985; Schneider, 1986; Smalley, 1987). The topic of fusion has found its way into colloquial settings as well. In a recently overheard conversation on a predominantly lesbian beach, three lesbians debated whether a lesbian couple is “fused” if they trade underwear back and forth.

So, what is all this fuss about fusion? Fusion, merger, and enmeshment are terms that have been used interchangeably in the literature to describe a common relational dynamic for lesbian couples. Fusion is variously defined in the psychological literature, but several features are common to most definitions: Fusion is a state of “psychic unity” in which individual ego boundaries are crossed and two individuals experience a sense of oneness (Burch, 1986). In the state of fusion, the self is embedded within a relational context, and boundaries between self and other are unclear (Karpel, 1976). Intense intimacy, a lack of separation, and overidentification are defined as characteristics of fusion.

We may argue about whether what is being defined as fusion is in fact fusion. However, for purposes of semantic simplicity, I will use the word fusion as it is used in both the traditional literature and the literature on lesbian fusion — and I will return later to explore the semantic problems with how fusion is used to describe particularly intense states of intimacy.

Fusion in lesbian relationships

Based on these definitions, several commentators have observed certain relational patterns in lesbian couples, have labeled these patterns fusion, and have marked fusion as a prominent problem in lesbian relationships. These patterns include both interpersonal dynamics and behavioral indicators.

The literature depicts these problematic dynamics in the following manner: It notes that lesbian women place a high premium on being intimately involved and experience difficulties when they are without an intimate relationship, frequently resulting in excessive tenacity to unsatisfying partnerships. The literature depicts the lesbian couple locked in an embrace of intimacy which values identification; mutual understanding and acceptance; and shared beliefs, behaviors, goals, and wishes. Differences between partners are feared, often to the extent that denial of differences is readily employed. Conflict is either avoided or constantly remains unresolved. The individual develops an acute sensitivity to her partner’s needs and feelings, often at the expense of fulfilling her own needs. Individual identities become “merged” or “blurred,” and partners have difficulty articulating, “I feel.” Relative to the heterosexual pattern of ostensibly asymmetrical dependency needs, the lesbian couple is viewed as