Research Note

Correlates of Stability in Long-Term Gay Male Couple Relationships

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An earlier study of 50 gay males and 32 lesbians in continuing same-sex romantic relationships (Lewis, et al. 1981) identified through factor analysis three components of commitment for these gay couples. These components—intradyadic (or personal) commitment, extradyadic (structural) commitment, and commitment-as-trust—were identified for male as well as female same-sex relationships. These components also appeared to account in large part for the stability or continuance of these couples over time.

An extension of the initial study has taken the form of extensive, in-depth interviews of 20 gay males who have lived together for a relatively long time, an average of 9.4 years as a couple. The longest time together was 27 years, followed by 16 years, 12, eight, seven, and five years. The purpose of the continuing study has been the exploration of factors both within and outside these couples which may account for the stability of these long-term relationships.

Methodology

The method chosen to accomplish this purpose was the case-study approach, since in-depth interviews are among the best ways in which
suggested findings from larger samples can be pursued at length, new hypotheses may be suggested, and serendipitous findings have the greatest chance of being uncovered.

Contacts in several gay communities helped us locate a number of gay male couples who had lived together for at least two years. The final selection of ten couples was made on the basis of accessibility for interviewing rather than willingness to be interviewed, since only one male couple refused to be interviewed out of 11 who were ultimately pursued for this part of the study.

The interviewing followed the procedures of the initial phase of the study, i.e., partners filled out several questionnaires independently in their own home and then were interviewed together as a couple for period of two are more hours. During the couple interview, open-ended questions, based on our earlier findings, were pursued at length through probes and confronting questions. Ultimately, friends of each couple were asked specific questions about the couple's relationship, especially where discrepancies or serious doubts were uncovered in the material. We believe that this triangulation of the data improved the validity of these data greatly.

Sample

Although this was not a random sample of couples, these males represented a wide variety of educational and occupational backgrounds and differing ages, as well as varied residential settings. For instance, the 20 males were between 28 and 63 years of age. Two of the ten couples lived in large metropolitan areas in the southwest of the United States. The remaining couples lived in much smaller communities in the southwest, where they were or were not recognized as gay couples by the heterosexual community.

Occupations represented in this sample include medicine, law, teaching, the military, communications, and various kinds of businesses. Some of these men were retired or nearing retirement. All respondents were white; almost all had completed at least a high school education. The fact that six of the 20 men had lived in heterosexual marriages prior to their on-going gay relationship suggests to us that not only have many of these men experienced other kinds of couple relationships and therefore desired enduring pair relationships, but also that they are probably atypical of the gay community.