Everyman as sociologist is concerned only with his own society and his own segment of it, and not with a general science of man or with an understanding of the exotic forms of social life. The two types of inquiry overlap, however, in that both are concerned with an observation of the chaos of the human condition and a reduction of its seeming randomness to modality and order... Both the folk and the professional sociologist generalize as a means of understanding the particular. It should surprise nobody that their results are frequently similar and that sociology, especially, appears to be the science of the obvious.

It is indeed possible for a sociologist to survey the courting behaviour of several hundred students and arrive at the conclusion that there is direct covariation between the number of times that a couple dates and the chances of occurrence of sexual intercourse. The wisdom of the street corner also tells us that if one tries hard enough and long enough he can't go wrong... The very fact that people have always speculated on these matters requires that scientific study be couched in terms unsullied by past usages and unclouded by the multiplicity of meanings that characterizes vernacular speech. But the latent function of social science terminology, as has long been understood, is a bit different. The true professional derives order, to be sure, but he then renders it unintelligible to all but the initiated. Language functions to provide communication, but the existence of thousands of mutually incomprehensible languages suggests that it serves also to block communication—a form of anticommunication, one might say. So also do professional sublanguages provide a means to establish the limits of the discipline and a measure of professional competence.

ROBERT F. MURPHY, The Dialectics of Social Life
and on interviews with homosexual couples. As well as giving an account of attitudes towards homosexuality, the difficulties faced by homosexuals and how some couples feel both about their own relationships and about marriage, the chapter highlights just how many assumptions are generally made about ‘man’ and ‘woman’ and about ‘a man and a woman’ in social relationships in general.

**Men in Love: Observations on Male Homosexual Couples**

KEN PLUMMER

It is, perhaps, a sign of the times that a book on ‘The Couple’ should include a chapter on homosexual couples. While nothing seems more natural than to discuss heterosexuality in terms of relationships and couples, homosexuality has been thought of as a condition requiring special causal explanations and special devices for controlling it. Only recently in this culture has homosexuality come to be viewed increasingly as a legitimate alternative way of life, and as a relationship.

This chapter is concerned only with male homosexual couples in contemporary England (and America). It deals with the nature and prevalence of ‘gay’ couples, and the social context which engulfs the homosexual experience, making such couples relatively infrequent. The particular experiences of nine gay couples are used to illustrate the way some homosexuals have overcome the problems faced. Throughout, data are drawn from the fragmented and limited literature in this field, from fieldwork in the homosexual community of London in the late sixties; from interviews with the nine couples mentioned above; and from personal experience. The discussion remains on the level of exploration.

**WHAT IS A GAY COUPLE?**

Two approaches to identifying ‘a couple’ are possible – the subjective and the conventional. The former suggests that a gay couple exists when a homosexual defines somebody as his partner. How an outsider defines the relationship is irrelevant; the important thing is the meanings that individuals attach to their
Men in Love

own relationships. By this kind of definition, for example, a husband and wife living together in marital disharmony for thirty years and who do not see themselves as a couple, are not a couple; while two homosexuals who fall in love but part within weeks are a couple during the time they define their relationship in this way. Such an approach has difficulties, though: it does direct attention towards what people themselves mean by couples.

The second kind of definition is more conventional and attempts to establish independent criteria by which any relationship can be assessed as a couple or not. Such criteria may include the emotional, social and sexual nature of the relationship, its duration, its exclusivity and whether or not the two people live together. By such criteria one definition of a ‘gay couple’ would be a fairly permanent, more or less exclusive relationship, based upon a social, emotional and sexual foundation, between two people of the same sex who sometimes share a common home. This would be an ideal type from which many variations could be derived. The main feature of the definition is that it includes several criteria, any one of which, if taken alone, would not depict a couple. Men may have long-term emotional commitments to other men: they may set up house with other men; they may have permanent sexual relationships with each other – all these would not be couples. Outsiders often make mistaken assumptions about the relationships of others: they may assume that two homosexuals who demonstrate a close friendship are also lovers, but generally this is not true. (Indeed, as Leznoff and Westley observed in their study of a Canadian homosexual community, a kind of ‘incest-taboo’ appears to exist amongst homosexuals, such that friends are prohibited as sexual partners. Many homosexuals call their close friends ‘sisters’, depicting a strong, non-sexual bond.) Similarly, outsiders may assume a love affair when two homosexuals set up house together, but homosexuals often do this out of convenience, practical considerations being more important than romantic ones. In other words, a range of relationships does exist in the homosexual world, but only a few could be labelled ‘couples’ according to the above definition.

KINDS OF COUPLES

There are many variations in homosexual couples, as there are in heterosexual ones. Carol Warren, in a study of a middle-class American gay community, suggested three kinds: those modelled on heterosexual marriage, those based upon a more flexible concept of an ‘open marriage’ where ‘extra-marital’ relationships are welcomed, and those based on ‘three-way relationships’ – stable relationships built up among three men. More generally three forms can be distinguished – ‘marriage’, the ‘boy friend’ and the ‘partnership’, forms which correspond more or less to the distinctions made by Weiss elsewhere in this book for heterosexual couples (see pp. 138-43).

Homosexual ‘Marriage’: Homosexuals sometimes, but rarely, attempt to imitate the rituals establishing heterosexual marriages – an engagement party, a ‘marriage’ ceremony, a wedding party, an exchange of rings and vows, a honeymoon. The relationship itself may develop on the basis of the male–female dichotomy, with one partner having a professional occupation, earning most of the money and playing the active role in sex, while the other plays a generally subordinate role, has a lower income and a less responsible job, and plays the passive role in sex.

Some of these ‘marriages’ are romantically ritualistic and serve primarily as an excuse for a party and a good time. Such marriages do not seem to last very long and are unstable – the ritual being more important than the relationship. Others may be more serious. In England some gay priests are frequently approached to conduct marriage ceremonies for lovers seeking recognition from the church. Sometimes their requests are granted in as much as a simple exchange of vows takes place. In America one ecumenical, revivalistic homosexual church (Troy Perry’s Metropolitan Community Church) publicly conducts and witnesses its own ‘marriage’ ceremonies. There have even been some successful attempts to find loopholes in the law by which gay ‘marriages’ can become legal and enjoy the benefits of tax relief associated with heterosexual marriage.

Boyfriends: This refers simply to a love relationship between
homosexuals, couples were very common amongst homosexuals in the community at large, though those who had been in prison very seldom formed couples and those who had visited psychiatrists formed them even less frequently. Even though generalizations cannot be made on the basis of these findings, that couples should emerge more frequently amongst homosexuals in the community than amongst those who visit psychiatrists seems plausible. Yet regrettably, most research on homosexuality comes from clinical studies.

Those homosexuals who do meet a partner, settle down, and isolate themselves from effective involvement in the homosexual world, are least likely to fall into the narrow sweep of the researcher's net. Conventional sampling sources for research on homosexuals may thus be of restricted value in understanding couples. Those involved have no need for the help of psychiatrists since they are well adjusted; they have little need for casual sex as they are sexually satisfied; they have little need for homophile organizations since they eschew protest and change; and they often have minimal involvement in the gay world. The small number of homosexual couples discovered by researchers may, therefore, be entirely unrepresentative of actual numbers, so creating difficult problems for research and generalization.

Even allowing for sampling problems, however, I have little doubt that male homosexuals less frequently form lasting couple relationships than heterosexuals. Several explanations for this exist in the literature.

Some biologists suggest that the infrequency of such relationships is a consequence of man's innate predatory and promiscuous sexual instincts, of the fact that man is more readily conditionable to any sexual stimulus than woman. (This explanation would also be used to account for the greater stability usually attributed to lesbian relationships.) The explanation claims that men, unlike women, are 'by nature' concerned with sexual stimulation rather than romantic attachment, which is thought more conducive to long-lasting relationships. Even if we accept that gender differences are largely the consequence of social learning (as I do) and not directly of biology, the conclusions drawn are the same - in this culture men are conventionally
‘sexier’ than women, which may make it difficult for a man to settle down with another man.

Some clinicians (probably a minority) stress that homosexuality is a sickness, a behavioural disorder making homosexuals incapable of stability and permanence in their relationships. Thus Bergler could argue that homosexuals are unconscious masochists seeking painful relationships in order to eliminate their guilt, while Searlides more recently (1972) suggested:

Instead of co-operation, solace, stimulation, emotional enrichment and a maximum opportunity for creative interpersonal maturation and realistic fulfillment, there are multiple underlying factors which threaten any ongoing homosexual relationship: destruction, mutual defeat, exploitation of the partner and the self, oral sadistic incorporation, aggressive onslaughts and attempts to alleviate anxiety—all comprising a pseudo-solution to the aggressive and libidinal conflicts that dominate and torment the individuals concerned.

Robbins, in an earlier paper on ‘Homosexual Marriages’ drawing on two case studies, describes homosexual relationships as characterized by ‘the parasitic boring of one member into the other, regardless of personal consequence in response to an imperative craving’. This craving is ‘the impulse to enslave and cruelly exploit another’. This sadism, he continues, is responsible for creating the actual need for the merger, functions throughout the entire relationship. Bieber, probably the most scholarly of these workers, is less extreme and sees difficulties ensuing from the high anxiety state generated in the homosexual, an anxiety state which is ‘similar to the anxiety surrounding the sexual and possessive feelings toward a mother figure’.

At best these arguments linking homosexuality with sickness are scientifically debatable. At worst, they are ideological distortions which serve to contain homosexuality in this society. Though homosexuals may develop pathological symptoms, Freedman, after reviewing a substantial body of work on the adjustment of homosexuals, concludes that ‘homosexuality is compatible with positive psychological functioning’.

They demonstrate that most of the homosexually orientated indi-

viduals evaluated in the studies function as well as comparable groups of heterosexually oriented individuals; that their functioning could be typically characterized as normal; and that in some cases, their functioning even approximates that of self-actualizing people. Cumulatively these studies dealt with more than 600 homosexually oriented subjects, whereas the studies with negative or mixed results had only about 150 homosexually oriented subjects in all.

Clinical explanations of the infrequency of homosexual couples are insufficient, firstly, because there is no doubt that many homosexuals are well adjusted, and secondly, even allowing for some degree of pathology, social rather than psychic factors cannot be ignored. In other words, the formation of homosexual couples may best be understood as a consequence of certain kinds of society. As one author rather cruelly puts it, ‘the reason that males who are homosexually inclined cannot form stable relationships with each other is that society does not want them to’. It is to this society that I now turn.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF HOMOSEXUALITY

My argument here draws from the broader one (developed in my book Sexual Stigma) that no adequate understanding of homosexuality, and indeed all sexuality, is possible without relating it to broader socio-historical contexts. Homosexuality or any pattern of sexuality has no absolute, automatic or trans-situational meaning—it takes its meaning and forms from its context. Such an observation is no more than an often overlooked truism; but it is a significant truism. It means that while homosexuality exists in this culture as a real and identifiable condition, this need not be so; that while the process of becoming a homosexual may be characterized by problems of guilt, access and identity (and sometimes concomitantly, pathology), this need not be so; that while a subculture of homosexuality emerges, this need not be so (or at least not in the form it takes); that while the everyday experience of homosexuals may be characterized by ‘passing as straight’ and ‘avoiding stigma’, this need not be so. Most importantly here, it means that while homosexual relationships in general and couples in
particular may be inhibited in this culture, again this need not be so.
The experience of homosexuality is situationally shaped, assuming its meanings from the context in which it arises, a context which comprises both direct responses to homosexuality and indirect responses which, while not directly aimed at homosexuals, nevertheless play a powerful role.
Negative or direct responses have received most attention. Recent studies have stressed the pervasiveness of homophobia. Condemned as a sin, sickness, crime or simply a sorrowful state, homosexuality has been responded to in a highly stigmatizing fashion. At worst, homosexuals have been slaughtered in concentration camps, murdered by ‘queer-bashers’ or killed by aversion therapy: more moderately, they have been hospitalized as sick, imprisoned as criminals, discriminated against in employment, mocked by media and acquaintances.
Homosexuals are confronted by an experience that is devalued and rendered illegitimate for them by their society. As a result, a homosexual may come to see his own experiences as wrong, feeling guilt and shame and a desire to conceal the experiences from others. He may subsequently find difficulty in meeting other homosexuals and in accepting his position in society as a homosexual. Through guilt and secrecy, the experience may be heightened until it becomes a pivotal part of his life and he develops an exaggerated concern with issues of masculinity and sexuality. These consequences of social hostility may inhibit the development of couple relations.
The indirect responses are also important. Such responses are the ideologies and institutions found in the mainstream of society which provides expectations and models of appropriate behaviour and attitudes for members of that society, expectations and models which run counter to homosexuality. Among these stand out: the broad institutions of marriage and the family with its accompanying belief system of romantic love, familialism and coupling; gender variation associated with the ideology of ‘sexism’; and procreative sexuality linked to sex negativism – the belief that sexuality constitutes a powerful natural drive linked to procreation and in need of constant control. All of these raise problems for homosexuals. The belief that it is natural, obvious, better to live one’s life with a partner than without one is a taken-for-granted view that homosexuals have to confront. Status is given to the couple, suspicion is cast upon the single. All people should at least aspire towards these relationships even if they do not achieve them, and marriage, of course, is the norm. (In 1966 87.2 per cent of all people in England aged between thirty and forty were married.) As Ralph Turner commented:

Marriage is one of the key devices ... for validating personal adequacy, heterosexual normality and personal maturity. Learning this connection explicitly or implicitly, most individuals expect to become married on reaching maturity. Turning the relations around, they become anxious about their own adequacy, normality and maturity when marriage is unduly delayed.20

While other writers do not necessarily stress marriage, they place even more importance on couple relationships as a means of self-actualization, fulfillment, and as a condition for healthy development.21

To have a stable partner is perceived as normal and mature; not to have one as worrying and unhealthy. Such a powerful ideology provides a key motivational source for the homosexual to seek couple relationships. Clearly homosexuality must be viewed against this backdrop of ‘taken for granted’ beliefs, since they serve as a constant reminder to homosexuals of how the world ‘really is’. Homosexuals find themselves constantly, though perhaps dimly, reminded of the importance of love, marriage, family life, the proper roles of men and women and the importance of settling down with a mate. Such beliefs simultaneously shape their daily experiences. (Of course the context of homosexuality should not be seen simply as stable, consensual, clear and uniformly opposed to homosexuals and in favour of couples, sex negativism and sexism. Many changing, contradictory and often ambiguous responses to homosexuality exist, and what people are supposed to believe is not always mirrored by their actual beliefs, statements or behaviour.22)

In brief, the indirect elements instil in homosexuals a strong
desire for couple relationships: the direct homophobic elements restrict their ability to meet these socially induced desires.

The stages through which people go in their search for a homosexual mate illustrate this point. These stages may be divided into: (i) the motivation for a couple relationship; (ii) the initiation of a homosexual relationship; (iii) the establishment of the right type (that is, couple) relationship; and (iv) the maintenance of the relationship. Each of these stages involves fewer people. I will discuss each in turn.

**OBSTRUCTING GAY COUPLES**

(i) **Motivation:** As I have said, the problem of forming couples has its roots for homosexuals in the wider structure of society. A great deal of childhood play is concerned with preparing children for adult roles as husband and wife, father and mother. The educational system and the media reinforce these notions. It can be taken for granted that by adolescence any 'normal' male will wish to "act like a man", "find himself a girl", "settle down" and ultimately "have children". Such is the *leitmotiv* of most male members of the western world.

Again I am oversimplifying and do not wish to suggest total consensus. In a pluralistic society ambiguities surround many values and some individuals gain access to groups championing different norms and others reject values earlier supported. If homosexuals gain access to such beliefs many problems do not exist for them, and most recently such beliefs have been forcefully, if not originally, put by the Gay Liberation Front. As one respondent said to Westwood in 1959:

> The idea of romantic homosexual marriage is nonsense. The great advantage of homosexuality is the freedom it gives. To translate this into terms of marriage and fidelity is vulgar and bourgeois.23

Indeed, in a survey in which I took part in 1970, a quarter of some 2,000 male homosexuals interviewed were not sure they wanted homosexual love relationships lasting more than six months, and about 10 per cent said they did not want such a relationship at all. Such findings emphasize that the problem is not a universal one, and that couple formation is not universally subscribed to.

Nevertheless most homosexuals as well as heterosexuals probably do seek couple relationships. This motivation may be so strong that some homosexuals marry heterosexually; but others are committed to finding a homosexual mate. The problem of finding a mate is a central problem in the lives of many.24

The homosexual motivated to find a stable relationship soon finds the world running in reverse. The heterosexual is facilitated, almost dragooned, into such a relationship, the homosexual is typically thwarted. The settings in which he has to meet other homosexuals, start relationships and maintain them are not the conventional ones.

(ii) **Initiation:** Heterosexuals find access to potential partners almost anywhere. For homosexuals the search for lovers is made difficult by the need for secrecy and anonymity created by the perception of a hostile society. If a homosexual were to make advances to any man who interested him he would have to learn to cope well with ridicule, rebuff, rage or risk of life. Only the foolhardy, the stupid or the troublesome would take such actions. To find a partner becomes an arduous task, for he must either gain access to a pool of potential partners or to a repertoire of skills which allow him to 'sound out' people within the general population.

The existence of a gay subculture may provide him with potential partners and skills. But while the subculture is widespread, all homosexuals do not have instant or easy access to it. Many are not even aware of its existence, and others who are have difficulty locating it, particularly those men who live in rural areas where the subculture is less systematically organized. Many homosexuals thus spend their lives without effective interaction with other homosexuals and consequently with little chance of establishing a homosexual relationship. As one respondent wrote:

> I know that I could give so much to homosexual marriage with the correct partner, yet I am denied simply because I don't know where to begin. I am not ashamed of what I am, but desperate, un-
happy and very lonely because the social system prevents me from finding a young man in similar circumstances as myself...

Even access to the subculture by no means guarantees a permanent partner. Within the subculture courting rules may be ambiguous. For heterosexuals the tacit assumption is generally that the man will pursue the woman, while the woman will make symbolic gestures of encouragement. A novice in the gay world may not know who should make the first move, each participant leaving the opening move to the other. Once involved, tacit rules do operate and they have much in common with those of heterosexuals - the older usually approaches the younger, the less attractive approaches the more attractive. The novice may not know these rules and his early failures may lead him to withdraw from the subculture. Another difficulty with parallels in the heterosexual world is the fear of rejection.

I think the only aspect of their self which male homosexuals are able to adequately present in a bar situation is their physical appearance. If they are restricted in making a conversational opening, this is interpreted (probably correctly) to mean a rejection of that crucial part of themselves, namely their desirability as a sexual partner. Hence their self-esteem is very much at stake, and they have a great deal to lose by being rejected... in the Gay World the only criterion of value is physical attractiveness; consequently a rejection by a desired partner is a rejection of the only valued part of one's identity in that world. When we understand this, I think we understand why the fear of rejection is so prevalent among homosexual men.

I think Hoffman in this passage makes the sense of rejection too narrow, for some homosexuals feel generally rejected by society and suffer from a trauma of inadequacy as a result of seeing their entire lives defined as illegitimate. Homosexuals who believe themselves to be inadequate and rejected may be unable to believe that others could find them attractive or pleasant. They may make no approaches because they believe others would not respond. These beliefs may result in self-fulfilling prophecies: dull, nervous, shy, they may not be able to elicit responses, so confirming their own suspicions. A spiral which is hard to break may be set in motion, especially since success in gay bars and clubs is defined largely in terms of extrovert behaviour - camp humour, drinking, dancing. In this sense, such people are objective failures in the gay world, where shyness and insecurity progressively weaken the chances of initiating relationships.

That other factors inhibit relationships even when homosexuals do have access to the subculture should not be overstated, for once the norms are familiar less risk is attached to making advances and the problems recede with success. Lack of success does, however, mean that many homosexuals leave the homosexual world disillusioned with its ability to provide a partner.

(iii) Establishing a Relationship: For heterosexuals, most boy-girl meetings are seen as bases from which couple relationships could develop; for homosexuals most relationships are seen as transient unless there are good grounds for believing otherwise. At least two factors contribute to these transient relationships. Firstly, the way in which the gay world is structured so that people meet each other primarily as sex objects, and secondly, the norms generated in the gay world partly as a defence against threats from the 'straight' world and partly as a positive response to a new situation.

First, then, people in the gay world often have virtually nothing in common but their homosexuality and their role as sexual outcasts. Heterosexual lovers may meet in many places, places associated with many interests other than sexual ones. The college boy is likely to find a college girl, the religious devotee another religious devotee, the ballroom champion another ballroom champion. The gay world does not provide this diversity - many classes, age groups, races, occupations, nationalities and interest groups gather together in homosexual bars and meeting places, with little in common except their homosexuality and their oppression. Relationships embarked upon will probably be between partners who differ greatly in social background and will function on the basis of limited traits such as youth and beauty, traits not typically leading to permanent relationships when not associated with reciprocal interests.

Of course, for homosexuals to meet others with similar inter-
ess is possible, but in homosexual bars the basis of most relationships is sex. Were homosexuality more acceptable and homosexual groups based on non-sexual criteria, the chances of meeting partners on other than purely sexual grounds would, of course, be increased. Over recent years a range of specific interest groups within the homosexual world have emerged. The Gay Liberation Movement brings together many with common links in the universities, third world movements, and so forth, while more specific groups such as the Gay Marxist Study Group, The Gay Christian Movement, the Jewish Homophile Group and the Gay Librarians group have already started to bring together many common interests.

Secondly, the existing norms of the gay world encourage transient relationships. The assumption is that a relationship embarked upon with a stranger will quickly result in sex and an anonymous departure. These norms may be explained firstly as a defence strategy, highlighting some of the areas most at risk for homosexuals in their relationship with the wider society.

A homosexual's masculinity is made an issue for him by society. In this culture to be sexual is valued if one is a man; to be emotional is devalued if one is a real man. Thus, by accentuating the sexual side of his life and divorcing it from the emotional, a homosexual can protect himself from the loss of his masculine identity from and to self-conception as deviant. As Horowitz remarks, 'Men regard sexual acts as less deviant than a male--male tenderness.'

A homosexual also has his total identity put at risk by society. He may choose to avoid being seen by others as a homosexual and thinking of himself in this way. He may give accounts of himself which suggest that he is not really a homosexual. However, embarking on a love affair and living with another homosexual means a daily confrontation with evidence of his homosexuality. Engaging in casual relationships renders the risk to self-conception less. The norms again serve to protect him.

Norms, however, are not only reactions and defences. They are also the consequence of constructive activities by the gay world where a release from dominant norms of society is seized upon as an opportunity for building up alternative ones. No universal linkage exists between sex, love and marriage; such linkages are socially constructed. The relationships among these three institutions may be highly functional for the smooth flow of this society, but the benefits may not accrue to all groups. The procreation and rearing of children may make the linkage a highly functional one, but when children are not an issue the linkage may be dysfunctional, in as much as it may limit the potential for loving outside of sexual relationships and limit the range of sexual experience. Homosexuals, divorced from routine sexual meanings, are in a position to actively explore and create alternatives.

(10) Maintaining a Relationship: Even when homosexuals establish couple relationships many factors work to break them up, a fact equally true of heterosexual relationships. Sociologists studying the family have produced long lists of factors which correlate with family/marital breakdown. But while dissimilar backgrounds, non-religious homes, incongruent attitudes, premarital petting and even lack of a church wedding may be associated with the demise of both heterosexual and homosexual couples, homosexuals may more readily part company than heterosexuals. As Altman notes, 'A bad “homosexual marriage” is likely to be dissolved far more easily than a bad “straight” one.'

Homosexual affairs probably dissolve speedily firstly because the relationship is given little validation or recognition by the outside (heterosexual) world and, secondly, because the gay world itself poses threats.

Heterosexual marriage involves formal institutions, the gay couple does not. The law does not protect it, nor does the church give it its blessing ‘till death do us part’. Family, community and society, if not outrightly hostile, refuse to recognize the couple as a unit. The break-up of a couple after many years together may be seen by outsiders simply as a decision to move flats; the tax man grants no relief; hospitals do not recognize partners as ‘next-of-kin’ in emergencies; observers look mockingly or
violently upon homosexuals kissing each other goodbye; hotel
keepers refuse to give a double bed to two men; heterosexual
colleagues and friends ignore the existence of a partner in a way that
would be offensive to heterosexual couples.

The scarcity of homosexual couples and the taken-for-
granted norms of transient relationships mean that the common
assumption is that all homosexuals are available for sex unless
proven otherwise. A homosexual in a bar who does not show
obvious signs of ‘being with someone’ is assumed ‘open’ and
‘available’ to all. In contrast, among heterosexuals over a certain
age, individuals are often assumed unavailable unless proven
otherwise. If contact is maintained with the homosexual world,
this risk to the couple is constantly present. Should homo-
sexuals detach themselves from the reified, abstract meaning of
coupling, a meaning which suggests that for couple relation-
ships to survive ‘promiscuous’ sexual relationships should be
avoided, they could experience both casual sexual relationships
in the gay world and stable couple relationships outside it. But
as long as they believe that casual sex precludes stability and
that sexuality must be associated with exclusivity, they are faced
with the dilemma of being unable to enjoy transient sex because
it is unstable and being unable to enjoy stable sex because of
unfaithfulness. The inability of many homosexuals to divorce
themselves from the constraints of the heterosexual culture
places many relationships under severe strain.

A further threat to stable relationships is posed by the very
fact that homosexuals can afford to be more idealistic in their
pursuit of a mate than heterosexuals. Homosexuals do not
have to ‘settle down by their mid-twenties’ and ‘make the most
of it’ when they do. A homosexual may find a lover and settle
down for a few months, only to discover that his mate is not
ideal and depart to find another. Stable lovers are desperately
sought, only to be dropped through unlimited aspirations.

NINE GAY COUPLES: GETTING ROUND PROBLEMS

Some homosexuals do, of course, circumvent the problems I
have outlined; some homosexuals do meet outside the gay
world and do develop stable relationships. The following dis-
cussion centres primarily on nine couples I interviewed between
1969 and 1970. The couples all lived in London and had been
together for at least three years. Two couples had spent over
twenty years together. Both partners in eight of the couples had
full-time occupations and only one of these occupations could
be termed unskilled. Among the occupations were lawyer,
doctor, professional musician, social worker, clergyman, lec-
turer, journalist. In age, they varied from early twenties to
mid-sixties and with the exception of one couple with an age dif-
fERENCE of twenty years partners were of similar age. Some had
been active in the homosexual world from an early age; others
had their first significant homosexual experience with their part-
ner and revealed an almost total ignorance of the sub-culture.
Clearly such a small sample allows no valid generalizations to
be made, though I have tried to draw some limited conclusions
from these examples.

Initiation: The men met under a variety of circumstances. Only
three couples met during involvements with the homosexual
world, another three met at work, one at a ‘straight’ party, an-
other through a pen-pal column in Woman’s Own, and another
was a priest who met his future partner while parish visiting.
Most met in routine heterosexual situations and the relationship
was not immediately seen as a homosexual one.

Establishing a Couple: Since they mostly met in routine situa-
tions outside the gay world they did not encounter the ex-
pectation of a transient relationship. Instead, many had been
strongly influenced by the ‘romantic love’ ideology of the domi-
nant culture.

I saw this rather dishy creature. He was playing in the first orchestra,
and I was playing in the second. I thought, that’s nice, but obviously
straight. I avoided looking at him at first, because I thought he’d beat
me over the head. Then during the performance I noticed he was
staring at me madly, so I sort of stared back, and by half way through
the performance we were falling about laughing. Absolutely hopeless.
In the evening I had to tear off, so I threw my pay packet at him
with my name and address, and lo and behold he rang me the following day. I never doubted from that moment on that this was it — I know it sounds silly ... (23-year-old with a 3-year relationship)

The first two months were rather like poetry books, all hearts and flowers. We didn't know any other people. (37-year-old with a 9-year relationship)

We were both cruising around (Pub) ... and looked at each other. We were both infatuated — we were ideal for each other. He was everything I sort of cared about, still is for that matter ... (23-year-old with a 3-year relationship)

In this last case the encounter did take place in a homosexual bar, though both participants were new to the homosexual world (the first and second time respectively that they had been to a bar) and they were naïve about 'gay life' and had not had time to encounter the norms of transciency.

Some were slow to define their relationships as permanent. One couple met at work during their teens but did not acknowledge each other's homosexuality for fifteen years and did not settle down together till five years after that. At the time of the interview they had been together for about ten years and were convinced that a 'soul mate' is never found by looking, 'he just comes along'. Another couple took six months to discover and interpret the nature of their relationship, as did a further couple who met in a public convenience. The report on the interview with them reads:

They met in the gent's lavatory at Marylebone station, where both were 'courting' in adjacent cubicles. There was the usual 'hole-in-the-wall' and exchange of notes. They began in a very casual fashion. Peter wasn't looking consciously for an affair, but there was a distinct hope that it might happen one day. They began living together after six months of casual meetings ... The initial feeling on Peter's part was that they could both benefit from a settled affair. Peter was from the first 'inordinately fond of his partner', and now, after seven years of intimacy, 'can't bear to think of life without him'.

A number of couples commented that they were not actively seeking love partners when they met. One man in his late twenties, who had never previously had a homosexual relation-

ship and had not defined himself as a homosexual, commented on his meeting with his partner:

I didn't plan it at all. Although I think I knew at this time [that I was a homosexual], I hated queers. I didn't go for his sort of thing at all.

Another remarked that finding a partner was the reverse of his expectations — 'It was against everything that I'd planned. I had wanted a father figure, but found a son.' On the other hand, one man said he had found his partner — with whom he had been living for twenty years — after a period of chronic depression and during a phase in his life when he was actively searching for a man to love and to share his life.

Seven of the couples had sex within a matter of weeks of meeting, the others at the first meeting. Most settled down to live together within six months, many within a few days.

Maintaining a Relationship: These couples had evolved two strategies to cope with threats from the homosexual world. Firstly, having non-exclusive relationships — most had developed rules which allowed partners to have sexual relationships with other men — and, secondly, withdrawal from the gay world. I will look at each in turn.

Only two couples professed fidelity. The others had experienced a range of sexual relationships, varying from long-term emotional commitments to other men through to more casual and impersonal sexual relationships. One couple, together for ten years, described how they had evolved long-standing love affairs with other men which did not threaten their relationship:

Frank: The first two months were rather like poetry books, all hearts and flowers. We didn't know any other people. In 1962 we went to Canada and had an agreement not to be jealous. But I was jealous. He had an affair but got bored ... Later, when we returned to London I picked up a chap in Piccadilly and I stopped feeling jealous ... We have sex occasionally now. For the physical side I have a West Indian friend from Brixton who is married with six kids. John [the partner] also has an affair but neither
threatens our relationship. I get an occasional spark of jealousy...

John: On Monday evening Frank had his lover boy in—who I think is an adorable bloke, I think he's wonderful, the most darling man, top of the pops in anybody's book. Well, he comes here and we all get on like a house on fire...

This couple had accepted a non-exclusive relationship, feeling this was possible only because they were completely honest and open with each other.

For us honesty is the be all and end all... and not just about sex—about everything. If we hadn't been honest it would have broken up ages ago...

The first time one of them had a sexual relationship with somebody else had led to a serious crisis, but their ability to withstand this and to evolve a strategy for coping with further ones seemed to have strengthened their relationship.

Another couple, with twenty years' difference in their ages, had accommodated additional sexual relationships almost from the beginning. (Most couples seem to have a short period of absolute fidelity.) When they met, one was in his early twenties and the other in his forties. That the younger would find other partners nearer his own age seemed likely, and this was, indeed, the case. The older partner described how the younger often came home to cry on his shoulder about some of his short-term affairs with men of his own age. But during the twenty years of their relationship neither partner had doubted its permanence.

Recently sexual activity with others had declined in frequency and the older partner wanted his friend to find another permanent partner so that all three could settle down together. Such an arrangement was desired because of their age difference and possible because of the nature of their relationship: not a threat, a third party would ensure a less lonely old age for the younger man when his older partner died.

Not all additional relationships were so permanent as these. One couple allowed each other sexual activity with strangers, providing it was kept out of their home. Nor did they tell each other of their activities, which should be not only out of sight but limited to a 'one night stand'. Yet another partner had several friends with whom he had sexual relationships from time to time. During my field work several more limited contacts also commented on how they remained emotionally faithful to their lovers but could have sexual relationships with others providing no affection was displayed. For example, they would not kiss other men, nor go to bed with them, and did not even want to know their names. Intimacies of this kind were reserved for the lover.

The two couples who had developed rules about fidelity and appeared to abide by them were uninvolved in the homosexual world. As I suggested earlier, the second main strategy for protecting stable relationships is withdrawal from the gay subculture. My own observations on this point corroborate those of a field worker in America, Sonnenschein, who wrote:

It was constantly observed in the subject community that as soon as any two individuals entered into a sexual or socio-sexual relationship that was hoped to last for any period of time, these individuals rapidly withdrew from the activity of the community and decreased their participation in group affairs regardless of how active or popular they were before: the institutions that were more conducive to sexual interaction were particularly avoided.\[9\]

The couples may still go to 'gay places' but become less involved than formerly. None of the nine couples had any great involvement in the bar scene in London, though two did go occasionally. Most did have contact with other homosexuals (often other couples), and sometimes this contact had increased since they settled down. But knowing a network of other homosexuals is not the same as regularly frequenting bars and clubs, and none of the respondents did this. Most commented that they found such places 'fickle' and 'pseudo'.

If homosexual couples have to work hard to protect themselves from the gay world, they have to work harder to counterbalance the lack of support that heterosexual couples would receive. Heterosexual married couples may have difficulty finding homes, but they can apply to local councils and may be able to raise a mortgage together. Homosexuals, in common with other unmarried couples, have the same problems of finding a
home, but greater difficulty in applying to councils or getting joint mortgages. (One respondent gave an elaborate account of the refusals of various building societies to give him and his partner a joint mortgage.)

Roles allotted to men and women in marriage often have a clear demarcation, but for gay couples the problem of who cooks, shops, does the housework, and pays the bills, has to be carefully worked out. Most of the nine couples merged such tasks rather than adopting conventional role divisions. Ownership rights presented further difficulties. If a home is furnished jointly, whose property is it in law? One couple had made a list of their respective purchases so that they would know who owned what, should they part company. If one partner dies without leaving a will, his property would by right go to the nearest kin, which could never be the lover. One couple felt strongly about this:

If somebody dies, the family would come along to see what they could get. And we didn’t want either to be left in the position of having to cope with families saying ‘Well, he was our brother’ or ‘We should legally get it’. We’d say ‘bulls’: the family means less to us than our relationship. I mean, after all, we’re man and wife.

Families could also cause problems in other ways. A simple act like sending a wreath signed by both partners to the funeral of a deceased mother caused uproar around the grave and a great deal of ill-feeling. The couples were unable to talk over problems with their families, colleagues or friends, nor even ask their neighbours for help if the partner was ill. The author of a homosexual novel portrays these difficulties when he writes about saying goodbye to his lover on board a ship:

As you turn away, you feel his hand squeeze your arm. But you mustn’t stop; if you do, you won’t be able to help yourself from suddenly blubbing like a big kid. And that won’t do... Everybody else that’s normal, they can blub away and fall over each other as much as they like. But you – you’ve just got to stand there and make yourself look as though it’s only a business acquaintance or someone who’s going away. You can’t show anything; people would only sneer if you did, sneer and jeer their little pinched souls out, laughing at you. That’s why you’ve got to get away... you [must] fight back those bloody tears in your eyes. Maybe if anyone does see you, they’ll just think you’re losing a wife or a sweetheart or someone. Maybe it’ll never occur to them that a man can love another man – yes, sexually and all – because they’re taught and told it’s something you can’t do. The hell you can’t. So they’d never guess that for you it’s just like the end of the world.38

Such problems prove stumbling blocks in the way of stable relationships, though paradoxically, they may also strengthen some. For many heterosexual liaisons may be routine, not rapture, but homosexuals who are challenged at every point must often give a fuller consideration to what they are doing. They have to think about their relationships with the community, to work out a relationship with their families, to consider carefully the roles they will play. None of these can be taken for granted, the meanings and rules which govern their relationships must be consciously constructed.

The presence of children is often thought to be a central stabilizing influence in marriage. While childless couples (about 10 per cent of married couples) tend to score more highly on marital adjustment scales than couples without children, they are represented in the divorcing population about two to three times more frequently than in the married population generally.39 Childless couples may expend the time and emotions otherwise occupied by children on other things. At present, male homosexual couples cannot have children, but the couples I interviewed had strong, time-consuming interests in common – similar occupations, music, the local church – which may have partially compensated for the lack of children.

No real contradiction exists between the difficulties of couple formation I have outlined and the existence of such relationships, for, once under way, nothing succeeds like success. Commitments are built up by which it becomes increasingly easy to stay together and increasingly costly to part. Obstacles mastered together add strength and stability; two separate lives develop a mutual reality of common history, common friends, a common home, making return to individual roles increasingly difficult. Or, as one man more basically put it:

Another bloke couldn’t break us up because I’m much too lazy to go and start all over again.
Whether it be through love, laziness or simply a desire to remain a couple in a society where the single are devalued, many relationships are viewed as permanent:

I can't bear to think of life without him.

I need it. I need someone solid, otherwise I just get ever so lost without someone firm, someone to lean on ...

It would have been difficult after a few years to split up. The world would have crashed around us.

There has never really been a danger of us breaking up. We need each other as emotional props. We are not like two persons, we are one person ...

I couldn't see our love fading now. We have a mature love and although the initial sexual attraction has continued, our love no longer depends on sex to feed it ...

I'm not the same person I was. I don't have to go out trolling to get sex ... I don't have to waste time doing all that ... I've got a settled permanent base, I've got somebody to talk to. There's nothing else I need. Whereas before I had nothing ...

THE FUTURE OF GAY COUPLES

Given the changes occurring in this society two things seem probable: first, gay couples may become more frequent, more accepted and more institutionalized; and second, gay couples will take on a wider range of forms.

An Increase in Couples?: I have suggested that the pervasiveness of couples and of marriage instills in homosexuals a strong need to seek couple relationships, while the widespread hostility towards homosexuals serves to inhibit the development of such relationships. Recent changes in these areas could have important consequences. Marriage and diversified forms of couple relationships are increasingly popular among heterosexuals, and attitudes towards homosexuals seem to be becoming less harsh.

Given these changes, stable homosexual relationships should become more frequent and more recognized, since the motivation for them is strengthened while the obstacle of hostility is decreased.

There is some evidence that these changes are already occurring. Recently there has been much discussion within the homosexual community about the possibility of homosexual marriage - the feasibility of legal contracts, religious ceremonies and even the adoption of children. As I have already said, ceremonies of 'marriage' have been held in America, Canada and England. Now computer dating, introduction agencies and 'marriage' counselling services for homosexuals have been introduced. Such issues are not only being raised within the gay community, but discussion of homosexual couples now has a legitimate part in more academic discussions of marriage and couples. Popular bestsellers, like Alvin Toffler's Future Shock, suggests that 'homosexual family units' are one of the future paths the family will take. As Toffler writes:

As homosexuality becomes more socially acceptable, we may even begin to find families based on homosexual marriages with the partners adopting children.38

Since social science knowledge can never exist apart from the social world of which it is a part, these very discussions may actually add to the legitimacy of the processes they describe.

More Forms for Gay Couples?: The meanings attached to couples and to marriage among heterosexuals are themselves becoming increasingly diversified, ambiguous and changing - a simple consensual portrait of men and women acting out gender roles in the romantic love context of a 'till death do us part' family is insufficient. Studies of alternatives to orthodox families have recently occupied many social scientists. Many of these writers, in claiming that orthodox families are a thing of the past and in predicting new forms for the future, themselves create a context where change becomes plausible even if not yet with us. As Gagnon and Simon have commented:

Significant social change does not come about only when there have been changes in overt behaviour patterns. The moment of change
may simply be the point at which new forms of behaviour appear plausible.⁴⁸

Some changes have already occurred. The increasing possibility of divorce has tacitly rendered precarious the meanings of marriage as ‘life-long’, ‘natural’ or ‘inevitable’. Marriage is now a contract which may be more easily broken if required. Large numbers of ‘parents without partners’—divorced, deserted, widowed and never married people with children—demonstrate that in America, for example, quite substantial numbers of the population are already living something different from ‘orthodox family lives’.⁴⁹ More polemically, a range of alternative life-styles are being suggested by a wide range of people. So we read of the importance of childless families; the growth of ‘two stage marriage’—one stage without children, one with; the increase of ‘mate swapping’ as a mechanism for sustaining the family while bringing change into it; the erosion of gender roles and the arrival of the ‘radical feminists’ and the ‘manipulated man’; the role played by youth in creating the new families of the future through a ‘new humanism’ in which communes of great diversity and tolerance are established; post-retirement child-rearing and geriatric group marriages.⁵¹

Homosexuals are embedded in this pluralistic and changing context and their experiences must obviously be affected by it. While some may pursue more conventional closed ‘marriages’, others will experiment with and embrace new life styles. Arguably, homosexuals, released from the responsibilities of children, are in a position to facilitate experimentation and exploration of new life styles: homosexuals may be acting out today what society may routinely script tomorrow. However, any claim that they are leading the way in this respect is, I think, wishful thinking on the part of some homosexuals, for their desire for concealment and anonymity has also concealed their innovative styles. Only recently have homosexuals been willing to be publicly recognized and to make their own life styles available for analysis.⁵² Rather than leading the development of new styles, homosexuals have been led by them—the discussion of alternatives, life in communes and so forth have created preconditions for gay people to ‘come out’ and consequently provided them with rhetorics which they now often adopt as their own. But although they may not have instigated the changes, they are now amongst the most articulate spokesmen for them.

Of these spokesmen, the Gay Liberation Front in its diverse groupings has been the most sophisticated, and one quick to condemn the emulation by gay people of heterosexual marriage. As one American liberalist wrote:

Homosexual marriage submitting to the guidelines of so-called conventional rites must be classed as reactionary. The gay lib movement does not need these kinds of tactics. We’re involved in rational warfare, not irrational. Now, don’t you agree it isn’t relevant to gay liberation when we start imitating meaningless, bad habits of our oppressors and begin instituting them? That isn’t the freedom we want. That isn’t our liberation. That isn’t the equality we want. And that ain’t revolutionary…⁵³

Perhaps the London Gay Liberation Front Manifesto Group, writing in 1971, put the simplest yet most coherent view of what conventional couple formation means and some of the alternatives to it. It is a provocative place on which to end this article—and one which captures my personal beliefs. They wrote:

We do not deny that it is as possible for gay couples as for some straight couples to live happily and constructively together. We question however as an ideal, the finding and settling down eternally with one ‘right’ partner. This is a blueprint of the straight world which gay people have taken over. It is inevitably a parody, since they haven’t even the justification of straight couples—the need to provide a stable environment for their children (though in any case we believe that the suffocating small family unit is by no means the best atmosphere for bringing up children).

Monogamy is usually based on ownership—the woman sells her services to the man in return for security for herself and her children—and is entirely bound up in the man’s idea of property; furthermore in our society the monogamous couple, with or without children, is an isolated shut-in, up-tight unit, suspicious of and hostile to outsiders. And though we don’t lay down rules or tell gay people how they should behave in bed or in their relationships, we do want
them to question society's blueprint for the couple. The blueprint says 'we two against the world' and that can be protective and comforting. But it can also be suffocating, leading to neurotic dependence and underlying hostility, the emotional dishonesty of staying in the comfy safety of the home and garden, the security and narrowness of life built for two, with the secret guilt of fancying someone else while remaining in thrall to the idea that true love lasts a lifetime - as though there were a ration of relationships, and to want more than one were greedy. Not that sexual fidelity is necessarily wrong; what is wrong is the unturned emotional exclusiveness of the couple which stunts the partners so they can no longer operate at all as independent beings in society. People need a variety of relationships in order to develop and grow, and to learn about other human beings.

It is especially important for gay people to stop copying straight - we are the ones who have the best opportunities to create a new life-style and if we don't, no one else will. Also, we need one another more than straight people do, because we are equals suffering under an insidious oppression from a society too primitive to come to terms with the freedom we represent. Singly, or isolated in couples, we are weak - the way society wants us to be. Society cannot put us down so easily if we fuse together. We have to get together, understand one another, live together.44

9. Couples, Constraints and Choices

Individuals involved in different kinds of sexual relationships find them acceptable or satisfying to different degrees. More personal relations are not necessarily more comfortable; personal experience is as likely to be divisive as to be cohesive, to produce conflict as to produce harmony. Joint activities and decisions, the sharing of household tasks, may attest to the closeness of some relations, but for some wives their husband's involvement in domestic chores and decisions results only in a feeling that they have no area of life which they control, no field of expertise they can call their own. Husbands and wives who see little of each other may decry the fact or appreciate the freedom it allows for each to ignore the other; married couples surrounded by friends and relatives may find these as much a source of irritation and interference as of aid and companionship; those without may feel cut off and deprived or enjoy the relative privacy of their marital life.

Gay liberation and women's liberation movements attest to a growing feeling, however, that individuals should be free from constraints imposed by social attitudes to gender. Both movements want to ensure that the positions people achieve and the social relations they develop are not determined by these attitudes. They also want to liberate sexual behaviour itself from ideas about propriety and perversion, leaving people free to pursue their sexual interests and inclinations as they choose.

In general, liberation has been aimed mainly at impersonal structures, perhaps because we think of social constraints primarily in terms of rules, morals, norms, more or less explicit ideas about what should or should not be done, all of which are