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Rose, S. (2000). Love. In B. Zimmerman (Ed.), *Lesbian Life and Culture* (pp. 480–482). New York: Garland.

## **Love**

Intense affection, sexual passion, or deep devotion. Love poetry and letters constitute the earliest written evidence of love between women. Poetry has been used to express the passion, turmoil, and tenderness of lesbian love throughout the ages, beginning with Sappho (ca. 600 B.C.E.). Love letters were a second major means of communicating a transgressive love and have provided the basis for understanding the rise of romantic friendships in the United States from the eighteenth century to the early twentieth century. Women in romantic friendships, also known as Boston marriages, avowed a deep, abiding love for each other, although the extent to which the relationships included a sexual dimension is uncertain. Multiple positive images of lesbian love evolved in the late twentieth century, paralleling the development of a modern lesbian

community. These images celebrated the sensuality, intensity, danger, and comfort of love between women. Concurrent with women's own accounts of love, lesbian love also has been stereotyped as depraved, sick, or titillating in religious, medical, and pornographic representations.

## **Characterizations of Lesbian Love**

Research on lesbian love in Western societies has found that choice, equality, intimacy, sensuality, and independence are highly characteristic of and valued in lesbian relationships, although individual variations exist (Peplau, 1993). Lesbians generally make a free, affectionally based choice of partners. Equality is enhanced by the equal gender status of partners

and feminist values that emphasize the importance of equity in relationships. Female gender socialization contributes to high levels of intimacy, including the desire to have an emotionally close and relatively secure love relationship. Sensuality encompasses physical affection, as well as explicit erotic acts. Independence refers to the high level of personal autonomy preferred by many lesbians, including having separate interests, friendships, and earnings.

Variation in the strength of particular elements may be associated with specific outcomes in lesbian love relationships. Couples who emphasize choice, equality, and intimacy may seek stable, close monogamous relationships. A pattern of high intimacy and low independence in couples has been associated with "fusion" or "merger," or the problem some lesbians have with maintaining a separate identity when they are in a couple. High levels of intimacy may contribute to a low rate of sexual desire or activity, also known as "lesbian bed death." If both intimacy and independence are highly valued, a pattern of serial monogamy or nonmonogamy may result, with high independence making it possible for lesbians to seek a more satisfying relationship if expectations for intimacy are not met.

### Lesbian Love Scripts

Three primary lesbian love scripts have emerged in the United States since the 1960s: friendship/companionate, romantic, and erotic. A script represents a cognitive schema concerning why, when, where, how, and with whom one should love, as prescribed by the individual's culture. Lesbian love scripts have been derived partly from heterosexual love scripts and partly from social norms as represented in lesbian popular culture, such as fiction and comedy. The three scripts are distinguished by the different emphasis each places on intimacy, sexuality, and commitment.

The friendship, or companionate, love script among lesbians combines feelings of deep attachment, intimacy, and commitment, with little or no emphasis placed on sexuality. It is highly valued by some lesbians because it promotes equality and is a preferred courtship script, particularly in first relationships. If friendship is not present prior to sexual involvement, lesbians generally act quickly to establish one. The priority given friendship love also is shown by a frequently expressed fear that becoming sexual with a friend might jeopardize the friendship.

The romantic love script combines emotional intimacy and sexual attraction. An emotional or sexual

awakening aroused by the beloved is a key component of the lesbian romantic love script. An intense longing for union with the loved one, if reciprocated, is associated with ecstasy and fulfillment. Separation or unrequited romantic love elicits feelings of anxiety and despair. During courtship, the intensity of romantic love can be increased by cultural barriers to lesbian love and the uncertainty of a new relationship.

The erotic love, or sexually explicit, script celebrates the active pursuit of sexual pleasure and variety. Sensuality and lust motivate the connection, rather than feelings associated with romantic or friendship love, such as duty, anxiety, or jealousy. Initiation of the relationship is direct and goal oriented. Erotic love scripts sometimes explicitly include role playing to stimulate desire, including butch-femme or sadomasochistic roles. In long-term erotic relationships, a friendship may be established but is not intertwined with the sexual component as it is in the case of romantic love.

Love scripts may be fluid, with changes in preferred script occurring over the course of a relationship or the life span. Friendship or erotic love may develop into romantic love or vice versa. The sexual component of romantic and erotic love declines substantially for most couples after two years; even so, most lesbians report high levels of sexual satisfaction and orgasm in relationships. Friendship love appears to remain strong even when a romantic or an erotic relationship has ended, accounting for the phenomenon among many lesbians of having ex-lovers as friends and extended family. Scripts also may overlap. In romantic friendships or Boston marriages, lesbians are highly committed to each other and view themselves as a couple but are asexual. Finally, love scripts are not mutually exclusive. For example, a lesbian might have an erotic and a romantic relationship with different partners simultaneously.

Little research has been conducted about the effect age, race, class, or disability have on lesbian love in Western, industrial societies. A majority of white lesbians fall in love with partners who are similar on these dimensions. Most also tend to choose partners based on companionate traits rather than physical beauty and to emphasize the importance of emotional connection over sexual intimacy. Lesbians of color appear to follow a similar pattern in terms of partner choice but often describe having to subordinate their lesbian desires to maintain the support of their own ethnic community. Barriers to love reported by interracial couples include societal and internalized racism and negative reactions from family and community.

**L** Although heterosexist cultural scripts had a strong influence on lesbian love scripts in the past, new themes introduced in the late twentieth century are having an impact, including increased gender blending of individual identity and roles, debates about same-sex parenting and marriage, the salience of race and culture in defining relationships, and the importance of extended friendship networks as a chosen family for lesbians. These themes are likely to result in the evolution of future love scripts that are more clearly lesbian defined. *Suzanna Rose*

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***See also*** Boston Marriage; Butch-Femme; Couples; Friendship; Monogamy and Nonmonogamy; Romantic Friendship; Sadomasochism; Sexuality

