

## Intimacy and Sexuality in Gay Male Couples

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*In a study of 320 men (20 to 77 years) in gay relationships, data were gathered on verbal, physical, and emotional intimacy and on sexual aspects of relationship functioning. Independent of relationship duration and partners' age, emotional intimacy predicts relationship satisfaction the best. Sexual satisfaction is best predicted by low sexual distance. Sexual frequency is best predicted by sexual satisfaction. Data analysis indicates that young gay men value emotional aspects of their relationship more than older gay men do. The attitude towards sexual encounters one partner has is related to his actual number of sexual partners and to his partner's attitude.*

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**KEY WORDS:** homosexuality; intimate relationships; sexuality; intimacy; relationship duration.

A shift in attention from an individual psychological perspective on gay men towards a relationship oriented one has been proposed (DeCecco and Shively, 1984). In the ethnographic study of the gay world by Hoffman (1968), the individual psychological approach is still predominant. His main thesis was that as long as homosexuality is condemned by society, it is impossible for gay men to develop intimate relationships. Ten years later, Bell and Weinberg (1978) classified men according to their sexual life-style and whether they had a partner. This classification proved useful in epidemiological research on the prevalence and incidence of sexually transmitted diseases. One must reconsider, however, using prevalence of sexuality as the main theme in nonepidemiological research. Deenen (1992) showed that in the period of 1960–1990 scientific interest in sexual tech-

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niques and sexual intimacy declined significantly, while the concepts of intimacy, love, and attachment became more important in research into gay male relationships. This shift from sexuality towards intimacy also occurs in the behavior and experiences of heterosexual men (Vennix, 1985; Whitbourne and Ebmeyer, 1990).

Intimacy and sexuality may be related in several ways. First, intimacy and sexuality may be independent (Duffy and Rusbult, 1986). Intimacy and sexuality may also be negatively related. Tripp (1975), for example, thought that for men intimate and sexual experiences were not to match. Finally, both intimacy and sexuality may depend on relationship duration, an idea developed by McWhirter and Mattison (1984). Their theory indicates that as relationships last, intimacy grows while sexuality declines. Although the number of sexual partners grows, the couple stays together for reasons of grown emotional intimacy. This model has become very popular among clinical practitioners. Just like relationship functioning, sexual satisfaction may be related to relationship satisfaction. In Duffy and Rusbult (1986), however, sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction are only minimally related. This questions the relative importance of sexual aspects in relationships. As relationships last, emotional and sexual experiences and their importance for relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction may change (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983).

There are some indications that changes in the Dutch social climate concerning sexuality and homosexuality influence the way men experience their sexual relationships. In the period of 1965–1975, attitudes concerning sexuality as well as sexual behavior itself have changed (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau [SCP], 1988, 1992; van Zessen and Sandfort, 1991). Grown tolerance for premarital sexual contacts and homosexuality went along with a decline in the age of first sexual contact. The age of self-identification as homosexual declined (Deenen and van Naerssen, 1988). This may result in young men differing from older men in the ways they value aspects of their relationships.

To examine the way that age, relationship duration, sexual, and intimate experiences are related to relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction, we tested the following presumptions:

1. Intimate and sexual experiences are negatively related.
2. Intimate and sexual experiences are related to relationship duration.
3. Factors predicting relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, sexual frequency, and sexual encounters differ according to relationship duration and age.

## METHOD

### Subjects

Data were gathered by means of an anonymous questionnaire sent to 229 gay couples. Subjects responded to appeals in two national and two provincial papers, three gay magazines of national Dutch political parties, and one national gay magazine in the winter of 1988–1989. By that time the Dutch social climate concerning homosexuality had grown quite positive. In 1968, 64% of the Dutch thought homosexuals should be free to live their own lives; in 1975, 83% agreed; in 1980, 93% agreed. Since the outbreak of AIDS, tolerance increased to 95% (SCP, 1992). In 1988 there were 322 AIDS-infected persons (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek [CBS], 1992). Each partner received his own questionnaire and postage-paid envelope. Compared to other research on gay relationships (cf. Kurdek, 1988), the number of 320 participants who completed and returned the questionnaire is large (70%). There were 156 couples participating and 8 men whose partners did not respond. The group is heterogeneous in relationship duration (10 to 446 months), age (20–77 years), living arrangements (69% live with their current partner), and sexual life-styles. Partners differ 5 years in age on average. The average relationship duration is 8.2 years. Of the men, 75% are nonreligious and 56% live in the nine major Dutch cities. In the Dutch society at large (15 million inhabitants), 67% are church members and 19% live in the nine major cities (CBS, 1988).

To facilitate internal comparisons, subjects were divided into three nearly equal-sized groups of relationship duration (10–39 months,  $n = 88$ ; 40–119,  $n = 138$ ; 120–446,  $n = 93$ ), or into three age groups (20–30 years,  $n = 89$ ; 31–39,  $n = 126$ ; 40–77,  $n = 103$ ). Men in relationships of short duration are on average 30 years of age, of medium duration 36 years, and of long duration 45 years.

### Measures

The questionnaire covered diverse aspects of an intimate relationship. Most items were derived from: Parelman (1983) Emotional Intimacy; Vennix (1983) Physical Intimacy; Buunk and Bosman (1980) Verbal Intimacy; Deenen (1986) and Schreurs (1990) Shared Activities; Vennix (1983) Sexual Experiences; Buunk (1990), Buunk and Bosman (1980) Relationship Satisfaction and Sexual Satisfaction, while for Sexual Encounters Outside the Relationship new items were constructed. Since these items and scales were not primarily developed for gay relationships, items were factor-ana-

lyzed (varimax rotation) to construct new scales. The consequent dimensions were only used as scales if Cronbach's alpha was sufficient ( $\alpha > .60$ ). Items referring to sexual experiences appeared to form the scales: sexual affection (spiritual attraction), sexual emotional exclusivity (sexual fantasies, sex is valuable, monogamy), sexually belonging together (mutual possessiveness), sexual distance (spiritual disinterest), sexual domination (being in charge), sexually being dominated (follow his lead). Examples of the items are shown in Table I. Table II presents the scale's statistical information.

## RESULTS

Table II shows that in this sample scores on the dimensions relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, emotional intimacy, and sexual affection are fairly high. Scores on verbal intimacy, shared activities, and sexually belonging together are medium; scores on emotional and sexual distance, sexual domination, and sexually being dominated are generally low. Scores differ most in shared activities indoors and in the experience of sexual exclusivity.

Two percent of the men have sex with their partner 6 times a week or more; 25% three to five times a week; 43% once or twice a week; 17%

Table I. Examples of the Items Used

Relationship satisfaction	I am happy with my partner
Emotional intimacy	I feel emotionally close to my partner
Physical intimacy	He caresses and hugs me
Verbal intimacy	I give my opinion of his friends
Shared activities indoors	We share the washing up
Emotional distance	I am angry at my partner
Physical distance	We don't touch
Sexual satisfaction	I enjoy sex with my partner very much
Sexual affection	I feel spiritually compatible with my partner
Sex. emotional exclusivity	I feel I give him something valuable
Sex. belong together	He's mine
Sexual distance	I don't actually care about him
Sexual domination	I am in charge
Sex. being dominated	I am dominated by him
No. of sex. encount.	In 1988 I had sexual contacts with...men
Sexual encounters	Sex with others will be more exciting
Sexual frequency	In the past year, how often did you have sex with your partner?

Table II. Statistical Information per Dimension

Dimension <sup>a</sup>	No. of items	$\alpha^b$	$\bar{X}^c$	SD	<i>n</i>
Nonsexual experiences					
r1	7	.88	6.2	0.61	314
r2	9	.80	6.1	0.67	308
r3	5	.80	5.0	1.15	308
r4	7	.65	4.6	0.94	301
r5	6	.79	4.6	1.40	318
r6	5	.69	2.2	0.70	314
r7	4	.70	2.6	1.15	299
Sexual experiences					
s1	5	.80	5.2	1.09	309
s2	8	.81	5.8	0.77	301
s3	4	.61	5.1	1.25	301
s4	3	.74	4.2	1.71	300
s5	7	.78	2.0	0.77	309
s6	3	.75	2.2	1.16	307
s7	3	.69	2.0	1.07	310

<sup>a</sup>r1 = Relationship satisfaction, r2 = Emotional intimacy, r3 = Physical intimacy, r4 = Verbal intimacy, r5 = Shared activities indoors, r6 = Emotional distance, r7 = Physical distance. s1 = Sexual satisfaction, s2 = Sexual affection, s3 = Sex. emotional exclusivity, s4 = Sex. belong together, s5 = Sexual distance, s6 = Sexual domination, s7 = Sex. being dominated.

<sup>b</sup>Cronbach's alpha.

<sup>c</sup>Mean of ratings (1 = never, 7 = always).

once to three times a month; 7% have sex a few times a year; 4% did not have sex with their partner; while 1% refused to answer this question. In 1988, 43.5% had sexual contact only with their partner, 10% had sex with one other man, and 46.5% had two or more sexual partners.

The first hypothesis assumes that intimate and sexual experience are negatively related. However, from Table III we learn that relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, emotionally intimate experiences, and sexually intimate experiences are positively related. Domination and being dominated during sexual contact are less related to other relationship experiences.

The second hypothesis expects that men differing in relationship duration also differ in intimate and sexual relationship experiences. Correlation coefficients (Table III) show that physical intimacy and emotional exclusivity are lower in relationships of long duration.

**Table III.** Correlations Between Relationship and Sexual Satisfaction, Intimacy, and Sexual Experiences, Relationship Duration and Age<sup>a</sup>

	r1	s1	r2	r3	r4	r5	r6	r7	s2	s3	s4	s5	s6	s7	rd
s1	35														
r2	79	30													
r3	38	13	50												
r4	33	22	42	42											
r5	40	20	38	19											
r6	-58	-35	-55	-18	-21	-29									
r7	-38	-21	-44	-46	-25	-20	34								
s2	50	45	55	35	31	23	-28	-30							
s3	31	54	32	19		20	-29		55						
s4	21		24	20		29			35	34					
s5	-31	-65	-26			-18	38	30	-39	-39					
s6	-22						22				19				
s7														24	
rd				-23						-18					
age	17					18									64

<sup>a</sup>Decimals are omitted, all correlations are significant at the 0.001 level. rd = Relationship duration, r1 = Relationship satisfaction, r2 = Emotional intimacy, r3 = Physical intimacy, r4 = Verbal intimacy, r5 = Shared activities indoors, r6 = Emotional distance, r7 = Physical distance. s1 = Sexual satisfaction, s2 = Sexual affection, s3 = Sex. emotional exclusivity, s4 = Sex. belong together, s5 = Sexual distance, s6 = Sexual domination, s7 = Sex. being dominated.

A second check was done using the classification of relationship duration proposed by McWhirter and Mattison (1984). Though a strict test of their model requires 20 years follow-up research, we tested whether our cross-sectional data are congruent with their model. Grouped according to McWhirter and Mattison's classification there are successively 19 (relationship duration of 1 year or less), 70 (2-3 years), 41 (4-5 years), 95 (6-10 years), 68 (10-20 years), and 18 men (20+ years). Only sexual satisfaction appears to differ significantly ( $\chi^2 = 169.06$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). The average sexual satisfaction slowly declines (first year: 6.1; 20+ years: 5.0).

The third hypothesis expects that the factors predicting (i) relationship satisfaction, (ii) sexual satisfaction, (iii) sexual frequency, and (iv) sexual encounters outside the relationship differ according to relationship duration and age. Since relationship duration and age are correlated ( $r = .64$ ) results must be interpreted prudently.

(i) The most eminent variable predicting relationship satisfaction is emotional intimacy (Table IV). In relationships of long duration, as well as in the older group, sexual experiences have an additive predictive value.

Table IV. Predictors of Relationship Satisfaction by Relationship Duration and Age

Predictor <sup>a</sup>	Total	Duration			Age		
		Short	Mid	Long	Young	Mid	Old
r2	82	77	88	74	82	85	80
r3	8		12				
r5	11		14		18		
r6	-18	-32		-17		-17	-20
s1	8		12				
s2				29		26	25
s6				-22			-19

<sup>a</sup>r2 = emotional intimacy, r3 = physical intimacy, r5 = shared activities indoors, r6 = emotional distance, s1 = sexual satisfaction, s2 = sexual affection, s6 = sexual domination.

Table V. Predictors of Sexual Satisfaction by Relationship Duration and Age

Predictor <sup>a</sup>	Total	Duration			Age		
		Short	Mid	Long	Young	Mid	Old
r2					27		
r4					18		
r6		-26			-32		
s2			61		20	25	
s3	35		28			38	38
s4							-19
s5	-64	-62	-34	-73	-72	-67	-57
s6	-9	-32					

<sup>a</sup>r2 = emotional intimacy, r4 = verbal intimacy, r6 = emotional distance, s2 = sexual affection, s3 = sex. emotional exclusivity, s4 = sex. belong together, s5 = sexual distance, s6 = sexual domination.

(ii) The most eminent variable predicting sexual satisfaction is sexual distance (Table 5). In relationships of short duration and for the younger group nonsexual intimacy has an additional predictive value.

(iii) In general sexual frequency can be predicted from sexual satisfaction ( $B = .57$ ), relationship duration ( $B = -.33$ ), and age ( $B = -.15$ ). However, in relationships of short duration and in the young group the predictive value of relationship duration is larger ( $B = -.38$  vs.  $-.50$ ). As relationships last, the predictive value of sexual satisfaction increases ( $B_{\text{short}} = .30$ ;  $B_{\text{mid}} = .47$ ;  $B_{\text{long}} = .58$ ), while this increase is smaller as men get older ( $B_{\text{young}} = .38$ ;  $B_{\text{mid}} = .57$ ;  $B_{\text{old}} = .58$ ). This may indicate that in rela-

tionships that last only a few years, men are more often motivated to have sex for other reasons than the satisfaction they derive from having sex.

(iv) The average number of sexual encounters outside the relationship is 7.1 (SD = 14.8), though only a minority scores above the average. The percentage of men having sex with someone other than their partner seems to *decrease* in the first 3 years from 61 to 41%, while after 6 years it remains almost stable at 62%. Since the average number of sexual partners increases from 2.5 in the first year to 11 in the sixth year, this increase must be attributed to a relatively small group of men. In the first 6 years, the correlation between the number of sexual encounters both partners have outside the relationship tends to increase from 0.31 (ns) to 0.86 ( $p = 0.00$ ). In the younger group the mean number of sexual partners is 4.7 (SD = 12.3); in the middle group 7.3 (SD = 13.4), and the older group 9.1 (SD = 18.1). The number of sexual partners of one partner is predicted in three age groups and three relationship duration groups in 156 couples. The number of sexual encounters of partner A can be predicted from partner A's or partner B's idea that sexual encounters are positive for relationship functioning and from partner B's number of sexual encounters in the group of young men ( $n = 33$  couples), men between 30 and 40 ( $n = 49$ ), and in 42 relationships of short duration. It can be predicted from the idea that sexual encounters are positive for relationship functioning in the older group ( $n = 66$ ) and in relationships of middle duration ( $n = 68$ ), and from partner B's number of sexual encounters in relationships of long duration ( $n = 43$ ). In these six groups explained variance is between 19 and 46%. The number of sexual partners both partners have are related ( $r = .47$ ), as well as both partner's idea that sexual encounters are positive for relationship functioning ( $r = .67$ ).

Though the number of sexual encounters prior to the relationship is known for only a minority, this variable may prove to be very important. As relationships last, the correlation between the number of sexual encounters in the year prior to the relationship and the present number of sexual encounters increases from 0.39 ( $p = 0.00$ ) in the 2nd year; 0.56 ( $p = 0.00$ ) in the 3rd year; to 0.87 ( $p = 0.00$ ) in the 4th year.

## DISCUSSION

Three hypotheses regarding gay male relationship functioning were tested. The first hypothesis, that intimate and sexual experiences are negatively related, could not be supported empirically. For the second hypothesis, that relationship functioning can be predicted from relationship duration, only a small amount of evidence was found. The third hypothesis,



that factors predicting relationship functioning differ according to relationship duration and age, however, was given credit.

Our results show that in relationships of short duration nonsexual aspects of relationship functioning predict relationship satisfaction best, whereas in relationships of long duration sexual aspects also seem to contribute. In relationships of long duration, sexual aspects predict sexual satisfaction, whereas in relationships of short duration nonsexual aspects are also important. These results resemble those found in married males (Whitbourne and Ebmeyer, 1990). This may indicate that it is not the level of intimate and sexual experiences that is changing as relationships last, but that these experiences are valued in a different way. Though the sexual frequency is lower in relationships of long duration, sexuality seems to be valued more in these relationships. Since relationship duration and age are strongly related, our results can as well be explained by aging or by cultural shifts. Because young men are brought up in a less gender-stereotyped society, they may have different ideas about homosexuality and masculinity (Bem, 1983; Franklin, 1984) and may value other relational experiences compared to older men.

We found the older men to have the most sexual partners. One explanation is that men in the gay subculture are socialized in a sexual lifestyle that stimulates having sexual encounters as men get older. In the Harry and DeVall (1978) study, however, men between 30 and 40 had the most sexual partners, while Sonenschein (1968) noted that young men had the most sexual partners. A comparison of these findings indicates that the cohort that grew up in the 1960s has the most sexual partners. Another explanation for the older men having the most sexual encounters is that this cohort learned to value homosexuality in another way. Men who grew up in a period where AIDS is a threat and where gay relationships are becoming formally recognized may have new ways of dealing with intimate relationships.

Gay men value emotional aspects of their relationships above sexual satisfaction. Emotional intimacy remains the criterion, irrespective of relationship duration. As relationships last, partners may notice that a high level of sexual contact is not necessary for relationship continuation. This may precede qualitative and quantitative changes in sexual contact. Sexual frequency may decline, while those who enjoy sex with their partner maintain a high frequency. Differences between age groups, however, may also contribute to the understanding of intimacy and sexuality in gay relationships.

Some practitioners use McWhirter and Mattison's stage model (1984) in aiding gay couples. Our findings, however, question some basic presumptions of this model. First, emotionally intimate experiences are positively

related to sexually affectionate experiences, but unrelated to sexual frequency and sexual encounters. Second, the level of verbal, physical, and emotional intimacy, relationship satisfaction, as well as sexually intimate experiences, are almost unrelated to relationship duration. Third, factors predicting relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction differ according to relationship duration and age. Furthermore, sexual encounters can be understood as a result of a life-style developed prior to the relationship and similarity in each partner's sexual life-style. Though the model may reflect some respondents interpretation of changes within their relationships, these interpretations are not necessarily valid. A lower level of sexual frequency in relationships of long duration, for example, does not mean that in those relationships sexual contact has become less important.

It is not strange that in therapy some success is achieved using McWhirter and Mattison's model. In asking for help, some men are confronted with a theoretical model, and start to describe their lives in accordance with the model. Some men describe themselves in a psychoanalytic way (McWhirter and Mattison, 1984, p. 176), while McWhirter and Mattison themselves experience their relationship in accordance with their stage-model (pp. 294-295). Men who adapt to a theoretical model they are confronted with are not necessarily being helped, since relationship satisfaction may decrease because of this adaptation. In using a model that has (sexual) activities outside the relationship as a central theme, the effect of the therapy may be positive, though it can also be negative.

In an alternative model, Arentewicz and Schmidt (1983) suppose that sexual problems evolve independently from other aspects of the relationship. They propose to diagnose and treat sexual problems and problems in relationship functioning as two different things. They fear that many problems in relationship functioning might falsely be ascribed to sexuality. Our results indicate that, though sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction are relatively independent, emotional intimacy may contribute to sexual satisfaction in the young, whereas sexual intimacy contributes to relationship satisfaction in the old. The relationship partners create depends on their specific perception of sexuality and intimacy (van Naerssen, 1989). This shows the importance of taking both emotional and sexual aspects of relationships into consideration in both research and therapy.

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