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The Boston Marriage Today: Romantic But Asexual Relationships Among Lesbians

IN LESBIAN FOLKLORE, there is anecdotal evidence of women in past centuries who chose to live together as married couples. The lesbian novels *Patience and Sarah* (Miller, 1969) and *The Ladies* (Grumbach, 1984) are fictional elaborations of such relationships. Lillian Faderman's book, *Soubh Verdita* (1983), is a factual account of two headmistresses who were accused of lesbianism by a pupil. In her book, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981), Lillian Faderman describes the passion, shared activities, and writings of women who expressed love for each other while often married to men or living other conventional roles in society. She states:

It became clear that women's love relationships have seldom been limited to that one area of expression, that love between women has been primarily a sexual phenomenon only in male fantasy literature. "Lesbian" describes a relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other. Sexual contact may be a part of the relationship to a greater or lesser degree, or it may be entirely absent. (pp. 17-18)

In past decades, "spinster" women who lived together and shared their lives were considered to be in a "Boston marriage," a term that reflected the presumed asexual nature of this relationship (the word "Boston" probably referred to the Puritan and thus asexual component). When we read about such women today, we may assume that their relationships were, in fact, sexual. Our assumptions are supported by the above authors, who added

a sexual component to the lives of women who existed but about whom little more is known than a few facts documented by newspapers of their era, presexual revolution and pre-Stonewall. Whether or not such Boston marriages were in fact sexual, there is very little question that the women involved would have kept knowledge of their sexuality secret from their community.

The current chapter will focus on the "Boston marriage" today. In lesbian communities there are women who are lovers in every sense of the word except for the fact that they are not currently sexually involved (and may never have been lovers). Sometimes they live together. Often they travel together, move to live in the same part of the country, make out wills for each other, and share long histories. Often, in total contrast to the Boston marriage of bygone eras, these women keep knowledge of their *asexuality* secret from their community.

Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) studied the relationships of more than 12,000 people, including lesbians, gay men, married heterosexuals, and heterosexuals living with a partner. Their results indicated that lesbian couples had sex less frequently than any other group of couples. In a society that defines a lover relationship by the occurrence of sexual activity, we have no word (and thus no awareness of) the intense romantic, but asexual, relationships that some lesbians may form. Consequently, these important relationships may be discounted by the two women involved in the relationship, by the lesbian community, and by therapists. Therapists even if lesbian or feminist, may define relationships by the occurrence of sexual activity (in fact, the results of Blumstein and Schwartz caused great disbelief among lesbian readers) and thus disregard the romantic nature of asexual relationships.

For lack of current terminology to describe such romantic but asexual relationships among lesbians, we have chosen to reclaim the historical term "Boston marriage." Although romantic but asexual relationships may occur among heterosexual and gay male couples, the former have the option of legal marriage (which then defines the relationship as legitimate, with or without the presence of sexual activity), and the latter have more frequent sexual activity than do lesbians (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983).

This chapter will describe a case study of two women involved in modern-day Boston marriage. We will analyze this case from the perspective of both intrapsychic and societal perspectives and then discuss possible strategies for therapists. We have chosen to use a fictitious case study that is a composite of many of the elements found in the Boston marriages w

know. We did not use a true case for two reasons. First, as we will discuss later, one or both members of the Boston marriage are often extremely closeted or only marginally involved in the lesbian community. Second, members of the Boston marriage often seek therapy when they are separating, and, at that point, one partner often denies that they were ever, in fact, a couple. For this reason, it is difficult to obtain consent from both partners of a Boston marriage who are in therapy.

CASE STUDY: A BOSTON MARRIAGE

Hilary, aged 41, and Anne, aged 35, describe themselves as a couple of 15 years' duration. Hilary is the principal of a high school and Anne plays keyboard in a jazz group and works part-time in a bookstore. They have known each other for 17 years, since Anne was a student teacher in the music department at the high school in which Hilary was an English teacher. At that time, Hilary was an important mentor to Anne, although they taught in different departments. They met again two years later at a party and shortly thereafter became lovers. Their sexual involvement lasted six months. There was no particular reason for the cessation of sexual activity; Hilary and Anne "drifted" into celibacy. Since that time, for the past 14 years, both women have been celibate.

Hilary and Anne have lived together for the entire 15-year period and recently bought a house together. Although Hilary's income is significantly higher than Anne's, and she is responsible for most of the mortgage, they alternated paying for household appliances and furniture, and each item, as well as their house, is seen as belonging to the "couple." They sleep in the same bed. The second bedroom is referred to as the "guest room."

Hilary and Anne present themselves as a couple when they are with other lesbians. Hilary is more likely than Anne to refer to the couple as "lovers" and to be physically affectionate when they are among friends. Each year, on the anniversary of when they first became lovers, they have a party to celebrate another year together. They are invited to social situations together, give presents together, and speak of themselves as a unit. No one in the lesbian community is aware that Hilary and Anne have been celibate for over 14 years. On the contrary, the longevity of their relationship has become legend in their community, and they were recently interviewed for a book on long-lasting lesbian couples.

Neither Hilary nor Anne is very politically involved in lesbian issues, nor do they attend many visible lesbian events. Hilary is particularly

closeted since she is concerned about losing her job in the school system, which is extremely homophobic. However, both women are well integrated into a network of lesbian friends, mostly couples in their 30s and 40s who are professional women and who view themselves as "gay." Hilary has been to a few gay bars, but this is usually limited to times when she is out of town at conventions. She has a great fear that she might run into students or teachers from her school, or into parents of her students. Once, when a friend placed the couple's names on a list to receive a catalog of lesbian books, Hilary wrote to the company and asked that her name be removed.

Anne has known that she was attracted to other girls since she was 16. She dated a boy for two years in high school. Then, as a junior in high school, she was attracted to Betsy, a girl in her class. Although they never had sex, they would frequently spend the night together, sleep in the same bed, and, under the pretense of being asleep, roll over and lie close together. The closeness of Anne and Betsy's friendship was noted by their peers, who jokingly referred to them as the "lezzies." Betsy was so alarmed at this that she broke off the friendship. Hilary is Anne's first and only sexual partner.

Hilary was sexually abused by her stepfather when she was 13. She remembers the abuse vividly but has never discussed her feelings about this period to anyone. Hilary had one brief sexual relationship with a woman in college. Both women were afraid of being caught, and neither woman would have defined herself as a lesbian. She also dated several men in college, but broke off with them when the men wanted to have sex.

Hilary has never come out to her mother or stepfather (her father is dead). When Hilary's mother comes to visit, Hilary and Anne spend several hours "straightening up" the house, removing lesbian books, records, and magazines, and hiding letters they have written to each other. Hilary is sure that it would kill her mother to know about her lesbian lifestyle. Hilary spends Christmas vacation with her mother and stepfather and has never brought Anne along on these visits.

Anne and Hilary have had several repeated conflicts in their relationship. In general, the theme of each conflict is that Anne accuses Hilary of being controlling, cautious, and closeted. Hilary retorts that Anne is impulsive, irresponsible, and immature. One of these conflicts concerns Anne's wish for the couple to spend Christmas together. When Anne contemplates the idea of coming out to her parents, Hilary talks her out of it, stating that Anne's mother, who lives near their town and who does

to become sexually involved with Ruth, both women would interpret this as the termination of their own coupled relationship. In therapy, Hilary views the current situation as Anne's problem and as something that could be resolved if Anne were to terminate any contact with Ruth. Hilary does not view her own relationship with Anne to be problematic. Both women state that they want their relationship to continue.

In therapy, Anne states that she feels less verbally skilled than Hilary and thus less able to "win" an argument. Consequently, she finds herself agreeing with Hilary's carefully constructed arguments about the nature of their relationship, while simultaneously being unable to express her own views about their relationship. She is feeling "crazy" and confused about continuing a relationship with Hilary without sex.

What Is a Boston Marriage?

Asexual but romantic relationships between lesbians can vary widely. However, they seem to include the following elements:

1. The two members of the Boston marriage are not currently engaged in a sexual relationship with each other. They may never have had sex with each other but, more typically, had a short period in which they were lovers.
2. One or both of the members is still sexually attracted to the other. In this regard, at least for one of the partners, the Boston marriage is different from a friendship.
3. With the exception of the lack of sexual activity, all other aspects of the Boston marriage are indistinguishable from many lesbian lover relationships. The two members may refer to each other in public or private as lovers and be physically affectionate in public or private social situations. They will engage in shared activities (rearing children, buying property, making out wills) that are rarely done by friends (or, if done by friends, are done for a specific and nonromantic reason).
4. The lesbian community is generally unaware that the two members are nonsexual and views them as a couple. Often the romantic nature of their relationship makes them role models for other lesbian couples to emulate and there may be some social pressure on the two members not to break up. When the lesbian community is aware that the two are *not* lovers, they will not be viewed as a couple.

not keep confidences (she occasionally gets drunk and divulges intimate information to her friends and neighbors), may tell other people about Anne and Hilary's lesbianism. Since Anne and her mother have a very distant relationship, Anne has agreed to keep her lesbianism a secret from her mother. A second area of conflict is that Hilary often puts pressure on Anne to lose weight and to pay more attention to her appearance. Of the two, Hilary would be considered the more physically attractive. Finally, Hilary occasionally tells Anne to find a more "serious" profession than music, and Anne resents such advice.

Recently, Anne joined an all-women's jazz group. Hilary has been alarmed that this jazz group is regarded by some people in the town as a lesbian group (in fact, most of the group's members are lesbians). She is particularly upset that the group performed at the local state fair (an event that most of her students and fellow teachers attend) wearing lavender T-shirts.

Anne has become good friends with Ruth, a member of the jazz group. Ruth is involved in many lesbian political activities. A few months previously, she invited Anne to accompany her to a conference on the politics of lesbian sexuality. During the car ride to the conference, Ruth and Anne discussed their own sexual history, and Anne revealed that she and Hilary had been celibate for 14 years. Shortly thereafter, Ruth asked Anne to be her lover, stating that, after all, Anne had not been "in a relationship" for 14 years. Anne is particularly flattered by Ruth's obvious sexual attraction to her physical appearance.

Anne and Ruth have not had sex but have talked about becoming sexual and have been flirting with each other. Anne told Hilary that she was attracted to Ruth. Hilary's reaction was anger and confusion. She felt that she and Anne are a monogamous couple. Anne responded that they have not really been a sexual couple for 14 years. This is the first time that Hilary and Anne have ever discussed their lack of sexual activity. Hilary felt very threatened by this conversation and responded that their bond, their long history of living together, and their love for each other should more than compensate for the lack of sexual activity. For the past several months, Hilary had accused Anne of being sexually attracted to Ruth and Anne denied this. Now Hilary accuses Anne of being a liar. When Anne returned home late after a jazz concert, Hilary experienced severe anxiety attacks triggered by the thought that Anne might be sexually involved with Ruth. Hilary is concerned that Anne may abandon her.

In therapy, both women are clear about the fact that they love each other and that they view their relationship as monogamous. If Anne were

5. Both members of the Boston marriage have typically had no or limited sexual experiences prior to the Boston marriage.
6. Both members of the Boston marriage are likely to be closeted to some degree in their place of employment, with their family, and in their community. If one or both members of the Boston marriage are extremely closeted or only marginally involved in the lesbian community, then they are less likely to refer to one another as lovers.
7. The two members of the Boston marriage usually have little or no direct communication about the lack of sexual activity in their relationship and the nature of their relationship.

Furthermore, we have found that the two members of the Boston marriage assume different roles. We will refer to these as "the woman in Hilary's position" and "the woman in Anne's position," respectively. Although Hilary and Anne in the case study, above, are composites of many Boston marriages, there are a few commonalities.

Usually, the woman in Anne's position is more aware of her sexual attraction to her partner and more willing to talk about the relationship. She is more likely to want continued sexual relations with her partner. Moreover, the woman in Anne's position has less power in the relationship. In the case study, Anne was younger, had a lower income, a less secure job, and was considered less physically attractive than Hilary. She may also provide the spontaneity, risk, and creativity in the relationship, although this may not be viewed as desirable by her partner.

The woman in Hilary's position is usually the one who declines sexual activity, although this is rarely discussed. The couple may "drift" into celibacy. The woman in Hilary's position, however, often perpetuates the image of the two as a couple in other ways. She may be the first to suggest joint activities and may be the one to refer to her partner more often in public. Interestingly, the lesbian community often has the impression that the woman in Hilary's position is more "in love" or invested in the relationship than the woman in Anne's position. The woman in Hilary's position often has more need for control, security, and safety.

It is important to differentiate a Boston marriage from other ways in which women relate. Members of Boston marriages are different from "best friends" in that friendship does not include long-lasting sexual attraction. The women in Hilary and Anne's position's are not ex-lovers in that they still define themselves as a couple and are viewed as a couple by the

lesbian community (Becker, 1988). Becker is also in the process of writing a book about a concept she calls lesbian friendship networks, or the close circle of immediate friends that serve the role of "family" for lesbians while not being lovers. For members of the Boston marriage, they are closer to each other than the closest member of their friendship network.

However, Boston marriages may exist in slightly different forms than the one we have described. Two women who feel mutually in love and sexually attracted to each other but who decide they cannot have sex (e.g., for reasons of physical pain or disability, because they have taken a vow of celibacy, because they want to be faithful to their husbands) might be considered to be in a Boston marriage. In other words, it is possible that both members of the Boston marriage are conscious of and comfortable with the asexual nature of their relationship despite their sexual attraction to each other. Usually, women in this category do not seek therapy for their relationship.

What Is a Lesbian Relationship?

The concept of the Boston marriage brings up the issue of what is the definition of a lesbian relationship. In the case study, both Hilary and Anne view Anne's having a sexual relationship with Ruth as a violation of their own relationship, despite their own celibacy. Ruth, on the other hand, does not view Anne and Hilary as being in a relationship, given the absence of sex.

Among heterosexuals, marriage is defined by a legal ceremony. Heterosexual couples are considered to be married until they obtain a legal divorce, whether or not they are sexually active and even when they are sexually active with other people. All other coupled relationships (whether between lesbians, gay men, or unmarried heterosexuals) tend to be defined by the presence or absence of sexual activity. This sex-focused definition of a relationship becomes problematic in the lesbian community, given the relatively lower frequency of sex among lesbian couples compared with gay male or heterosexual couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Loulan's (1988) research on the frequency of sexual activity of over 1,500 lesbians indicates that the majority (78%) had been celibate at some point, with 35% celibate from one to five years and 8% celibate for over six years. Loulan states: "The fact that lesbians are raised in a culture that teaches women that they cannot be sexual, and that teaches lesbians their

The woman in Hilary's role is attracted to another person (often a man) or (b) the woman in Anne's role is attracted to another person (often a woman).

The woman in Hilary's position is usually more closeted and thus may be viewed as sexually available by men in her workplace or men she meets in social situations. Furthermore, she may experience more internalized homophobia, which will be discussed later on. The woman in Anne's position is usually more willing to come out in the lesbian community and more interested in a sexual relationship. Thus, she is more likely to consider relationships with other women in the community.

What is particularly painful about Boston marriages, however, is that one partner can change the rules on the other and often does. Although Hilary and Anne had considered themselves to be in a partnered relationship for 15 years, Anne suddenly refers to them (inspired by Ruth) as celibate for 14 of those years. Thus, she is suddenly changing the definition of their "relationship" from 15 years to six months! At the time of the breakup of the relationship, the members of the Boston marriage may discuss their expectations of the relationship for the first time and be considerably surprised by their lack of agreement.

The breakup of a Boston marriage often involves the lesbian community to a considerable extent. First, with their strong focus on romance and external validation, Boston marriages may be the role models of their communities. Thus, the termination of such a relationship may threaten other lesbians who have built up this relationship as the fantasy model. If Hilary and Anne break up without informing their community about the asexual nature of their relationship, the community is likely to side with Hilary. Anne (and Ruth) will be viewed as breaking up an ideal relationship and may lose many of their previous friends. The woman in Anne's position is often blamed by the lesbian community for breaking up the relationship, because she is often the one to have the first sexual relationship with someone else. This will add to her confusion about her own needs for intimacy and passion and perpetuate her guilt for needing and seeking sexual relations. On the other hand, if Anne were to discuss their celibacy with members of the lesbian community, Hilary might receive little support for her "irrational" negative feelings about Anne and Ruth. After all, if Hilary and Anne were not currently lovers, why should Hilary be jealous of Anne's seeking another lover? In this way, the lesbian community would deny the reality of the long-term Boston marriage.

identity is determined by their sexual partner, becomes a double bind. This creates a great deal of anxiety, ambivalence, and pressure on the sex lives of lesbians" (p. 221).

What could account for the lower frequency of sexual activity in lesbian relationships? Blumstein and Schwartz argue that their results reflect the desirability of touching, cuddling, and romance among lesbians, without the presence of males who would value genital activity above nonsexual contact. Given the low frequency of sexual activity among lesbians compared to other couples, this sex-focused definition of relationships in our society denies other ways in which lesbians relate. Given the importance our society places on sexual relationships, many lesbians may feel undesirable or rejected if they are not currently having frequent sex.

What Does It Mean to End a Lesbian Relationship?

All relationships follow a certain mythology and one that is sanctioned by the particular subculture. Similarly, our culture has norms for terminating relationships. Usually we define the end of a sexual relationship by the absence of sex or, if the relationship is monogamous, by the absence of monogamy. In sum, the beginnings and endings of relationships are defined by sexual activity. Is this a valid definition for lesbian relationships?

Gawain (1986) describes the vagaries of such simplistic definitions. She argues that each relationship is a commitment to a set of rules, but that people rarely clarify what these rules are. One rule may be the lack of sex with anyone else, but it is unclear whether sex includes sexual feelings or just behavior. Furthermore, rules may be static, whereas one or both partners will change over time. Rules may exist to guarantee the security of a relationship, but no external form can offer such a guarantee.

What Does It Mean to End a Boston Marriage?

It is rare that couples in Boston marriages seek therapy because they cannot tolerate the relationship or the absence of sex. Couples in Boston marriages often seek therapy when they are "breaking up." The concept of "breaking up" is a difficult one to define in the Boston marriage, since our society defines breaking up by the termination of sexual activity. In the case of the Boston marriage, sexual activity is not present.

It is our impression that such couples come to therapy when one of two things happen to suddenly alter the definition of the relationship: (a)

Usually, the two women involved in a Boston marriage have been colluding to some degree, often for years. They may have called themselves lovers while knowing that the lesbian community would not define them as such because of the lack of sexual activity in their relationship. The collusion may continue even as the nature of the couple's relationship changes. For example, one or both partners may be involved in relationships with other people but keep this a secret from their friends and acquaintances. This is especially likely if one partner is involved with a man, yet does not want to be ostracized by the lesbian community. Consequently, neither partner may be able to discuss all the facts of the relationship difficulties with anyone else, and the members of the Boston marriage often have difficulties discussing their relationship with each other as well.

Termination of a Boston marriage is particularly confusing in a situation where only one member of the couple (Partner A) may consider herself to be in a relationship to begin with, whereas the other (Partner B) may view the relationship as a "friendship," but typically may be maintaining the relationship in other ways. Partner A may want to leave the relationship, to the confusion of Partner B, who cannot understand why anyone would want to leave a good "friendship." Or Partner A may be jealous, angry, and confused that Partner B is "leaving her" to have a sexual relationship with a man or with another woman. On the other hand, Partner B, who may have been urging her partner to have sex with other women or men, may be alarmed at her own panic and confusion when Partner A acts on this advice.

GOALS FOR THERAPY

We feel that it is in the nature of individuals to be sexual. Lesbians who are in romantic but asexual relationships may do so for intrapsychic as well as societal reasons. A further issue in the case of lesbians is homophobia, which also may be intrapsychic (internalized) or societal (external). Thus, we will discuss intrapsychic and societal issues facing members of the Boston marriage separately.

The lack of sexual activity in the Boston marriage is rarely the overt issue in therapy. In fact, the therapist may be the only one who even refers to this or views it as a problem. Thus, we will also discuss countertransference issues.

Countertransference Issues

The therapist's own definition of relationships and norms about frequency of sexual activity will affect the course of therapy with women involved in Boston marriages. If the therapist expresses amazement or negativity about the extended period of celibacy, this will reinforce the belief that the couple is not "legitimate" and may also increase the couple's reluctance to broach this subject with other lesbians who may have similar reactions.

It is very difficult not to take sides when two members of a Boston marriage are terminating their relationship. Lesbian and/or feminist therapists may be acquainted with or know about the couple from the lesbian community and thus may be influenced by the strong community reactions to their breakup (especially if the couple is idealized in the community). One or both members of the Boston marriage may have convincing arguments for terminating the relationship. Furthermore, each member of the couple is likely to have extremely different interpretations of the nature of the relationship.

It is very important that the therapist be familiar with the norms of the lesbian community. A homophobic therapist may want to discount this relationship or suggest that the women are not really lesbians. It is important that a heterosexual therapist not equate the Boston marriage with the kind of "best friends" relationship she may be having and deny its sexual attraction component. It is important for the therapist to examine her own values about sex versus affection and not to project these into the therapeutic relationship. The members of the Boston marriage are engaging in their own projections, fantasies, and metacommunications—if the therapist colludes in this it will reinforce indirect communication and perpetuate confusion.

Intrapsychic Issues

The therapist's goal is to uncover what needs each woman has in this relationship and to what degree these needs are being met. This is not an easy process, as neither woman is likely to have thought or talked about her needs in this relationship. The woman in Anne's position has less overt power and may become even more vulnerable if she discloses sexual or affectional needs. She may not be aware of her own anger about the relationship or at having to tolerate lack of sexual activity for years. She may be angry that the couple presents a cover of "normalcy" among

friends. The woman in Hilary's position may deny any needs in the relationship.

It is critical for the therapist to help the couple determine the importance of sexual activity in their relationship. Are closeness, intimacy, affection, and shared activities of enough value to continue the relationship in its present form? There are women who are celibate for conscious reasons, who are in tune with these reasons. There were probably women in past generations who lived together in celibacy and were comfortable with asexual but affectionate closeness. From an intrapsychic level, the question in therapy becomes whether Anne and Hilary's celibacy is a conscious choice for one or both women.

Women who have been involved in Boston marriages often have a history of such relationships and may never have been in a relationship that was sexual for more than several months. Frequently, women in Anne's position indicate that many previous lovers were heterosexual or bisexual women, or women who were unavailable sexually (e.g., women concurrently married to men). The therapist can help the couple to explore the reasons why they remain in relationships for extended periods without sexual activity.

For the woman in Hilary's position who becomes involved with a new lover, there is often little discussion of the role that her previous Boston marriage played. Consequently, there may be unresolved issues. For example, the woman in Hilary's position may be withholding sexually (out of guilt to Anne). The woman in Hilary's position often has concerns about being openly identified as a lesbian. Although Hilary would deny this, she may have negative views of lesbians who look 'gay' or who rally for political changes for lesbians and gay men. Thus, internalized homophobia needs to be examined. Hilary may be concerned that she will lose control over Anne if Anne becomes friends with Ruth, and she may specifically be concerned that Ruth will spread information about Hilary being a lesbian.

In the case study, Anne is younger, financially less powerful, and less verbally facile during arguments. Anne is often a woman who makes few demands on the woman in Hilary's position and, thus, is a "safe" partner for someone who needs to retain some control. In the case study, Hilary's history of sexual abuse is very likely to predispose her to want some control in her sexual life. Given Anne's sexual history, she may feel sexually unattractive and feel that she is not deserving of sexual intimacy or that no one would want to have sex with her. Often, women in Anne's

position may feel capable of generating love and respect, but not sexual passion.

We may speculate that Hilary represents a secure mother-figure to Anne. Anne has fears of being abandoned, and Hilary's financial and professional security are attractive to her. Nevertheless, the woman in Anne's position frequently becomes depressed during the course of their relationship, which will affect her motivation, self-esteem, and creativity.

Either partner in a Boston marriage may be someone who separates sex and love. If sex is viewed as dirty or immoral, but love is viewed as beautiful and respectful, then two emotions may be displayed towards different people. For example, one or both members of a Boston marriage may have occasional and superficial sexual relations with men or women when out of town, or have rules permitting sex but prohibiting close emotional involvement with other people.

It is possible that women who become involved in Boston marriages may have less rigid boundaries between what constitutes friendship and sexual attraction. The issue of boundaries and definitions for the relationship can be a profoundly important direction in psychotherapy. Many psychotherapeutic theories state that people select sexual partners based on early relationships with their mother and father. Yet we have comparatively less understanding of how people choose friends and how one may project early relationships onto friends as well.

Societal Issues

From a societal level, the question in therapy becomes whether two women can be termed a couple if they are consciously and happily celibate. The irony of the Boston marriage today is that two women involved in such a relationship will be viewed as a "couple" in public more so than in private, whereas historically they were viewed as "just friends" or "spinsters" in public but may have regarded themselves as a couple in private. Today, members of a Boston marriage are sometimes keeping up appearances as lesbians to hide the fact that they are not sexual and, thus, not "technically" in a lesbian relationship. In some ways this points out the gradual social acceptance of lesbians in U.S. society and certainly the fact that lesbian sexuality may be more socially accepted today than is celibacy.

The absence of sexuality presents us with confusion about when two women become "more than" friends. In fact, the phrase that two women are "just friends" indicates how much we devalue friendships compared to

dence of a refusal to let go of the earlier relationship and build a new relationship with commitment and emotional involvement. On the other hand, as Becker (1988) points out, the relationships between ex-lovers in a lesbian community may run the gamut from total avoidance of the former lover to the development of healthy enduring friendships and a sense of "family." The therapist, in working with the aftermath of the loss of a relationship, can be of great help to the client in sorting out the motivations behind and realities of the ties between former lovers.

We feel that it is most important not to pathologize the Boston marriage. Given the lower frequency of sex between lesbian couples and the number of lesbians who are celibate, the Boston marriage is by no means rare. The partners of a Boston marriage meet many of one another's needs. Nevertheless, the reasons for the absence of sex and the possible nonreciprocity of sexual attraction need to be examined.

It is difficult to describe a relationship for which there is no clear definition, and we, the authors, were surprised to find that our individual inclusion and exclusion criteria for this type of relationship were somewhat different from one another, although there was considerable overlap. Ka-ty argued strongly that our case example should be one of a lesbian couple that was sexual for a period of time before drifting into a Boston marriage, as this was the more typical scenario. Esther, on the other hand, felt that the true Boston marriage was one in which the couple had never had sex and thus could not use the "legitimizing" presence of previous sexual activity to define their relationship. We decided to use the former scenario since we felt that therapists (like the lesbian community) would be more likely to discount the more "extreme" latter scenario. We would be interested to learn whether readers would have felt differently about Hilary and Anne's relationship and implications for therapy had we described them as never having had sex.

We also differed in our degree of acceptance of the Boston marriage, and our ambivalence is reflected in this chapter. On the one hand, we state repeatedly in this chapter that our society (including the lesbian community) should not define relationships solely by the presence of sexual activity. On the other hand, we also state that therapists need to examine the reasons why the members of the Boston marriage are not sexual, which implies that this is a problem that needs to be remedied. We have deliberately chosen not to take a position on this dilemma. Rather, we would like readers to consider the Boston marriage as a reality in the lesbian community that needs to be acknowledged and discussed.

sexual relationships in our society. A good question for the therapist to ask members of a Boston marriage may be: "What would you do with a lover (besides sex) that you would not do with a close friend?" Answers to this question provide a more complete definition of a relationship and determine whether it more closely approximates a friendship or a partnered relationship.

The issue of the Boston marriage demonstrates how inadequate our terminology is for defining relationships in the lesbian community. In the institution of heterosexual marriage, sex is not used as the definition of who is married. The lesbian community must examine the ramifications of defining a partnered relationship by the frequency or duration of the sexual aspect of that relationship. Even the term "we are in a relationship" is vague, since lesbians have intimate, nonsexual relationships with many people—friends, ex-lovers, biological family members, athletic partners, etc. Nevertheless, if two women refer to each other as "lovers" and they are not sexual, there is some amount of disequilibrium and extra explanations may be necessary. Just as lesbians once had to define their sexuality in a homophobic society, so it is necessary to define lesbian romantic love without sexuality in a society that currently defines love and romance by the presence of sex. Perhaps if there had been a term for this type of relationship in Hilary and Anne's community, the two women would never have had sex, because there would have been no need to "legitimize" their relationship via sex. Carla Golden (personal communication, 1983) has discussed lesbianism as consisting of three dimensions: lesbian identity ("I am a lesbian"), lesbian sexuality ("I am having sex with another woman"), and lesbian politics ("I support rights for lesbians"). She argues that the lesbian community assumes that all lesbians agree with all three dimensions, when in fact there are multiple variations.

Similarly, the lesbian community needs terminology for the relationships that women assume when they have terminated sexual relationships. Becker's (1988) book on lesbian ex-lovers indicates the variable norms in lesbian communities for remaining friends with ex-lovers. In the case of the Boston marriage, this may be confusing. If Anne were to become sexual with Ruth, Hilary's role in Anne's life may not have a defining term, yet would continue to be very important. Often, to the confusion of everyone, Hilary's role in Anne's life continues to be more important than that of Ruth. Former lovers, now both involved sexually and emotionally with new lovers, may still maintain primary ties and roles that approximate those of the Boston marriage. Quite frequently, this is evi-

Because the topic of the modern-day Boston marriage has not, to our knowledge, been described in the lesbian literature, we were not sure how others would react to this topic. Our imposter feelings were exacerbated when several lesbian therapists expressed ignorance of the term "Boston marriage" and its description. Interestingly, upon reading earlier drafts of this chapter, they asked for additional copies to distribute to clients who they now realized fit our criteria!

Finally, our conversations were often humorous as we realized that we had very different ideas about components of such relationships. We expect that many readers will find our conceptualization somewhat different than theirs and urge them to contact us with their own thoughts and experiences of modern-day asexual but romantic relationships among lesbians.

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