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# **Work in Progress**

## **Intimacy in Lesbian Relationships: A Critical Re-Examination of Fusion**

Julie Mencher, M.S.W.



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# Intimacy in Lesbian Relationships: A Critical Re-Examination of Fusion

Julie Mencher, M.S.W.

## **About the Author**

Julie Mencher, M.S.W., is a psychotherapist at the Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies at Wellesley College, and in private practice in Northampton, Massachusetts.

## **Abstract**

Based on a male-derived model which views separation as the cornerstone of healthy development, the concept of fusion has been noted and pathologized in the literature on lesbian relationships. This paper will re-examine the relational patterns of lesbian couples within a perspective more attuned to female development which views connection as vital to growth. As women whose relational preferences are not compromised by the differing relational needs and behaviors of men, lesbians may offer a unique window to the specific intimacy patterns preferred by most women, but not often achieved in heterosexual relationships.

This paper was originally presented at a Stone Center Colloquium on February 7, 1990.

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I appreciate the opportunity to be here tonight to share with you my work on intimacy patterns in lesbian relationships. The work of Surrey, Stiver, Miller, Kaplan, and Jordan has been crucial to my understanding of women's development and has greatly informed my analysis of lesbian psychology. I congratulate and thank these women for their growing acknowledgment that the relational experience of lesbians is a critical topic of inquiry for any students of women's development. My presence here tonight reflects the recognition that diversity exists among women, that the experience of some women can inform our understanding of all women, and that women must speak for ourselves — while there are many commonalities among us, we must enrich our understanding of women through work by lesbians about lesbians, by women of color about women of color.

Underlying the relational perspective is the notion that context is fundamental, that the social and psychic context of gender decisively shapes the female experience. In that vein, I would like to make clear that my personal and professional context consists primarily of white women, of varying ages, classes, educational backgrounds, and physical abilities. In our discussion tonight, I would welcome the input of women of other contexts to add to our collective understanding.

Recent endeavors in feminist psychology have questioned the male bias of traditional theoretical frameworks which emphasize separation and autonomy as the hallmarks of healthy human development. Instead, some feminist theorists propose that women grow through connection, that women's development relies on participation in mutual, authentic relationships. However, attempts to

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study the relational nature of women have been colored by a predominant focus on women in heterosexual relationships. In these relationships, the woman's authentic expression of self may be hindered by the need to adjust to the different developmental pathway of her male partner, which may produce distinct behavior in relationships. An examination of women's behavior, emotional dynamics, and patterns of intimacy in lesbian relationships may offer a unique window through which to view women's psychological development.

Several researchers have measured patterns of intimacy in lesbian relationships by a male standard of separation and autonomy and have pathologized as "fusion" the intimacy they observe. This paper will explore lesbian relationships within the context of women's relational development and will critique traditional notions of healthy and unhealthy relational dynamics, particularly the notions of fusion and intimacy.

Tonight I will be weaving together an examination of several different questions:

- What are the sources of fusion in lesbian relationships, i.e., why is fusion a predominant relational pattern for lesbians?
- Is fusion in lesbian relationships inherently maladaptive or pathological?
- How are traditional notions about fusion altered by new understandings of women's development?
- How does an understanding of lesbian relational patterns of fusion contribute to a more generic understanding of female patterns of intimacy?

"Fusion in lesbian relationships" is a topic which has received much air time in settings as diverse as lesbian dinner party conversations and articles in the psychological literature. In the relatively small body of literature on lesbian couples, at least fourteen articles have appeared in the last ten years which feature fusion as the prominent issue; it is rare to find an analysis of lesbian couples which does not address fusion (Burch, 1982, 1985, 1986, 1987; Decker, 1983-84; Elise, 1986; Kaufman, Harrison, & Hyde, 1984; Krestan & Bepko, 1980; Lindenbaum, 1985; Lowenstein, 1980; Pearlman, 1988; Roth, 1985; Schneider, 1986; Smalley, 1987). The topic of fusion has found its way into colloquial settings as well. In a recently overheard

conversation on a predominantly lesbian beach, three lesbians debated whether a lesbian couple is "fused" if they trade underwear back and forth.

So, what is all this fuss about fusion? Fusion, merger, and enmeshment are terms that have been used interchangeably in the literature to describe a common relational dynamic for lesbian couples. Fusion is variously defined in the psychological literature, but several features are common to most definitions: Fusion is a state of "psychic unity" in which individual ego boundaries are crossed and two individuals experience a sense of oneness (Burch, 1986). In the state of fusion, the self is embedded within a relational context, and boundaries between self and other are unclear (Karpel, 1976). Intense intimacy, a lack of separation, and overidentification are defined as characteristics of fusion.

We may argue about whether what is being defined as fusion is in fact fusion. However, for purposes of semantic simplicity, I will use the word fusion as it is used in both the traditional literature and the literature on lesbian fusion — and I will return later to explore the semantic problems with how fusion is used to describe particularly intense states of intimacy.

### **Fusion in lesbian relationships**

Based on these definitions, several commentators have observed certain relational patterns in lesbian couples, have labeled these patterns fusion, and have marked fusion as a prominent problem in lesbian relationships. These patterns include both interpersonal dynamics and behavioral indicators.

The literature depicts these problematic dynamics in the following manner: It notes that lesbian women place a high premium on being intimately involved and experience difficulties when they are without an intimate relationship, frequently resulting in excessive tenacity to unsatisfying partnerships. The literature depicts the lesbian couple locked in an embrace of intimacy which values identification; mutual understanding and acceptance; and shared beliefs, behaviors, goals, and wishes. Differences between partners are feared, often to the extent that denial of differences is readily employed. Conflict is either avoided or constantly remains unresolved. The individual develops an acute sensitivity to her partner's needs and feelings, often at the expense of fulfilling her own needs. Individual identities become "merged" or "blurred," and partners have difficulty articulating, "I feel." Relative to the heterosexual pattern of ostensibly asymmetrical dependency needs, the lesbian couple is viewed as

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mutually dependent, with both partners highly dependent on each other. The women often describe a sense of being able to share “everything” with their partners, and the ability to self-disclose is often seen as nearly total. Growth and the continued development of individual identity is seen as dependent on continued involvement in the relationship.

Other features identified in the literature as indicators of fusion are more behavioral: The couple attempts to spend all or most of its leisure time together; social contacts are limited primarily to mutual friends, with few individual ones. They share professional services, e.g., doctors, lawyers, therapists, financial planners. Monies are pooled. Clothing and other possessions are shared, and the couple is in frequent telephone contact when apart, even if apart only during the work day (Kaufman, Harrison, & Hyde, 1984). These are the dynamic and behavioral characteristics which have been called fusion and which I am describing for the moment when I use the word fusion. Taken together, these characteristics form the aggregate picture of a typical lesbian relationship, as depicted in the literature. While some of these features are also shared by heterosexual couples and some are undeniably problematic, in the literature it is all of these characteristics together that are viewed as pathological.

Speculation about why lesbian relationships show greater fusion than heterosexual or gay male relationships generally describes two factors. Krestan and Bepko (1980) view lesbian fusion as the couple’s response to the situating of a lesbian relationship in a homophobic culture. In constant contact with a culture which ignores, denies, invalidates, pathologizes, and attempts to destroy lesbian relationships, the partners bond together in a “two-against-the-world” posture. In Krestan and Bepko’s view, fusion is an attempt — though misguided and ultimately self-destructive, they believe — to respond to the culture’s diluting of the relationship externally by concentrating and reconstituting togetherness internally. Fusion may help the partners to develop the sense of “relationship constancy” that society usually bolsters for heterosexual couples, but badly batters for lesbian couples (Pearlman, 1988).

Others locate the source of lesbian fusion in the gender differences of pre-Oedipal relational life (Burch, 1982, 1985, 1986, 1987; Lindenbaum, 1985; Lowenstein, 1980). They argue that fusion is a consequence of the presence of two women in the lesbian dyad. Leaning heavily on the work of Chodorow (1978), they assert that while all erotic relationships involve a yearning for replication of the

unity of the mother-infant dyad, only heterosexual men and lesbian women can hope to recall that primary connection in their adult romantic relationships because only heterosexual men and lesbian women are involved with women. In order to develop with a sense of maleness, boys must develop defenses which enable them “to individuate” and to separate from the mother-child connection. On the other hand, girls can develop while remaining attached to their “primary love objects.” Ultimately, adult males end up with greater skills in separating and distancing, while adult females end up with greater skills in connecting and empathizing.

According to these authors, a man in a heterosexual relationship may begin to re-experience the merger of the mother-infant relationship, but he can readily employ the familiar defenses against merger which are quickly aroused in him. (Parenthetically, men’s defenses against merger with mother may significantly contribute to male misogyny and male avoidance of intense intimacy.) In contrast, a woman brings to her relationship with another woman a set of skills in connection without the man’s highly developed defenses against the recollection of mother-infant merger. Because both partners are women, there is an unstymied regressive pull, according to this argument, toward fusion.

Framing the sources of fusion in these particular ways contributes to these authors’ assumptions that fusion is inherently pathological, maladaptive, or dysfunctional. Fusion as a response to oppression is then seen as a necessary evil, a consequence of homophobia from which lesbians must free themselves. The long-standing psychoanalytic tradition that views sustained regression as inimical to healthy development enables the psychodynamic explanation of lesbian fusion to serve as sufficient justification for the inherent harm of fusion. These observers of lesbian relationships point to the isolation of the couple, rigidity of relational patterns and roles, diminished tolerance for individual differences, and the lack of opportunity for the development of individual identity as the inevitable and dangerous consequences of fusion.

There is ample evidence in the literature of lesbian psychology to suggest that the patterns of intimacy of lesbian couples are different from those of heterosexual and gay male relationships, and that many of these distinctive features have been pathologized by labeling them as fusion. However, as the literature stacks up to argue that what is called fusion is inherently pathological, I believe that we see these commentators doing to lesbians what we so

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often (and so accurately) accuse traditional theorists and clinicians of doing to women: Similar to the ways in which traditional psychology has failed to examine what is normative for women and consequently has found pathology in women when measured by male norms; so the literature on fusion fails to examine what is normative for lesbians and finds pathology in lesbians when measured by male and heterosexual norms. It is erroneous to assume that lesbian relationships will follow heterosexual patterns, especially when we are confronted with the evidence — i.e., that fusion is so prevalent — that they do not. These authors may be putting the cart before the horse, highlighting the pathological before we have adequately determined what is normative for lesbians.

In fact, empirical data suggests that the prevalence of the relational dynamics that have been called fusion do not necessarily create pathology or dysfunction in lesbian relationships. Several studies have found that lesbians express a high degree of satisfaction in their relationships, and account for this satisfaction by crediting the by-products of intense intimacy — equality, companionship, the connection between friendship and love, and the valuing, by both partners, of communication and emotional support, many of the features which have been interpreted as fusion (McCandlish, 1982; Moses, 1978; Vetere, 1982).

In 1984 I examined lesbian relationship patterns in a small, qualitative study of well-functioning, stable lesbian couples (Mencher, 1984). Based on a series of individual and couple interviews with six women in relationships of six to eight years, my study differed from existing work on fusion by taking a detailed look at a nonclinical sample. A critical finding was that these satisfying, enduring lesbian relationships were characterized by fusion — but that these patterns did not cause the couples particular disturbance. In fact, the women interviewed accounted for the success of their relationships by naming as relational advantages the very same traits which often are labeled fusion. The intense closeness of the partners and the placement of the relationship as an axis around which their lives turned were cited as significant advantages of these relationships. Contrary to the idea that fusion limits the growth of individual identity, these women conveyed that the intense intimacy creates the trust and safety which foster self-actualization and risk-taking. For these women, the intimacy patterns that some would call fusion promoted a sense of security and faith in the relationship, and assurance that the women would be accompanied along life's journeys.

In an interesting study of eighteen heterosexual women's valued female friendships, Berzoff (1990) found that the four women who described an experience of fused self-other boundaries with a close female friend are the same four women who tested at the highest levels of ego development in the sample — that the healthiest women were those who described experiences of fusion.

These studies suggest that what has been identified as fusion may not be inherently disturbing to women and may indeed be both normative and growth-enhancing for lesbian couples. Confusion about both the function of fusion and the malignancy of fusion has resulted in a spate of articles which direct clinicians to prescribe separation and differentiation to their lesbian clients. In doing so, these authors ignore the vital use of fusion as a strategy to cope with homophobia, and fail to consider the syntonicity of fusion and women's preference for certain relational structures.

At times, fusion has been a creative and useful strategy employed by lesbians to strengthen a sense of couplehood and to fight active and passive cultural resistance to the lesbian relationship. Slater (1989) notes that it is the lesbian couples who fail to create this compensatory fusion whose relationships are at risk. She argues that if the outside pressure for the couple to act as separate, disconnected individuals is supplemented by one of the women fearing this level of connectedness, the couple will fail to generate sufficient cohesiveness and will separate. The existence of the couple within the context of a homophobic society is one source of fusion in lesbian relationships, and provides one way to understand how fusion is functional for lesbian women.

In the remainder of this paper, I will focus on the question of why fusion is a relational pattern which particularly characterizes an intimate dyad composed of two women. I believe that women's development is the principal source of lesbians' tendency toward fusion, and that fusion may function constructively as a relational pattern which allows women to express their relational strengths. Before we begin to rework the notion of fusion, it is necessary first to understand its underpinnings in classical psychoanalytic theory, and how fusion came to acquire a pathological reputation. At that point, we can utilize new understandings of women's development to rework our understanding of the malignant nature of fusion. Finally, we will discuss how this examination of lesbian fusion informs our understanding of more generically female patterns of intimacy.

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## Traditional views of fusion

Traditional psychodynamic theory, particularly object relations theory, depicts psychic life as beginning in fusion and proceeding as a struggle against an intense desire to return to this state of blissful merger. The individual throughout life longs for and searches for a union with a “symbiotic love object” that will recall the primary relationship with mother. This longing continually alternates with the “fear of re-engulfment which threatens the personal identity and entity of the individual. The longing for union and fear of re-engulfment is the basic conflict of human existence” (Pacella, 1980, p. 117).

This merger (momentary as it is before a fear of engulfment sets in) is the primal relational configuration from which further object relations develop. According to theorists such as Fairbairn (1952), Guntrip (1969), and Mahler (1975), the merged relational matrix of mother and infant is the vital prerequisite for the healthy development which ensues (we might say, paradoxically) from the child’s separation from this matrix.

Mahler goes on to describe a series of stages in the child’s separation and individuation from this primary relational matrix, from union with the mother (1975). In this scheme, the goal of development is separation from the fused state of infancy. Although the object relations theorists focus on pre-Oedipal relationships, the Oedipal crisis, as articulated in the psychoanalytic literature, is viewed as a further developmental push toward separation, away from intense intimacy with mother. Development proceeds as a series of successive disengagements from the primary, merged attachment with mother and progressive delineations of individual boundaries and personal autonomy.

According to this theory, erotic adult relationships involve transitory but precious moments of fusion, moments which recapitulate — however briefly — the early fused relationship with mother. The essence of what is called “mature love” consists of the ability to experience fusion in these moments, and only momentarily. Fusion as a sustained relational pattern is seen as taboo. Erikson (1963, 1968) insists that the experience of true intimacy requires that the individual has successfully negotiated an adolescent process of building a firmly delineated identity with strong individual boundaries. These strong boundaries and firm identity will enable the individual to withstand the momentary fusion experiences that characterize intimacy, without threat of ego loss. In contrast, Erikson describes adolescent

love as “an attempt to arrive at a definition of one’s identity by projecting one’s diffused self-image on another and by seeing it thus reflected and gradually clarified” (Erikson, 1968, p. 132).

Likewise, Kernberg (1976, 1980) believes that mature love involves the ability to re-experience fusion without loss of self. For Kernberg, individual identity consolidation and increasing individuation of self from “object” are the goals of development. When successfully accomplished, the individual can experience without harm the crossing of the boundaries of the self that characterize what Kernberg calls “mature love.”

The psychoanalytic literature views infancy as the sole province of the fulfillment of yearnings for fusion. These theorists depict the momentary recapitulations of fusion in adult erotic relationships as the pay-off for the individual’s successful repudiation of infantile merger and successful disengagement from the mother-child dyad.

However, both Erikson and Kernberg are clear that their descriptions of the pathways of healthy development have only limited applications. After constructing a developmental theory without reference to gender and thus with implied universal application, Erikson (1968) parenthetically adds that for women development may proceed differently. He states that the determination of female identity remains incomplete until a woman engages in an intimate relationship, that she evolves identity within a relational context (based on the man she marries). Lest we begin to build enthusiasm for Erikson as the precursor of the self-in-relation perspective, it is important to remember that Erikson’s parenthetical observations of the confluence of female identity and involvement in intimate relationships did not motivate him to alter his developmental scheme nor to make significant gender distinctions about what constitutes healthy development. For our purposes, the extreme similarity between Erikson’s definition of “adolescent love” and his description of female patterns of intimacy and identity is eloquent.

The juxtaposition of Erikson’s comments on love and those on female development suggests that he believes young women to be incapable of mature love, since they do not bring a firmly established identity to intimate relationships, but instead rely upon intimate relationships to shape their identities. Thus, for Erikson, female development may be necessarily delayed or impaired.

Kernberg’s explanation of how two individuals in a mature love relationship can experience fusion

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without ego loss also illustrates the limited application of this theoretical perspective. Discussing heterosexual relationships only, Kernberg contends that the couple maintains individual boundaries in the midst of moments of crossing boundaries by creating, individually, “elements of secrecy and mystery” (Kernberg, 1980). The secrecy and mystery derive from the recollection of the Oedipal constellation in the adult relationship, a recollection made possible by virtue of the fact that it is a man and woman who are joining in an intimate dyad. It is probable that the Oedipal constellation would not be recalled in the same way in an intimate dyad of two women; thus, the elements of secrecy and mystery would not be present to protect the couple from (what Kernberg calls) “uncontrolled intimacy,” what we might call sustained fusion.

Indeed, it can be postulated that, in traditional psychoanalytic terms, a pre-Oedipal constellation would be more likely to be recalled in an intimate relationship between two women. While, according to psychoanalytic theory, the re-enacted Oedipal constellation for a female may recall issues of separateness and differentness from a male which prevents patterns of sustained fusion in normative heterosexual relationships, the pre-Oedipal constellation may recall issues of primary oneness and female identification which promotes sustained fusion in normative lesbian relationships. Whatever the explanation, it is clear that Oedipal regression has been viewed as desirable, while pre-Oedipal regression has been seen as dangerous.

From this brief review, we can see that the psychoanalytic literature views adult fusion as pathological because it illustrates impaired development of the self and immature or regressed object relations. This summary, however, also raises the likelihood — indeed, the normative expectation — that women will evolve identity within a relational matrix and that intimate dyads of two women will normatively be characterized by fusion. In order to move on from the traditional literature’s pathologizing of these normative female relational patterns, we must examine more recent, female-centered theories of women’s development.

### **Fusion and women’s development**

The fusion-as-pathology arguments rest on three basic assertions: First, life begins in a state of symbiotic merger with mother. Second, development consists of a series of progressive disengagements from this (and subsequent) relationships; “...we start in a state of dual oneness and wind up in a state of

singular oneness” (Benjamin, 1988, p. 18). Third, fusion in adulthood represents regression to an infantile state of merger and must therefore be held at bay. Recent revisions in developmental theory, revisions which attempt to correct the male and (male-based) separation bias of traditional theory, resoundingly critique these three assertions.

Infant research in the past decade, particularly the work of Stern (1985), has substantially refuted the notion that infancy is a state of unity with mother. Contrary to the notion of mother-infant symbiosis, Stern presents evidence to suggest that even the newborn is “primed” to be interested in others and to experience itself as distinct from others.

We have only begun to understand how Stern’s and others’ findings about the absence of mother-infant merger alter psychoanalytic notions of development, separation, dependency, regression, health, intimacy, and fusion. In her provocative book, *The Bonds of Love*, Benjamin (1988) begins to articulate a theory of “intersubjectivity” which is partially based on Stern’s findings:

Once we accept the idea that infants do not begin life as part of an undifferentiated unity, the issue is not only how we separate from oneness, but also how we connect to and recognize others; the issue is not how we become free of the other, but how we actively engage and make ourselves known in relationship to the other. (Benjamin, 1988, p. 18)

Stern (1985), Surrey (1985), Jordan (1986), and Benjamin (1988) all question the very telling language of psychoanalytic thought, the language of subject and object, of the doer and the done-to, in which the child is subject and the mother is object, which has grown out of an “infantocentric” view of mother-infant merger. Instead, as Benjamin asserts, the dyad of the mother and the social infant who can respond to and distinguish others represents not a oneness which is destined to be separated into subject and object; but that of subject and subject. The intersubjective view is different from the intrapsychic view in that it “reorients the conception of the psychic world from a subject’s relations to its object toward a subject meeting another subject” (Benjamin, 1988, p. 20). It emphasizes what happens “in the field of self and other,” in the connective space between two individuals, rather than emphasizing the internal, intrapsychic field of internalizations.

If we view the mother-infant relationship within an intersubjective frame, we remove it from the

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symbiotic matrix of oneness, total dependency, and total selflessness (of both infant and mother); it is no longer a relationship to be forsaken, either through separation or through internalization.

The contributions of Stern and Benjamin to refute the notion of the blissful merger of infancy have profound implications for the psychoanalytic view of development. If development consists of a series of separations from the primary fused relational matrix of infancy, if all subsequent relationships involve the negotiation of the essential life dilemma between the yearning for fusion and the terror of engulfment, then what happens to our view of development if we radically alter our ideas of that primary relationship? If we pull the main thread, does the whole fabric unravel? How does a different understanding of how we begin life alter our understanding of how development proceeds? In examining the second assertion on which the fusion-as-pathology argument is based — that development consists of a series of separations — it is helpful to turn to the relational perspective of the Stone Center (Jordan, 1984, 1986; Kaplan, 1984; Miller, 1984, 1986, 1988; Stiver, 1984; Surrey, 1985, 1987). In proposing new models of female development, the theory group of the Stone Center begins to offer clues as to why the intimacy patterns of lesbians differ, and why they differ particularly in the direction of fusion.

In shifting the emphasis from separation to *relationship* as the basis for women's self-experience and development, the relational perspective complements Stern's assertion that life begins in a relational template. According to this perspective, for women, "The primary experience of the self is relational; the self is organized and developed in the context of important relationships" (Surrey, 1985). The primary emotional motive for women is to seek a relational process. The goal of development is the increasing ability to build and to enlarge mutually enhancing relationships. The pathway toward this goal involves what Surrey (1985) has termed *relationship differentiation*, a process of differentiation in the embryological sense — in which the individual articulates increasing levels of complexity, fluidity, choice, and satisfaction in her constellation of relationships. Women's development, in this scheme, hinges neither on the assertion of difference of self from other, nor on a lessening degree of need for or connection to the other. The ongoing actual relational process between self and other, between subject and subject, is critical, along with the internalization of intrapsychic relational images.

Based on these notions of the goals of women's development, the relational perspective redefines what constitutes a healthy adult relationship. Unlike Kernberg and Erikson, who measure healthy adult relationships by the "individual-ness" of the two selves, the Stone Center theorists mark healthy relationships by the quality of the relational processes. They view mutual engagement, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment as the fundamental processes of a healthy relationship. A key feature is relational authenticity.

*Mutual engagement* — the capacity, in both people, for attention and interest — is illustrated by a comment from Adrienne, one of the subjects in my 1984 study of lesbian couples:

[I get] so many things [from the relationship]. I can validate myself as a caring, giving, loving person through her. And I certainly receive all those things when I need to receive them. I get companionship, the sharing of experiences together, the freedom of being able to express anything I need to — there doesn't have to be a filtering system there. (Mencher, 1984, p. 118)

*Mutual empathy* refers to being attuned to and responsive to the subjective, inner experience of the other, and the capacity to share in and comprehend the momentary psychological state of the other person. Mutual empathy requires neither sameness nor differentness, but can exist in either case.

Jesse: I would say that the effects of homophobia and having to be closeted are that they just bring us closer. It's the subtle homophobia — assumptions of heterosexuality. [Laurie] and I understand that immediately and share without any questions at all. (Mencher, 1984, p. 107)

Kathleen: She lets me be who I am even if it's not her. And if she doesn't understand it, she lets me be in those ways. She encourages me to go with those places that are different from her. (Mencher, p. 98)

Adrienne: She's never not understood me. We're usually able to talk and talk. (Mencher, p. 103)

*Mutual empowerment* consists of the mutual capacity to be moved by, respond to, and move the other. Even when interviewed separately, Kathleen

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and Cory described with remarkable similarity how the intimacy of their couple relationship has moved them each toward growth.

Kathleen: I think that lesbian relationships allow for a lot more expansion. My relationship is what has allowed me to change so much in this period of time and to allow [Cory] to change and grow. (Mencher, 1984, p. 105)

Cory: This relationship provides me with a safety and sustenance. When people feel safe, they learn, grow, and change. Since the relationship is so safe, I've been able to change. I've allowed myself to be more inward, to feel painful feelings, and to show them in ways that I couldn't before....When I'm loved, I know I can love myself better....It's a very life-affirming relationship. (Mencher, pp. 105-106)

*Relational authenticity* is the ongoing challenge to feel emotionally real, connected, vital, clear, and purposeful in relationship.

Joan: I would be who I am without her, but I am certainly more complete with her. (Mencher, 1984, p. 101)

Jesse: In being together, both of us have been able to become who we really were all along....We've really helped each other become something that we're comfortable with. (Mencher, p. 105)

These are the comments of women in lesbian relationships which exhibited marked patterns of what is traditionally viewed as fusion. I present these comments within a discussion of the relational perspective's definitions of the features of a healthy relationship in order to suggest the following: If we identify norms for relational structures which are based on women's developmental experience, then some of the features of lesbian relationships that have been described as fusion — e.g., intense intimacy, acute sensitivity to the inner emotional world of the other, and the embeddedness of individual identity within the relationship — these features lose their pejorative connotation. Instead, these intimacy patterns in lesbian relationships appear to be the likely result of two women — both of whom have travelled developmental pathways marked by movement toward connection — coming together in an intimate erotic pairing. Contrary to the notion that these

relational patterns indicate something gone awry, these patterns may indicate movement toward the fulfillment of women's preferences for relational structures which feature mutual engagement, mutual empathy, mutual empowerment, and relational authenticity.

In discussing fusion as pathology in lesbian relationships without first identifying the normative patterns of intimacy, researchers and clinicians may have unwittingly pathologized women's ways of being and loving. An examination of intimacy patterns in lesbian couples may allow us to understand a bit more about how women experience themselves and their relationships when that experience is unfettered by the different intimacy patterns of men and by patriarchal assumptions about how women should love. Whereas the presence of men may, as Erikson and Kernberg describe, bring to heterosexual pairings a movement toward individuation and away from intense sustained intimacy, a similar pushing-against women's preference for connection does not exist in a lesbian dyad.

Certainly, this does not indicate that either the heterosexual pattern or the lesbian pattern is better or worse than the other; they each have their possibilities and problems, to be sure. I am suggesting, simply, that the lesbian pattern — a more fused pattern — is not inherently disturbed and that the lesbian pattern may further explicate women's relational patterns in general. In a relationship in which both partners, as women, are consistently directed toward connection, there can exist a full range of possibility for mutuality, empathy, and authenticity.

## Conclusion

In closing, I'd like to refer again to Benjamin for her comments on how psychoanalytic thought may have distorted our understandings of intimacy:

The classic psychoanalytic viewpoint did not see differentiation as a balance, but as a process of disentanglement. Thus it cast experiences of union, merger, and self-other harmony as regressive opposites to differentiation and self-other distinction. Merging was a dangerous form of undifferentiation, a sinking back into the sea of oneness — the "oceanic feeling" that Freud told Romain Rolland he frankly couldn't relate to. The original sense of oneness was seen as absolute, as "limitless narcissism," and, therefore, regression to it would impede development and prevent separation. In its

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most extreme version, this view of differentiation pathologized the sensation of love: relaxing the boundaries of the self in communion with others threatened the identity of the isolate self. (Benjamin, 1988, pp. 46-47)

The actualization of the self and the intense intimacy of a relationship need not be mutually exclusive. As Jordan (1984) suggests, there may exist a paradox of empathy: by joining in an intimate connection, self and other may become more accurately articulated. As a woman, the more I feel connected, the more I feel myself.

The dichotomizing of “oneness” and “separation” offers a distorted vision of relational life — which Miller (1990) suggests arises from male theorists’ difficulties in conceptualizing true relatedness. Within this dichotomous vision, oneness is associated as mother and as female, while separation is associated as father and as male. If men control the world, it’s not difficult to guess which part of the dichotomy will be idealized and which will be pathologized.

In this paper, I have attempted to re-examine traditional notions of fusion. I have tried to understand how the pathologizing of what have been viewed as more fused patterns of intimacy represents a pathologizing of lesbians’ ways of loving in particular and of women’s ways of loving in general. I have used the word *fusion* tonight within an attempt to de-pathologize some of the behaviors and dynamics it describes and to assert that fusion may represent a relational pattern which allows women to express our relational strengths. However, in the state of distortion and bias which surrounds fusion in the literature, it may be impossible to de-toxify the term and to relieve it of malignant connotations.

Instead, we might substitute a nonpejorative word, such as *embeddedness*, to describe the situating of women’s identity within relationships. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *to embed* means “to fix firmly in a surrounding mass of some solid material” (Murray, et al., 1933, p. 106). For women, the relational world *is* made of solid material. The use of *embeddedness* bypasses the confusion and inaccuracy of the word *fusion*. *Embeddedness* as a description of healthy relational involvement acknowledges the normative developmental needs and intimacy patterns of women and revises the traditional standards of autonomy and separation which are so male-derived. The use of a nonpejorative term, such as *embeddedness*, may enable us to view relational patterns which differ from the prescribed heterosexual

norm without foregone conclusions about the pathology.

It is critical to examine our fundamental assumptions about love before we move to a critique of certain patterns of intimacy. These assumptions have arisen from the male experience of separation and the heterosexual experience of difference and distance within relationship. We must re-assess whether these notions resonate with the experience of women. In critiquing how lesbians tend to love, I am afraid that some have depreciated how most women would prefer to love — with mutuality, with trust, with passion, with empathy — *with abandon*.

### Discussion Summary

A discussion is held after each colloquium presentation. Selected portions of the discussion are summarized here. At this session Carolyn Dillon (Clinical Professor, Boston University School of Social Work), Alexandra Kaplan, Jean Baker Miller, Lourdes Rodriguez (Counseling Psychologist, Simmons College), and Irene Stiver joined Julie Mencher in leading the discussion.

**Question:** Is fusion related to decreased sexual activity in long-term lesbian relationships? Did you find that in your 1984 study?

**Mencher:** I did not measure my subjects’ levels of sexual activity, but I do have some ideas about decreased sexual activity in long-term lesbian relationships. First, we have to remember that as lesbians we have not been taught how to be sexual with our partners. Heterosexual women are taught from an early age, implicitly and explicitly, how to carry on sexual relationships with men. But as lesbians, no one taught us how to date, how to be sexually aggressive, how to initiate sex, etc. So, I think that may have something to do with many lesbians not being able to sustain eroticism past that initial period of wild passion. Secondly, since such a high percentage of women have been sexually abused as children, and since the consequences of child sexual abuse are often reflected in adult sexual activity, there is an increased likelihood that two women coming together in an intimate dyad will reflect those difficulties.

**Rodriguez:** It occurs to me that lesbian relationships reflect the psychology of an oppressed people. Sometimes internalized homophobia and internalized self-hate are played out in the sexual context.

**Comment:** We need to look at the definition of sexuality, just as we have to look at the definitions of fusion and intimacy.

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**Kaplan:** We need to think about lesbian relationships in relation to what? In relation to heterosexual relationships? One way to turn it around is to say that in the heterosexual culture, the level of sexual activity (who knows what it is?) is heavily determined by the men. Maybe that's the aberration. Maybe lesbians have found the level of sexual activity that is comfortable. We shouldn't think of that level as something that we have to excuse, vis-à-vis the other.

**Dillon:** There's so much homophobia in the culture. It's very hard to come home to the couple and feel sexy when what you really want to do first is to discharge the conflicts, tensions, disempowerments, devaluations, slight remarks, avoidances of the day.

**Mencher:** Many lesbian women spend their days pretending that they are not lesbian women, confronting homophobia with that kind of silence. The cumulative effect of this may, as Carolyn and Lourdes have stated, affect lesbians' interest in making love.

**Stiver:** The notion of reframing sexuality, just as Julie has reframed fusion, is not a small matter. Women don't want to talk about it. We are often obliged to accept a male understanding of sexuality. Women have had male sexuality imposed upon them so much, that they believe they have to accept this view or they will reveal themselves as defective or inadequate in some powerful, central way. This makes it difficult to develop and explore one's sexuality in a free kind of way — for all women, but particularly for lesbians. We have had a sexuality imposed on us that doesn't feel congenial. We haven't felt the freedom to explore our sexuality.

Also, I want to comment on what you have implied about fusion: that men are so cut off from the opportunity to experience connection with their mothers that they "romanticize" the yearned-for state of symbiosis (that has nothing to do with what was). Thus, they see it as a paradise that they long to return to but are terrified of. Then, the male theorists develop and present a theory which devalues and makes one horrified of the longing and fantasy that men carry into adulthood.

**Miller:** The basic theory is a male-made-up notion, about the life of mothers and babies that never existed. It has to do with this culture's lack of understanding of relationship. There's this notion of this so-called paradise of people sort of glommed together into a "oneness" or of separation — not a conception of the interplay, flow, and interaction that is relatedness.

**Question:** Can you comment on the experience of being multicultural from a lesbian perspective?

**Rodriguez:** There is a difference. As a Hispanic woman, I found validation for being Hispanic within my family, growing up. That's very different for lesbians and gay men, where identity formation and validation does not happen *inside* the family. That's why going inside ourselves, within the couple, and the community for that validation is so important.

**Question:** Is fusion another word for codependency?

**Mencher:** That is a really interesting question. I'd like that topic to be my next paper. I think that the feminist critique on codependency has yet to be written. We need a gender-based analysis of codependency to really understand if what is being called codependency is pathology or caring.

**Question:** I wonder if you can comment on what would be a more accurate understanding of women's sexuality.

**Mencher:** I can't possibly. The point that several panelists have made tonight is that because men have always been in control of women's sexuality, we don't know what women would want sexually if we weren't schooled in those male-derived norms.

I hope that we all can collectively define what women's sexuality is, both for heterosexual and lesbian women.

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