

**The article is a product of authoress' long-term engagement in providing psychological assistance to women and girls of lesbian orientation and working with educational programs dealing with diversity, together with numerous women and other NGOs; during the period March-April 2005, the authoress provided psychological assistance to women as a co-facilitator in the Support group for sexually different women; the article is being published within the Labris psychological web counseling and is a continuation of the four previously published articles from January, June, December 2004 and June 2005.**

**THE LESBIAN PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS  
(OR: THE IMPORTANCE OF SEEKING PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSISTANCE IN BUILDING  
LESBIAN PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS (AND NOT ONLY WHEN IN A CRISIS))**

## **INTRODUCTION**

“The feeling of not doing anything right”, “As if I was let down, actually I’m afraid of not being attractive to her anymore”. She is angry at Her because “she always makes all the decisions in their relationship”, and She is angry with Her because “she lets Her do everything”. While laughing: “Ok, if nothing else, at least we are completely mad about each other”, “We have broken up several times and always continued again...”. “I’m tired of constant hiding, at the beginning I had agreed; now I myself am not sure what I think about it”. “Does anger belong to your relationship in the parents’ or partners’ roles?” Silence... They unanimously start talking about the beginning of their relationship.

The purpose of this article is to support women and girls lesbians to learn about partnerships instead of “coping” within some. Also, this is an attempt to demystify ‘going to therapy’ for lesbian couples, having in mind all of the numerous obstacles standing before such a step. The article deals with “The Same and the Specific” – the partner relationships’ dynamics regardless of sexual orientation and then moves on to the particularities of lesbian relationships. There are no universal truths such as “there is something less (or more) to lesbian relationships”, i.e. there is no “exact” or absolute description of lesbian population as a homogenous group within the partner relationships’ context. On the contrary, the last description lesbians wish for or feel useful is the image of ‘a typical couple’ that usually leaves out a flexible explanation of their desires or concerns. In order to have a successful partnership with a degree of quality, it is necessary to understand the dynamics within a partnership as well as to understand what one brings in from a personal history and what it does to the dynamics. Depending on the importance of a relationship to the partners and its duration (in order to “make a fair attempt”), a working through will be done, avoiding or lessening negative repetitions and enabling the relationship to grow within different spheres, otherwise it will be disturbed and finally broken. The internalized homophobia has a particularly damaging impact in lesbian partner relationships.

## **LEARN ABOUT PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS**

It is important to learn how to build a partner relationship. This is something that, probably, nobody has ever taught you before. Each couple undergoes the phases of Entanglement, Individuation, and Moving towards Autonomy – and each relationship can encounter certain difficulties. In such situations, the lack of seeking psychological assistance in our society is often understood as “cultural” – “we are not used to it” or it is because it brings on the stigma, so it is understandably difficult to achieve trust in psychological assistance, i.e. the therapy process. The psychological assistance offers insight into what one knows and feels. It offers a chance to assume a distance from the situation one found herself in, then one can feel the dynamics, and at the same time not lose control. The official starting with the sessions is in itself a coming out for a lesbian couple. Some of the initial concerns have to do with the confidentiality, trusting the counselor (where and how to find one and whether she is lesbian-friendly?) and the entire process (“Talking about it can only make things worse” or “When differences are brought out, it can escalate into a conflict, and the conflict can escalate into violence”, the lack of trust can originate from the family or some other experience) then there is an issue of choosing the counselor (“Will she understand?”, “Will she be considerate for the both of us, it is

important for me to be fair?"

Different problems can lead to the feeling of loneliness: from partners not being able to hear each other, not listen to each other, lacking negotiating skills in various important existential issues, had they made "the golden rules" at the beginning of their relationship?, one of them lacks the intimacy they had before or they are facing e.g. the phenomenon of "lesbian bed death" (disappearance of physical passion). The partnership always has to do with an experience, not the factual reality, since there is no such thing. Insisting on "the objective truth" by one of the partners is just a step away from a violent relationship. Simply, You experience differently because You have a different history.

You carry your history all your life. That means all of the contents in your life until the moment you enter present relationship. And you personally bring it in as one's "heritage" into each relationship. The history contains both "strengths" and "damage" that inevitably come up.

## A CASE STUDY

\*Any possible recognition of the partners is not possible. The case summary is taken from Ms Marleen Diekmann practice, a Dutch psychotherapist – the case is described in her article "SCHEIDEN EN VERBINDEN MET "EEN TAAL ERBIJ", 2005.

"The beginning of the relationship between A. (aged 28) and B. (36) was intensive. They have lived together for five years and are no longer very happy. A. is feeling B. is too much oriented to sex. This is the reason for her not to feel safe and loved, so she blocks when they are about to make love. B. is complaining she needs constant adaptation for A., that she has to put up with her moods, solve her problems and stand up for her partner at all times. She perceives their relationship as a breathtaking one which brings anxiety. In the sessions that followed, there was a fragment of disclosure that A. as a little girl had been abused by her father, while B. had to take care of her mother as a little girl.

B.: "I had grown up alone with my mother and she often laid on the couch. It was only later that I understood she had been suffering from depression."

The feeling of anxiety B. communicated and a tentative to adjust was actually recognized also in their relationship with her mother when as a child she had to perform "filthy jobs". "That hadn't been easy for a little girl", the therapist states. Mother's depression brought too much harm to the family. This girl always had to do everything in order to feel safe. She did not learn to make boundaries. The better she took care of her mother, the chances grew the mother would become "the real mother" and take care of her in return (be functional for her).

B.: "I don't see anything in it, but sometimes I have this feeling of being with a big, naughty child instead of being with a grown woman. I have to "take her everywhere by the hand", sometimes she can't even make a phone call. And then I say something she doesn't like and her whole mood instantly changes and whatever I do just doesn't help. At times, I am simply afraid of her!"

A.: "You humiliate me when you talk about me this way. I can do anything when I have to, as I have always been able to, so if this is the point, from now on I'll do everything on my own".

Therapist: "B., are you aware in what situations you experience A. as an adult woman?"

B.: "Yes, the first and foremost is when we make love. Then I can completely let go and feel safe with her".

Therapist (looking at A.): "And this is exactly the most confusing part of your life, isn't it?"

A. laughs and nods. Her desire to have B. taking care of her and her fear that people in general would not have compassion for her, are perceived by B. as repetition of her having to perform "everything". A. desires to let go and be a sheltered child that receives help for her fears. She perceives this feeling is reduced when put in a demand of their partnership to take part in sexuality.

Within their relationship A. and B. had difficulties for some time, but have gradually managed somehow to achieve a better understanding of repeating their individual traumas and reach personal growth."

The pain and joy in a person's life go together with the ties and loyalties one has received through generations; they are affected by the one personally and one's surrounding. Sometimes loyalties can stand in the way and it seems to would have been much easier without them, although they cannot be removed or torn apart, but it is important to make them visible, to understand them and seek their new form within a partnership. Using psychological assistance means seeking help to make new choices through being aware of one's intra-psychic reality. Previous experiences are oftentimes painful.

## THE PHASES IN A PARTNER RELATIONSHIP

It is necessary for the first session to offer a possibility for each of the partners to express their pain and dissatisfaction with the partnership which is oftentimes not done through the mutual exchanges - the importance of this session being to achieve a situation where they can listen to each other. Do you have space for Her perception, do you know how She is perceiving it? The same argument between the partners is often represented through two experiences ("two sides"). It is important that both perceptions remain/"survive" as a symbol for the fact that it is not dangerous to think differently and that the way She thinks probably will not change. Paradoxically, when you become aware of the previous, YOUR personal experience starts changing immanently.

Entanglement – When lesbians find themselves surrounded by problems, they are often, actually, in the kind of entanglement they mostly perceive as a mutual (relentless) fighting. The only intimacy they still feel is through reacting (should be read: quarrels) on each other. They are not able to "see" each other clearly. This looks like a hopeless dance. In such a situation it is not necessary to elaborate upon almost anything about the mutual entanglement in "the struggle" and about the lack of autonomy, these are very obvious.

Individuation – As always in one's lifetime, here in the next phase of supportive sessions with the counselor, "the job" is to take the history into one's own hands and in its part that is causing difficulties within the relationship it is necessary to learn how not to repeat it further on with a partner (or to repeat it less). Each partner has her own part of "job" that has to do with her own life and her own responsibility within the interaction with the other one. These sessions are concerned with primary partners' families, ex partners and other relevant individuals.

It is of tremendous importance to explore the ways each partner deals with their loneliness and fear of individuation. This resembles a painful drill, the end of which is uncertain. Within this phase partners also become aware of how destructive their tie is. The more content they disclose openly the easier they would define their personal strategy and seek what possible, and achievable.

Gradually, there arises a new situation where partners take over more responsibility for their reactions.

Autonomy – This means to be able to rely on oneself. Here it is about making an effort to become separate, to liberate yourself from the persons you are dependant on and not to lose the tie/thread you have with them. For example, partners can be very different from one another and again not to be threatening or endangering one another, while sometimes it becomes obvious the entanglement is better to be dealt with through ending the relationship. The processes of both partners are rarely synchronized. Sometimes, the decision of not disclosing everything in the sessions or one of the partners abandoning the therapy process can also mean giving up on her part. If the couple has a child or children that they both love and take care of, this process includes also all the possible effects children can suffer.

And eventually, one of the "vicious circles" any relationship can fall into consists of the following:  
Expectations from the relationship are not communicated - The differences amongst mutual expectations remain "invisible" - The couple does not have a conflict - The event occurs that discloses the expectations - They communicate expectations - Differences in mutual expectations arise - The couple has a conflict - There are no events that would disclose expectations - The expectations about the relationship are not communicated (and by this the circle is complete). Looks familiar?

## SOME SPECIFICS WHEN BUILDING UP LESBIAN LOVE RELATIONSHIP

It is of utmost importance not to generalize experiences of lesbian couples. The popular incorrect representation holds lesbians, gays and bisexuals different from heterosexuals, thus leading to the conclusion that individuals from these communities are alike. The truth is that these are all communities within a community. Connected to this is the task not only to validate diversities but – basically – to recognize that diversities exist.

The lack of role-models: Not only in this country we do lack role-models within the outstanding individual lesbians that are out with their identity (this was dealt with in the Labris Web Counseling article in June 2005), but this is also the case with the role-models of out, public lesbian relationships. Most often, lesbians that create partnerships do so in secrecy, representing themselves to the outer world as “friends”, “roommates”, “cousins” etc., sometimes they do not name the nature of their relationship as a lesbian one even among themselves, or sometimes this is “covered up” by a (heterosexual) marriage. Further on, it is – unfortunately – easy to indicate the “invisibility” of older lesbian couples or couples featuring other differences (within the different). Again, if we have a certain image of a lesbian couple in front of ourselves, it usually follows the dominant values. One must pay the toll to secrecy, isolation, shame and “role-playing”, fear and oppression (different legal, emotional, family, economical and security reasons), so the types of choices remain limited.

Internalized homophobia: To be out with one’s lesbianism can also bring discrimination. Sometimes the couples that are out become exposed to extra pressure.

Some couples are not even out with themselves. This assumes the fact that they do not describe themselves as being in a lesbian relationship nor do they socialize with other couples that describe themselves as lesbian ones. Of course, it can be disputed that some is either ‘pro’ or ‘contra’ any labeling, since for some couples having a name for an individual identity or status can be liberating – the structure that has also its name feels safe, lessens or removes confusion and offers to a certain degree the feeling of control over one’s life; while other couples may perceive this as something that would automatically disqualify them in any existential sphere and this perception begins from the fact that they cannot personally cope with the naming of one of their identities.

The concern arises from the fact it is extremely difficult to live in constant fear of being “discovered” by your neighbors, colleagues and primary family or it may happen that your partner also may have problem with labeling. Practically, the toll of internalized homophobia is repeated (dealt with in the Labris Web Counseling article from June 2004), now within a relationship which is best seen in the lowering of partners’ self-esteem, their fear is intensified and they feel more and more unhappy. Professional authoress’ experience includes a high degree of denying the damaging effect of the internalized homophobia onto the partnership with most of the lesbian couples she encountered.

The lesbian relationship values/Pioneering endeavor: The values authentically belonging to the lesbian partnership are difficult to list, since, understandably, all couples that are not heterosexual, to a certain degree still use the experiences of the dominantly offered and learned heterosexual relationships. This is the matrix where couples of other orientation than heterosexual test what they desire to keep, try or reject. Basically, there is recognition of the heterosexual imperative “heritage” in the following: 1) one can achieve utter happiness only coupled with another individual and 2) long-term love relationships are the best. This heritage sometimes means performing partner relationships through stereotype gender roles. Because of this it is very important to explore and create one’s own practice, which is in itself a pioneering endeavor (and is connected to the lack of role-models).

Individual practices can vary. Some couples decide on monogamous relationships, some at the very beginning or somewhat later arrange that one or both partners have sexual contacts with other individuals while remaining, so-called, primary partners, some women will not form “fixed” relations, they will not

commit to just one person or even if they choose one individual they will not enter a steadier relationship. Because of all this, it is equally important to choose the structure within the lesbian relationships and agree on the “basic rules” of that relationship. It happens that difficulties arise upon negotiating the rules, breaking them or the couple confronts the prejudices of others through the reactions towards the agreed structure (e.g. when negotiating the rules within the so-called “open relationships”, some of the issues partners decide upon is the degree of information they would communicate to their immediate surroundings plus what they would share with each other, as well as the issues regarding safe sex, etc.).

#### Some of the issues lesbian couples encounter:

- Lesbian couples cannot have problems since these only confirm the negative stereotype about lesbian relationships. If they do have them, the myth of the dominant culture – that homosexual relations are doomed to failure anyway – is activated automatically.
- The myth of lesbian couples rushing into joint living and that they should feel uncomfortable about it. There is oftentimes an overlapping in the fact that one of the partners is in need of an (rented) apartment in the period soon after the relationship has started or she just needs to move from one to another, so the availability of the other’s living space and economical reasons can support the decision of moving in together. This is by no means a rule and it is neither particularly connected with the sexual orientation nor with any patterns of a partner relationship.
- Even in a supportive surrounding the couple can hardly influence their own image. The couples that are out within their circle of friends and have a long-term relationship can sometimes feel isolated when difficulties come up: “The longer we are together, the more we are being idealized and the less we talk to our friends about our problems, not even to each other. The others only see our strengths and I really feel as a failure.” This is yet another way of being “in the closet”.
- Discussing differences in the desire for love making. What would be “normal” sexual behavior? Instead of this myth it is important to give a positive connotation and value the differences, as well as to encourage the partner to exchange ideas, each about their individual sexualities. It is necessary to support the realization of sexuality “in one’s own way” which is suitable for both of the partners, instead of insisting on “the right way”.
- Different issues: The conflict about the status of the relationship itself; Coming out; In what way work-related stress impacts the relationship; At least one of the partners is maintaining a relationship with a third person; Coming to a decision of living together; One of the partners wishes “more space” within the relationship, while the other is concerned about it; Jealousy, insecurity, isolation; Violence in the lesbian love relationship; Renegotiation of the “basic relationship rules”; The relation with the primary partners’ families; The communication is “gone” and gradually, a feeling of losing each other sets in; Parenthood; The partners are separated and are working on “the positive ending” or moving onto a new form of partnership; The change of value system in one or both partners compared to the beginning of their relationship, etc.

## CONCLUSION

It is important for lesbians to learn about building relationships and not only when these enter a crisis. It is not easy to instantly find an alternative frame and language necessary for a lesbian existence. Winning the battle with oneself is particularly difficult and accepting oneself as a lesbian (and one’s partner as a lesbian). While using psychological assistance and during its entire process related to the lesbian existence, together with counselor you have an opportunity to establish, re-examine and/or re-describe the framework that is comfortable for you and your partner. It is true that there are difficulties in identifying a lesbian-friendly counselor. If you, however, succeed at this, it can easily happen that the counselor in her own private surroundings has one or two homosexual acquaintances (if she has any at all) who are not sure to be a part of her family gatherings and openly presented as her lesbian friends. She may be meeting lesbians (or even more rarely lesbian couples) merely professionally or is acquainted with the lesbian issues only e.g. from the research. When choosing the counselor, it is important to measure to what extent she is able to

challenge dominant ideas and couples generalizations and especially those about homosexual couples, and how much she has preserved openness, uncertainty and curiosity. When faced with a possible counselor's uneasiness/uncomfortability related to the specifics of the lesbian relationship you bring up, you need not to try to "adjust" your own experience to the values of a dominant heterosexual culture – but, rather ask your counselor to understand the broader system than the dominant one, to understand what meaning You and Your partner give to a certain problem and let her know that existential lesbian and lesbian couples issues open up space not only for personal, but for political issues as well. These are just some of the qualities an expert must possess when working with individuals of sexual orientation other than the majority one and you should not accept anything less, since you deserve an equal understanding for your life issues just like any other person.

Dušica Popadić

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Translated into English by Ana Zorbić