

20-Oct-2003

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***GAY, LESBIAN COUPLES CAN TEACH HETEROSEXUALS HOW TO IMPROVE RELATIONSHIPS***

Married heterosexual couples can learn a great deal from gay and lesbian couples, far more than the stereotypical images presented by the television show "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy," according to the first published observational studies of homosexual relationships.

"Gay and lesbian couples are a lot more mature, more considerate in trying to improve a relationship and have a greater awareness of equality in a relationship than straight couples," said John Gottman, a University of Washington emeritus professor of psychology who directed the research along with Robert Levenson, a University of California, Berkeley, psychology professor.

"I think that in 200 years heterosexual relationships will be where gay and lesbian relationships are today," said Gottman, who now heads the Relationship Research Institute in Seattle.

In the first of two papers published this month in the Journal of Homosexuality, the researchers explored the conflict interaction of homosexual and heterosexual couples using mathematical modeling techniques. In the second study, they looked at factors influencing gay and lesbian couples' relationship satisfaction and dissolution.

"In the modeling paper we looked at processes, and they look so different you could draw a picture," said Gottman. "Straight couples start a conflict discussion in a much more negative place than do gays and lesbian couples. Homosexuals start the same kind of discussions with more humour and affection, are less domineering and show considerably more positive emotions than heterosexual couples.

"The way a discussion starts is critical. If it starts off in a bad way in a heterosexual relationship, we have found that it will become even more negative 96 percent of the time. Gays and lesbians are warmer, friendlier and less belligerent. You see it over and over in their discussions, and their partner is receiving the message they are communicating. In turn, their partner is allowing himself or herself to be influenced in a positive way. With married heterosexual couples a discussion is much more of a power struggle with someone being invalidated."

Gay and lesbian relationships seem to be marked by what Gottman calls "the triumph of positive emotions over negative emotions."

"Negative emotions have more impact in heterosexual relationships," he said. "This is why our previous research has shown you need a 5-to-1 ratio of positive to negative statements. This seems to be universal in heterosexual couples. But it may be different in gay and lesbian relationships where positive emotions seem to have a lot more power or influence."

Dan Yoshimoto, a UW psychology doctoral student who worked on the studies, added that the ways gays and lesbians resolve conflict may be the glue that maintains stability in homosexual relationships.

"They start and maintain a conversation a positive way and this may enable them to solve a problem and resolve conflict," he said."

What makes the new studies noteworthy is that they went beyond collecting self-reported data from questionnaires. While self reports produce important information, the researchers wrote, "there is considerable evidence that people's perceptions of their relationship may diverge quite markedly from their actual interaction." The researchers videotaped discussions each couple had about what occurred that day, a topic of ongoing conflict, and a pleasant topic to analyze the verbal and nonverbal content of their interaction during the talks and again at a later time when the partners viewed the tape individually. The researchers also collected an array of physiological data, including heart rate, during the conversations.

Homosexual couples in the studies were recruited in the San Francisco Bay area and they filled out a questionnaire that assessed relationship satisfaction. Forty pairs 12 happy gay couples, 10 unhappy gay couples, 10 happy lesbian couples and 8 unhappy lesbian couples were chosen to participate in the study. The comparison sample of married couples was drawn from a larger study that recruited couples from around Bloomington, Ind. It was matched in terms of age, marital satisfaction, education and income to the homosexual couples and consisted of 20 happy and 20 unhappy couples.

The researchers also collected data for 12 years on the relationships of the homosexual couples. By then eight couples (20 percent), one gay and seven lesbian had broken up. This rate, if projected over a 40-year period, would be almost 64 percent, which is similar to the 67 percent divorce rate for first marriages among heterosexual couples of the same time span.

Data also showed that while high levels of cardiovascular arousal among straight couples during a conflict conversation was a predictor of lower relationship satisfaction and higher risk for relationship dissolution, the reverse was true with homosexual couples. With gays and lesbians, low physiological arousal was related to these negative outcomes.

"Another interesting thing that emerged in conversations the couples had was that gays and lesbians are more honest. They talked explicitly about monogamy and sex. Those topics don't come up in 31 years of studying heterosexual couples," said Gottman. "Heterosexual are uptight in talking about sex and you don't hear explicit sexual talk. In reviewing the tapes of their conversations, you really don't know what they are talking about. Same sex couples talk about sex, and are more mature and honest and less fragile in talking about it.

Gottman also said: "The overall implication of this research is that we have to shake off all of the stereotypes of homosexual relationships and have more respect for them as committed relationships. Gays and lesbians may be more competent at having a mature relationship. Our data suggests our society needs to reconsider its policy and that we should value and honour love where we find it," Gottman said.

The National Institute of Mental Health funded the research.

Co-authors of the conflict interaction paper were Catherine Swanson and Rebecca Tyson, both of whom earned their doctorates in applied mathematics at the UW, and Kristin Swanson, a UW research assistant professor of pathology. Co-authors of the study examining gay and lesbian relationship satisfaction were James Gross, a Stanford University associate professor of psychology; Barbara Frederick, University of Michigan psychology professor; Kim McCoy, a UC Berkeley psychology doctoral student; Leah Rosenthal, who earned a doctorate in psychology at UC Berkeley; and Anna Ruef, an assistant professor at Boston Veterans Administration Medical Center.

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